

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*
Overview, Summary, and Analysis from SparkNotes

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5 **Key Facts**

full title · *The Canterbury Tales*

author · Geoffrey Chaucer

type of work · Poetry (two tales are in prose: the Tale of Melibee and the Parson's Tale)

genres · Narrative collection of poems; character portraits; parody; estates satire; romance; fabliau

10 **language** · Middle English

time and place written · Around 1386–1395, England

date of first publication · Sometime in the early fifteenth century

publisher · Originally circulated in hand-copied manuscripts

15 **narrator** · The primary narrator is an anonymous, naïve member of the pilgrimage, who is not described. The other pilgrims narrate most of the tales.

point of view · In the General Prologue, the narrator speaks in the first person, describing each of the pilgrims as they appeared to him. Though narrated by different pilgrims, each of the tales is told from an omniscient third-person point of view, providing the reader with the thoughts as well as actions of the characters.

20 **tone** · *The Canterbury Tales* incorporates an impressive range of attitudes toward life and literature. The tales are by turns satirical, elevated, pious, earthy, bawdy, and comical. The reader should not accept the naïve narrator's point of view as Chaucer's.

tense · Past

setting (time) · The late fourteenth century, after 1381

setting (place) · The Tabard Inn; the road to Canterbury

25 **protagonists** · Each individual tale has protagonists, but Chaucer's plan is to make none of his storytellers superior to others; it is an equal company. In the Knight's Tale, the protagonists are Palamon and Arcite; in the Miller's Tale, Nicholas and Alisoun; in the Wife of Bath's Tale, the errant knight and the loathsome hag; in the Nun's Priest's Tale, the rooster Chanticleer.

30 **major conflict** · The struggles between characters, manifested in the links between tales, mostly involve clashes between social classes, differing tastes, and competing professions. There are also clashes between the sexes, and there is resistance to the Host's somewhat tyrannical leadership.

rising action · As he sets off on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, the narrator encounters a group of other pilgrims and joins them. That night, the Host of the tavern where the pilgrims are staying presents them with a storytelling challenge and appoints himself judge of the competition and leader of the company.

35 **climax** · Not applicable (collection of tales)

falling action · After twenty-three tales have been told, the Parson delivers a long sermon. Chaucer then makes a retraction, asking to be forgiven for his sins, including having written *The Canterbury Tales*.

themes · The pervasiveness of courtly love, the importance of company, the corruption of the church

motifs · Romance, fabliaux

40 **symbols** · Springtime, clothing, physiognomy

foreshadowing · Not applicable (collection of tales)

Context

45 The *Canterbury Tales* is the most famous and critically acclaimed work of Geoffrey Chaucer, a late-fourteenth-century English poet. Little is known about Chaucer's personal life, and even less about his education, but a number of existing records document his professional life. Chaucer was born in London in the early 1340s, the only son in his family. Chaucer's father, originally a property-owning wine merchant, became tremendously wealthy when he inherited the property of relatives who had died in the Black Death of 1349. He was therefore able to send the young Geoffrey off as a page to the Countess of Ulster, which meant that Geoffrey was not required to follow in his ancestors' footsteps and become a merchant. Eventually, Chaucer began to serve the countess's

50 husband, Prince Lionel, son to King Edward III. For most of his life, Chaucer served in the Hundred Years War between England and France, both as a soldier and, since he was fluent in French and Italian and conversant in Latin and other tongues, as a diplomat. His diplomatic travels brought him twice to Italy, where he might have met Boccaccio, whose writing influenced Chaucer's work, and Petrarch.

55 In or around 1378, Chaucer began to develop his vision of an English poetry that would be linguistically accessible to all—obedient neither to the court, whose official language was French, nor to the Church, whose official language was Latin. Instead, Chaucer wrote in the vernacular, the English that was spoken in and around London in his day. Undoubtedly, he was influenced by the writings of the Florentines Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, who wrote in the Italian vernacular. Even in England, the practice was becoming increasingly common among poets, although many were still writing in French and Latin.

60 That the nobles and kings Chaucer served (Richard II until 1399, then Henry IV) were impressed with Chaucer's skills as a negotiator is obvious from the many rewards he received for his service. Money, provisions, higher appointments, and property eventually allowed him to retire on a royal pension. In 1374, the king appointed Chaucer Controller of the Customs of Hides, Skins and Wools in the port of London, which meant that he was a government official who worked with cloth importers. His experience overseeing imported cloths might be why he frequently describes in exquisite detail the garments and fabric that attire his characters. Chaucer held the position

65 at the customhouse for twelve years, after which he left London for Kent, the county in which Canterbury is located. He served as a justice of the peace for Kent, living in debt, and was then appointed Clerk of the Works at various holdings of the king, including Westminster and the Tower of London. After he retired in the early 1390s, he seems to have been working primarily on *The Canterbury Tales*, which he began around 1387. By the time of his

70 retirement, Chaucer had already written a substantial amount of narrative poetry, including the celebrated romance *Troilus and Criseyde*.

75 Chaucer's personal life is less documented than his professional life. In the late 1360s, he married Philippa Roet, who served Edward III's queen. They had at least two sons together. Philippa was the sister to the mistress of John of Gaunt, the duke of Lancaster. For John of Gaunt, Chaucer wrote one of his first poems, *The Book of the Duchess*, which was a lament for the premature death of John's young wife, Blanche. Whether or not Chaucer had an extramarital affair is a matter of some contention among historians. In a legal document that dates from 1380, a woman named Cecily Champaigne released Chaucer from the accusation of seizing her (raptus), though whether

the expression denotes that he raped her, committed adultery with her, or abducted her son is unclear. Chaucer's wife Philippa apparently died in 1387.

80 Chaucer lived through a time of incredible tension in the English social sphere. The Black Death, which ravaged England during Chaucer's childhood and remained widespread afterward, wiped out an estimated thirty to fifty percent of the population. Consequently, the labor force gained increased leverage and was able to bargain for better wages, which led to resentment from the nobles and propertied classes. These classes received another
85 blow in 1381, when the peasantry, helped by the artisan class, revolted against them. The merchants were also wielding increasing power over the legal establishment, as the Hundred Years War created profit for England and, consequently, appetite for luxury was growing. The merchants capitalized on the demand for luxury goods, and when Chaucer was growing up, London was pretty much run by a merchant oligarchy, which attempted to control both the aristocracy and the lesser artisan classes. Chaucer's political sentiments are unclear, for although *The Canterbury Tales* documents the various social tensions in the manner of the popular genre of estates satire, the
90 narrator refrains from making overt political statements, and what he does say is in no way thought to represent Chaucer's own sentiments.

Chaucer's original plan for *The Canterbury Tales* was for each character to tell four tales, two on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. But, instead of 120 tales, the text ends after twenty-four tales, and the party is still on its way to Canterbury. Chaucer either planned to revise the structure to cap the work at twenty-four
95 tales, or else left it incomplete when he died on October 25, 1400. Other writers and printers soon recognized *The Canterbury Tales* as a masterful and highly original work. Though Chaucer had been influenced by the great French and Italian writers of his age, works like Boccaccio's *Decameron* were not accessible to most English readers, so the format of *The Canterbury Tales*, and the intense realism of its characters, were virtually unknown to readers in the fourteenth century before Chaucer. William Caxton, England's first printer, published *The Canterbury Tales* in the
100 1470s, and it continued to enjoy a rich printing history that never truly faded. By the English Renaissance, poetry critic George Puttenham had identified Chaucer as the father of the English literary canon. Chaucer's project to create a literature and poetic language for all classes of society succeeded, and today Chaucer still stands as one of the great shapers of literary narrative and character.

Language in The Canterbury Tales

105 *The Canterbury Tales* is written in Middle English, which bears a close visual resemblance to the English written and spoken today. In contrast, Old English (the language of *Beowulf*, for example) can be read only in modern translation or by students of Old English. Students often read *The Canterbury Tales* in its original language, not only because of the similarity between Chaucer's Middle English and our own, but because the beauty and humor of the poetry—all of its internal and external rhymes, and the sounds it produces—would be lost in translation.

110 The best way for a beginner to approach Middle English is to read it out loud. When the words are pronounced, it is often much easier to recognize what they mean in modern English. Most Middle English editions of the poem include a short pronunciation guide, which can help the reader to understand the language better. For particularly difficult words or phrases, most editions also include notes in the margin giving the modern versions of the words, along with a full glossary in the back. Several online Chaucer glossaries exist, as well as a number of printed
115 lexicons of Middle English.

The Order of The Canterbury Tales

The line numbers cited in this SparkNote are based on the line numbers given in *The Riverside Chaucer*, the authoritative edition of Chaucer's works. The line numbering in *The Riverside Chaucer* does not run continuously throughout the entire *Canterbury Tales*, but it does not restart at the beginning of each tale, either. Instead, the
120 tales are grouped together into *fragments*, and each fragment is numbered as a separate whole.

Nobody knows exactly in what order Chaucer intended to present the tales, or even if he had a specific order in mind for all of them. Eighty-two early manuscripts of the tales survive, and many of them vary considerably in the

order in which they present the tales. However, certain sets of tales do seem to belong together in a particular order. For instance, the General Prologue is obviously the beginning, then the narrator explicitly says that the Knight tells the first tale, and that the Miller interrupts and tells the second tale. The introductions, prologues, and epilogues to various tales sometimes include the pilgrims' comments on the tale just finished, and an indication of who tells the next tale. These sections between the tales are called *links*, and they are the best evidence for grouping the tales together into ten fragments. But *The Canterbury Tales* does not include a complete set of links, so the order of the ten fragments is open to question. *The Riverside Chaucer* bases the order of the ten fragments on the order presented in the Ellesmere manuscript, one of the best surviving manuscripts of the tale. Some scholars disagree with the groupings and order of tales followed in *The Riverside Chaucer*, choosing instead to base the order on a combination of the links and the geographical landmarks that the pilgrims pass on the way to Canterbury.

Plot Overview

GENERAL PROLOGUE

At the Tabard Inn, a tavern in Southwark, near London, the narrator joins a company of twenty-nine pilgrims. The pilgrims, like the narrator, are traveling to the shrine of the martyr Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury. The narrator gives a descriptive account of twenty-seven of these pilgrims, including a Knight, Squire, Yeoman, Prioress, Monk, Friar, Merchant, Clerk, Man of Law, Franklin, Haberdasher, Carpenter, Weaver, Dyer, Tapestry-Weaver, Cook, Shipman, Physician, Wife, Parson, Plowman, Miller, Manciple, Reeve, Summoner, Pardoner, and Host. (He does not describe the Second Nun or the Nun's Priest, although both characters appear later in the book.) The Host, whose name, we find out in the Prologue to the Cook's Tale, is Harry Bailey, suggests that the group ride together and entertain one another with stories. He decides that each pilgrim will tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. Whomever he judges to be the best storyteller will receive a meal at Bailey's tavern, courtesy of the other pilgrims. The pilgrims draw lots and determine that the Knight will tell the first tale.

THE KNIGHT'S TALE

Theseus, duke of Athens, imprisons Arcite and Palamon, two knights from Thebes (another city in ancient Greece). From their prison, the knights see and fall in love with Theseus's sister-in-law, Emelye. Through the intervention of a friend, Arcite is freed, but he is banished from Athens. He returns in disguise and becomes a page in Emelye's chamber. Palamon escapes from prison, and the two meet and fight over Emelye. Theseus apprehends them and arranges a tournament between the two knights and their allies, with Emelye as the prize. Arcite wins, but he is accidentally thrown from his horse and dies. Palamon then marries Emelye.

THE MILLER'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

The Host asks the Monk to tell the next tale, but the drunken Miller interrupts and insists that his tale should be the next. He tells the story of an impoverished student named Nicholas, who persuades his landlord's sexy young wife, Alisoun, to spend the night with him. He convinces his landlord, a carpenter named John, that the second flood is coming, and tricks him into spending the night in a tub hanging from the ceiling of his barn. Absolon, a young parish clerk who is also in love with Alisoun, appears outside the window of the room where Nicholas and Alisoun lie together. When Absolon begs Alisoun for a kiss, she sticks her rear end out the window in the dark and lets him kiss it. Absolon runs and gets a red-hot poker, returns to the window, and asks for another kiss; when Nicholas sticks his bottom out the window and farts, Absolon brands him on the buttocks. Nicholas's cries for water make the carpenter think that the flood has come, so the carpenter cuts the rope connecting his tub to the ceiling, falls down, and breaks his arm.

THE REEVE'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

Because he also does carpentry, the Reeve takes offense at the Miller's tale of a stupid carpenter, and counters with his own tale of a dishonest miller. The Reeve tells the story of two students, John and Alayn, who go to the mill to watch the miller grind their corn, so that he won't have a chance to steal any. But the miller unties their horse, and while they chase it, he steals some of the flour he has just ground for them. By the time the students catch the horse, it is dark, so they spend the night in the miller's house. That night, Alayn seduces the miller's

daughter, and John seduces his wife. When the miller wakes up and finds out what has happened, he tries to beat the students. His wife, thinking that her husband is actually one of the students, hits the miller over the head with a staff. The students take back their stolen goods and leave.

THE COOK'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

175 The Cook particularly enjoys the Reeve's Tale, and offers to tell another funny tale. The tale concerns an apprentice named Perkyn who drinks and dances so much that he is called "Perkyn Reveler." Finally, Perkyn's master decides that he would rather his apprentice leave to revel than stay home and corrupt the other servants. Perkyn arranges to stay with a friend who loves drinking and gambling, and who has a wife who is a prostitute. The tale breaks off, unfinished, after fifty-eight lines.

THE MAN OF LAW'S INTRODUCTION, PROLOGUE, TALE, AND EPILOGUE

180 The Host reminds his fellow pilgrims to waste no time, because lost time cannot be regained. He asks the Man of Law to tell the next tale. The Man of Law agrees, apologizing that he cannot tell any suitable tale that Chaucer has not already told—Chaucer may be unskilled as a poet, says the Man of Law, but he has told more stories of lovers than Ovid, and he doesn't print tales of incest as John Gower does (Gower was a contemporary of Chaucer). In the
185 Prologue to his tale, the Man of Law laments the miseries of poverty. He then remarks how fortunate merchants are, and says that his tale is one told to him by a merchant.

In the tale, the Muslim sultan of Syria converts his entire sultanate (including himself) to Christianity in order to persuade the emperor of Rome to give him his daughter, Custance, in marriage. The sultan's mother and her attendants remain secretly faithful to Islam. The mother tells her son she wishes to hold a banquet for him and all
190 the Christians. At the banquet, she massacres her son and all the Christians except for Custance, whom she sets adrift in a rudderless ship. After years of floating, Custance runs ashore in Northumberland, where a constable and his wife, Hermengyld, offer her shelter. She converts them to Christianity.

One night, Satan makes a young knight sneak into Hermengyld's chamber and murder Hermengyld. He places the bloody knife next to Custance, who sleeps in the same chamber. When the constable returns home, accompanied
195 by Alla, the king of Northumberland, he finds his slain wife. He tells Alla the story of how Custance was found, and Alla begins to pity the girl. He decides to look more deeply into the murder. Just as the knight who murdered Hermengyld is swearing that Custance is the true murderer, he is struck down and his eyes burst out of his face, proving his guilt to Alla and the crowd. The knight is executed, Alla and many others convert to Christianity, and Custance and Alla marry.

200 While Alla is away in Scotland, Custance gives birth to a boy named Mauricius. Alla's mother, Donegild, intercepts a letter from Custance to Alla and substitutes a counterfeit one that claims that the child is disfigured and bewitched. She then intercepts Alla's reply, which claims that the child should be kept and loved no matter how malformed. Donegild substitutes a letter saying that Custance and her son are banished and should be sent away on the same ship on which Custance arrived. Alla returns home, finds out what has happened, and kills Donegild.

205 After many adventures at sea, including an attempted rape, Custance ends up back in Rome, where she reunites with Alla, who has made a pilgrimage there to atone for killing his mother. She also reunites with her father, the emperor. Alla and Custance return to England, but Alla dies after a year, so Custance returns, once more, to Rome. Mauricius becomes the next Roman emperor.

210 Following the Man of Law's Tale, the Host asks the Parson to tell the next tale, but the Parson reproaches him for swearing, and they fall to bickering.

THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

The Wife of Bath gives a lengthy account of her feelings about marriage. Quoting from the Bible, the Wife argues against those who believe it is wrong to marry more than once, and she explains how she dominated and controlled each of her five husbands. She married her fifth husband, Jankyn, for love instead of money. After the
215 Wife has rambled on for a while, the Friar butts in to complain that she is taking too long, and the Summoner

retorts that friars are like flies, always meddling. The Friar promises to tell a tale about a summoner, and the Summoner promises to tell a tale about a friar. The Host cries for everyone to quiet down and allow the Wife to commence her tale.

220 In her tale, a young knight of King Arthur's court rapes a maiden; to atone for his crime, Arthur's queen sends him on a quest to discover what women want most. An ugly old woman promises the knight that she will tell him the secret if he promises to do whatever she wants for saving his life. He agrees, and she tells him women want control of their husbands and their own lives. They go together to Arthur's queen, and the old woman's answer turns out to be correct. The old woman then tells the knight that he must marry her. When the knight confesses later that he is repulsed by her appearance, she gives him a choice: she can either be ugly and faithful, or beautiful and
225 unfaithful. The knight tells her to make the choice herself, and she rewards him for giving her control of the marriage by rendering herself both beautiful *and* faithful.

THE FRIAR'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

The Friar speaks approvingly of the Wife of Bath's Tale, and offers to lighten things up for the company by telling a funny story about a lecherous summoner. The Summoner does not object, but he promises to pay the Friar back in
230 his own tale. The Friar tells of an archdeacon who carries out the law without mercy, especially to lechers. The archdeacon has a summoner who has a network of spies working for him, to let him know who has been lecherous. The summoner extorts money from those he's sent to summon, charging them more money than he should for penance. He tries to serve a summons on a yeoman who is actually a devil in disguise. After comparing notes on their treachery and extortion, the devil vanishes, but when the summoner tries to prosecute an old
235 wealthy widow unfairly, the widow cries out that the summoner should be taken to hell. The devil follows the woman's instructions and drags the summoner off to hell.

THE SUMMONER'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

The Summoner, furious at the Friar's Tale, asks the company to let him tell the next tale. First, he tells the company that there is little difference between friars and fiends, and that when an angel took a friar down to hell to show
240 him the torments there, the friar asked why there were no friars in hell; the angel then pulled up Satan's tail and 20,000 friars came out of his ass.

In the Summoner's Tale, a friar begs for money from a dying man named Thomas and his wife, who have recently lost their child. The friar shamelessly exploits the couple's misfortunes to extract money from them, so Thomas tells the friar that he is sitting on something that he will bequeath to the friars. The friar reaches for his bequest,
245 and Thomas lets out an enormous fart. The friar complains to the lord of the manor, whose squire promises to divide the fart evenly among all the friars.

THE CLERK'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

The Host asks the Clerk to cheer up and tell a merry tale, and the Clerk agrees to tell a tale by the Italian poet Petrarch. Griselde is a hardworking peasant who marries into the aristocracy. Her husband tests her fortitude in
250 several ways, including pretending to kill her children and divorcing her. He punishes her one final time by forcing her to prepare for his wedding to a new wife. She does all this dutifully, her husband tells her that she has always been and will always be his wife (the divorce was a fraud), and they live happily ever after.

THE MERCHANT'S PROLOGUE, TALE, AND EPILOGUE

The Merchant reflects on the great difference between the patient Griselde of the Clerk's Tale and the horrible shrew he has been married to for the past two months. The Host asks him to tell a story of the evils of marriage, and he complies. Against the advice of his friends, an old knight named January marries May, a beautiful young
255 woman. She is less than impressed by his enthusiastic sexual efforts, and conspires to cheat on him with his squire, Damien. When blind January takes May into his garden to copulate with her, she tells him she wants to eat a pear, and he helps her up into the pear tree, where she has sex with Damien. Pluto, the king of the faeries, restores
260 January's sight, but May, caught in the act, assures him that he must still be blind. The Host prays to God to keep him from marrying a wife like the one the Merchant describes.

THE SQUIRE'S INTRODUCTION AND TALE

The Host calls upon the Squire to say something about his favorite subject, love, and the Squire willingly complies. King Cambuskan of the Mongol Empire is visited on his birthday by a knight bearing gifts from the king of Arabia and India. He gives Cambuskan and his daughter Canacee a magic brass horse, a magic mirror, a magic ring that gives Canacee the ability to understand the language of birds, and a sword with the power to cure any wound it creates. She rescues a dying female falcon that narrates how her consort abandoned her for the love of another. The Squire's Tale is either unfinished by Chaucer or is meant to be interrupted by the Franklin, who interjects that he wishes his own son were as eloquent as the Squire. The Host expresses annoyance at the Franklin's interruption, and orders him to begin the next tale.

THE FRANKLIN'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

The Franklin says that his tale is a familiar Breton lay, a folk ballad of ancient Brittany. Dorigen, the heroine, awaits the return of her husband, Arveragus, who has gone to England to win honor in feats of arms. She worries that the ship bringing her husband home will wreck itself on the coastal rocks, and she promises Aurelius, a young man who falls in love with her, that she will give her body to him if he clears the rocks from the coast. Aurelius hires a student learned in magic to create the illusion that the rocks have disappeared. Arveragus returns home and tells his wife that she must keep her promise to Aurelius. Aurelius is so impressed by Arveragus's honorable act that he generously absolves her of the promise, and the magician, in turn, generously absolves Aurelius of the money he owes.

THE PHYSICIAN'S TALE

Appius the judge lusts after Virginia, the beautiful daughter of Virginius. Appius persuades a churl named Claudius to declare her his slave, stolen from him by Virginius. Appius declares that Virginius must hand over his daughter to Claudius. Virginius tells his daughter that she must die rather than suffer dishonor, and she virtuously consents to her father's cutting her head off. Appius sentences Virginius to death, but the Roman people, aware of Appius's hijinks, throw him into prison, where he kills himself.

THE PARDONER'S INTRODUCTION, PROLOGUE, AND TALE

The Host is dismayed by the tragic injustice of the Physician's Tale, and asks the Pardoner to tell something merry. The other pilgrims contradict the Host, demanding a moral tale, which the Pardoner agrees to tell after he eats and drinks. The Pardoner tells the company how he cheats people out of their money by preaching that money is the root of all evil. His tale describes three riotous youths who go looking for Death, thinking that they can kill him. An old man tells them that they will find Death under a tree. Instead, they find eight bushels of gold, which they plot to sneak into town under cover of darkness. The youngest goes into town to fetch food and drink, but brings back poison, hoping to have the gold all to himself. His companions kill him to enrich their own shares, then drink the poison and die under the tree. His tale complete, the Pardoner offers to sell the pilgrims pardons, and singles out the Host to come kiss his relics. The Host infuriates the Pardoner by accusing him of fraud, but the Knight persuades the two to kiss and bury their differences.

THE SHIPMAN'S TALE

The Shipman's Tale features a monk who tricks a merchant's wife into having sex with him by borrowing money from the merchant, then giving it to the wife so she can repay her own debt to her husband, in exchange for sexual favors. When the monk sees the merchant next, he tells him that he returned the merchant's money to his wife. The wife realizes she has been duped, but she boldly tells her husband to forgive her debt: she will repay it in bed. The Host praises the Shipman's story, and asks the Prioress for a tale.

THE PRIORESS'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

The Prioress calls on the Virgin Mary to guide her tale. In an Asian city, a Christian school is located at the edge of a Jewish ghetto. An angelic seven-year-old boy, a widow's son, attends the school. He is a devout Christian, and loves to sing *Alma Redemptoris* (Gracious Mother of the Redeemer). Singing the song on his way through the ghetto, some Jews hire a murderer to slit his throat and throw him into a latrine. The Jews refuse to tell the widow where her son is, but he miraculously begins to sing *Alma Redemptoris*, so the Christian people recover his body, and the magistrate orders the murdering Jews to be drawn apart by wild horses and then hanged.

310 **THE PROLOGUE AND TALE OF SIR THOPAS**

The Host, after teasing Chaucer the narrator about his appearance, asks him to tell a tale. Chaucer says that he only knows one tale, then launches into a parody of bad poetry—the Tale of Sir Thopas. Sir Thopas rides about looking for an elf-queen to marry until he is confronted by a giant. The narrator’s doggerel continues in this vein until the Host can bear no more and interrupts him. Chaucer asks him why he can’t tell his tale, since it is the best he knows, and the Host explains that his rhyme isn’t worth a turd. He encourages Chaucer to tell a prose tale.

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THE TALE OF MELIBEE

Chaucer’s second tale is the long, moral prose story of Melibee. Melibee’s house is raided by his foes, who beat his wife, Prudence, and severely wound his daughter, Sophie, in her feet, hands, ears, nose, and mouth. Prudence advises him not to rashly pursue vengeance on his enemies, and he follows her advice, putting his foes’ punishment in her hands. She forgives them for the outrages done to her, in a model of Christian forbearance and forgiveness.

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THE MONK’S PROLOGUE AND TALE

The Host wishes that his own wife were as patient as Melibee’s, and calls upon the Monk to tell the next tale. First he teases the Monk, pointing out that the Monk is clearly no poor cloisterer. The Monk takes it all in stride and tells a series of tragic falls, in which noble figures are brought low: Lucifer, Adam, Sampson, Hercules, Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Zenobia, Pedro of Castile, and down through the ages.

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THE NUN’S PRIEST’S PROLOGUE, TALE, AND EPILOGUE

After seventeen noble “falls” narrated by the Monk, the Knight interrupts, and the Host calls upon the Nun’s Priest to deliver something more lively. The Nun’s Priest tells of Chanticleer the Rooster, who is carried off by a flattering fox who tricks him into closing his eyes and displaying his crowing abilities. Chanticleer turns the tables on the fox by persuading him to open his mouth and brag to the barnyard about his feat, upon which Chanticleer falls out of the fox’s mouth and escapes. The Host praises the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, adding that if the Nun’s Priest were not in holy orders, he would be as sexually potent as Chanticleer.

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THE SECOND NUN’S PROLOGUE AND TALE

In her Prologue, the Second Nun explains that she will tell a saint’s life, that of Saint Cecilia, for this saint set an excellent example through her good works and wise teachings. She focuses particularly on the story of Saint Cecilia’s martyrdom. Before Cecilia’s new husband, Valerian, can take her virginity, she sends him on a pilgrimage to Pope Urban, who converts him to Christianity. An angel visits Valerian, who asks that his brother Tiburce be granted the grace of Christian conversion as well. All three—Cecilia, Tiburce, and Valerian—are put to death by the Romans.

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THE CANON’S YEOMAN’S PROLOGUE AND TALE

When the Second Nun’s Tale is finished, the company is overtaken by a black-clad Canon and his Yeoman, who have heard of the pilgrims and their tales and wish to participate. The Yeoman brags to the company about how he and the Canon create the illusion that they are alchemists, and the Canon departs in shame at having his secrets discovered. The Yeoman tells a tale of how a canon defrauded a priest by creating the illusion of alchemy using sleight of hand.

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THE MANCIPLE’S PROLOGUE AND TALE

The Host pokes fun at the Cook, riding at the back of the company, blind drunk. The Cook is unable to honor the Host’s request that he tell a tale, and the Manciple criticizes him for his drunkenness. The Manciple relates the legend of a white crow, taken from the Roman poet Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and one of the tales in *The Arabian Nights*. In it, Phoebus’s talking white crow informs him that his wife is cheating on him. Phoebus kills the wife, pulls out the crow’s white feathers, and curses it with blackness.

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THE PARSON’S PROLOGUE AND TALE

As the company enters a village in the late afternoon, the Host calls upon the Parson to give them a fable. Refusing to tell a fictional story because it would go against the rule set by St. Paul, the Parson delivers a lengthy treatise on

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the Seven Deadly Sins, instead.

CHAUCER'S RETRACTION

360 Chaucer appeals to readers to credit Jesus Christ as the inspiration for anything in his book that they like, and to attribute what they don't like to his own ignorance and lack of ability. He retracts and prays for forgiveness for all of his works dealing with secular and pagan subjects, asking only to be remembered for what he has written of saints' lives and homilies.

General Prologue: Introduction

SUMMARY: FRAGMENT I, LINES 1–42

365 The narrator opens the General Prologue with a description of the return of spring. He describes the April rains, the burgeoning flowers and leaves, and the chirping birds. Around this time of year, the narrator says, people begin to feel the desire to go on a pilgrimage. Many devout English pilgrims set off to visit shrines in distant holy lands, but even more choose to travel to Canterbury to visit the relics of Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral, where they thank the martyr for having helped them when they were in need. The narrator tells us that as he prepared to go on such a pilgrimage, staying at a tavern in Southwark called the Tabard Inn, a great company of 370 of twenty-nine travelers entered. The travelers were a diverse group who, like the narrator, were on their way to Canterbury. They happily agreed to let him join them. That night, the group slept at the Tabard, and woke up early the next morning to set off on their journey. Before continuing the tale, the narrator declares his intent to list and describe each of the members of the group.

ANALYSIS

375 The invocation of spring with which the General Prologue begins is lengthy and formal compared to the language of the rest of the Prologue. The first lines situate the story in a particular time and place, but the speaker does this in cosmic and cyclical terms, celebrating the vitality and richness of spring. This approach gives the opening lines a dreamy, timeless, unfocused quality, and it is therefore surprising when the narrator reveals that he's going to describe a pilgrimage that he himself took rather than telling a love story. A pilgrimage is a religious journey 380 undertaken for penance and grace. As pilgrimages went, Canterbury was not a very difficult destination for an English person to reach. It was, therefore, very popular in fourteenth-century England, as the narrator mentions. Pilgrims traveled to visit the remains of Saint Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, who was murdered in 1170 by knights of King Henry II. Soon after his death, he became the most popular saint in England. The pilgrimage in *The Canterbury Tales* should not be thought of as an entirely solemn occasion, because it also offered 385 the pilgrims an opportunity to abandon work and take a vacation.

In line 20, the narrator abandons his unfocused, all-knowing point of view, identifying himself as an actual person for the first time by inserting the first person—"I"—as he relates how he met the group of pilgrims while staying at the Tabard Inn. He emphasizes that this group, which he encountered by accident, was itself formed quite by chance (25–26). He then shifts into the first-person plural, referring to the pilgrims as "we" beginning in line 29, 390 asserting his status as a member of the group.

The narrator ends the introductory portion of his prologue by noting that he has "tyme and space" to tell his narrative. His comments underscore the fact that he is writing some time after the events of his story, and that he is describing the characters from memory. He has spoken and met with these people, but he has waited a certain length of time before sitting down and describing them. His intention to describe each pilgrim as he or she *seemed* 395 to him is also important, for it emphasizes that his descriptions are not only subject to his memory but are also shaped by his individual perceptions and opinions regarding each of the characters. He positions himself as a mediator between two groups: the group of pilgrims, of which he was a member, and us, the audience, whom the narrator explicitly addresses as "you" in lines 34 and 38.

400 On the other hand, the narrator's declaration that he will tell us about the "condicioun," "degree," and "array" (dress) of each of the pilgrims suggests that his portraits will be based on objective facts as well as his own opinions. He spends considerable time characterizing the group members according to their social positions. The

pilgrims represent a diverse cross section of fourteenth-century English society. Medieval social theory divided society into three broad classes, called “estates”: the military, the clergy, and the laity. (The nobility, not represented in the General Prologue, traditionally derives its title and privileges from military duties and service, so it is considered part of the military estate.) In the portraits that we will see in the rest of the General Prologue, the Knight and Squire represent the military estate. The clergy is represented by the Prioress (and her nun and three priests), the Monk, the Friar, and the Parson. The other characters, from the wealthy Franklin to the poor Plowman, are the members of the laity. These lay characters can be further subdivided into landowners (the Franklin), professionals (the Clerk, the Man of Law, the Guildsmen, the Physician, and the Shipman), laborers (the Cook and the Plowman), stewards (the Miller, the Manciple, and the Reeve), and church officers (the Summoner and the Pardoner). As we will see, Chaucer’s descriptions of the various characters and their social roles reveal the influence of the medieval genre of estates satire.

General Prologue: The Knight through the Man of Law

SUMMARY: FRAGMENT I, LINES 43–330

The narrator begins his character portraits with the Knight. In the narrator’s eyes, the Knight is the noblest of the pilgrims, embodying military prowess, loyalty, honor, generosity, and good manners. The Knight conducts himself in a polite and mild fashion, never saying an unkind word about anyone. The Knight’s son, who is about twenty years old, acts as his father’s squire, or apprentice. Though the Squire has fought in battles with great strength and agility, like his father, he is also devoted to love. A strong, beautiful, curly-haired young man dressed in clothes embroidered with dainty flowers, the Squire fights in the hope of winning favor with his “lady.” His talents are those of the courtly lover—singing, playing the flute, drawing, writing, and riding—and he loves so passionately that he gets little sleep at night. He is a dutiful son, and fulfills his responsibilities toward his father, such as carving his meat. Accompanying the Knight and Squire is the Knight’s Yeoman, or freeborn servant. The Yeoman wears green from head to toe and carries an enormous bow and beautifully feathered arrows, as well as a sword and small shield. His gear and attire suggest that he is a forester.

Next, the narrator describes the Prioress, named Madame Eglentyne. Although the Prioress is not part of the royal court, she does her best to imitate its manners. She takes great care to eat her food daintily, to reach for food on the table delicately, and to wipe her lip clean of grease before drinking from her cup. She speaks French, but with a provincial English accent. She is compassionate toward animals, weeping when she sees a mouse caught in a trap, and feeding her dogs roasted meat and milk. The narrator says that her features are pretty, even her enormous forehead. On her arm she wears a set of prayer beads, from which hangs a gold brooch that features the Latin words for “Love Conquers All.” Another nun and three priests accompany her.

The Monk is the next pilgrim the narrator describes. Extremely handsome, he loves hunting and keeps many horses. He is an outrider at his monastery (he looks after the monastery’s business with the external world), and his horse’s bridle can be heard jingling in the wind as clear and loud as a church bell. The Monk is aware that the rule of his monastic order discourages monks from engaging in activities like hunting, but he dismisses such strictures as worthless. The narrator says that he agrees with the Monk: why should the Monk drive himself crazy with study or manual labor? The fat, bald, and well-dressed Monk resembles a prosperous lord.

The next member of the company is the Friar—a member of a religious order who lives entirely by begging. This friar is jovial, pleasure-loving, well-spoken, and socially agreeable. He hears confessions, and assigns very easy penance to people who donate money. For this reason, he is very popular with wealthy landowners throughout the country. He justifies his leniency by arguing that donating money to friars is a sign of true repentance, even if the penitent is incapable of shedding tears. He also makes himself popular with innkeepers and barmaids, who can give him food and drink. He pays no attention to beggars and lepers because they can’t help him or his fraternal order. Despite his vow of poverty, the donations he extracts allow him to dress richly and live quite merrily.

Tastefully attired in nice boots and an imported fur hat, the Merchant speaks constantly of his profits. The merchant is good at borrowing money, but clever enough to keep anyone from knowing that he is in debt. The narrator does not know his name. After the Merchant comes the Clerk, a thin and threadbare student of

philosophy at Oxford, who devours books instead of food. The Man of Law, an influential lawyer, follows next. He is a wise character, capable of preparing flawless legal documents. The Man of Law is a very busy man, but he takes care to appear even busier than he actually is.

ANALYSIS

The Canterbury Tales is more than an estates satire because the characters are fully individualized creations rather than simple good or bad examples of some ideal type. Many of them seem aware that they inhabit a socially defined role and seem to have made a conscious effort to redefine their prescribed role on their own terms. For instance, the Squire is training to occupy the same social role as his father, the Knight, but unlike his father he defines this role in terms of the ideals of courtly love rather than crusading. The Prioress is a nun, but she aspires to the manners and behavior of a lady of the court, and, like the Squire, incorporates the motifs of courtly love into her Christian vocation. Characters such as the Monk and the Friar, who more obviously corrupt or pervert their social roles, are able to offer a justification and a rationale for their behavior, demonstrating that they have carefully considered how to go about occupying their professions.

Within each portrait, the narrator praises the character being described in superlative terms, promoting him or her as an outstanding example of his or her type. At the same time, the narrator points out things about many of the characters that the reader would be likely to view as flawed or corrupt, to varying degrees. The narrator's naïve stance introduces many different ironies into the General Prologue. Though it is not always clear exactly how ironic the narrator is being, the reader can perceive a difference between what each character *should* be and what he or she is.

The narrator is also a character, and an incredibly complex one at that. Examination of the narrator's presentation of the pilgrims reveals some of his prejudices. The Monk's portrait, in which the narrator inserts his own judgment of the Monk into the actual portrait, is the clearest example of this. But most of the time, the narrator's opinions are more subtly present. What he does and doesn't discuss, the order in which he presents or recalls details, and the extent to which he records objective characteristics of the pilgrims are all crucial to our own ironic understanding of the narrator.

The Knight, the Squire, and the Yeoman

The Knight has fought in crusades the world over, and comes as close as any of the characters to embodying the ideals of his vocation. But even in his case, the narrator suggests a slight separation between the individual and the role: the Knight doesn't simply exemplify chivalry, truth, honor, freedom, and courtesy; he "loves" them. His virtues are due to his self-conscious pursuit of clearly conceived ideals. Moreover, the Knight's comportment is significant. Not only is he a worthy warrior, he is prudent in the image of himself that he projects. His appearance is calculated to express humility rather than vainglory.

Whereas the narrator describes the Knight in terms of abstract ideals and battles, he describes the Knight's son, the Squire, mostly in terms of his aesthetic attractiveness. The Squire prepares to occupy the same role as his father, but he envisions that role differently, supplementing his father's devotion to military prowess and the Christian cause with the ideals of courtly love (see discussion of courtly love under "Themes, Motifs, and Symbols"). He displays all of the accomplishments and behaviors prescribed for the courtly lover: he grooms and dresses himself carefully, he plays and sings, he tries to win favor with his "lady," and he doesn't sleep at night because of his overwhelming love. It is important to recognize, however, that the Squire isn't simply in love because he is young and handsome; he has picked up all of his behaviors and poses from his culture.

The description of the Knight's servant, the Yeoman, is limited to an account of his physical appearance, leaving us with little upon which to base an inference about him as an individual. He is, however, quite well attired for someone of his station, possibly suggesting a self-conscious attempt to look the part of a forester.

The Prioress, the Monk, and the Friar

With the descriptions of the Prioress, the Monk, and the Friar, the level of irony with which each character is presented gradually increases. Like the Squire, the Prioress seems to have redefined her own role, imitating the

495 behavior of a woman of the royal court and supplementing her religious garb with a courtly love motto: Love
 Conquers All. This does not necessarily imply that she is corrupt: Chaucer's satire of her is subtle rather than
 scathing. More than a personal culpability, the Prioress's devotion to courtly love demonstrates the universal
 appeal and influence of the courtly love tradition in Chaucer's time. Throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer
 500 seems to question the popularity of courtly love in his own culture, and to highlight the contradictions between
 courtly love and Christianity.

The narrator focuses on the Prioress's table manners in minute detail, openly admiring her courtly manners. He
 seems mesmerized by her mouth, as he mentions her smiling, her singing, her French speaking, her eating, and her
 drinking. As if to apologize for dwelling so long on what he seems to see as her erotic manner, he moves to a
 consideration of her "conscience," but his decision to illustrate her great compassion by focusing on the way she
 505 treats her pets and reacts to a mouse is probably tongue-in-cheek. The Prioress emerges as a very realistically
 portrayed human being, but she seems somewhat lacking as a religious figure.

The narrator's admiring description of the Monk is more conspicuously satirical than that of the Prioress. The
 narrator zeroes in on the Monk with a vivid image: his bridle jingles as loud and clear as a chapel bell. This image is
 pointedly ironic, since the chapel is where the Monk should be but isn't. To a greater degree than the Squire or the
 510 Prioress, the Monk has departed from his prescribed role as defined by the founders of his order. He lives like a
 lord rather than a cleric. Hunting is an extremely expensive form of leisure, the pursuit of the upper classes. The
 narrator takes pains to point out that the Monk is aware of the rules of his order but scorns them.

Like the Monk, the Friar does not perform his function as it was originally conceived. Saint Francis, the prototype
 for begging friars, ministered specifically to beggars and lepers, the very people the Friar disdains. Moreover, the
 515 Friar doesn't just neglect his spiritual duties; he actually abuses them for his own profit. The description of his
 activities implies that he gives easy penance in order to get extra money, so that he can live well. Like the Monk,
 the Friar is ready with arguments justifying his reinterpretation of his role: beggars and lepers cannot help the
 Church, and giving money is a sure sign of penitence. The narrator strongly hints that the Friar is lecherous as well
 as greedy. The statement that he made many marriages at his own cost suggests that he found husbands for young
 520 women he had made pregnant. His white neck is a conventional sign of lecherousness.

The Merchant, the Clerk, and the Man of Law

The Merchant, the Clerk, and the Man of Law represent three professional types. Though the narrator valiantly
 keeps up the pretense of praising everybody, the Merchant evidently taxes his ability to do so. The Merchant is in
 525 debt, apparently a regular occurrence, and his supposed cleverness at hiding his indebtedness is undermined by
 the fact that even the naïve narrator knows about it. Though the narrator would like to praise him, the Merchant
 hasn't even told the company his name.

Sandwiched between two characters who are clearly devoted to money, the threadbare Clerk appears strikingly
 oblivious to worldly concerns. However, the ultimate purpose of his study is unclear. The Man of Law contrasts
 sharply with the Clerk in that he has used his studies for monetary gain.

530 ***General Prologue: The Franklin through the Pardoner***

SUMMARY: FRAGMENT I, LINES 331–714

The white-bearded Franklin is a wealthy gentleman farmer, possessed of lands but not of noble birth. His chief
 attribute is his preoccupation with food, which is so plenteous in his house that his house seemed to snow meat
 and drink (344–345). The narrator next describes the five Guildsmen, all artisans. They are dressed in the livery, or
 535 uniform, of their guild. The narrator compliments their shiny dress and mentions that each was fit to be a city
 official. With them is their skillful Cook, whom Chaucer would praise fully were it not for the ulcer on his shin. The
 hardy Shipman wears a dagger on a cord around his neck. When he is on his ship, he steals wine from the
 merchant he is transporting while he sleeps.

The taffeta-clad Physician bases his practice of medicine and surgery on a thorough knowledge of astronomy and

540 the four humors. He has a good setup with his apothecaries, because they make each other money. He is well acquainted with ancient and modern medical authorities, but reads little Scripture. He is somewhat frugal, and the narrator jokes that the doctor's favorite medicine is gold.

545 Next, the narrator describes the slightly deaf Wife of Bath. This keen seamstress is always first to the offering at Mass, and if someone goes ahead of her she gets upset. She wears head coverings to Mass that the narrator guesses must weigh ten pounds. She has had five husbands and has taken three pilgrimages to Jerusalem. She has also been to Rome, Cologne, and other exotic pilgrimage sites. Her teeth have gaps between them, and she sits comfortably astride her horse. The Wife is jolly and talkative, and she gives good love advice because she has had lots of experience.

550 A gentle and poor village Parson is described next. Pure of conscience and true to the teachings of Christ, the Parson enjoys preaching and instructing his parishioners, but he hates excommunicating those who cannot pay their tithes. He walks with his staff to visit all his parishioners, no matter how far away. He believes that a priest must be pure, because he serves as an example for his congregation, his flock. The Parson is dedicated to his parish and does not seek a better appointment. He is even kind to sinners, preferring to teach them by example rather than scorn. The parson is accompanied by his brother, a Plowman, who works hard, loves God and his neighbor, 555 labors "for Christ's sake" (537), and pays his tithes on time.

The red-haired Miller loves crude, bawdy jokes and drinking. He is immensely stout and strong, able to lift doors off their hinges or knock them down by running at them with his head. He has a wart on his nose with bright red hairs sticking out of it like bristles, black nostrils, and a mouth like a furnace. He wears a sword and buckler, and loves to joke around and tell dirty stories. He steals from his customers, and plays the bagpipes.

560 The Manciple stocks an Inn of Court (school of law) with provisions. Uneducated though he is, this manciple is smarter than most of the lawyers he serves. The spindly, angry Reeve has hair so short that he reminds the narrator of a priest. He manages his lord's estate so well that he is able to hoard his own money and property in a miserly fashion. The Reeve is also a good carpenter, and he always rides behind everybody else.

565 The Summoner arraigns those accused of violating Church law. When drunk, he ostentatiously spouts the few Latin phrases he knows. His face is bright red from an unspecified disease. He uses his power corruptly for his own gain. He is extremely lecherous, and uses his position to dominate the young women in his jurisdiction. In exchange for a quart of wine, he would let another man sleep with his girlfriend for a year and then pardon the man completely.

570 The Pardoner, who had just been in the court of Rome, rides with the Summoner. He sings with his companion, and has long, flowing, yellow hair. The narrator mentions that the Pardoner thinks he rides very fashionably, with nothing covering his head. He has brought back many souvenirs from his trip to Rome. The narrator compares the Pardoner's high voice to that of a goat, and mentions that he thinks the Pardoner might have been a homosexual. The narrator mocks the Pardoner for his disrespectful manipulation of the poor for his own material gain. In charge of selling papal indulgences, he is despised by the Church and most churchgoers for counterfeiting pardons and pocketing the money. The Pardoner is a good preacher, storyteller, and singer, the narrator admits, although he 575 argues it is only because he cheats people of their money in that way.

ANALYSIS

Again, the narrator describes many of the characters as though he had actually witnessed them doing things he has only heard them talk about. Other portraits, such as that of the Miller, are clearly shaped by class stereotypes.

The Franklin, the Guildsmen, and the Cook

580 The Franklin and the five Guildsmen share with the Merchant and the Man of Law a devotion to material wealth, and the narrator praises them in terms of their possessions. The description of the Franklin's table is a lavish poetic tribute to hospitality and luxury. The Haberdasher, Carpenter, Weaver, Dyer, and Tapestry-Weaver are not individualized, and they don't tell their own tales. The narrator's approval of their pride in material displays of wealth is clearly satirical. The Cook, with his disgusting physical defect, is himself a display of the Guildsmen's

585 material worth and prosperity.

The Shipman and the Physician

The descriptions of the Shipman and the Physician are both barbed with keenly satiric turns of phrase implying dishonesty and avarice. The Shipman's theft of wine is slipped in among descriptions of his professional skills, and his brutality in battle is briefly noted in the midst of his other nautical achievements. The narrator gives an
 590 impressive catalog of the Physician's learning, but then interjects the startling comment that he neglects the Bible, implying that his care for the body comes at the expense of the soul. Moreover, the narrator's remarks about the Doctor's love of gold suggest that he is out to make money rather than to help others.

The Wife of Bath

According to whether they infer Chaucer's implied attitude toward this fearless and outspoken woman as admiring or satirical, readers have interpreted the Wife of Bath as an expression either of Chaucer's proto-feminism or of his misogyny. Certainly, she embodies many of the traits that woman-hating writers of Chaucer's time attacked: she is vain, domineering, and lustful. But, at the same time, Chaucer portrays the Wife of Bath in such realistic and humane detail that it is hard to see her simply as a satire of an awful woman. Minor facets of her description, such as the gap between her teeth and her deafness, are expanded upon in the long prologue to her tale.

The Parson and the Plowman

Coming after a catalog of very worldly characters, these two brothers stand out as rare examples of Christian ideals. The Plowman follows the Gospel, loving God and his neighbor, working for Christ's sake, and faithfully paying tithes to the Church. Their "worth" is thus of a completely different kind from that assigned to the valorous Knight or to the skilled and wealthy characters. The Parson has a more complicated role than the Plowman, and a
 605 more sophisticated awareness of his importance.

The Miller, the Manciple, and the Reeve

The Miller, the Manciple, and the Reeve are all stewards, in the sense that other people entrust them with their property. All three of them abuse that trust. Stewardship plays an important symbolic role in *The Canterbury Tales*, just as it does in the Gospels. In his parables, Jesus used stewardship as a metaphor for Christian life, since God
 610 calls the individual to account for his or her actions on the Day of Judgment, just as a steward must show whether he has made a profitable use of his master's property.

The Miller seems more demonic than Christian, with his violent and brutal habits, his mouth like a furnace, the angry red hairs sprouting from his wart, and his black nostrils. His "golden thumb" alludes to his practice of cheating his customers. The narrator ironically upholds the Manciple as a model of a good steward. The Manciple's
 615 employers are all lawyers, trained to help others to live within their means, but the Manciple is even shrewder than they are. The Reeve is depicted as a very skilled thief—one who can fool his own auditors, and who knows all the tricks of managers, servants, herdsmen, and millers because he is dishonest himself. Worst of all, he enjoys his master's thanks for lending his master the things he has stolen from him.

The Summoner and the Pardoner

The Summoner and Pardoner, who travel together, are the most corrupt and debased of all the pilgrims. They are not members of holy orders but rather lay officers of the Church. Neither believes in what he does for the Church; instead, they both pervert their functions for their own gain and the corruption of others. The Summoner is a lecher and a drunk, always looking for a bribe. His diseased face suggests a diseased soul. The Pardoner is a more complicated figure. He sings beautifully in church and has a talent for beguiling his somewhat horrified audience.
 625 Longhaired and beardless, the Pardoner's sexuality is ambiguous. The narrator remarks that he thought the Pardoner to be a gelding or a mare, possibly suggesting that he is either a eunuch or a homosexual. His homosexuality is further suggested by his harmonizing with the Summoner's "stif burdoun," which means the bass line of a melody but also hints at the male genitalia (673). The Pardoner will further disrupt the agreed-upon structure of the journey (friendly tale-telling) by launching into his indulgence-selling routine, turning his tale into a sermon he frequently uses to con people into feeding his greed. The narrator's disdain of the Pardoner may in part
 630 owe to his jealousy of the Pardoner's skill at mesmerizing an audience for financial gain—after all, this is a poet's

goal as well.

General Prologue: Conclusion

SUMMARY: FRAGMENT I, LINES 715–858

635 After introducing all of the pilgrims, the narrator apologizes for any possible offense the reader may take from his tales, explaining that he feels that he must be faithful in reproducing the characters' words, even if they are rude or disgusting. He cites Christ and Plato as support for his argument that it is best to speak plainly and tell the truth rather than to lie. He then returns to his story of the first night he spent with the group of pilgrims.

640 After serving the pilgrims a banquet and settling the bill with them, the Host of the tavern speaks to the group. He welcomes and compliments the company, telling them they are the merriest group of pilgrims to pass through his inn all year. He adds that he would like to contribute to their happiness, free of charge. He says that he is sure they will be telling stories as they travel, since it would be boring to travel in silence. Therefore, he proposes to invent some entertainment for them if they will unanimously agree to do as he says. He orders the group to vote, and the narrator comments that the group didn't think it would be worthwhile to argue or deliberate over the Host's
645 proposition and agreed immediately.

The Host congratulates the group on its good decision. He lays out his plan: each of the pilgrims will tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two more on the way back. Whomever the Host decides has told the most meaningful and comforting stories will receive a meal paid for by the rest of the pilgrims upon their return. The Host also declares that he will ride with the pilgrims and serve as their guide at his own cost. If anyone disputes his
650 judgment, he says, that person must pay for the expenses of the pilgrimage.

The company agrees and makes the Host its governor, judge, and record keeper. They settle on a price for the supper prize and return to drinking wine. The next morning, the Host wakes everyone up and gathers the pilgrims together. After they have set off, he reminds the group of the agreement they made. He also reminds them that whoever disagrees with him must pay for everything spent along the way. He tells the group members to draw
655 straws to decide who tells the first tale. The Knight wins and prepares to begin his tale.

ANALYSIS

The Host shows himself to be a shrewd businessman. Once he has taken the pilgrims' money for their dinners, he takes their minds away from what they have just spent by flattering them, complimenting them for their mirth. Equally quickly, he changes the focus of the pilgrimage. In the opening lines of the General Prologue, the narrator
660 says that people go on pilgrimages to thank the martyr, who has helped them when they were in need (17–18). But Bailey (as the Host is later called) tells the group, "Ye goon to Caunterbury—God yow speede, / The blissful martir quite yow youre meede!" (769–770). He sees the pilgrimage as an economic transaction: the pilgrims travel to the martyr, and in return the martyr rewards them. The word "quite" means "repay," and it will become a major motif throughout the tales, as each character is put in a sort of debt by the previous character's tale, and must
665 repay him or her with a new tale. Instead of traveling to reach a destination (the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket), the traveling becomes a contest, and the pilgrimage becomes about the journey itself rather than the destination. Bailey also stands to profit from the contest: the winner of the contest wins a free meal at his tavern, to be paid for by the rest of the contestants, all of whom will presumably eat with the winner and thus buy more meals from Bailey.

670 After creating the storytelling contest, Bailey quickly appoints himself its judge. Once the pilgrims have voted to participate in the contest, Bailey inserts himself as their ruler, and anyone who disagrees with him faces a strict financial penalty. Some have interpreted Bailey's speedy takeover of the pilgrimage as an allegory for the beginnings of absolute monarchy. The narrator refers to the Host as the group's "governour," "juge," and "reportour [record-keeper]"—all very legalistic terms (813–814).

675 **Character Analysis: The Wife of Bath**

One of two female storytellers (the other is the Prioress), the Wife has a lot of experience under her belt. She has traveled all over the world on pilgrimages, so Canterbury is a jaunt compared to other perilous journeys she has endured. Not only has she seen many lands, she has lived with five husbands. She is worldly in both senses of the word: she has seen the world and has experience in the ways of the world, that is, in love and sex.

680 Rich and tasteful, the Wife's clothes veer a bit toward extravagance: her face is wreathed in heavy cloth, her stockings are a fine scarlet color, and the leather on her shoes is soft, fresh, and brand new—all of which demonstrate how wealthy she has become. Scarlet was a particularly costly dye, since it was made from individual red beetles found only in some parts of the world. The fact that she hails from Bath, a major English cloth-making town in the Middle Ages, is reflected in both her talent as a seamstress and her stylish garments. Bath at this time
685 was fighting for a place among the great European exporters of cloth, which were mostly in the Netherlands and Belgium. So the fact that the Wife's sewing surpasses that of the cloth makers of "Ipres and of Gaunt" (Ypres and Ghent) speaks well of Bath's (and England's) attempt to outdo its overseas competitors.

Although she is argumentative and enjoys talking, the Wife is intelligent in a commonsense, rather than
690 intellectual, way. Through her experiences with her husbands, she has learned how to provide for herself in a world where women had little independence or power. The chief manner in which she has gained control over her husbands has been in her control over their use of her body. The Wife uses her body as a bargaining tool, withholding sexual pleasure until her husbands give her what she demands.