

GENERAL PROLOGUE

The opening is a long, elaborate sentence about the effects of Spring on the vegetable and animal world, and on people. The style of the rest of the Prologue and Tales is much simpler than this opening. A close paraphrase of the opening sentence is offered at the bottom of this page.¹

	When that April with his showers soote	<i>its showers sweet</i>
	The drought of March hath piercèd to the root	
	And bathed every vein in such liquor	<i>rootlet / liquid</i>
	Of which virtúe engendered is the flower; ²	
5	When Zephyrus eke with his sweetè breath	<i>West Wind also</i>
	Inspired hath in every holt and heath	<i>grove & field</i>
	The tender croppès, and the youngè sun	<i>young shoots / Spring sun</i>
	Hath in the Ram his halfè course y-run, ³	<i>in Aries / has run</i>
	And smallè fowlès maken melody	<i>little birds</i>
10	That sleepen all the night with open eye	<i>Who sleep</i>
	(So pricketh them Natúre in their couráges),	<i>spurs / spirits</i>
	Then longen folk to go on pilgrimáges,	<i>people long</i>
	And palmers for to seeken strangè strands	<i>pilgrims / shores</i>
	To fernè hallows couth in sundry lands, ⁴	<i>distant shrines known</i>
15	And specially from every shirè's end	<i>county's</i>
	Of Engèland to Canterbury they wend	<i>go</i>
	The holy blissful martyr for to seek,	<i>St. Thomas Becket</i>
	That them hath holpen when that they were sick.	<i>Who has helped them</i>

¹ When April with its sweet showers has pierced the drought of March to the root and bathed every rootlet in the liquid by which the flower is engendered; when the west wind also, with its sweet breath, has brought forth young shoots in every grove and field; when the early sun of spring has run half his course in the sign of Aries, and when small birds make melody, birds that sleep all night with eyes open, (as Nature inspires them to) --THEN people have a strong desire to go on pilgrimages, and pilgrims long to go to foreign shores to distant shrines known in various countries. And especially they go from every county in England to seek out the shrine of the holy blessed martyr who has helped them when they were sick.

² 4: "By virtue (strength) of which the flower is engendered."

³ 8: The early sun of Spring has moved part way through the sign of Aries (the Ram) in the Zodiac.

⁴ 13-14: "Pilgrims seek foreign shores (to go) to distant shrines known in different lands." *Palmers*: pilgrims, from the palm-leaves they got in Jerusalem.

At the Tabard Inn, just south of London, the poet-pilgrim falls in with a group of twenty nine other pilgrims who have met each other along the way.

	Befell that in that season on a day	<i>It happened</i>
20	In Southwark at The Tabard as I lay	<i>inn name / lodged</i>
	Ready to wenden on my pilgrimage	<i>to go</i>
	To Canterbury with full devout couráge,	<i>spirit, heart</i>
	At night was come into that hostelry	<i>inn</i>
	Well nine and twenty in a company	<i>fully 29</i>
25	Of sundry folk by áventure y-fall	<i>by chance fallen ...</i>
	In fellowship, and pilgrims were they all	<i>...Into company</i>
	That toward Canterbury woulden ride.	<i>wished to</i>
	The chambers and the stables weren wide	<i>were roomy</i>
	And well we weren easèd at the best.	<i>entertained</i>
30	And shortly, when the sunnè was to rest,	<i>sun had set</i>
	So had I spoken with them every one	
	That I was of their fellowship anon,	
	And madè forward early for to rise	<i>agreement</i>
	To take our way there as I you devise.	<i>I shall tell you</i>
35	But natheless, while I have time and space,	<i>nevertheless</i>
	Ere that I further in this talè pace,	<i>Before I go</i>
	Methinketh it accordant to reason	<i>It seems to me</i>
	To tell you all the condition	<i>circumstances</i>
	Of each of them so as it seemèd me,	<i>to me</i>
40	And which they weren, and of what degree	<i>And who / social rank</i>
	And eke in what array that they were in;	<i>also / dress</i>
	And at a knight then will I first begin.	

The Knight is the person of highest social standing on the pilgrimage though you would never know it from his modest manner or his clothes. He keeps his ferocity for crusaders' battlefields where he has distinguished himself over many years and over a wide geographical area. As the text says, he is not "gay", that is, he is not showily dressed, but is still wearing the military padded coat stained by the armor he has only recently taken off.

A KNIGHT there was and that a worthy man
 That from the timè that he first began
 45 To riden out, he lovèd chivalry,
 Truth and honóur, freedom and courtesy.¹

¹ 45-6: "He loved everything that pertained to knighthood: truth (to one's word), honor, magnanimity

Full worthy was he in his lord's war,
 And thereto had he ridden--no man farre
 As well in Christendom as Heatheness
 50 And ever honoured for his worthiness.

*lorde's = king's or God's
 farther
 heathendom*

His 

At Alexandria he was when it was won.
 Full often time he had the board begun
 Aboven allè nations in Prussia.¹
 In Lithow had he reisèd and in Russia
 55 No Christian man so oft of his degree.
 In Gránad' at the siege eke had he be
 Of Algesir and ridden in Belmarie.
 At Leyès was he and at Satalie
 When they were won, and in the Greatè Sea
 60 At many a noble army had he be.
 At mortal battles had he been fifteen
 And foughten for our faith at Tramissene
 In listès thrice, and ay slain his foe.²
 This ilkè worthy knight had been also
 65 Sometimè with the lord of Palatie
 Against another heathen in Turkey,
 And ever more he had a sovereign prize,³

*captured
 table*

*Lithuania / fought
 rank*

Granada / also

Mediterranean

*combat 3 times & always
 same*

always

His 

And though that he was worthy he was wise,
 And of his port as meek as is a maid.
 70 Ne never yet no villainy he said

*valiant / sensible
 deportment
 rudeness*

(*freedom*), courtesy."

¹ 52-3: He had often occupied the seat of honor at the table of the Teutonic Knights in Prussia, where badges awarded to distinguished crusaders read "Honneur vainc tout: Honor conquers all." Though the campaigns listed below were real, and though it was perhaps just possible for one man to have been in them all, the list is probably idealized. The exact geographical locations are of little interest today. This portrait is generally thought to show a man of unsullied ideals; Jones (see Bibliography) insists that the knight was a mere mercenary.

² 63: "In single combat (*listes*) three times, and always (*ay*) killed his opponent."

³ 64-67: The knight had fought for one Saracen or pagan leader against another, a common, if dubious, practice. *And ever more ...* may mean he always kept the highest reputation or that he always came away with a splendid reward or booty (*prize*)..

*In the **Wife of Bath** we have one of only three women on the pilgrimage. Unlike the other two she is not a nun, but a much-married woman, a widow yet again. Everything about her is large to the point of exaggeration: she has been married five times, has been to Jerusalem three times and her hat and hips are as large as her sexual appetite and her love of talk.*

445	A good WIFE was there of besidè Bath But she was somedeal deaf, and that was scath. Of clothmaking she haddè such a haunt She passèd them of Ypres and of Gaunt. ¹ In all the parish, wife ne was there none	<i>near somewhat d. / a pity skill surpassed</i>
450	That to the offering before her shouldè gon. ² And if there did, certain so wroth was she That she was out of allè charity. Her coverchiefs full finè were of ground; I durstè swear they weighèdèn ten pound	<i>go patience finely woven I dare</i>
455	That on a Sunday were upon her head. Her hosèn werèn of fine scarlet red Full straight y-tied, and shoes full moist and new. Bold was her face and fair and red of hue.	<i>her stockings were supple color</i>
460	She was a worthy woman all her life. Husbands at churchè door she had had five, ³ Withoutèn other company in youth, But thereof needeth not to speak as nouth. And thrice had she been at Jerusalem.	<i>not counting now 3 times</i>
465	She had passèd many a strangè stream. At Romè she had been and at Boulogne, In Galicia at St James and at Cologne.	<i>many a foreign [famous shrines]</i>

(cont'd)

¹ 448: Ypres, Ghent (Gaunt): Famous cloth-making towns across the English Channel.

² 449-452: There was no woman in the whole parish who dared to get ahead of her in the line to make their offering (in church). If anyone did, she was so angry that she had no charity (or patience) left.

³ 460: Weddings took place in the church porch, followed by Mass inside.

- 545 The MILLER was a stout carl for the nones. *strong fellow*
 Full big he was of brawn and eke of bones *& also*
 That proved well, for over all there he came *wherever*
 At wrestling he would have always the ram. *prize*
 He was short-shouldered, broad, a thickè knarre. *rugged fellow*
- 550 There was no door that he n'ould heave off harre¹
 Or break it at a running with his head.
 His beard as any sow or fox was red,
 And thereto broad as though it were a spade. *And also*
 Upon the copright of his nose he had *tip*
- 555 A wart, and thereon stood a tuft of hairs
 Red as the bristles of a sowè's ears.
 His nostrils blackè were and wide.
 A sword and buckler bore he by his side. *shield*
- 560 He was a jangler and a goliardese *talker & joker*
 And that was most of sin and harlotries. *dirty talk*
 Well could he stolen corn and tollèn thrice, *take triple toll*
 And yet he had a thumb of gold pardee.² *by God*
 A white coat and a blue hood wearèd he.
- 565 A bagpipe well could he blow and sound
 And therewithal he brought us out of town. *with that*

The Manciple is in charge of buying provisions for a group of Lawyers in London, but is shrewder in his management than all of them put together.

- A gentle MANCIPLE was there of a temple³
 Of which achatours mightè take example *buyers*
 For to be wise in buying of vitaille; *victuals, food*
 570 For whether that he paid or took by taille *by tally, on credit*
 Algate he waited so in his achate *Always / buying*

¹ 550: "There was no door that he could not heave off its hinges (*harre*)."

² 563: A phrase hard to explain. It is sometimes said to allude to a saying that an honest miller had a thumb of gold, i.e. there is no such thing as an honest miller. But the phrase "And yet" after the information that the miller is a thief, would seem to preclude that meaning, or another that has been suggested: his thumb, held on the weighing scale, produced gold.

³ 567: A manciple was a buying agent for a college or, as here, for one of the Inns of Court, the Temple, an association of lawyers, once the home of the Knights Templar. Clearly the meaning of the word "gentle" here as with the Pardoner later, has nothing to do with good breeding or "gentle" birth. Presumably it does not mean "gentle" in our sense either. Its connotations are hard to be sure of. See "ENDPAPERS."

In daunger had he, at his owne guise
 The younge girls of the diocese.¹
 665 And knew their counsel and was all their redde.
 A garland had he set upon his head
 As great as it were for an alestake.
 A buckler had he made him of a cake.²

*In his power / disposal**secrets / adviser**tavern sign**shield*

*With the disgusting Summoner is his friend, his singing partner and possibly his lover,
 the even more corrupt **Pardoner***

With him there rode a gentle PARDONER.³
 670 Of Rouncival, his friend and his compeer
 That straight was comen from the court of Rome.
 Full loud he sang "Come hither love to me."⁴
 This Summoner bore to him a stiff burdoun.
 Was never trump of half so great a sound.
 675 This pardoner had hair as yellow as wax
 But smooth it hung as does a strike of flax.
 By ounces hung his lockes that he had,
 And therewith he his shoulders overspread.
 But thin it lay, by colpons, one by one,
 680 But hood, for jollity, wearèd he none,
 For it was trussed up in his wallet:
 Him thought he rode all of the newè jet,
 Dishevelled; save his cap he rode all bare.
 Such glaring eyen had he as a hare.
 685 A vernicle had he sewed upon his cap.⁵

*colleague**had come directly**bass melody**trumpet**hank**By strands**clumps**bag**fashion**W. hair loose**eyes*

¹ 664: *girls* probably meant "prostitutes," as it still can. See "Friars Tale," 1355 ff for further information on the activities of summoners.

² 667: A tavern "sign" was a large wreath or broom on a pole. Acting the buffoon, the Summoner has also turned a thin cake into a shield.

³ 669: The Pardoner professes to give gullible people pardon for their sins in exchange for money, as well as a view of his pretended holy relics which will bring them blessings. He too is physically repellent. His high voice and beardlessness suggest that he is not a full man but something eunuch-like, again a metaphor for his sterile spiritual state. His headquarters were at Rouncival near Charing Cross in London. See ENDPAPERS; and also for "gentle".

⁴ 672: The Pardoner's relationship to the Summoner is not obvious but appears to be sexual in some way. The rhyme *Rome / to me* may have been forced or comic even in Chaucer's day; it is impossible or ludicrous today.

⁵ 685: *vernicle*: a badge with an image of Christ's face as it was believed to have been imprinted on the veil of Veronica when she wiped His face on the way to Calvary. Such badges were frequently sold to pilgrims.

His wallet lay before him in his lap *bag*
 Bretfull of pardons, come from Rome all hot. *crammed*
 A voice he had as small as hath a goat. *thin*
 No beard had he nor never should he have;
 690 As smooth it was as it were late y-shave. *recently shaved*
 I trow he were a gelding or a mare. *guess*

His [redacted]

But of his craft, from Berwick unto Ware *trade*
 Ne was there such another pardoner,
 For in his mail he had a pillowber *bag / pillowcase*
 695 Which that he saidè was Our Lady's veil. *O.L's = Virgin Mary's*
 He said he had a gobbet of the sail *piece*
 That Saintè Peter had when that he went
 Upon the sea, till Jesus Christ him hent. *pulled him out*
 He had a cross of latten full of stones *brass*
 700 And in a glass he haddè piggès' bones.

His skill in [redacted] *and* [redacted] *money from people*

But with these "relics" when that he [had] found
 A poorè parson dwelling upon land, *in the country*
 Upon one day he got him more money
 Than that the parson got in monthès tway;
 705 And thus, with feignèd flattery and japes *two*
 He made the parson and the people his apes. *tricks*
 But truly, to tellèn at the last, *fools, dupes*
 He was in church a noble ecclesiast. *the facts*
 Well could he read a lesson and a story. *churchman*
 710 But alderbest he sang an offertory ¹ *best of all*
 For well he wisté when that song was sung *knew*
 He mustè preach and well afile his tongue *sharpen*
 To winne silver as he full well could. *knew how*
 Therefore he sang the merrierly and loud.

This is the end of the portraits of the pilgrims.

¹ 710: The offertory was that part of the Mass where the bread and wine were first offered by the priest. It was also the point at which the people made their offerings to the parish priest, and to the Pardoner when he was there. The prospect of money put him in good voice.

After serving dinner, Harry Bailly, the fictional Host or owner of the Tabard Inn originates the idea for the Tales:

	Great cheerè made our HOST us every one, ¹	<i>welcome / for us</i>
	And to the supper set he us anon.	<i>quickly</i>
	He servèd us with victuals at the best.	<i>the best food</i>
750	Strong was the wine and well to drink us lest.	<i>it pleased us</i>
	A seemly man our Hosté was withall	<i>fit</i>
	For to be a marshall in a hall.	<i>master of ceremonies</i>
	A largè man he was with eyen steep	<i>prominent eyes</i>
	A fairer burgess was there none in Cheap.	<i>citizen / Cheapside</i>
755	Bold of his speech and wise and well y-taught	
	And of manhood him lackèdè right naught.	
	Eke thereto he was right a merry man,	<i>And besides</i>
	And after supper playèn he began	<i>joking</i>
	And spoke of mirthè amongst other things,	
760	(When that we had made our reckonings),	<i>paid our bills</i>
	And saidè thus: "Now, lordings, truly	<i>ladies and g'men</i>
	You be to me right welcome heartily,	
	For by my truth, if that I shall not lie,	
	I saw not this year so merry a company	
765	At oncè in this harbor as is now.	<i>this inn</i>
	Fain would I do you mirthè, wist I how,	<i>Gladly / if I knew</i>
	And of a mirth I am right now bethought	<i>amusement</i>
	To do you ease, and it shall costè naught.	
	You go to Canterbury, God you speed.	
770	The blissful martyr 'quitè you your meed.	<i>give you reward</i>
	And well I wot, as you go by the way,	<i>I know / along the road</i>
	You shapèn you to talèn and to play;	<i>intend to tell tales & jokes</i>
	For truly, comfort nor mirth is none	
	To ridèn by the way dumb as a stone;	
775	And therefore would I makèn you desport	<i>amusement for you</i>
	As I said erst, and do you some comfort.	<i>before</i>
	And if you liketh all by one assent	<i>if you please</i>
	For to standen at my judgèment	<i>abide by</i>
	And for to workèn as I shall you say,	
780	Tomorrow when you ridèn by the way,	

¹ 747: "The Host had a warm welcome for every one of us." The Host is the innkeeper of The Tabard, Harry Bailly.

Now by my father's soule that is dead,¹
 But you be merry, I'll give you my head. *If you're not*
 Hold up your hands withouten more speech."
 Our counsel was not longè for to seek. *Our decision*

The pilgrims agree to [REDACTED]

785 Us thought it was not worth to make it wise, *not worthwhile / difficult*
 And granted him withouten more advice, *discussion*
 And bade him say his verdict as him lest. *as pleased him*

*To pass the time pleasantly, every one will [REDACTED] on the way out
 and a couple on the way back.*

"Lordings," quod he, "now hearken for the best, *Ladies & g'men*
 But take it not, I pray you, in disdain.
 790 This is the point -- to speaken short and plain:
 That each of you to shorten with our way
 In this viage, shall tellen talès tway *journey / two*
 To Canterbury-ward, I mean it so, *on the way to C.*
 And homeward he shall tellen other two
 795 Of adventures that whilom have befall. *events / in past*

*The teller of the best tale will [REDACTED] at Harry's inn, The Tabard,
 on the way back from Canterbury. He offers to [REDACTED]*

And which of you that bears him best of all,
 That is to say, that telleth in this case
 Talès of best senténcé and most soláce, *instruction / amusement*
 Shall have a supper at our aller cost *at expense of all of us*
 800 Here in this place, sitting by this post
 When that we come again from Canterbury.
 And for to maken you the more merry
 I will myselfen goodly with you ride *gladly*
 Right at mine ownè cost, and be your guide.
 805 And whoso will my judgements withsay *whoever / contradict*
 Shall pay all that we spenden by the way,² *on the trip*

¹ 781: "Now, by the soul of my dead father ..."

² The host will be the Master of Ceremonies and judge. Anyone who revolts against the Host's rulings will have to pay what the others spend along the way.

And if you vouchesafe that it be so, *agree*
 Tell me anon withouten wordès mo' *now / more*
 And I will early shapèn me therefore." *prepare*

They all [redacted] agreeing that the Host be MC, and then they [redacted]

810 This thing was granted and our oathès swore
 With full glad heart, and prayèd him also
 That he would vouchèsafe for to do so *agree*
 And that he wouldè be our governor
 And of our talès judge and reporter,
 815 And set a supper at a certain price, *direction*
 And we will rulèd be at his device
 In high and low; and thus by one assent
 We been accorded to his judgèment. *agreed*
 And thereupon the wine was fetchèd anon.
 820 We dranken, and to restè went each one
 Withoutèn any longer tarrying.

The next morning they set out and [redacted]

A-morrow, when the day began to spring
 Up rose our Host, and was our aller cock,¹
 And gathered us together in a flock,
 825 And forth we rode a little more than pace *no great speed*
 Unto the watering of St Thomas.
 And there our Host began his horse arrest,
 And saidè: "Lordings, hearken if you lest.
 You wot your forward (and I it you record)
 830 If evensong and morrowsong accord.²
 Let see now who shall tell the firstè tale.
 As ever may I drinkèn wine or ale,
 Whoso be rebel to my judgèment *Whoever is*
 Shall pay for all that by the way is spent.
 835 Now drawèth cut, ere that we further twinn; *draw lots before we go*

¹ 823: "He was the cock (rooster) for all of us." That is, he got us all up at cockcrow.

² 825-30: They set out at a gentle pace, and at the first watering place for the horses, (*the watering of St. Thomas*) the Host says: "Ladies and gentlemen, listen please. You know (*wot*) your agreement (*forward*), and I remind (*record*) you of it, if evening hymn and morning hymn agree," i.e. if what you said last night still holds this morning.

He which that has the shortest shall begin.
 Sir Knight," quod he, "my master and my lord,
 Now draweth cut, for that is mine accord. *said he*
 Come near," quod he, "my lady Prioress. *draw lots / wish*
 840 And you, Sir Clerk, let be your shamefastness, *shyness*
 Nor study not. Lay hand to, every man."

They all draw lots. It falls to [redacted] to tell the first tale

Anon to drawen every wight began *person*
 And shortly for to tellen as it was,
 Were it by aventure or sort or cas, *Whether by fate, luck or fortune*
 845 The sooth is this, the cut fell to the knight, *The truth / the lot*
 Of which full blithe and glad was every wight. *very happy / person*
 And tell he must his tale as was reason
 By forward and by composition *By promise & contract*
 As you have heard. What needeth wordes mo'? *more*
 850 And when this good man saw that it was so,
 As he that wise was and obedient
 To keep his forward by his free assent, *his agreement*
 He said: "Since I shall begin the game,
 What! welcome be the cut, in God's name.
 855 Now let us ride, and hearken what I say."
 And with that word we riden forth our way
 And he began with right a merry cheer *with great good humor*
 His tale anon, and said as you may hear. *at once*