

Geoffrey Chaucer

From the General Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales*

The spelling of what follows has been modernized as far as is possible; all who can, should read the text in its original form. This is only meant to help people with no experience of Middle English begin to read Chaucer. [Click here](#) to compare this text with the original Middle English.

1: When that April with his showers soft
2: The drought of March has pierced to the root,
3: And bathed every vein in such liquor
4: Of which vertue engendred is the flower;
5: When Zephirus eek with his sweet breath
6: Inspired hath in every holt and heath
7: The tender crops, and the young sun
8: Hath in the Ram his half course run,
9: And small fowls make melody,
10: That sleep all the night with open eye
11: (So pricks them Nature in their corages);
12: Then long folk to go on pilgrimages,
13: And palmers for to seek strange strands,
14: To far-off hallows, couth in sundry lands;
15: And specially from every shires end
16: Of England to Canterbury they wend,
17: The holy blissful Martyr for to seek,
18: That them has holpen when that they were sick.

19: Befell that in that season on a day,
20: In Southwark at the Tabard as I lay
21: Ready to wend on my pilgrimage
22: To Canterbury with full devout corage,
23: At night was come into that hostelry
24: Well nine and twenty in a company
25: Of sundry folk, by aventure fallen
26: In fellowship, and pilgrims were they all,
27: That toward Canterbury would ride.
28: The chambers and the stables were wide,
29: And well we were eased at best.
30: And shortly, when the sun was to rest,
31: So had I spoken with them every one
32: That I was of their fellowship anon,
33: And made forward early for to rise,
34: To take our way there as I you devise.

35: But nonetheless, while I have time and space,
36: Er that I farther in this tale pace,

37: Me thinketh it acordant to reason
38: To tell you all the condition
39: Of each of them, so as it seemed me,
40: And which they were, and of what degree,
41: And eek in what array that they were in;
42: And at a knight then will I first begin.

The Knight's Portrait

43: A knight there was, and that a worthy man,
44: That from the time that he first began
45: To ride out, he loved chivalry,
46: Truth and honour, freedom and courtesy.
47: Full worthy was he in his lord's war,
48: And therto had he ridden, no man farther,
49: As well in christendom as in hethenesse,
50: And ever honoured for his worthiness.
51: At Alisaundre he was when it was won.
52: Full oft time he had the bord begun
53: Above all nations in Prussia;
54: In Lettow had he reysed and in Russia,
55: No christian man so oft of his degree.
56: In Gernade at the siege eek had he been
57: Of Algezir, and ridden in Belmarye.
58: At Lyeys was he and at Satalye,
59: When they were won; and in the great sea
60: At many a noble armee had he be.
61: At mortal battles had he been fifteen,
62: And fought for our faith at Tramysse
63: In lists thrice, and ay slain his foe.
64: This ilke worthy knight had been also
65: Sometime with the lord of Palatye
66: Against another heathen in Turkey.
67: And evermore he had a sovereign price;
68: And though that he were worthy, he was wise,
69: And of his port as meek as is a maid.
70: He never yet no villainy ne said
71: In all his life unto no manner wight.
72: He was a very, perfect gentil knight.
73: But, for to tell you of his array,
74: His horses were good, but he was nat gay.
75: Of fustian he wore a gypon
76: All bismotered with his habergeon,
77: For he was lately come from his voyage,
78: And went for to do his pilgrimage.

The Prioress' Portrait

118: There was also a nun, a prioress,
119: That of her smiling was full simple and coy;
120: Her greatest oath was but 'By Saint Loy';
121: And she was cleped madame Eglentyne.
122: Full well she sung the service divine,
123: Entuned in her nose full seemly,
124: And French she spoke full fair and fetisly,
125: After the school of Stratford at Bowe,
126: For French of Paris was to her unknown.
127: At meat well taught was she withal:
128: She let no morsel from her lips fall,
129: Ne wet her fingers in her sauce deep;
130: Well could she carry a morsel and well keep
131: That no drop ne fell upon her breast.
132: In courtesy was set full much her lest.
133: Her over-lip wiped she so clean
134: That in her cup there was no ferthyng seen
135: Of grease, when she drunken had her draught.
136: Full seemly after her meat she raughte
137: And sikerly she was of great desport,
138: And full pleasant, and aimiable of port,
139: And pained her to counterfeit cheer
140: Of court, and to been stately of manner,
141: And to be held digne (*worthy*) of reverence.
142: But, for to speak of her conscience,
143: She was so charitable and so pitous
144: She would weep, if that she saw a mouse
145: Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bled.
146: Of small hounds had she that she fed
147: With roasted flesh, or milk and wastel-bread.
148: But sore wept she if one of them were dead,
149: Or if men smote it with a yerde smart;
150: And all was conscience and tender heart.
151: Full seemly her wimple pinched was,
152: Her nose tretys, her eyes grey as glass,
153: Her mouth full small, and thereto soft and red;
154: But sikerly she had a fair forehead;
155: It was almost a span broad, I trow;
156: For, hardily, she was not undergrown.
157: Full fetys was her cloak, as I was ware.
158: Of small coral about her arm she bare
159: A pair of beads, gauded all with green,
160: And thereon hung a broach of gold full sheene,
161: On which there was first written a crowned 'A',

162: And after *amor vincit omnia*.

The Monk's Portrait

165: A monk there was, a fair for the maistrie,
166: An outrider, that loved venery (*hunting*),
167: A manly man, to be an abbot able.
168: Full many a dainty horse had he in stable,
169: And when he rode, men might his bridle hear
170: Jingling in a whistling wind as clear
171: And eek as loud as does the chapel bell
172: There as this lord was keeper of the cell.
173: The rule of saint Maure or of saint Benedict,
174: Because that it was old and somedeal strict
175: This ilke monk let old things pass,
176: And held after the new world the space.
177: He gave not of that text a pulled hen,
178: That says that hunters be not holy men,
179: Ne that a monk, when he is reckless,
180: Is likened to a fish that is waterless, --
181: This is to say, a monk out of his cloister.
182: But that text held he not worth an oyster;
183: And I said his opinion was good.
184: What should he study and make himself wood (*mad*),
185: Upon a book in cloister always to pour,
186: Or swynken (*work*) with his hands, and labour,
187: As Augustine bade? how shall the world be served?
188: Let Augustine have his swink to him reserved!
189: Therefore he was a prikasour (*rider*) aright:
190: Greyhounds he had as swift as fowl in flight;
191: Of pricking and of hunting for the hare
192: Was all his lust, for no cost would he spare.
193: I saw his sleeves purfiled at the hand
194: With gris, and that the finest in the land;
195: And, for to fasten his hood under his chin,
196: He had of gold wrought a full curious pin;
197: A love-knot in the greater end there was.
198: His head was bald, that shone as any glass,
199: And eek his face, as he had been annoint.
200: He was a lord full fat and in good point;
201: His eyes steep, and rolling in his head,
202: That steamed as a furnace of a lead;
203: His boots supple, his horse in great estate.
204: Now certainly he was a fair prelate;
205: He was not pale as a forpined ghost.
206: A fat swan loved he best of any roast.

207: His palfrey was as brown as is a berry.

The Clerk's Portrait

285: A clerk there was of Oxford also,
286: That unto logic had long gone.
287: As lean was his horse as is a rake,
288: And he nas not right fat, I undertake,
289: But looked hollow, and thereto soberly.
290: Full threadbare was his overmost courtepy;
291: For he had gotten him yet no benefice,
292: Nor was so worldly for to have office.
293: For him was lever have at his bed's head
294: Twenty books, clad in black or red,
295: Of Aristotle and his philosophy,
296: Than robes rich, or fiddle, or gay sautrie.
297: But although that he was a philosopher,
298: Yet had he but little gold in coffer;
299: But all that he might of his friends hente,
300: On books and on learning he it spent,
301: And busily gan for the souls pray
302: Of them that gave him wherewith to school.
303: Of study took he most care and most heed,
304: Not one word spoke he more than was need,
305: And that was said in form and reverence,
306: And short and quick and full of high sentence;
307: Sounding in moral vertue was his speech,
308: And gladly would he learn and gladly teach.

The Shipman's Portrait

388: A shipman was there, wonynge (*living*) far by west;
389: For aught I wot, he was of Dartmouth.
390: He rode upon a rounce, as he could,
391: In a gown of faldyng to the knee.
392: A dagger hanging on a leash had he
393: About his neck, under his arm adown.
394: The hote summer had made his hue all brown;
395: And certainly he was a good fellow.
396: Full many a draught of wine had he drawn
397: From Bordeaux-ward, while that the chapmen slept.
398: Of nice conscience took he no keep.
399: If that he fought, and had the higher hand,
400: By water he sent them home to every land.
401: But of his craft to reckon well his tides,

402: His streams, and his dangers him besides,
403: His harbour, and his moon, his lodemenage,
404: Ther nas none such from Hull to Cartage.
405: Hardy he was and wise to undertake;
406: With many a tempest had his beard been shaken.
407: He knew all the havens, as they were,
408: From Gootlond to the cape of Finisterre,
409: And every creek in Brittany and in Spain.
410: His barge ycleped was the 'Maudelayne'.

The Wife of Bath's Portrait

445: A good wife was there of beside Bath,
446: But she was somdel deaf, and that was scathe (*a pity*).
447: Of cloth-making she had such a haunt,
448: She passed them of Ypres and of Ghent.
449: In all the parish wife ne was there none
450: That to the offering before her should go;
451: And if they did, certain so wroth was she,
452: That she was out of all charity.
453: Her coverchiefs full fine were of ground;
454: I dorste swear they weighed ten pound
455: That on a Sunday were upon her head.
456: Her hose were of fine scarlet red,
457: Full straight tied, and shoes full moist and new.
458: Bold was her face, and fair, and red of hue.
459: She was a worthy woman all her life:
460: Husbands at church door she had five,
461: Without other company in youth, --
462: But thereof need not to speak as now.
463: And thrice had she been at Jerusalem;
464: She had passed many a strange stream;
465: At Rome she had been, and at Boulogne,
466: In Galicia at Saint-James, and at Cologne.
467: She could much of wandering by the way.
468: Gap-toothed was she, soothly for to say.
469: Upon an ambler easily she sat,
470: Ywympled well, and on her head an hat
471: As broad as is a buckler or a targe;
472: A foot-mantel about her hips large,
473: And on her feet a pair of spurs sharp.
474: In fellowship well could she laugh and carp.
475: Of remedies of love she knew per chance,
476: For she could of that art the old dance.

The Parson's Portrait

477: A good man was there of religion,
478: And was a poor parson of a town,
479: But rich he was of holy thought and work.
480: He was also a learned man, a clerk,
481: That Christ's Gospel truly would preach;
482: His parishoners devoutly would he teach.
483: Benign he was, and wonder diligent,
484: And in adversity full patient,
485: And such he was proved oft sithes.
486: Full loth were him to curse for his tithes,
487: But rather would he give, out of doubt,
488: Unto his poor parishoners about
489: Of his offering and eek of his substance.
490: He could in little thing have suffisance.
491: Wide was his parish, and houses far asunder,
492: But he ne left not, for rain ne thunder,
493: In sickness nor in mischief to visit
494: The farthest in his parish, much and little,
495: Upon his feet, and in his hand a staff.
496: This noble example to his sheep he gave,
497: That first he wrought, and afterward he taught.
498: Out of the Gospel he those words caught,
499: And this figure he added eek thereto,
500: That if gold rust, what shall iron do?
501: For if a priest be foul, on whom we trust,
502: No wonder is a lewd man to rust;
503: And shame it is, if a priest take keep,
504: A shiten shepherd and a clean sheep.
505: Well ought a priest example for to give,
506: By his cleanness, how that his sheep should live.
507: He set not his benefice to hire
508: And left his sheep encombered in the mire
509: And ran to London unto Saint Paul's
510: To seek him a chantry for souls,
511: Or with a brotherhood to be withhold;
512: But dwelt at home, and kept well his fold,
513: So that the wolf ne made it not miscarry;
514: He was a shepherd and not a mercenary.
515: And though he holy were and vertuous,
516: He was to sinful men not despitous,
517: Ne of his speech dangerous ne digne,
518: But in his teaching discreet and benign.
519: To draw folk to heaven by fairness,
520: By good example, this was his business.
521: But if were any person obstinate,

522: What so he were, of high or low estate,
523: Him would he snybben sharply for the nones.
524: A better priest I trow that nowhere none is.
525: He waited after no pomp and reverence,
526: Ne maked him a spiced conscience,
527: But Christ's lore and his apostles twelve
528: He taught, but first he followed it himself.

The Plowman's Portrait

529: With him there was a plowman, was his brother,
530: That had loaded of dung full many a fother;
531: A true swinker and a good was he,
532: Living in peace and perfect charity.
533: God loved he best with all his whole heart
534: At all times, though him gamed or smerte,
535: And then his neighbor right as himself.
536: He would thresh, and thereto dig and delve,
537: For Christ's sake, for every poor wight,
538: Without hire, if it lay in his might.
539: His tithes paid he full fair and well,
540: Both of his proper swink and his cattel.
541: In a tabard he rode upon a mare.

The Miller's Portrait

545: The miller was a stout carl for the nones;
546: Ful big he was of brawn, and eek of bones.
547: That proved well, for over all there he came,
548: At wrestling he would have always the ram.
549: He was short-shouldered, broad, a thick knarre;
550: There was no door that he nold heave off harre (*hinges*),
551: Or break it at a running with his head.
552: His beard as any sow or fox was red,
553: And thereto broad, as though it were a spade.
554: Upon the cop right of his nose he had
555: A wart, and thereon stood a tuft of hairs,
556: Red as the bristles of a sow's ears;
557: His nosethirles black were and wide.
558: A sword and buckler bare he by his side.
559: His mouth as great was as a great furnace.
560: He was a jangler and a goliardeys,
561: And that was mostly of sin and harlotries.
562: Well could he steal corn and tollen thrice;
563: And yet he had a thumb of gold, pardee.

564: A white coat and a blue hood weared he.
565: A bagpipes well could he blow and sound,
566: And therewithal he brought us out of town.

The Pardoner's Portrait

669: With him there rode a gentil pardoner
670: Of Rouncivale, his friend and his compeer,
671: That straight was come from the court of Rome.
672: Full loud he sang "Come hither, love, to me!
673: This Somonour bare to him a stiff bourdon;
674: Was never trompet of half so great a sound.
675: This Pardoner had hair as yellow as wax,
676: But smooth it hung as doth a streak of flax;
677: By ounces hung his locks that he had,
678: And therewith he his shoulders overspread;
679: But thin it lay, by colpons one and one.
680: But hood, for jollity, weared he none,
681: For it was trussed up in his wallet.
682: Him thought he rode all of the new jet;
683: Dischevelee, save his cape, he rode all bare.
684: Such glaring eyes had he as a hare.
685: A Vernycle had he sewed upon his cape.
686: His wallet lay before him in his lap,
687: Bretfull of pardons, come from Rome all hot.
688: A voice he had as small as hath a goat.
689: No beard had he, ne never should have;
690: As smooth it was as it were late shave.
691: I trowe he were a gelding or a mare.
692: But of his craft, from Berwick to Ware,
693: Ne was there such another pardoner
694: For in his mall he had a pillow-beer,
695: Which that he said was Our Lady's veil:
696: He said he had a gobet of the sail
697: That Seint Peter had, when that he went
698: Upon the sea, till Jesu Christ him hente.
699: He had a cross of laton full of stones,
700: And in a glass he had pigs bones.
701: But with thise relics, when that he found
702: A poor parson dwelling upon lond,
703: Upon a day he got him more money
704: Than that the parson got in months two;
705: And thus, with fained flattery and japes,
706: He made the parson and the people his apes.
707: But truly to tell at last,
708: He was in church a noble ecclesiaste.

709: Well could he read a lesson or a story,
710: But alderbest he sang an offertory;
711: For well he wiste, when that song was sung,
712: He must preach and well affile (*sharpen*) his tongue
713: To win silver, as he full well could;
714: Therefore he sang the merrierly and loud.
