Geoffrey Chaucer
The Canterbury Tales

'The translation is certainly the best we have ever had.'
Peter Levi

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GEOFFREY CHAUCER
The Canterbury Tales

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For
Will Sulkin: instigator
and
C. H. Sisson: grant translateur

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INTRODUCTION

THE 'tales of Canterbury', as Chaucer refers to his last and most ambitious poem, describe a fictional journey from the Tabard Inn in Southwark, just outside London, to Canterbury, sixty miles away. Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1162 to 1170, had been brutally murdered in his cathedral over a disagreement with Henry II (1133–89), and, after Becket was canonized (in 1173), Canterbury became one of the most important sites for pilgrimage in the Christian West. The group assembled in the Tabard have a very serious purpose, then, and the *Canterbury Tales* is, at root, an equally serious exploration of social life (in what good and bad ways people may live together) and human purpose (as a character in the Knight's Tale puts it, 'What is this life? What should men wish to have?'). But it is also a poem that is equally serious about noticing and appreciating the comedy that comes from human foibles. The result is an exploration of human possibility as enjoyable as it is rich, and as balanced as it is varied.

The *Canterbury Tales* is also very much a poem of its time, and the long introduction Chaucer gives us in the General Prologue presents the pilgrims as a convenient cross-section of fourteenth-century English society. Although Chaucer has a knack for providing just the descriptive detail that will individualize each pilgrim, they are almost never identified by anything other than their profession, and they seem, in most ways, to derive their entire world view from the position in society given them by the work they do. They also often (although not always) manifest their personalities in the tales they tell, and the simple plan of the *Canterbury Tales*, proposed by the proprietor of the Tabard (the Host), is that each pilgrim will entertain his companions by telling two tales on the journey to Canterbury and two on the way back, and whoever is judged to have told the 'best' tale (which the Host defines as 'the most pleasing and informative') will be treated to a meal by all the other pilgrims. This form, sometimes called a 'frame-tale' because it uses one story (the pilgrimage) to frame others (the tales each pilgrim tells), was not invented by Chaucer, but he makes his frame unusually organic and vivid.

The *Canterbury Tales* collects an enormous variety of narratives (romance, bawdy comedy, beast fable, learned debate, saint's life, parable, Eastern adventure), and, given Chaucer's great ambition, and the length of time over which the individual tales were written, it is not surprising that they are of uneven quality. And yet part of their richness is to provide something for almost every kind of reader (it is markedly the case that the poems that were most popular in the centuries after Chaucer are the least popular with students and scholars now). The great majority of the *Tales* are extraordinary however, by turns elaborately ornamented and elegant in their language, movingly passionate in their sentiment, or precise in the minutiae of their observation and comic timing. At their very best, however, what is most characteristic of Chaucer's style and language is the tendency for every aspect of its artfulness to melt away, with the result that all that has been elaborately constructed—almost in direct proportion to the care of that construction—appears so natural as to be 'real' and so familiar as to be always and simply true.

Chaucer's Life

Chaucer's career gave him the support and patronage he needed to write poetry, but it also provided a tour of human variety, since Chaucer himself lived a life of extraordinary social mobility for the Middle Ages. Although his father was wealthy, he was a merchant and no more, but Chaucer—no doubt helped along by his father's money—moved into aristocratic circles at a very young age. By 17 he is visible in the public record as a *pajettus* ('page') in the household of the son of Edward III. He then moved steadily from court to greater court until, by the age of 27, he is an *esquire* (that is, of a rank just below a knight) in the court of the king himself. It is usual for biographies of Chaucer to note that the 500 or so public documents that survive with some mention of his activities never once mention that Chaucer was a poet. But the converse is not true, since his poetry was often addressed to public men of great power. And, while Chaucer performed the variety of tasks normal for a courtier (serving in attendance at large functions; ferrying letters and money; taking part in military campaigns), it is clear that he was also particularly successful in the creation of the short and long poems whose recitation was a central court entertainment. Chaucer clearly wanted to be around powerful aristocrats, but much of his success in

their company was surely due to the fact that he wrote such pleasing poetry that they liked to have him around too.

Despite the quality of his connections, Chaucer was, essentially, a civil servant. As he suggests in *The House of Fame* (*c*. 1380), much of the reading that informed his poetry—and presumably the writing of that poetry as well—occurred late in the evening, after a long day's work. Although Chaucer had an excellent early literary education, in a day when the majority of people were illiterate, that education also qualified him to read and write in much more utilitarian ways. In trips to Genoa and Florence in 1372 and Lombardy in 1378, Chaucer's knowledge of Latin (then the international language in the West) was doubtless the qualifying skill for the diplomacy that was his mission. As Controller of Customs from 1374 he was responsible for keeping accurate records of the various payments of the export duty on wool, one of England's most important tax revenues. As Clerk of the King's Works from 1389 he would have sent letters in a variety of directions to maintain the king's properties for which he was responsible. His steady progress through these positions suggests that Chaucer was as able a bureaucrat as he was a poet, but it may be, again, that the two skills were not unrelated. Chaucer's earliest major poem, *The Book of the Duchess* (1369), is a daring attempt to console John of Gaunt, one of the most powerful men in England, on the anniversary of his muchbeloved wife's death. It must have been perfectly judged since Chaucer benefited from Gaunt's patronage long afterwards. But to collect hefty taxes from men more powerful than yourself, or to bring disappointing or expensive news about building works to your king, required no less expressive precision than writing such a poem, and Chaucer was clearly as good with the tactful approach in the delicate situation as he was with the well-turned phrase.

Chaucer also survived some of the greatest civil and social tumult that medieval England ever saw. The rising of a group of commoners against what they perceived to be an unjust tax in 1381, and their rampage through London, was only the most concentrated moment of violence in a very unstable set of decades which saw a boy ascend the throne in 1377 (Richard II, aged 10), groups of powerful lords attempt to usurp his power by putting his favourites to death (in the 'Merciless Parliament' of 1388), and, finally, the deposition of Richard in 1399. Through it all, disagreement and serious in-fighting in London among various factions resulted in the death of at

least one writer, Thomas Usk (beheaded in 1388). Chaucer's skill as a bureaucrat need not have seen him through all of these changes, and it is clear that at certain moments of his career—particularly in the period 1386–9, when he seems to have left London—he was simply prudent enough to move, smartly, out of harm's way. Chaucer can also be seen using his literary skills to navigate his way through very troubled waters. The poem usually called 'Chaucer's Complaint to His Purse' is a short allegory, written in the dangerous moment just after Richard II's deposition, in which Chaucer is bold enough to address complaints about his finances to the new king Henry IV. He must have got the timing and the tone just right again, for the annuity Richard had been paying him is paid as usual the following June.

The work Chaucer did to earn his living and the politics he lived through affected what he wrote deeply, but it is the books that Chaucer encountered along the way that shaped his poetry most of all. The six short texts that comprise the basic curriculum for beginning students (the collections of proverbs, beast fables, mini-epics, and elegies that made up what is sometimes called the *Libri catoniani*) are still shaping the poetry Chaucer writes at the end of his life. In the 1360s Chaucer translated the Old French *Romance of the Rose* (1230 and 1275), an allegory describing the wooing of a lady by her lover, and its themes and many aspects of its structure substantially influence the style and genre of Chaucer's early work. Two of the romance's most striking figures ('False Seeming' and 'The Old Woman') are the basis of Chaucer's most memorable and vivacious pilgrims in the *Canterbury Tales* (the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath). Chaucer must have read Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1308–21) in the late 1370s since the *House of Fame* offers a delightful parody of some of its key elements, while also offering a searching exploration of how any poet can hope to succeed in the face of great predecessors such as Dante. Chaucer also read a number of works by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75) in this period, and as his poetry grew increasingly ambitious he turned to Boccaccio again and again for source material and inspiration: *Palamon and Arcite* (later incorporated into the *Canterbury Tales* as the Knight's Tale) is based on Boccaccio's *Teseida* (1340–1) and *Troilus and Criseyde* is based on Boccaccio's *Filostrato* (1335–40). In the middle of the 1380s, Chaucer also decided to translate Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy,* a sixthcentury treatise (mixing sections of poetry and prose) that draws on the

whole tradition of ancient philosophy in order to explain the nature of misfortune so that it might be more easily endured. Chaucer internalized the *Consolation* so deeply that whole passages from it turn up as the very words and thoughts of his most important characters.

The Plan of the Canterbury Tales

At some point in the late 1380s Chaucer conceived the idea of the *Canterbury Tales* and, perhaps because his career in the civil service had earned him sufficient wealth and position—or perhaps because he finally wanted to devote himself exclusively to writing poetry—this idea gradually grew until it absorbed all of his attention. Chaucer probably derived the structure of the *Tales* from Boccaccio, whose *Decameron* (1350–3) also creates a frame-tale to surround a sequence of narratives. But where Boccaccio's collection is rigorously ordered (ten tales per day are told over ten days, in a fixed place, with each day of tales involving a particular theme) Chaucer's frame is not only loose, but disordered by design. Despite the Host's attempt to organize proceedings, the Miller and the Reeve quickly take matters into their own hands, and, as the pilgrims spill out into and along the road to Canterbury, it is the drama of their interactions that dictates what tales will get told, by whom, and when. Some tales (the Monk's and the Tale of Sir Topaz) are begun but never finished (they are interrupted because the pilgrims find them either unpleasant or bad). The Canon's Yeoman joins the group after they are well under way and then tells a tale of his own. A storytelling contest that moves further and further away from its initial plan has an inherent liveliness, but it is also a very convenient structure for a poet like Chaucer who clearly had a drawer full of unfinished or unsatisfactory poems which could be inserted, without alteration, so that they could be interrupted or decried by the pilgrims as 'bad'. Because Chaucer refers to them in the *Legend of Good Women* as free-standing poems, it is also clear that the fully finished poems, the Knight's Tale and the Second Nun's Tale, existed long before Chaucer had conceived the idea of the *Tales*. And because Chaucer seems to draw on it for language and ideas in a large number of other tales it is equally likely that he had already written the treatise that would become the Parson's Tale.

   The *Canterbury Tales* is not only incomplete by design, however, it is unfinished by accident. The two facts are surprisingly related because, even

though the Host proposes a scheme in which each pilgrim will tell more tales than they ever actually tell, by the end of the *Tales* it is clear that Chaucer's plan is much simpler (rather than two tales in each direction, each pilgrim tells only one tale and only on the way to Canterbury); since it is most likely that the beginning of the *Tales* was written later, Chaucer must have been revising the *Tales* to make them *more* ambitious and more difficult to finish as he went along. Chaucer must also have died suddenly, either after a short illness or a catastrophic accident, but he also never took the opportunity to reconcile many loose ends of the most minor sort (the Shipman's Tale uses a few pronouns which suggest it is being told by a woman; the Second Nun's Tale uses a phrase that suggests it is being told by a man; the Man of Law says that he will speak in prose when he delivers a tale in verse). Chaucer also failed to write many of the passages linking the tales he had written, begun, or simply earmarked for final inclusion in the collection, and so the *Tales* not only falls into ten distinct pieces (usually called 'fragments'), but, with the exception of the first and last of these, it is difficult to know what order Chaucer intended for the whole. The scribe who made the first complete copies of the *Tales* (by hand, since the printing press would not arrive in Britain for eighty-five years) did the best that really could be done, and his scheme is followed in most editions and in this translation. This deep uncertainty about the order of the *Canterbury Tales* presents an even larger interpretative challenge for anyone trying to assign larger meaning to the whole, however, since any perception of cumulative meanings may simply be an illusion born out of the particular order in which the *Tales* are being read.

Gender and Power

One of the earliest and most persuasive readings derived from the modern printed order of the *Tales* was the suggestion, by George Kittredge (1860–1941), that, at the 'centre' of the collection, was something that should be understood as the 'Marriage Group'. Kittredge was referring to the explosive quality of the Wife of Bath's prologue, which is so provocative that the Wife has been interrupted twice before she has even begun her tale. But he was also thinking of the *Tales* in their standard order as a work akin to a novel (with continuous characters and a developing plot), so that, once a provocative idea is introduced it is 'developed' over the course of a

number of tales. The Wife of Bath is designed with the strongest of personalities and, to an audience comprised almost entirely of men (the only other female pilgrims are the Prioress and the nun attending her), she claims to have taken advantage of her five husbands. It is therefore inevitable that the other tales that focus on the issue of marriage will seem in some way to respond to her views, particularly since those tales seem to describe a very neatly schematic set of complementary scenarios, one in which the wife is completely subservient (the Clerk's Tale), another in which the husband thinks he is in control but is being duped (the Merchant's Tale), and a marriage of such successful mutuality that it seems capable of surviving a betrayal (the Franklin's Tale). It helps that the standard sequence unfolds these tales with the successful marriage 'last', as if the extremes must be examined before the 'plot' of the *Tales* as a whole can move to a fitting 'conclusion'. But of course we have no idea in what order these tales were written, and, in fact, in what may be the oldest copy of the *Canterbury Tales* we have, this 'group' is broken up and the Clerk's Tale follows the Franklin's Tale anyway.

Kittredge's failure to take in such uncertainties about the order of the *Tales* does not invalidate his insight that the collection has distinct centres, but these 'centres' are not spatial—they are not 'grouped' together physically—but are, rather, centres of *meaning,* concerns so important to such a number of tales that they become fundamental to the meaning of the collection as a whole. Kittredge was also right that the dynamics of power between men and women was one of these (although 'marriage' is not the only form in which that dynamic matters); in fact, the subject was so important to Chaucer that it not only extends to many more parts of the *Tales* than Kittredge identified, but is basic to much of Chaucer's other poetry. *Troilus and Criseyde* (1381–6), for example, while deeply influenced by the *Consolation of Philosophy,* finds the grounds for its philosophical explorations in the difficulties faced by a man and a woman trying to forge a successful relationship. Since Troilus is a Trojan and the son of the king, and Criseyde's father is a traitor who has defected to the Greeks besieging Troy, the fate of a whole civilization and the pressures of a great war are brought to bear on these two people and their search for a way to declare their love honestly. That the war itself has been caused by the abduction of a Greek woman (Helen) by the Trojan who fell in love with her (Paris) is no accident, and suggests at a different level that the

relationship between a man and a woman can be so important as to be a political problem. Chaucer uses the five books of *Troilus and Criseyde* to track just how and why this should be so, making the power imbalance between Troilus and Criseyde an illustrative and exploratory example of the power imbalance between all men and women. Once Troilus has fallen in love with Criseyde and begun to make his feelings known, Chaucer's brilliant stroke is to have him realize, just as Criseyde does, that it is almost impossible for her to agree to love him in any way he can believe (or she can mean) since he holds her life in his hands. Chaucer is of course following his source in telling this story, but when Criseyde is finally passed to the Greeks in a prisoner exchange and she 'betrays' Troilus by yielding to the advances of Diomede, a new and powerful protector, Chaucer so carefully anatomizes the difficulties of Criseyde's position that he can have each of the major characters in the story condemn her (as her uncle puts it quite simply 'for certain I hate Criseyde'), while simultaneously ensuring that his readers will recoil from this view. If Criseyde is a 'bad woman' by the estimation of all those around her, it is also those people who have given her no other means to survive.

Chaucer's next long poem, *The Legend of Good Women* (1386–7), builds upon this premiss—and, it would appear, this hardening conviction, in Chaucer's sense of the world—for what makes women 'good' in this poem, in almost every case, is that they have been betrayed by men. The symmetrical relationship is there in the prologue to the collection where, in a vision in a dream, a figure much like Chaucer (for he has written everything Chaucer has up to that point) is condemned by Cupid to penance for having written poems such as *Troilus and Criseyde* which 'defame' women. It is probably important that this represents a misreading of *Troilus and Criseyde* (the *Legend of Good Women* also has some bones to pick with bad but powerful readers), but the Chaucer-figure responds dutifully, and begins to tell a series of stories, all taken from classical sources, which describe women who are abandoned, mistreated, or violently abused by men (Cleopatra, Thisbe, Dido, Hypsipyle, Medea, Lucrece, Ariadne, Philomela). It is of course strange that, in every case, the virtue of these women is generated, inversely, by the harm done to them, but it is easy to see the importance of the strategy to Chaucer, who clearly believed that male power allowed women hardly any space in which to shape their own

lives. These stories let him focus on the injuries that power inflicts, while still insisting, in every case, that this was women's problem, not their fault.

There must also have been something deeply unsatisfying about the celebration of such pitiable victims, and, although the *Legend of Good Women* was meant to be a much longer poem, Chaucer never finished it, and the project of the *Canterbury Tales* quickly took its place. The return to issues of gender and power in these narratives could, in this sense, be seen as an equally reciprocal attempt to champion women by envisioning the opposite of a victim in the Wife of Bath. There is some evidence that the Wife of Bath was an early creation (parts of her Prologue seem to have been in circulation long before the rest of the *Tales*). Her personality is also based on a kind of reciprocity for, in another stroke of genius, Chaucer took the huge amount of poetry and prose that he had accumulated to warn men of the dangers of female sexuality and marriage (a surprisingly popular genre throughout the Middle Ages) and turned it on its head so that the Wife of Bath is created, point for point, as that genre's perfect nightmare: she marries for money, manipulates her husbands, and makes their lives a misery unless they do what she says. In a culture where women were rarely allowed any independence, it is impossible not to admire her spirit, but the tale she tells—which describes a knight who rapes a woman and is sentenced to death unless he discovers 'what women most desire'—makes clear that the stakes are reciprocal here too. Though the view is implicit rather than overtly expressed in her story, the Wife believes that there will be no happiness between men and women unless there is some sharing of power, for there is only a happy ending when the knight renounces any control he might have over his wife (he has learned that this is what women want most), and she in turn gives him exactly what he wants.

It is the strength of the Wife of Bath's performance that makes the other tales of 'marriage' in the *Canterbury Tales* seem to orient themselves around her, not because they express a range of views (as Kittredge argued) but because they offer a variety of perspectives on the same assumptions about the entwining of gender and power. While the Clerk's Tale may seem to be about a 'bad' marriage, the story of a meek wife, Griselda, dominated by her overpowering husband, Walter, Chaucer insists that this is a story about the ways in which it is *Walter's* will not Griselda's that finally bends. The Merchant's Tale might seem, in a similar way, to criticize rather than praise women's power, since the young woman, May, whom the elderly

January marries, is scheming and cruel, and finally betrays her husband right before his eyes. But this tale is also carefully structured to show that May's desire becomes dangerous only as a result of having her wishes entirely ignored. Rather than contradict the Wife of Bath's claim that men must give women power if they want to be happy, this tale shows how men suffer most (that they, in effect, condemn themselves to betrayal) when they try to subjugate women's will to their own. The Franklin's Tale continues this point by insisting that both men and women benefit when women are also given the scope to choose and have what they want.

Many more tales explore the strong connection between gender and power, and the result is a championing of women throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, whether they are subjected to men or manage to make their own decisions. In addition to the tales of the 'marriage group', this is very much the case in the Tale of Melibee, where all of the wisdom that matters resides in Melibee's wife Prudence. In the Miller's Tale and the Shipman's Tale wives who get what they want even though they cause harm to their husbands go completely unpunished. It is also no accident that the one saint's life in the collection, the Second Nun's Tale, is a story celebrating a woman's wisdom. This last example also reveals the powerful religious traditions and meanings Chaucer harnessed to this topic. Griselda acquires power through victimization in the Clerk's Tale in part because her circumstances and behaviour are continually portrayed as Christ-like: like Christ, she emerges from an 'ox's stall', and like him she defeats strength by means of patient endurance rather than brute force. This is a set of meanings Chaucer also explores in the Man of Law's Tale, where the trials endured by Constance always reveal the power given her by her faith. While valuing women's suffering like this might seem to justify women's oppression, Chaucer is simply bringing together two fundamental truths for a Christian society and emphasizing their inherent connection. If suffering is taken to be a positive good (if, like Christ, Christians are most virtuous when they can endure great hardship), then the medieval ideal of marriage (in which the wife must endure whatever demands her husband makes on her) makes women *especially* good in Christian terms. If there is a power imbalance in these religious tales, in other words, it is actually all in favour of women: to precisely the extent that the men in these tales cause women to suffer, they are actually helping them to be better Christians than those men could ever be.

Philosophies of Language

Rather than offering progressive arguments about a particular idea or generating some sort of thematic narrative by their forward motion, then, the disordered (the never-to-be-finally ordered) *Canterbury Tales* radiate outward from certain central convictions like spokes from the hub of a wheel. If the most important of these is the definition of female virtue in relation to male power, of nearly equal importance as a centre of meaning in the *Tales* is Chaucer's insistence that language is, fundamentally, a social and political instrument. This may seem an obvious point to anyone willing to pick up a book that contains a six-hundred-year-old poem. Words matter to all of us who read a great deal, and Chaucer's words matter very much to those of us who care about the history of English poetry. But Chaucer's claims about language are both more complex and more subtle than this, and might be said to occupy the area of thinking that, in its modern form, is usually called ordinary language philosophy. What Chaucer, like such philosophers, wants to say, again and again, is that words are so powerful that they amount to a sort of action. In fact, because we live in and by words, uttering words may constitute the most important actions human beings perform.

To some extent Chaucer makes these points by means of the medieval arts of verbal expression or 'rhetoric'. The rhetorical manuals available in Chaucer's day described many sorts of verbal ornament, as well as a variety of ways to amplify a point and make it more affecting or persuasive. Particularly in lengthy descriptions or speeches (as, say, in the Knight's Tale or the Merchant's Tale) and even in his more humorous tales (such as the Miller's Tale) Chaucer drew on the techniques taught by these manuals. He also makes rhetoric a topic for consideration in the Nun's Priest's Tale where the rooster, Chanticleer, also employs these techniques to try to persuade his wife, the hen Pertelote, that a dream he has had (in which he is seized by a fox in the farmyard) is prophetic. Chaucer's capacity to manage elaborate verbal flourishes over long periods of verse is never more skilful than in this long speech (which comprises almost half the tale), and yet when Chanticleer has finished, not only has he failed to persuade Pertelote, he has failed to persuade himself, and so he 'defies' his own words, leaps off his perch, and is duly seized by a fox. Although rhetoric may seem wholly ineffective in this case, the point of this lengthy introduction is to

make words the central issue of the tale (this is also done by endowing a rooster with such eloquence) and the narrative then moves smartly toward an illustration of verbal power. As the captured Chanticleer begins to talk to the fox, his words persuade (or cause) the fox to trumpet his victory. When the fox simply agrees to speak ('I'll do just that') the very act of opening his mouth to form these words frees Chanticleer. Although the events of the tale are finally trivial (a day in the life of farmyard animals), the role speech is given in these events suggests that words are not only one of the most powerful instruments we have to alter our world, they can, under the right circumstances, save a life.

Though no one has ever talked about a 'Language Group' in the *Canterbury Tales*, there are a number of other tales that might be seen to radiate out from the emphases of the Nun's Priest's Tale. A more workmanlike but fundamental contribution to this group is the Friar's Tale, which involves a systematic investigation of the relationship between intention and speech, and whose entire plot turns on the validity of a curse: if, as the old woman in the tale finally insists, she means to say that the summoner should be carried off to hell, then the fiend who is his companion will gladly ferry him there (and, since she does, he is). But the tale in which Chaucer returns most fully to the notion that words matter is the Manciple's Tale, where, as if in a mirror image of the Nun's Priest's Tale, words do not save a life but, rather, kill. Here, it is not his wife's adultery that most upsets Phoebus, nor even that his pet crow tells him about it (although he does punish the crow), but, rather, having his cuckoldry described in words. Accordingly, the tale ends with a whole list of injunctions to hold your tongue when you can and a set of images that liken the tongue to a weapon (it is, for example, like a knife that cuts).

Verbal action is also important in the *Tales* where it is not central to the plot. The Franklin's Tale involves a sequence of oaths or promises. It matters very much in the Clerk's Tale that Griselda swears never to thwart Walter's will ('I'll never wilfully disobey you in thought or deed'), since it is his will that she finally breaks. And there is a largescale commitment to the importance of words in the set of prologues and tales which are often called 'confessional' because they loosely adopt the form by which a medieval Christian might confess his wrongdoing to a priest: as the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner, and the Canon's Yeoman unfold their past deeds and inner lives at great length in their prologues, and, as the tales they tell

emerge in shapes that seem to further reveal these personalities, these pilgrims create a kind of selfhood out of words. These confessional prologues may also be understood as excessive versions of the principle by which every one of the *Canterbury Tales* is in some measure created: that we all exist, fundamentally, in language—that language is the only medium through which we *can* make ourselves known to others. This is not to say that every tale gives us some insight into the inner life of its speaker (for, as we have seen, some tales are arbitrarily assigned to their speakers and, in some cases, there is not even a prologue to introduce them), but it is very much the case that Chaucer created a fiction in which the principal activity of its characters was the making of words.

Language and Legacy

Small wonder then that Chaucer should have sometimes been called not only the 'Father of English Poetry' (by John Dryden (1631–1700), among many others) but even the Father of the English Language (by G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936)). Even though he had a knack for positioning himself in good fortune's way, much of Chaucer's perceived centrality is, however, the result of events entirely beyond his control. In subsequent centuries the dialect of Middle English that Chaucer spoke and wrote in, sometimes called the 'London standard', became the basis of what we now call Modern English, whereas many of Chaucer's contemporaries wrote in dialects that, although they have modern forms, were less and less likely to be written down.

Although he used an eight-syllable line in his first poems (the partial translation of the *Romance of the Rose*, the *Book of the Duchess*, and the *House of Fame*), Chaucer's poetry also retains the illusion of founding later English poetry because, like much verse in later centuries, it is written in ten-syllable lines, often rhyming in pairs (a structure later called 'heroic couplets'). Chaucer's lines are more regular in their syllable count than almost all of the poetry in English he would have known, and this also creates the perception of improvement and increased sophistication (although it might be better understood as a matter of taste). But even though Chaucer's long lines resemble those of Shakespeare, Milton, and Dryden, there is no direct relationship, since, in the fifteenth century, his imitators loosened the metre they had inherited from him considerably

(often elevating the variations he allowed into line 'types'), with the result that the regular, ten-syllable line had to be reinvented in the sixteenth century. Chaucer introduced two other verse forms into English which he probably derived from French lyric poetry. The first was an eight-line stanza (rhyming *ababbcbc*), sometimes just called the 'Monk's-Tale stanza' after its most prominent appearance, although this was a dead end, since even Chaucer did not use it a great deal. He often used a seven-line stanza (rhyming *ababbcc*), usually called 'rime royal', because it is ideal for both forward-moving narrative and for a slower lyricism which made it possible to linger over images or philosophical principles in a more meditative mode. It was a verse form that was therefore especially suitable for elevated and ambitious classicizing poetry (such as *Troilus and Criseyde*) or a more solemn religiosity (as in the Man of Law's Tale, the Clerk's Tale, and the Second Nun's Tale). Rime royal did not survive in common use beyond the fifteenth century, however.

It is, nevertheless, still a common view that Chaucer's importance to the English literary tradition lay in his careful grafting of the sophistication of the form and style of Continental poetry (that is, principally, French and Italian) on to a rougher, even ruder, English stock. This point can be made in terms of the verse forms I have mentioned, or Chaucer's vocabulary (he used many words derived from French for the first time, although it was common for English poets in his day to draw on French for their lexicon), or the narratives he chose to write, whether derived directly from French or Italian writers, or the classical poems that these writers also drew upon. Chaucer was unusual and innovative in his ability to exploit colloquial English: the *Tales* are not only coloured with it, but strategic uses of oaths and words so untraceable they must originate in speech make the language of some pilgrims surprisingly naturalistic. Chaucer also tried to represent regional forms of English for the first time (in the accents given to the two clerks in the Reeve's Tale). But, if this capacity to exploit a more common speech is unusual and its presence in an ambitious poem even more so, it is really the contrast between the common and the ornate that makes Chaucer's poetry seem so sophisticated (and, in this sense, seem more sophisticated than it actually was). In fashioning a more elevated English vocabulary and style Chaucer was in fact only part of a general movement in all of Europe (where the vernacular was finally outstripping Latin as the important language of literature) and one of a cohort of English poets

(including William Langland, John Gower (1330–1408), and the anonymous poet who wrote *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), each very different from the other, but each subject to all these transforming influences, and all alike convinced that English was now the right language to use for the most carefully crafted literary expression.

From almost the moment Chaucer died, however, he was said to be foundational: poets who imitated him, such as Thomas Hoccleve (1368–1426) and John Lydgate (1370–1451), heaped such praise upon him, couched in language they derived from him, in poems that closely resembled his, that even as they declared Chaucer the founder of everything of literary importance, they made this claim true. But if Chaucer is only the Father of English Poetry because so many writers chose to follow him, he was also a poet of unparalleled genius. His capacity to use artifice to create the appearance of reality and to construct forms with such precision that they seem to be utterly natural has hardly ever been matched, in his lifetime or since.

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

THAT intimate conversational undertone remains more or less impossible to translate or counterfeit in modern English. All the same—though well aware of the foolhardiness of the venture, as my earlier prose rendering will attest—I have undertaken to translate *The Canterbury Tales* into verse. In making the attempt I have preferred to sacrifice, for the sake of the immediacy, directness, and plain speech that make up the real poetry of the original, any strict adherence to Chaucer's rhyme-schemes, whether the couplets which are the vehicle of the *General Prologue* and most of the Tales, or the rhyme-royal of the remainder. The idea has been rather to suggest them by such contemporary alternatives as half-rhymes, quarter-rhymes, or assonance real or imaginary, and so keep, as nearly as possible, to Chaucer's tone and to what he is actually saying. It is often claimed that Chaucer's language is so near modern English that only a little, if any, study is required to read him without difficulty. This, if I may say so, is a fallacy. Many of the still-extant words that Chaucer uses have shifted their meanings and nuances; some idioms and many references are now incomprehensible, quite apart from the great number of words in Chaucer's large vocabulary that have long fallen out of use and been forgotten. All the same this version is not offered as any kind of substitute—as were Dryden's magnificent renderings—but as an introductory prolusion to the real thing.

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6 March 1984

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A CHRONOLOGY OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER

1340	Chaucer born to John and Agnes Chaucer of London.
1346	Overwhelming English victory over French in Battle of Crécy; early stages of what came to be called 'The 100 Years War'.
1347	English capture of Calais.
1348–50	Black Plague throughout Europe.
1356	Chaucer first appears in the written record as a page in the household of Elizabeth de Burgh, Countess of Ulster, wife of Lionel, Duke of Clarence, son of Edward III.
1360	Treaty of Brétigny ceding large territories in south-west France to England; Chaucer carries diplomatic letters from France in the service of Prince Lionel.
1361–2	Severe outbreak of plague in England.
1366	Chaucer marries Philippa de Roet of Hainault, lady-in-waiting to Queen Philippa of Hainault, wife of Edward III.
1369	Chaucer accompanies John of Gaunt (brother of the king) on a military expedition in Picardy. *The Book of the Duchess*.
1372–3	Chaucer accompanies two Italian merchants to Genoa; he also visits Florence.
1374	Chaucer leases 'for life' a house over Aldgate (one of six gates leading into the city of London); Chaucer appointed Controller of Customs (in charge of collecting export taxes on wool, England's most lucrative export) in the port of London.
1376	Death of Edward, the Black Prince, heir to the throne; 'Good Parliament'.
1377	Edward III dies. Accession of Richard II.
1378	Chaucer travels to Lombardy.
c.1380	*House of Fame, Parliament of Fowls*; 'Life of St Cecilia'.

1381	Rebels march on London, burning John of Gaunt's palace; Simon Sudbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Robert Hales, the king's treasurer, beheaded.
1381–6	*Troilus and Criseyde*.
1382	Chaucer is appointed Controller of Petty Customs (responsible for export duty on wine and other lesser merchandise) while retaining his previous responsibilities for duties on wool.
1386	'Wonderful Parliament' (expels members of Royal Council deemed to be corrupt and appoints new counsellors to the king). Chaucer is present as a Member of Parliament for Kent.
1386–7	*The Legend of Good Women*.
1387	Philippa Chaucer dies.
c.1387	*The Canterbury Tales* begun.
1388	'Merciless Parliament' in which favourites of Richard II are stripped of assets or executed and the 'Lords Appellant' seize control of government; the writer Thomas Usk is executed as a result of factional fighting in London; Chaucer in Kent (perhaps Greenwich).
1389	Chaucer appointed Clerk of the King's Works (in charge of maintaining all of the king's properties).
1391	Chaucer leaves the King's Works and is appointed Deputy Forester of the North Petherton Forest in Somerset.
1394	Death of Queen Anne.
1396	Truce with France.
1397	Arrest and execution of Richard, 4th earl of Arundel, one of the Lords Appellant.
1398	Henry of Derby, eldest son of John of Gaunt, banished for ten years.
1399	Death of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster; Henry of Derby's banishment extended to life and Lancastrian estates confiscated; Richard II deposed. Accession of Henry of Derby as Henry IV.

1399   *The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse* addressed to Henry IV.
1400   Richard II dies; Chaucer dies.

THE CANTERBURY TALES

Fragment I (Group A)

GENERAL PROLOGUE

WHEN the sweet showers of April have pierced The drought of March, and
    pierced it to the root,
And every vein is bathed in that moisture
Whose quickening force will engender the flower
And when the west wind too with its sweet breath
Has given life in every wood and field
To tender shoots, and when the stripling sun
Has run his half-course in Aries, the Ram,
And when small birds are making melodies,
That sleep all the night long with open eyes,
(Nature so prompts them, and encourages);
Then people long to go on pilgrimages,
And palmers* to take ship for foreign shores, And distant shrines, famous
    in different lands;
And most especially, from all the shires
Of England, to Canterbury they come,
The holy blessed martyr* there to seek, Who gave his help to them when
    they were sick.
  It happened at this season, that one day
In Southwark at the Tabard* where I stayed Ready to set out on my
    pilgrimage
To Canterbury, and pay devout homage,
There came at nightfall to the hostelry
Some nine-and-twenty in a company,
Folk of all kinds, met in accidental
Companionship, for they were pilgrims all;
It was to Canterbury that they rode.
The bedrooms and the stables were good-sized,
The comforts offered us were of the best.
And by the time the sun had gone to rest

I'd talked with everyone, and soon became
One of their company, and promised them
To rise at dawn next day to take the road
For the journey I am telling you about.
But, before I go further with this tale,
And while I can, it seems reasonable
That I should let you have a full description
Of each of them, their sort and condition,
At any rate as they appeared to me;
Tell who they were, their status and profession,
What they looked like, what kind of clothes they dressed in; And with a
   KNIGHT, then, I shall first begin.
  There was a Knight,* a reputable man, Who from the moment that he
      first began
Campaigning, had cherished the profession
Of arms; he also prized trustworthiness,
Liberality, fame, and courteousness.
In the king's service he'd fought valiantly,
And travelled far; no man as far as he
In Christian and in heathen lands as well,
And ever honoured for his ability.
He was at Alexandria when it fell,
Often he took the highest place at table
Over the other foreign knights in Prussia;
He'd raided in Lithuania and Russia,
No Christian of his rank fought there more often.
Also he'd been in Granada, at the siege
Of Algeciras; forayed in Benmarin;
At Ayas and Adalia he had been
When they were taken; and with the great hosts
Freebooting on the Mediterranean coasts;
Fought fifteen mortal combats; thrice as champion
In tournaments, he at Tramassene
Fought for our faith, and each time killed his man.
This worthy knight had also, for a time,

Taken service in Palatia for the Bey,
Against another heathen in Turkey;
And almost beyond price was his prestige.
Though eminent, he was prudent and sage,
And in his bearing mild as any maid.
He'd never been foul-spoken in his life
To any kind of man; he was indeed
The very pattern of a noble knight.
But as for his appearance and outfit, He had good horses, yet was far from
    smart.
He wore a tunic made of coarse thick stuff,
Marked by his chainmail, all begrimed with rust,
Having just returned from an expedition,
And on his pilgrimage of thanksgiving.
   With him there was his son, a young SQUIRE,*
A lively knight-apprentice, and a lover,
With hair as curly as if newly waved;
I took him to be twenty years of age.
In stature he was of an average length,
Wonderfully athletic, and of great strength.
He'd taken part in cavalry forays
In Flanders, in Artois, and Picardy,
With credit, though no more than a novice,
Hoping to stand well in his lady's eyes.
His clothes were all embroidered like a field
Full of the freshest flowers, white and red.
He sang, or played the flute, the livelong day,
And he was fresher than the month of May.
Short was his gown, with sleeves cut long and wide.
He'd a good seat on horseback, and could ride,
Make music too, and songs to go with it;
Could joust and dance, and also draw and write.
So burningly he loved, that come nightfall
He'd sleep no more than any nightingale.
Polite, modest, willing to serve, and able,

He carved before his father at their table.
   The Knight had just one servant, a YEOMAN,*
For so he wished to ride, on this occasion.
The man was clad in coat and hood of green.
He carried under his belt, handily,
For he looked to his gear in yeoman fashion,
A sheaf of peacock arrows, sharp and shining,
Not liable to fall short from poor feathering;
And in his hand he bore a mighty bow.
He had a cropped head, and his face was brown;
Of woodcraft he knew all there was to know.
He wore a fancy leather guard, a bracer,
And by his side a sword and a rough buckler,
And on the other side a fancy dagger, Well-mounted, sharper than the point
   of spear,
And on his breast a medal: St Christopher,
The woodman's patron saint, in polished silver.
He bore a horn slung from a cord of green,
And my guess is, he was a forester.
   There was also a nun, a PRIORESS,*
Whose smile was unaffected and demure;
Her greatest oath was just, 'By St Eloi!'*
And she was known as Madame Eglantine.
She sang the divine service prettily,
And through the nose, becomingly intoned;
And she spoke French well and elegantly
As she'd been taught it at Stratford-at-Bow,*
For French of Paris was to her unknown.
Good table manners she had learnt as well:
She never let a crumb from her mouth fall;
She never soiled her fingers, dipping deep
Into the sauce; when lifting to her lips
Some morsel, she was careful not to spill
So much as one small drop upon her breast.
Her greatest pleasure was in etiquette.

She used to wipe her upper lip so clean,
No print of grease inside her cup was seen,
Not the least speck, when she had drunk from it.
Most daintily she'd reach for what she ate.
No question, she possessed the greatest charm,
Her demeanour was so pleasant, and so warm;
Though at pains to ape the manners of the court,
And be dignified, in order to be thought
A person well deserving of esteem.
But, speaking of her sensibility,
She was so full of charity and pity
That if she saw a mouse caught in a trap,
And it was dead or bleeding, she would weep.
She kept some little dogs, and these she fed
On roast meat, or on milk and fine white bread.
But how she'd weep if one of them were dead,
Or if somebody took a stick to it!
She was all sensitivity and tender heart.
Her veil was pleated most becomingly; Her nose well-shaped; eyes blue-
   grey, of great beauty; And her mouth tender, very small, and red.
And there's no doubt she had a fine forehead,
Almost a span in breadth, I'd swear it was,
For certainly she was not undersized.
Her cloak, I noticed, was most elegant.
A coral rosary with gauds* of green She carried on her arm; and from it
   hung
A brooch of shining gold; inscribed thereon
Was, first of all, a crowned 'A',
And under, *Amor vincit omnia*.*
  With her were three priests,* and another NUN, Who was her chaplain
     and companion.
  There was a MONK;* a nonpareil was he, Who rode, as steward of his
     monastery,
The country round; a lover of good sport,
A manly man, and fit to be an abbot.

He'd plenty of good horses in his stable,
And when he went out riding, you could hear
His bridle jingle in the wind, as clear
And loud as the monastery chapel-bell.
Inasmuch as he was keeper of the cell,
The rule of St Maurus or St Benedict
Being out of date, and also somewhat strict,
This monk I speak of let old precepts slide,
And took the modern practice as his guide.
He didn't give so much as a plucked hen
For the maxim, 'Hunters are not pious men',
Or 'A monk who's heedless of his regimen
Is much the same as a fish out of water',
In other words, a monk out of his cloister.
But that's a text he thought not worth an oyster;*
And I remarked his opinion was sound.
What use to study, why go round the bend
With poring over some book in a cloister,
Or drudging with his hands, to toil and labour
As Augustine* bids? How shall the world go on?
You can go keep your labour, Augustine!
So he rode hard—no question about that—
Kept greyhounds swifter than a bird in flight.
Hard riding, and the hunting of the hare,
Were what he loved, and opened his purse for.
I noticed that his sleeves were edged and trimmed
With squirrel fur, the finest in the land.
For fastening his hood beneath his chin,
He wore an elaborate golden pin,
Twined with a love-knot at the larger end.
His head was bald and glistening like glass
As if anointed; and likewise his face.
A fine fat patrician, in prime condition,
His bright and restless eyes danced in his head,
And sparkled like the fire beneath a pot;

Boots of soft leather, horse in perfect trim:
No question but he was a fine prelate!
Not pale and wan like some tormented spirit.
A fat roast swan was what he loved the best.
His saddle-horse was brown as any berry.
   There was a begging FRIAR,* a genial merry Limiter,* and a most
      imposing person.
In all of the four Orders there was none
So versed in small talk and in flattery:
And many was the marriage in a hurry
He'd had to improvise and even pay for.
He was a noble pillar of his Order,
And was well in and intimate with every
Well-to-do freeman farmer of his area,
And with the well-off women in the town;
For he was qualified to hear confession,
And absolve graver sins than a curate,
Or so he said; he was a licentiate.*
How sweetly he would hear confession!
How pleasant was his absolution!
He was an easy man in giving shrift,
When sure of getting a substantial gift:
For, as he used to say, generous giving
To a poor Order is a sign you're shriven;
For if you gave, then he could vouch for it
That you were conscience-stricken and contrite;
For many are so hardened in their hearts
They cannot weep, though burning with remorse Therefore, instead of
   weeping and prayers,
They should give money to the needy friars.*
The pockets of his hood were stuffed with knives
And pins to give away to pretty wives.
He had a pleasant singing voice, for sure,
Could sing and play the fiddle beautifully;
He took the biscuit as a ballad-singer,

And though his neck was whiter than a lily,
Yet he was brawny as a prize-fighter.
He knew the taverns well in every town,
And all the barmaids and the innkeepers,
Better than lepers or the street-beggars;
It wouldn't do, for one in his position,
One of his ability and distinction,
To hold acquaintance with diseased lepers.
It isn't seemly, and it gets you nowhere,
To have any dealings with that sort of trash,
Stick to provision-merchants and the rich!
And anywhere where profit might arise
He'd crawl with courteous offers of service.
You'd nowhere find an abler man than he,
Or a better beggar in his friary;
He paid a yearly fee for his district,
No brother friar trespassed on his beat.
A widow might not even own a shoe,
But so pleasant was his *In principio**
He'd win her farthing in the end, then go.
He made his biggest profits on the side.
He'd frolic like a puppy. He'd give aid
As arbitrator upon settling-days,
For there he was not like some cloisterer
With threadbare cape, like any poor scholar,
But like a Master of Arts, or the Pope!
Of the best double-worsted was his cloak,
And bulging like a bell that's newly cast.
He lisped a little, from affectation,
To make his English sweet upon his tongue;
And when he harped, as closing to a song,
His eyes would twinkle in his head just like
The stars upon a sharp and frosty night.
This worthy limiter was called Hubert.

A MERCHANT was there, on a high-saddled horse: He'd a forked beard, a
    many-coloured dress,
And on his head a Flanders beaver hat,
Boots with expensive clasps, and buckled neatly.
He gave out his opinions pompously,
Kept talking of the profits that he'd made,
How, at all costs, the sea should be policed
From Middleburg in Holland to Harwich.
At money-changing he was an expert;
He dealt in French gold florins on the quiet.
This worthy citizen could use his head:
No one could tell whether he was in debt,
So impressive and dignified his bearing
As he went about his loans and bargaining.
He was a really estimable man,
But the fact is I never learnt his name.
  There was a CLERK* from Oxford as well, Not yet an MA, reading Logic
    still;
The horse he rode was leaner than a rake,
And he himself, believe me, none too fat,
But hollow-cheeked, and grave and serious.
Threadbare indeed was his short overcoat:
A man too unworldly for lay office,
Yet he'd not got himself a benefice.
For he'd much rather have at his bedside
A library, bound in black calf or red,
Of Aristotle and his philosophy,
Than rich apparel, fiddle, or fine psaltery.
And though he was a man of science, yet
He had but little gold in his strongbox;
But upon books and learning he would spend
All he was able to obtain from friends;
He'd pray assiduously for their souls,
Who gave him wherewith to attend the schools.
Learning was all he cared for or would heed.

He never spoke a word more than was need,
And that was said in form and decorum,
And brief and terse, and full of deepest meaning.
Moral virtue was reflected in his speech, And gladly would he learn, and gladly teach.
  There was a wise and wary Sergeant-at-Law, A well-known figure in the portico
Where lawyers meet; one of great excellence,
Judicious, worthy of reverence,
Or so he seemed, his sayings were so wise.
He'd often acted as Judge of Assize
By the king's letters patent, authorized
To hear all cases. And his great renown
And skill had won him many a fee, or gown
Given in lieu of money. There was none
To touch him as a property-buyer; all
He bought was fee-simple, without entail;*
You'd never find a flaw in the conveyance.
And nowhere would you find a busier man;
And yet he seemed much busier than he was.
From yearbooks he could quote, chapter and verse,
Each case and judgement since William the First.
And he knew how to draw up and compose
A deed; you couldn't fault a thing he wrote;
And he'd reel all the statutes off by rote.
He was dressed simply, in a coloured coat,
Girt by a silk belt with thin metal bands.
I have no more to tell of his appearance.
  A Franklin*—that's a country gentleman And freeman landowner— was his companion.
White was his beard, as white as any daisy;
Sanguine his temperament; his face ruddy.
He loved his morning draught of sops-in-wine,
Since living well was ever his custom,
For he was Epicurus' own true son

And held with him that sensuality
Is where the only happiness is found.
And he kept open house so lavishly
He was St Julian to the country round,
The patron saint of hospitality.
His bread and ale were always of the best,
Like his wine-cellar, which was unsurpassed.
Cooked food was never lacking in his house,
Both meat and fish, and that so plenteous That in his home it snowed with
    food and drink,
And all the delicacies you could think.
According to the season of the year,
He changed the dishes that were served at dinner.
He'd plenty of fat partridges in coop,
And kept his fishpond full of pike and carp.
His cook would catch it if his sauces weren't
Piquant and sharp, and all his equipment
To hand. And all day in his hall there stood
The great fixed table, with the places laid.
When the justices met, he'd take the chair;
He often served as MP for the shire.
A dagger, and a small purse made of silk,
Hung at his girdle, white as morning milk.
He'd been sheriff, and county auditor:
A model squireen, no man worthier.
  A HABERDASHER and a CARPENTER, A WEAVER, DYER, TAPESTRY-
    MAKER*— And they were in the uniform livery
Of a dignified and rich fraternity,
A parish-guild: their gear all trim and fresh,
Knives silver-mounted, none of your cheap brass;
Their belts and purses neatly stitched as well,
All finely finished to the last detail.
Each of them looked indeed like a burgess,
And fit to sit on any guildhall dais.
Each was, in knowledge and ability,

Eligible to be an alderman;

For they'd income enough and property.

What's more, their wives would certainly agree,

Or otherwise they'd surely be to blame—

It's very pleasant to be called 'Madam'

And to take precedence at church processions,

And have one's mantle carried like a queen's.

They had a Cook* with them for the occasion, To boil the chickens up with marrowbones,

Tart powdered flavouring, spiced with galingale.

No better judge than he of London ale.

And he could roast, and seethe, and boil, and fry,

Make a thick soup, and bake a proper pie; But to my mind it was the greatest shame

He'd got an open sore upon his shin;

For he made chicken-pudding with the best.

A Shipman, whose home was in the west, Was there—a Dartmouth man, for all I know.

He rode a cob as well as he knew how,

And was dressed in a knee-length woollen gown.

From a lanyard round his neck, a dagger hung

Under his arm. Summer had tanned him brown.

As rough a diamond as you'd hope to find,

He'd tapped and lifted many a stoup of wine

From Bordeaux, when the merchant wasn't looking.

He hadn't time for scruples or fine feeling,

For if he fought, and got the upper hand,

He'd send his captives home by sea, not land.

But as for seamanship, and calculation

Of moon, tides, currents, all hazards at sea,

For harbour-lore, and skill in navigation,

From Hull to Carthage there was none to touch him.

He was shrewd adventurer, tough and hardy.

By many a tempest had his beard been shaken.

And he knew all the harbours that there were

Between the Baltic and Cape Finisterre,
And each inlet of Brittany and Spain.
The ship he sailed was called 'The Magdalen'.
  With us there was a doctor, a PHYSICIAN; Nowhere in all the world was
     one to match him
Where medicine was concerned, or surgery;
Being well grounded in astrology
He'd watch his patient with the utmost care
Until he'd found a favourable hour,
By means of astrology, to give treatment.
Skilled to pick out the astrologic moment
For charms and talismans to aid the patient,
He knew the cause of every malady,
If it were 'hot' or 'cold' or 'moist' or 'dry',
And where it came from, and from which humour.*
He was a really fine practitioner.
Knowing the cause, and having found its root,
He'd soon give the sick man an antidote.
Ever at hand he had apothecaries
To send him syrups, drugs, and remedies,
For each put money in the other's pocket—
Theirs was no newly founded partnership.
Well-read was he in Aesculapius,
In Dioscorides, and in Rufus,
Ancient Hippocrates, Hali, and Galen,
Avicenna, Rhazes, and Serapion,
Averroës, Damascenus, Constantine,
Bernard, and Gilbertus, and Gaddesden.*
In his own diet he was temperate,
For it was nothing if not moderate,
Though most nutritious and digestible.
He didn't do much reading in the Bible.
He was dressed all in Persian blue and scarlet
Lined with taffeta and fine sarsenet,
And yet was very chary of expense.

He put by all he earned from pestilence;
In medicine gold is the best cordial.
So it was gold that he loved best of all.
    There was a WIFE, from near Bath,
But, more's the pity, she was a bit deaf;
So skilled a clothmaker, that she outdistanced
Even the weavers of Ypres and Ghent.
In the whole parish there was not a woman
Who dared precede her at the almsgiving,
And if there did, so furious was she,
That she was put out of all charity.
Her headkerchiefs were of the finest weave,
Ten pounds and more they weighed, I do believe,
Those that she wore on Sundays on her head.
Her stockings were of finest scarlet red,
Very tightly laced; shoes pliable and new.
Bold was her face, and handsome; florid too.
She had been respectable all her life,
And five times married, that's to say in church,
Not counting other loves she'd had in youth,
Of whom, just now, there is no need to speak.
And she had thrice been to Jerusalem;
Had wandered over many a foreign stream; And she had been at Rome, and at Boulogne,
St James of Compostella,* and Cologne; She knew all about wandering—and straying:
For she was gap-toothed, if you take my meaning.
Comfortably on an ambling horse she sat,
Well-wimpled, wearing on her head a hat
That might have been a shield in size and shape;
A riding-skirt round her enormous hips,
Also a pair of sharp spurs on her feet.
In company, how she could laugh and joke!
No doubt she knew of all the cures for love,
For at that game she was a past mistress.

And there was a good man, a religious.

He was the needy PARSON* of a village, But rich enough in saintly thought and work.

And educated, too, for he could read;

Would truly preach the word of Jesus Christ,

Devoutly teach the folk in his parish.

Kind was he, wonderfully diligent;

And in adversity most patient,

As many a time had been put to the test.

For unpaid tithes he'd not excommunicate,

For he would rather give, you may be sure,

From his own pocket to the parish poor;

Few were his needs, so frugally he lived.

Wide was his parish, with houses far asunder,

But he would not neglect, come rain or thunder,

Come sickness or adversity, to call

On the furthest of his parish, great or small;

Going on foot, and in his hand a staff.

This was the good example that he set:

He practised first what later he would teach.

Out of the gospel he took that precept;

And what's more, he would cite this saying too:

'If gold can rust, then what will iron do?'

For if a priest be rotten, whom we trust,

No wonder if a layman comes to rust.

It's shame to see (let every priest take note)

A shitten shepherd and a cleanly sheep.

It's the plain duty of a priest to give Example to his sheep; how they should live.

He never let his benefice for hire

And left his sheep to flounder in the mire

While he ran off to London, to St Paul's

To seek some chantry and sing mass for souls,

Or to be kept as chaplain by a guild;

But stayed at home, and took care of his fold,

So that no wolf might do it injury.
He was a shepherd, not a mercenary.
And although he was saintly and virtuous,
He wasn't haughty or contemptuous
To sinners, speaking to them with disdain,
But in his teaching tactful and humane.
To draw up folk to heaven by goodness
And good example, was his sole business.
But if a person turned out obstinate,
Whoever he was, of high or low estate,
He'd earn a stinging rebuke then and there.
You'll never find a better priest, I'll swear.
He never looked for pomp or deference,
Nor affected an over-nice conscience,
But taught the gospel of Christ and His twelve
Apostles; but first followed it himself.
  With him there was his brother, a PLOUGHMAN,*
Who'd fetched and carried many a load of dung;
A good and faithful labourer was he,
Living in peace and perfect charity.
God he loved best, and that with all his heart,
At all times, good and bad, no matter what;
And next he loved his neighbour as himself.
He'd thresh, and ditch, and also dig and delve,
And for Christ's love would do as much again
If he could manage it, for all poor men,
And ask no hire. He paid his tithes in full,
On what he earned and on his goods as well.
He wore a smock, and rode upon a mare.
  There was a REEVE as well, also a MILLER, A PARDONER and a
    SUMMONER, A MANCIPLE, and myself—there were no more.
  The MILLER was a burly fellow—brawn And muscle, big of bones as
    well as strong,
As was well seen—he always won the ram
At wrestling-matches up and down the land.

He was barrel-chested, rugged and thickset,
And would heave off its hinges any door
Or break it, running at it with his head.
His beard was red as any fox or sow,
And wide at that, as though it were a spade.
And on his nose, right on its tip, he had
A wart, upon which stood a tuft of hairs
Red as the bristles are in a sow's ears.
Black were his nostrils; black and squat and wide.
He bore a sword and buckler by his side.
His big mouth was as big as a furnace.
A loudmouth and a teller of blue stories
(Most of them vicious or scurrilous),
Well versed in stealing corn and trebling dues,
He had a golden thumb—by God he had!
A white coat he had on, and a blue hood.
He played the bagpipes well, and blew a tune,
And to its music brought us out of town.
  A worthy Manciple* of the Middle Temple Was there; he might have
    served as an example
To all provision-buyers for his thrift
In making purchase, whether on credit
Or for cash down: he kept an eye on prices,
So always got in first and did good business.
Now isn't it an instance of God's grace,
Such an unlettered man should so outpace
The wisdom of a pack of learned men?
He'd more than thirty masters over him,
All of them proficient experts in law,
More than a dozen of them with the power
To manage rents and land for any peer
So that—unless the man were off his head—
He could live honourably, free of debt,
Or sparingly, if that were his desire;
And able to look after a whole shire

In whatever emergency might befall;
And yet this manciple could hoodwink them all.
   There was a REEVE,* a thin and bilious man; His beard he shaved as
      close as a man can;
Around his ears he kept his hair cropped short
Just like a priest's, docked in front and on top.
His legs were very long, and very lean,
And like a stick; no calf was to be seen.
His granary and bins were ably kept;
There was no auditor could trip him up.
He could foretell, by noting drought and rain,
The likely harvest from his seed and grain.
His master's cattle, dairy, cows, and sheep,
His pigs and horses, poultry and livestock,
Were wholly under this reeve's governance.
And, as was laid down in his covenant,
Of these he'd always rendered an account
Ever since his master reached his twentieth year.
No man could ever catch him in arrears.
He was up to every fiddle, every dodge
Of every herdsman, bailiff, or farm-lad.
All of them feared him as they feared the plague.
His dwelling was well placed upon a heath,
Set with green trees that overshadowed it.
At business he was better than his lord:
He'd got his nest well-feathered, on the side,
For he was cunning enough to get round
His lord by lending him what was his own,
And so earn thanks, besides a coat and hood.
As a young man he'd learned a useful trade
As a skilled artisan, a carpenter.
The Reeve rode on a sturdy farmer's cob
That was called Scot: it was a dapple grey.
He had on a long blue-grey overcoat,
And carried by his side a rusty sword.

A Norfolk man was he of whom I tell,
From near a place that they call Bawdeswell.
Tucked round him like a friar's was his coat;
He always rode the hindmost of our troop.
  A SUMMONER* was among us at the inn, Whose face was fire-red, like
    the cherubim;
All covered with carbuncles; his eyes narrow; He was as hot and randy as a
    sparrow.
He'd scabbed black eyebrows, and a scraggy beard,
No wonder if the children were afraid!
There was no mercury, white lead, or sulphur,
No borax, no ceruse, no cream of tartar,
Nor any other salves that cleanse and burn,
Could help with the white pustules on his skin,
Or with the knobbed carbuncles on his cheeks.
He'd a great love of garlic, onions, leeks,
Also for drinking strong wine, red as blood,
When he would roar and gabble as if mad.
And once he had got really drunk on wine,
Then he would speak no language but Latin.
He'd picked up a few tags, some two or three,
Which he'd learned from some edict or decree—
No wonder, for he heard them every day.
Also, as everybody knows, a jay
Can call out 'Wat' as well as the Pope can.
But if you tried him further with a question,
You'd find his well of learning had run dry;
'*Questio quid iuris*'* was all he'd ever say.
A most engaging rascal, and a kind,
As good a fellow as you'd hope to find:
For he'd allow—given a quart of wine—
A scallywag to keep his concubine
A twelvemonth, and excuse him altogether.
He'd dip his wick, too, very much sub rosa.
And if he found some fellow with a woman,

He'd tell him not to fear excommunication
If he were caught, or the archdeacon's curse,
Unless the fellow's soul was in his purse,
For it's his purse must pay the penalty.
'Your purse is the archdeacon's Hell,' said he.
Take it from me, the man lied in his teeth:
Let sinners fear, for that curse is damnation,
Just as their souls are saved by absolution.
Let them beware, too, of a '*Significavit*'.*
Under his thumb, to deal with as he pleased,
Were the young people of his diocese;
He was their sole adviser and confidant.
Upon his head he sported a garland
As big as any hung outside a pub,
And, for a shield, he'd a round loaf of bread.
    With him there was a peerless PARDONER*
Of Charing Cross, his friend and his confrère,
Who'd come straight from the Vatican in Rome.
Loudly he sang, 'Come to me, love, come hither!'
The Summoner sang the bass, a loud refrain;
No trumpet ever made one half the din.
This pardon-seller's hair was yellow as wax,
And sleekly hanging, like a hank of flax.
In meagre clusters hung what hair he had;
Over his shoulders a few strands were spread,
But they lay thin, in rat's tails, one by one.
As for a hood, for comfort he wore none,
For it was stowed away in his knapsack.
Save for a cap, he rode with head all bare,
Hair loose; he thought it was the *dernier cri*.
He had big bulging eyes, just like a hare.
He'd sewn a veronica* on his cap.
His knapsack lay before him, on his lap,
Chockful of pardons, all come hot from Rome.
His voice was like a goat's, plaintive and thin.

He had no beard, nor was he like to have;
Smooth was his face, as if he had just shaved.
I took him for a gelding or a mare.*
As for his trade, from Berwick down to Ware
You'd not find such another pardon-seller.
For in his bag he had a pillowcase
Which had been, so he said, Our Lady's veil;
He said he had a snippet of the sail
St Peter had, that time he walked upon
The sea, and Jesus Christ caught hold of him.
And he'd a brass cross, set with pebble-stones,
And a glass reliquary of pigs' bones.
But with these relics, when he came upon
Some poor up-country priest or backwoods parson,
In just one day he'd pick up far more money
Than any parish priest was like to see
In two whole months. With double-talk and tricks He made the people and
    the priest his dupes.
But to speak truth and do the fellow justice,
In church he made a splendid ecclesiastic.
He'd read a lesson, or saint's history,
But best of all he sang the offertory:
For, knowing well that when that hymn was sung,
He'd have to preach and polish smooth his tongue
To raise—as only he knew how—the wind,
The louder and the merrier he would sing.
    And now I've told you truly and concisely
The rank, and dress, and number of us all,
And why we gathered in a company
In Southwark, at that noble hostelry
Known as the Tabard, that's hard by the Bell.
But now the time has come for me to tell
What passed among us, what was said and done
The night of our arrival at the inn;
And afterwards I'll tell you how we journeyed,

And all the remainder of our pilgrimage.
But first I beg you, not to put it down
To my ill-breeding if my speech be plain
When telling what they looked like, what they said, Or if I use the exact words they used.
For, as you all must know as well as I,
To tell a tale told by another man
You must repeat as nearly as you can
Each word, if that's the task you've undertaken,
However coarse or broad his language is;
Or, in the telling, you'll have to distort it
Or make things up, or find new words for it.
You can't hold back, even if he's your brother:
Whatever word is used, you must use also.
Christ Himself spoke out plain in Holy Writ,
And well you know there's nothing wrong with that.
Plato, as those who read him know, has said,
'The word must be related to the deed.'
Also I beg you to forgive it me
If I overlooked all standing and degree
As regards the order in which people come
Here in this tally, as I set them down: My wits are none too bright, as you can see.
  Our HOST gave each and all a warm welcome, And set us down to supper there and then.
The eatables he served were of the best;
Strong was the wine; we matched it with our thirst.
A handsome man our Host, handsome indeed,
And a fit master of ceremonies.
He was a big man with protruding eyes
—You'll find no better burgess in Cheapside—
Racy in talk, well-schooled and shrewd was he;
Also a proper man in every way.
And moreover he was a right good sort,
And after supper he began to joke,

And, when we had all paid our reckonings,
He spoke of pleasure, among other things:
'Truly,' said he, 'ladies and gentlemen,
Here you are all most heartily welcome.
Upon my word—I'm telling you no lie—
All year I've seen no jollier company
At one time in this inn, than I have now.
I'd make some fun for you, if I knew how.
And, as it happens, I have just now thought
Of something that will please you, at no cost.
    'You're off to Canterbury—so Godspeed!
The blessed martyr give you your reward!
And I'll be bound, that while you're on your way,
You'll be telling tales, and making holiday;
It makes no sense, and really it's no fun
To ride along the road dumb as a stone.
And therefore I'll devise a game for you,
To give you pleasure, as I said I'd do.
And if with one accord you all consent
To abide by my decision and judgement,
And if you'll do exactly as I say,
Tomorrow, when you're riding on your way,
Then, by my father's soul—for he is dead—
If you don't find it fun, why, here's my head!
Now not another word! Hold up your hands!'
    We were not long in making up our minds.
It seemed not worth deliberating, so We gave our consent without more
    ado,
Told him to give us what commands he wished.
'Ladies and gentlemen,' began our Host,
'Do yourselves a good turn, and hear me out:
But please don't turn your noses up at it.
I'll put it in a nutshell: here's the nub:
It's that you each, to shorten the long journey,

Shall tell two tales *en route* to Canterbury, And, coming homeward, tell
    another two,*
Stories of things that happened long ago.
Whoever best acquits himself, and tells
The most amusing and instructive tale,
Shall have a dinner, paid for by us all,
Here in this inn, and under this roof-tree,
When we come back again from Canterbury.
To make it the more fun, I'll gladly ride
With you at my own cost, and be your guide.
And anyone who disputes what I say
Must pay all our expenses on the way!
And if this plan appeals to all of you,
Tell me at once, and with no more ado,
And I'll make my arrangements here and now.'
  To this we all agreed, and gladly swore
To keep our promises; and furthermore
We asked him if he would consent to do
As he had said, and come and be our leader,
And judge our tales, and act as arbiter,
Set up our dinner too, at a fixed price;
And we'd obey whatever he might decide
In everything. And so, with one consent,
We bound ourselves to bow to his judgement.
And thereupon wine was at once brought in.
We drank; and not long after, everyone
Went off to bed, and that without delay.
  Next morning our Host rose at break of day:
He was our cockcrow; so we all awoke.
He gathered us together in a flock,
And we rode, at little more than walking-pace
Till we had reached St Thomas' watering-place,
Where our Host began reining in his horse.
'Ladies and gentlemen, attention please!'
Said he. 'All of you know what we agreed,

And I'm reminding you. If evensong
And matins are in harmony—that's to say,
If you are still of the same mind today—
Let's see who'll tell the first tale, and begin.
And whosoever baulks at my decision
Must pay for all we spend upon the way,
Or may I never touch a drop again!
And now let's draw lots before going on.
The one who draws the short straw must begin.
Sir Knight, my lord and master,' said our Host,
'Now let's draw lots, for such is my request.
Come near,' said he, 'my lady Prioress,
And, Mister Scholar, lay by bashfulness,
Stop dreaming! Hands to drawing, everyone!'
To cut the story short, the draw began,
And, whether it was luck, or chance, or fate,
The truth is this: the lot fell to the Knight,
Much to the content of the company.
Now, as was only right and proper, he
Must tell his tale, according to the bargain
Which, as you know, he'd made. What more to say?
And when the good man saw it must be so,
Being sensible, and accustomed to obey
And keep a promise he had freely given,
He said, 'Well, since I must begin the game,
Then welcome to the short straw, in God's name!
Now let's ride on, and listen to what I say.'
   And at these words we rode off on our way,
And he at once began, with cheerful face,
His tale. The way he told it was like this:

THE KNIGHT'S TALE

PART ONE

EXPLANATORY NOTES

GENERAL PROLOGUE

The General Prologue is an 'estates satire', a popular genre of writing in the Middle Ages that anatomized an entire society (and its ills) profession-by-profession. Chaucer had no direct source here, but many of the details he uses to give individual pilgrims their character are also traits traditionally identified with a particular profession in this genre.

3 *palmers*: pilgrims, especially those who have already been to Jerusalem, since they would carry a palm leaf or branch as a badge commemorating this journey.

holy blessed martyr: St Thomas Becket (1118–70), the Archbishop of Canterbury murdered on the altar of his own cathedral. The length, complexity, and syntactic balance of this first sentence in the Middle English original (and reflected here in translation) is unprecedented in Chaucer's writing. It has the subtle effect of suggesting that pilgrimage is as natural an activity as the coming of spring.

Southwark at the Tabard: there was a Tabard Inn in Southwark, just over the Thames from London, in Chaucer's day. Chaucer plays with what is real and what is fictional in this description (and so it is all too easy to forget that the 'I' here and throughout the *Tales* is to be distinguished from Chaucer the author).

4 *KNIGHT*: one of three exemplary pilgrims (the others are the Parson and the Ploughman), each representing one of the three 'estates' (the nobility, the clergy, and labourers). The list of battles in which the knight has fought are also exemplary, crusades undertaken by the Christian West against the 'heathen' East.

5 *SQUIRE*: next in rank to a knight; a 'squire' was usually a young man aspiring to knighthood.

YEOMAN: a paradoxical rank since a 'yeoman' was either a servant in a royal household (thus, the lowest among the high) or the owner of a small estate (a gentleman, but of modest means).

6 *PRIORESS*: a nun of some authority, either an officer within a large nunnery, or the head of her own smaller house (or 'priory').

Her greatest oath was just, 'By St Eloi!': more important than that her oaths are 'mild' is that the Prioress swears, since a nun should not.

Stratford-at-Bow: the Prioress speaks Anglo-Norman, the dialect of French used in England, rather than Continental French, a distinct disadvantage given her social aspirations; while she was probably high-born (many women who became nuns were), the Prioress's over-careful manners suggest she was not secure in her gentility.

7 *gauds*: adornments.

Amor vincit omnia: 'Love conquers all', a quotation from Virgil's *Eclogues*, which, much like the beautiful ornament in which it is set, suggests that this nun's priorities are more secular and materialistic—more worldly—than a nun's should be.

three priests: this phrase and the whole couplet in which it occurs may be a last-minute insertion to accommodate the (late) insertion of the Nun's Priest's Tale; a discrepancy remains, however (since there are three priests here but there seems to be only one to tell a tale), and these lines also throw off the total number of pilgrims (elsewhere said to number twenty-nine).

MONK: such men left the secular world for a life of religious devotion, in a community, guided by a rule (the most important such rule in the West was the Rule of St Benedict, *c*. 530–40); it is therefore amusing and worrying that this monk is so worldly.

not worth an oyster: with this phrase, as well as a number of others in the lines that follow, the monk is described in what seem to be his own words.

Augustine: St Augustine of Hippo (354–430), one of the most influential 'fathers' of the medieval Church, wrote a work, *De opere monachorum*, urging monks to engage in manual labour.

8 *FRIAR*: such men (of which there were four different 'orders') pursued a religious life, but, unlike a monk or a nun, lived out in the world, constantly tempted, as this friar clearly is, by worldly entanglement.

limiter: each convent or community of friars was allowed to beg in—or 'limited' to—a particular geographical area.

licenciate: he held a licence to preach or hear confession.

9 *They should give money to the needy friars*: because friars often received alms in return for services such as hearing confession (or 'shrift'), it was all too easy to turn the transaction into a kind of fee-for-service.

In principio: 'In the beginning', the first words of the Gospel of John, the first fourteen verses of which were often used as a blessing when entering a house.

10 *CLERK*: what we would now call a 'cleric', but the term—as in modern-day Britain—need not refer to a religious figure, but to any man of education of some (but not great) authority. Chaucer was, later in life, a clerk in the king's pay.

11 *fee-simple, without entail*: property owned without any restrictions about further sale, and, particularly, no obligation to bequeath it to a particular heir (an 'entail').

FRANKLIN: a 'free' man as opposed to a man 'bound' to serve some aristocrat (in return for his job or the land he lived on); the term was unusual in Chaucer's day and the social status it indicates remains uncertain; this may well be precisely Chaucer's point, since, like Chaucer himself, this man is a sort of 'new man' 'freer' to move in society than English people had so far been.

12 *A HABERDASHER and a CARPENTER, | A WEAVER, DYER, TAPESTRY-MAKER*: none of the five 'guildsmen' here tells a tale (each is named by an established 'craft', with a professional organization governing it), so they are either late additions or potentially incendiary figures Chaucer did not dare to flesh out (there having been much political conflict between the 'crafts' in London in the last decades of the fourteenth century).

COOK: this figure, who later identifies himself as 'Hogge', may well make fun of a person Chaucer (and his friends) knew, one Roger Knight de Ware, a London cook (mentioned in a document of 1384–5).

13 *humour*: medieval medicine understood the body to be composed of four humours: blood (which was 'moist' and 'dry'), phlegm ('cold' and 'moist'), choler ('hot' and 'dry'), and melancholy ('cold' and 'dry'). Illness was the result of an imbalance in these humours, and treatment involved administering substances that would restore equilibrium.

14 *Aesculapius … Gaddesden*: this list takes in most recognized medical authorities both ancient (Aesculapius, Dioscorides, Hippocrates, etc.) and modern (John of Gaddesden died in 1361).

15 *Jerusalem … St James of Compostella*: Rome, the shrine of St James at Compostela (in Spain), and Jerusalem were the three most important destinations for pilgrimage in the Middle Ages.

PARSON: a priest without special office; his simple and sincere piety makes this the second of Chaucer's idealizing portraits.

16 *PLOUGHMAN*: a third 'ideal' pilgrim, here standing in for the whole of the labouring classes. Although peasants were common figures in estates satire, ploughmen were not and this figure also seems to pay homage to William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (B-text, *c*.1378), a contemporaneous poem also about English social life, but from a much more religious perspective.

17 *MANCIPLE*: a figure responsible for provisioning a corporate community such as a college or, as here, an 'inn' (the 'Middle Temple') where lawyers were trained.

18 *REEVE*: a person who looked after the physical condition of an aristocrat's estate and its finances.

SUMMONER: an official whose job was to 'summon' those guilty of the sins and moral offences that the Church regulated to a bishop's or archdeacon's court (as opposed to the king's court or local courts). This summoner trumps up charges so he can be bribed to let his victims off.

19 *'Questio quid iuris'*: 'The question [is]: what [point] of law [is relevant].'

'Significavit': writs or legal orders were often known by their first word (or words) and this word identified the writ for excommunication.

20 *PARDONER*: someone with an official letter from the Pope allowing him to grant remission of time in Purgatory for those who agreed to do fixed sorts and amounts of penance. Like a friar, he tended to live from alms, but this pardoner is clearly corrupt (as many pardoners were thought to be), and has turned the idea of charity inside out, asking not for help in continuing his work, but, instead, for what amounted to a fee for the pardon.

20 *veronica*: (Middle English 'vernycle'), a medal representing the veil of St Veronica, which itself bore the image of Christ's face; such a badge identified its bearer as having made a pilgrimage to Rome.

Smooth … a gelding or a mare: the Pardoner is effeminate, but the narrator may call him a 'gelding' or a 'mare' either to suggest that there is some physical fault behind his moral corruption, or because it was the only way Chaucer knew to have the narrator say that he thought the Pardoner was gay.

23 *another two*: the plan for pilgrims to tell two tales in each direction conflicts with the Host's assumption, in the Prologue to the Parson's Tale, that each pilgrim would only tell one tale and only on the way to Canterbury. Even though it comes earlier in the *Tales*, the more ambitious plan was probably the later addition, because the General Prologue is probably a late work. It may be that the change was intended as a more subtle transformation from realism to allegory, however, so that the pilgrimage to Canterbury should slowly seem to transform itself into an image of the pilgrimage of every Christian life in which an increase in spiritual perfection is likened to a journey toward the heavenly Jerusalem (from which none of us will return).

THE KNIGHT'S TALE

The Knight's Tale is based on Giovanni Boccaccio's *Teseida* (1339–41). It is clear from the *Legend of Good Women* (1386–7) that Chaucer had composed it before he devised the scheme of the *Canterbury Tales*, for he refers to it there as 'Palamon and Arcite' (F 420). Chaucer condenses the *Teseida* drastically, particularly its more martial sections, bending the story toward romance and away from the epic style of his source.

25 *And married there*:1 although the language is mild, the narrative is explicit: Theseus is a tyrant, whose wife is a spoil of war.

27 *pity*: (Middle English: *pitee*), a key word for Chaucer, which is slightly different from the modern sense of 'feeling sorry for someone or something', and is, rather, a more active entry into the emotions of others as well as a consequent willingness to act on their behalf.

34 *God's providence, or Fortune*: Arcita's language here, and Palamon's afterwards, draws its concepts and terms from Boethius's *Consolation of*