

The CANTERBURY TALES

Geoffrey Chaucer



The PROLOGUE

BACKGROUND In “The Prologue” of *The Canterbury Tales*, a group gathers at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, a town just south of London, to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket at Canterbury. At the suggestion of the innkeeper, the group decides to hold a storytelling competition to pass the time as they travel. “The Prologue” introduces the “sundry folk” who will tell the stories and is followed by the tales themselves—24 in all.

When in April the sweet showers fall
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power
As brings about the engendering of the flower,
5 When also Zephyrus with his sweet breath
Exhales an air in every grove and heath
Upon the tender shoots, and the young sun
His half-course in the sign of the *Ram* has run,
And the small fowl are making melody
10 That sleep away the night with open eye
(So nature pricks them and their heart engages)
Then people long to go on pilgrimages
And palmers long to seek the stranger strands
Of far-off saints, hallowed in sundry lands,
15 And specially, from every shire’s end
Of England, down to Canterbury they wend
To seek the holy blissful martyr, quick
To give his help to them when they were sick. **A**

It happened in that season that one day
20 In Southwark, at *The Tabard*, as I lay

5 Zephyrus (zěf’ər-əs): the Greek god of the west wind.

8 the Ram: Aries—the first sign of the zodiac. The time is mid-April.

13 palmers: people journeying to religious shrines; pilgrims; **strands:** shores.

14 sundry (sŭn’drē): various.

15 shire’s: county’s.

17 martyr: St. Thomas à Becket.

A PARAPHRASE

Restate lines 1–18. Why does the group make its pilgrimage in April?

Ready to go on pilgrimage and start
For Canterbury, most devout at heart,
At night there came into that hostelry
Some nine and twenty in a company
25 Of sundry folk happening then to fall
In fellowship, and they were pilgrims all
That towards Canterbury meant to ride.
The rooms and stables of the inn were wide;
They made us easy, all was of the best.
30 And, briefly, when the sun had gone to rest,
I'd spoken to them all upon the trip
And was soon one with them in fellowship,
Pledged to rise early and to take the way
To Canterbury, as you heard me say.

35 But none the less, while I have time and space,
Before my story takes a further pace,
It seems a reasonable thing to say
What their condition was, the full array
Of each of them, as it appeared to me,
40 According to profession and degree,
And what apparel they were riding in;
And at a Knight I therefore will begin. **B**
There was a *Knight*, a most distinguished man,
Who from the day on which he first began
45 To ride abroad had followed chivalry,
Truth, honor, generousness and courtesy.
He had done nobly in his sovereign's war
And ridden into battle, no man more,
As well in Christian as in heathen places,
50 And ever honored for his noble graces.

When we took Alexandria, he was there.
He often sat at table in the chair
Of honor, above all nations, when in Prussia.
In Lithuania he had ridden, and Russia,
55 No Christian man so often, of his rank.
When, in Granada, Algeciras sank
Under assault, he had been there, and in
North Africa, raiding Benamarin;
In Anatolia he had been as well
60 And fought when Ayas and Attalia fell,
For all along the Mediterranean coast
He had embarked with many a noble host.
In fifteen mortal battles he had been
And jousted for our faith at Tramissene

23 hostelry (hōs'tel-rē): inn.

B PARAPHRASE

Paraphrase lines 35–42. What does the narrator set out to accomplish in “The Prologue”?

45 chivalry (shīv'el-rē): the code of behavior of medieval knights, which stressed the values listed in line 46.

51 Alexandria: a city in Egypt, captured by European Christians in 1365. All the places named in lines 51–64 were scenes of conflicts in which medieval Christians battled Muslims and other non-Christian peoples.

64 jousted: fought with a lance in an arranged battle against another knight.

65 Thrice in the lists, and always killed his man.
This same distinguished knight had led the van
Once with the Bey of Balat, doing work
For him against another heathen Turk;
He was of sovereign value in all eyes.

70 And though so much distinguished, he was wise
And in his bearing modest as a maid.
He never yet a boorish thing had said
In all his life to any, come what might;
He was a true, a perfect gentle-knight. **C**

75 Speaking of his equipment, he possessed
Fine horses, but he was not gaily dressed.
He wore a fustian tunic stained and dark
With smudges where his armor had left mark;
Just home from service, he had joined our ranks
80 To do his pilgrimage and render thanks.

He had his son with him, a fine young *Squire*,
A lover and cadet, a lad of fire
With locks as curly as if they had been pressed.
He was some twenty years of age, I guessed.

85 In stature he was of a moderate length,
With wonderful agility and strength.
He'd seen some service with the cavalry
In Flanders and Artois and Picardy
And had done valiantly in little space
90 Of time, in hope to win his lady's grace.
He was embroidered like a meadow bright
And full of freshest flowers, red and white.
Singing he was, or fluting all the day;
He was as fresh as is the month of May.
95 Short was his gown, the sleeves were long and wide;
He knew the way to sit a horse and ride.
He could make songs and poems and recite,
Knew how to joust and dance, to draw and write.
He loved so hotly that till dawn grew pale
100 He slept as little as a nightingale.
Courteous he was, lowly and serviceable,
And carved to serve his father at the table.

There was a *Yeoman* with him at his side,
No other servant; so he chose to ride.

105 This Yeoman wore a coat and hood of green,
And peacock-feathered arrows, bright and keen
And neatly sheathed, hung at his belt the while

65 **thrice**: three times; **lists**: fenced areas for jousting.

66 **van**: vanguard—the troops foremost in an attack.

67 **Bey of Balat**: a Turkish ruler.

C CHARACTERIZATION

Reread lines 43–74. What do the Knight's actions on and off the battlefield reveal about his character? Cite details to support your answer.

77 **fustian** (fūs'chən): a strong cloth made of linen and cotton.

81 **Squire**: a young man attending on and receiving training from a knight.

82 **cadet**: soldier in training.

88 **Flanders and Artois** (är-twä') and **Picardy** (pĭk'ər-dē): areas in what is now Belgium and northern France.

93 **fluting**: whistling.

103 **Yeoman** (yō'mən): an attendant in a noble household; **him**: the Knight.

—For he could dress his gear in yeoman style,
 His arrows never drooped their feathers low—
 110 And in his hand he bore a mighty bow.
 His head was like a nut, his face was brown.
 He knew the whole of woodcraft up and down.
 A saucy brace was on his arm to ward
 It from the bow-string, and a shield and sword
 115 Hung at one side, and at the other slipped
 A jaunty dirk, spear-sharp and well-equipped.
 A medal of St. Christopher he wore
 Of shining silver on his breast, and bore
 A hunting-horn, well slung and burnished clean,
 120 That dangled from a baldrick of bright green.
 He was a proper forester, I guess.

There also was a *Nun*, a Prioress,
 Her way of smiling very simple and coy.
 Her greatest oath was only “By St. Loy!”
 125 And she was known as Madam Eglantyne.
 And well she sang a service, with a fine
 Intoning through her nose, as was most seemly,
 And she spoke daintily in French, extremely,
 After the school of Stratford-atte-Bowe;
 130 French in the Paris style she did not know.
 At meat her manners were well taught withal;
 No morsel from her lips did she let fall,
 Nor dipped her fingers in the sauce too deep;
 But she could carry a morsel up and keep
 135 The smallest drop from falling on her breast.
 For **courtliness** she had a special zest,
 And she would wipe her upper lip so clean
 That not a trace of grease was to be seen
 Upon the cup when she had drunk; to eat,
 140 She reached a hand **sedately** for the meat.
 She certainly was very entertaining,
 Pleasant and friendly in her ways, and straining
 To counterfeit a courtly kind of grace,
 A stately bearing fitting to her place,
 145 And to seem dignified in all her dealings. **D**
 As for her sympathies and tender feelings,
 She was so charitably solicitous
 She used to weep if she but saw a mouse
 Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bleeding.
 150 And she had little dogs she would be feeding
 With roasted flesh, or milk, or fine white bread.
 And bitterly she wept if one were dead

113 saucy: jaunty; stylish; **brace:** a leather arm-guard worn by archers.

116 dirk: small dagger.

117 St. Christopher: patron saint of travelers.

120 baldrick: shoulder strap.

122 Prioress: a nun ranking just below the abbess (head) of a convent.

124 St. Loy: St. Eligius (known as St. Éloi in France).

129 Stratford-atte-Bowe: a town (now part of London) near the Prioress’s convent.

131 at meat: when dining; **withal:** moreover.

courtliness (kôrt’lê-nĭs) *n.*
 polite, elegant manners; refined behavior

sedately (sĭ-dât’lê) *adv.* in a composed, dignified manner; calmly

143 counterfeit: imitate.

D CHARACTERIZATION
 Reread lines 122–145. Which details suggest that the Prioress may be trying to appear more sophisticated than she really is?

Or someone took a stick and made it smart;
 She was all sentiment and tender heart.
 155 Her veil was gathered in a seemly way,
 Her nose was elegant, her eyes glass-grey;
 Her mouth was very small, but soft and red,
 Her forehead, certainly, was fair of spread,
 Almost a span across the brows, I own;
 160 She was indeed by no means undergrown.
 Her cloak, I noticed, had a graceful charm.
 She wore a coral trinket on her arm,
 A set of beads, the gaudies tricked in green,
 Whence hung a golden brooch of brightest sheen
 165 On which there first was graven a crowned A,
 And lower, *Amor vincit omnia*.

Another *Nun*, the secretary at her cell,
 Was riding with her, and *three Priests* as well.

A *Monk* there was, one of the finest sort
 170 Who rode the country; hunting was his sport.
 A manly man, to be an Abbot able;
 Many a dainty horse he had in stable.
 His bridle, when he rode, a man might hear
 Jingling in a whistling wind as clear,
 175 Aye, and as loud as does the chapel bell
 Where my lord Monk was Prior of the cell.
 The Rule of good St. Benet or St. Maur
 As old and strict he tended to ignore;
 He let go by the things of yesterday
 180 And took the modern world's more spacious way.
 He did not rate that text at a plucked hen
 Which says that hunters are not holy men
 And that a monk uncloistered is a mere
 Fish out of water, flapping on the pier,
 185 That is to say a monk out of his cloister.
 That was a text he held not worth an oyster;
 And I agreed and said his views were sound;
 Was he to study till his head went round
 Poring over books in cloisters? Must he toil
 190 As Austin bade and till the very soil?
 Was he to leave the world upon the shelf?
 Let Austin have his labor to himself.

This Monk was therefore a good man to horse;
 Greyhounds he had, as swift as birds, to course.
 195 Hunting a hare or riding at a fence

159 span: a unit of length equal to nine inches. A broad forehead was considered a sign of beauty in Chaucer's day.

163 gaudies: the larger beads in a set of prayer beads.

166 *Amor vincit omnia* (ä'môr wĭn'kĭt òm'nē-ə): Latin for "Love conquers all things."

171 Abbot: the head of a monastery.

172 dainty: excellent.

176 Prior of the cell: head of a subsidiary group of monks.

177 St. Benet . . . St. Maur: St. Benedict, who established a strict set of rules for monks' behavior, and his follower, St. Maurus, who introduced those rules into France.

190 Austin: St. Augustine of Hippo, who recommended that monks engage in hard agricultural labor.

194 to course: for hunting.



Was all his fun, he spared for no expense.
 I saw his sleeves were garnished at the hand
 With fine grey fur, the finest in the land,
 And on his hood, to fasten it at his chin
 200 He had a wrought-gold cunningly fashioned pin;
 Into a lover's knot it seemed to pass.
 His head was bald and shone like looking-glass;
 So did his face, as if it had been greased.
 He was a fat and **personable** priest;
 205 His prominent eyeballs never seemed to settle. **E**
 They glittered like the flames beneath a kettle;
 Supple his boots, his horse in fine condition.
 He was a prelate fit for exhibition,
 He was not pale like a tormented soul.
 210 He liked a fat swan best, and roasted whole.
 His palfrey was as brown as is a berry.

There was a *Friar*, a wanton one and merry,
 A Limiter, a very festive fellow.
 In all Four Orders there was none so mellow,
 215 So glib with gallant phrase and well-turned speech.
 He'd fixed up many a marriage, giving each
 Of his young women what he could afford her.
 He was a noble pillar to his Order.
 Highly beloved and intimate was he
 220 With County folk within his boundary,
 And city dames of honor and possessions;
 For he was qualified to hear confessions,

personable (pûr'sə-nə-bəl)
adj. pleasing in behavior and appearance

E CHARACTERIZATION

List three **character traits** of the Monk. In what ways does the narrator appear to poke fun at him?

211 **palfrey** (pôl'frē): saddle horse.

212 **Friar**: a member of a religious group sworn to poverty and living on charitable donations; **wanton** (wŏn'tən): playful; jolly.

213 **Limiter**: a friar licensed to beg for donations in a limited area.

214 **Four Orders**: the four groups of friars—Dominican, Franciscan, Carmelite, and Augustinian.

222 **confessions**: church rites in which people confess their sins to clergy members. Only certain friars were licensed to hear confessions.

Or so he said, with more than priestly scope;
 He had a special license from the Pope.
 225 Sweetly he heard his penitents at shrift
 With pleasant absolution, for a gift.
 He was an easy man in penance-giving
 Where he could hope to make a decent living;
 It's a sure sign whenever gifts are given
 230 To a poor Order that a man's well shriven,
 And should he give enough he knew in verity
 The penitent repented in sincerity.
 For many a fellow is so hard of heart
 He cannot weep, for all his inward smart.
 235 Therefore instead of weeping and of prayer
 One should give silver for a poor Friar's care.
 He kept his tippet stuffed with pins for curls,
 And pocket-knives, to give to pretty girls.
 And certainly his voice was gay and sturdy,
 240 For he sang well and played the hurdy-gurdy.
 At sing-songs he was champion of the hour.
 His neck was whiter than a lily-flower
 But strong enough to butt a bruiser down.
 He knew the taverns well in every town
 245 And every innkeeper and barmaid too
 Better than lepers, beggars and that crew, **F**
 For in so *eminent* a man as he
 It was not fitting with the dignity
 Of his position, dealing with a scum
 250 Of wretched lepers; nothing good can come
 Of commerce with such slum-and-gutter dwellers,
 But only with the rich and victual-sellers.
 But anywhere a profit might *accrue*
 Courteous he was and lowly of service too.
 255 Natural gifts like his were hard to match.
 He was the finest beggar of his batch,
 And, for his begging-district, paid a rent;
 His brethren did no poaching where he went.
 For though a widow mightn't have a shoe,
 260 So pleasant was his holy how-d'ye-do
 He got his farthing from her just the same
 Before he left, and so his income came
 To more than he laid out. And how he romped,
 Just like a puppy! He was ever prompt
 265 To arbitrate disputes on settling days
 (For a small fee) in many helpful ways,
 Not then appearing as your cloistered scholar
 With threadbare habit hardly worth a dollar,

225 **shrift**: confession.

230 **well shriven**: completely forgiven through the rite of confession.

231 **verity**: truth.

237 **tippet**: an extension of a hood or sleeve, used as a pocket.

240 **hurdy-gurdy**: a stringed musical instrument, similar to a lute, played by turning a crank while pressing down keys.

F PARAPHRASE

Restate lines 237–246. How does the Friar spend the money he earns through hearing confessions?

252 **victual** (vɪ'tl): food.

accrue (ə-krōō') v. to be added or gained; to accumulate

261 **farthing**: a coin of small value used in England until recent times.

265 **settling days**: days on which disputes were settled out of court. Friars often acted as arbiters in the disputes and charged for their services, though forbidden by the church to do so.

But much more like a Doctor or a Pope.
 270 Of double-worsted was the semi-cope
 Upon his shoulders, and the swelling fold
 About him, like a bell about its mold
 When it is casting, rounded out his dress.
 He lisped a little out of wantonness
 275 To make his English sweet upon his tongue.
 When he had played his harp, or having sung,
 His eyes would twinkle in his head as bright
 As any star upon a frosty night.
 This worthy's name was Hubert, it appeared.

280 There was a *Merchant* with a forking beard
 And motley dress; high on his horse he sat,
 Upon his head a Flemish beaver hat
 And on his feet daintily buckled boots.
 He told of his opinions and pursuits
 285 In solemn tones, he harped on his increase
 Of capital; there should be sea-police
 (He thought) upon the Harwich-Holland ranges;
 He was expert at dabbling in exchanges.
 This estimable Merchant so had set
 290 His wits to work, none knew he was in debt,
 He was so stately in administration,
 In loans and bargains and negotiation.
 He was an excellent fellow all the same;
 To tell the truth I do not know his name. **G**

295 An *Oxford Cleric*, still a student though,
 One who had taken logic long ago,
 Was there; his horse was thinner than a rake,
 And he was not too fat, I undertake,
 But had a hollow look, a sober stare;
 300 The thread upon his overcoat was bare.
 He had found no preferment in the church
 And he was too unworldly to make search
 For secular employment. By his bed
 He preferred having twenty books in red
 305 And black, of Aristotle's philosophy,
 Than costly clothes, fiddle or psaltery.
 Though a philosopher, as I have told,
 He had not found the stone for making gold.
 Whatever money from his friends he took
 310 He spent on learning or another book
 And prayed for them most earnestly, returning
 Thanks to them thus for paying for his learning.

270 double-worsted (wōōs'tīd): a strong, fairly costly fabric made from tightly twisted woolen yarn; **semi-cope**: a short cloak.

281 motley: multicolored.

282 Flemish: from Flanders, an area in what is now Belgium and northern France.

287 Harwich-Holland ranges: shipping routes between Harwich (hār'tj), a port on England's east coast, and the country of Holland.

288 exchanges: selling foreign currency at a profit.

G PARAPHRASE

Paraphrase lines 284–294.
 Is the Merchant a successful businessman? Why or why not?

295 Cleric: a student preparing for the priesthood.

301 preferment: advancement.

305 Aristotle's philosophy: the writings of Aristotle, a famous Greek philosopher of the fourth century B.C.

306 psaltery (sôl'tè-rê): a stringed instrument.

307–308 Though a philosopher . . . gold: The “philosopher’s stone” supposedly turned metals into gold.

His only care was study, and indeed
He never spoke a word more than was need,
315 Formal at that, respectful in the extreme,
Short, to the point, and lofty in his theme.
A tone of moral virtue filled his speech
And gladly would he learn, and gladly teach. **H**

A Sergeant at the Law who paid his calls,
320 Wary and wise, for clients at St. Paul's
There also was, of noted excellence.
Discreet he was, a man to reverence,
Or so he seemed, his sayings were so wise.
He often had been Justice of Assize
325 By letters patent, and in full commission.
His fame and learning and his high position
Had won him many a robe and many a fee.
There was no such conveyancer as he;
All was fee-simple to his strong digestion,
330 Not one conveyance could be called in question.
Though there was nowhere one so busy as he,
He was less busy than he seemed to be.
He knew of every judgment, case and crime
Ever recorded since King William's time.
335 He could dictate defenses or draft deeds;
No one could pinch a comma from his screeds
And he knew every statute off by rote.
He wore a homely parti-colored coat,
Girt with a silken belt of pin-stripe stuff;
340 Of his appearance I have said enough.

There was a *Franklin* with him, it appeared;
White as a daisy-petal was his beard.
A sanguine man, high-colored and benign,
He loved a morning sop of cake in wine.
345 He lived for pleasure and had always done,
For he was Epicurus' very son,
In whose opinion sensual delight
Was the one true felicity in sight.
As noted as St. Julian was for bounty
350 He made his household free to all the County.
His bread, his ale were finest of the fine
And no one had a better stock of wine.
His house was never short of bake-meat pies,
Of fish and flesh, and these in such supplies
355 It positively snowed with meat and drink
And all the dainties that a man could think. **I**

H CHARACTERIZATION

Reread lines 295–318. In what ways does the Oxford Cleric differ from the Monk and the Friar? Cite details.

319 Sergeant at the Law: a lawyer appointed by the monarch to serve as a judge.

320 St. Paul's: the cathedral of London, outside which lawyers met clients when the courts were closed.

324 Justice of Assize: a judge who traveled about the country to hear cases.

325 letters patent: royal documents commissioning a judge.

328 conveyancer: a lawyer specializing in conveyances (deeds) and property disputes.

329 fee-simple: property owned without restrictions.

334 King William's time: the reign of William the Conqueror.

336 screeds: documents.

341 Franklin: a wealthy landowner.

343 sanguine (sǎng'gwĭn): cheerful and good-natured.

346 Epicurus' very son: someone who pursues pleasure as the chief goal in life, as the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus was supposed to have recommended.

349 St. Julian: the patron saint of hospitality; **bounty:** generosity.

I CHARACTERIZATION

What does the narrator state directly about the Franklin in lines 341–356?

According to the seasons of the year
Changes of dish were ordered to appear.
He kept fat partridges in coops, beyond,
360 Many a bream and pike were in his pond.
Woe to the cook unless the sauce was hot
And sharp, or if he wasn't on the spot!
And in his hall a table stood arrayed
And ready all day long, with places laid.
365 As Justice at the Sessions none stood higher;
He often had been Member for the Shire.
A dagger and a little purse of silk
Hung at his girdle, white as morning milk.
As Sheriff he checked audit, every entry.
370 He was a model among landed gentry.

*A Haberdasher, a Dyer, a Carpenter,
A Weaver and a Carpet-maker* were
Among our ranks, all in the livery
Of one impressive guild-fraternity.
375 They were so trim and fresh their gear would pass
For new. Their knives were not tricked out with brass
But wrought with purest silver, which avouches
A like display on girdles and on pouches.
Each seemed a worthy burgess, fit to grace
380 A guild-hall with a seat upon the dais.
Their wisdom would have justified a plan
To make each one of them an alderman;
They had the capital and revenue,
Besides their wives declared it was their due.
385 And if they did not think so, then they ought;
To be called "*Madam*" is a glorious thought,
And so is going to church and being seen
Having your mantle carried, like a queen.

They had a *Cook* with them who stood alone
390 For boiling chicken with a marrow-bone,
Sharp flavoring-powder and a spice for savor.
He could distinguish London ale by flavor,
And he could roast and seethe and broil and fry,
Make good thick soup and bake a tasty pie.
395 But what a pity—so it seemed to me,
That he should have an ulcer on his knee.
As for *blancmange*, he made it with the best.

There was a *Skipper* hailing from far west;
He came from Dartmouth, so I understood.

365 Sessions: local court proceedings.

366 Member for the Shire: his county's representative in Parliament.

368 girdle: belt.

369 Sheriff: a royal tax collector.

370 landed gentry (jĕn'trē): well-born, wealthy landowners.

371 Haberdasher: a seller of hats and other clothing accessories.

373–374 livery . . . guild-fraternity: uniform of a social or religious organization.

379 burgess (bŭr'jĭs): citizen of a town.

382 alderman: town councilor.

388 mantle: cloak.

397 blancmange (blə-mānj'): a thick chicken stew with almonds.

399 Dartmouth (dārt'mēth): a port in southwestern England.

400 He rode a farmer's horse as best he could,
 In a woolen gown that reached his knee.
 A dagger on a lanyard falling free
 Hung from his neck under his arm and down.
 The summer heat had tanned his color brown,
 405 And certainly he was an excellent fellow.
 Many a draft of vintage, red and yellow,
 He'd drawn at Bordeaux, while the trader snored.
 The nicer rules of conscience he ignored.
 If, when he fought, the enemy vessel sank,
 410 He sent his prisoners home; they walked the plank.
 As for his skill in reckoning his tides,
 Currents and many another risk besides,
 Moons, harbors, pilots, he had such dispatch
 That none from Hull to Carthage was his match.
 415 Hardy he was, prudent in undertaking;
 His beard in many a tempest had its shaking,
 And he knew all the havens as they were
 From Gottland to the Cape of Finisterre,
 And every creek in Brittany and Spain;
 420 The barge he owned was called *The Maudelayne*.

A *Doctor* too emerged as we proceeded;
 No one alive could talk as well as he did
 On points of medicine and of surgery,
 For, being grounded in astronomy,
 425 He watched his patient closely for the hours
 When, by his horoscope, he knew the powers
 Of favorable planets, then ascendant,
 Worked on the images for his dependent.
 The cause of every **malady** you'd got
 430 He knew, and whether dry, cold, moist or hot;
 He knew their seat, their humor and condition.
 He was a perfect practicing physician.
 These causes being known for what they were,
 He gave the man his medicine then and there.
 435 All his apothecaries in a tribe
 Were ready with the drugs he would prescribe
 And each made money from the other's guile;
 They had been friendly for a goodish while.
 He was well-versed in Aesculapius too
 440 And what Hippocrates and Rufus knew
 And Dioscorides, now dead and gone,
 Galen and Rhazes, Hali, Serapion,
 Averroes, Avicenna, Constantine,
 Scotch Bernard, John of Gaddesden, Gilbertine.

402 lanyard (lăn'yərd): a cord worn as a necklace.

406 vintage: wine.

407 Bordeaux (bôr-dô'): a region of France famous for its wine.

414 Hull . . . Carthage: ports in England and in Spain. The places named in lines 414–419 show that the Skipper is familiar with all the western coast of Europe.

416 tempest: violent storm.

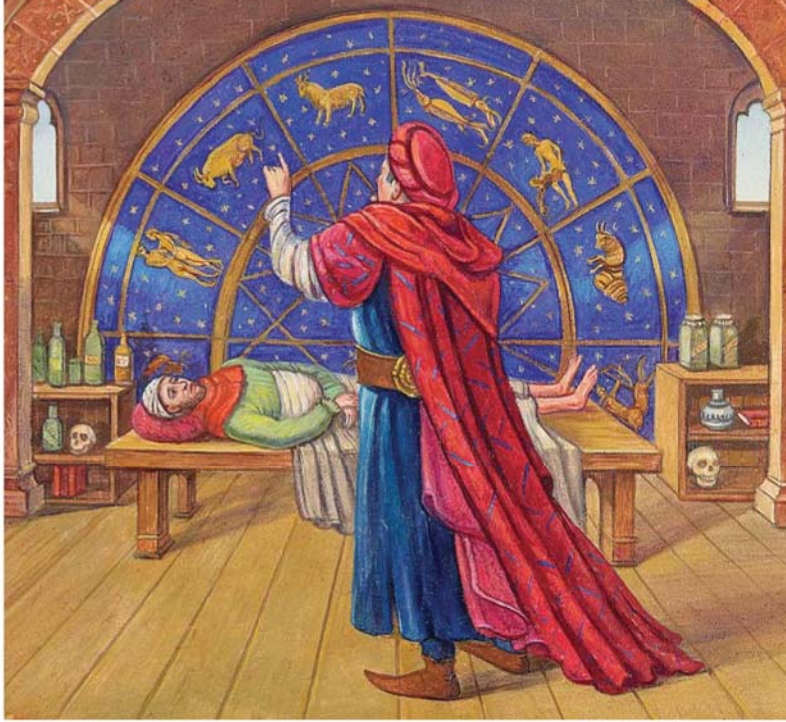
424 astronomy: astrology.

malady (măl'ə-dē) *n.* a disease or disorder; an ailment

430 dry, cold, moist . . . hot: in medieval science, the four basic qualities that were thought to combine to form both the four elements of the world (fire, air, water, and earth) and the four humors of the human body.

435 apothecaries (ə-pōth'ĭ-kēr'ēz): druggists.

439–444 Aesculapius (ēs'kyə-lā'pē-əs) . . . **Gilbertine:** famous ancient and medieval medical experts.



ANALYZE VISUALS

What does this image reveal about the ways in which a medieval doctor's practice differed from that of a modern doctor?

445 In his own diet he observed some measure;
 There were no superfluities for pleasure,
 Only digestives, nutritives and such.
 He did not read the Bible very much.
 In blood-red garments, slashed with bluish grey
 450 And lined with taffeta, he rode his way;
 Yet he was rather close as to expenses
 And kept the gold he won in pestilences.
 Gold stimulates the heart, or so we're told.
 He therefore had a special love of gold.

455 A worthy *woman* from beside *Bath* city
 Was with us, somewhat deaf, which was a pity.
 In making cloth she showed so great a bent
 She bettered those of Ypres and of Ghent.
 In all the parish not a dame dared stir
 460 Towards the altar steps in front of her,
 And if indeed they did, so wrath was she
 As to be quite put out of charity.
 Her kerchiefs were of finely woven ground;
 I dared have sworn they weighed a good ten pound,
 465 The ones she wore on Sunday, on her head.
 Her hose were of the finest scarlet red
 And gartered tight; her shoes were soft and new.
 Bold was her face, handsome, and red in hue.
 A worthy woman all her life, what's more
 470 She'd had five husbands, all at the church door,
 Apart from other company in youth;
 No need just now to speak of that, forsooth.

446 **superfluities** (sōō'pær-flōō'y-tēz): excesses.

450 **taffeta** (tăf'y-tə): a stiff, smooth fabric.

452 **pestilences**: plagues.

455 **Bath**: a city in southwestern England.

458 **Ypres** (ē'prə) . . . **Ghent** (gĕnt): Flemish cities famous in the Middle Ages for manufacturing fine wool fabrics.

461 **wrath** (răth): angry.

463 **ground**: a textured fabric.

466 **hose**: stockings.

470 **all at the church door**: In medieval times, a marriage was performed outside or just within the doors of a church; afterwards, the marriage party went inside for mass.

472 **forsooth**: in truth; indeed.

And she had thrice been to Jerusalem,
Seen many strange rivers and passed over them;
475 She'd been to Rome and also to Boulogne,
St. James of Compostella and Cologne,
And she was skilled in wandering by the way.
She had gap-teeth, set widely, truth to say.
Easily on an ambling horse she sat
480 Well wimpled up, and on her head a hat
As broad as is a buckler or a shield;
She had a flowing mantle that concealed
Large hips, her heels spurred sharply under that.
In company she liked to laugh and chat
485 And knew the remedies for love's mischances,
An art in which she knew the oldest dances. **J**

A holy-minded man of good renown
There was, and poor, the *Parson* to a town,
Yet he was rich in holy thought and work.
490 He also was a learned man, a clerk,
Who truly knew Christ's gospel and would preach it
Devoutly to parishioners, and teach it.
Benign and wonderfully diligent,
And patient when adversity was sent
495 (For so he proved in much adversity)
He hated cursing to extort a fee,
Nay rather he preferred beyond a doubt
Giving to poor parishioners round about
Both from church offerings and his property;
500 He could in little find sufficiency.
Wide was his parish, with houses far asunder,
Yet he neglected not in rain or thunder,
In sickness or in grief, to pay a call
On the remotest, whether great or small,
505 Upon his feet, and in his hand a stave.
This noble example to his sheep he gave
That first he wrought, and afterwards he taught;
And it was from the Gospel he had caught
Those words, and he would add this figure too,
510 That if gold rust, what then will iron do?
For if a priest be foul in whom we trust
No wonder that a common man should rust;
And shame it is to see—let priests take stock—
A shitten shepherd and a snowy flock.
515 The true example that a priest should give
Is one of cleanness, how the sheep should live.

473–476 Jerusalem . . . Rome . . .
Boulogne (bōō-lōn'), St. James of
Compostella and Cologne (kə-lōn'):
popular destinations of religious
pilgrimages in the Middle Ages.

480 **wimpled**: with her hair and
neck covered by a cloth headdress.

481 **buckler**: small round shield.

J CHARACTERIZATION

Reread lines 455–486. Which
details help define the Wife of
Bath as a worldly woman?

490 **clerk**: scholar.

500 **sufficiency**: enough to get by on.

501 **asunder**: apart.

505 **stave**: staff.

507 **wrought** (rôt): worked.

509 **figure**: figure of speech.

He did not set his benefice to hire
 And leave his sheep encumbered in the mire
 Or run to London to earn easy bread
 520 By singing masses for the wealthy dead,
 Or find some Brotherhood and get enrolled.
 He stayed at home and watched over his fold
 So that no wolf should make the sheep miscarry.
 He was a shepherd and no mercenary. **K**
 525 Holy and virtuous he was, but then
 Never contemptuous of sinful men,
 Never disdainful, never too proud or fine,
 But was discreet in teaching and benign.
 His business was to show a fair behavior
 530 And draw men thus to Heaven and their Savior,
 Unless indeed a man were obstinate;
 And such, whether of high or low estate,
 He put to sharp rebuke, to say the least.
 I think there never was a better priest.
 535 He sought no pomp or glory in his dealings,
 No scrupulosity had spiced his feelings.
 Christ and His Twelve Apostles and their lore
 He taught, but followed it himself before.

There was a *Plowman* with him there, his brother;
 540 Many a load of dung one time or other
 He must have carted through the morning dew.
 He was an honest worker, good and true,
 Living in peace and perfect charity,
 And, as the gospel bade him, so did he,
 545 Loving God best with all his heart and mind
 And then his neighbor as himself, repined
 At no misfortune, slacked for no content,
 For steadily about his work he went
 To thrash his corn, to dig or to manure
 550 Or make a ditch; and he would help the poor **L**
 For love of Christ and never take a penny
 If he could help it, and, as prompt as any,
 He paid his tithes in full when they were due
 On what he owned, and on his earnings too.
 555 He wore a tabard smock and rode a mare.

There was a *Reeve*, also a *Miller*, there,
 A College *Manciple* from the Inns of Court,
 A papal *Pardoner* and, in close consort,

517 set his benefice (bĕn'ə-fĭs) **to hire**: pay someone to perform his parish duties for him.

K PARAPHRASE

Restate lines 515–524. In what ways does the Parson serve the members of his parish?

536 scrupulosity (skrŭ'pyə-lŏs'ĭ-tē): excessive concern with fine points of behavior.

L CHARACTERIZATION

Compare the Plowman with his brother, the Parson. What **character traits** do they seem to share?


555 tabard smock: a short loose jacket made of a heavy material.

556 Reeve: an estate manager;

557 Manciple: a servant in charge of purchasing food; **Inns of Court**:

London institutions for training law students; **558 Pardoner**: a church official authorized to sell people pardons for their sins.

A Church-Court *Summoner*, riding at a trot,
560 And finally myself—that was the lot.

The *Miller* was a chap of sixteen stone,
A great stout fellow big in brawn and bone.
He did well out of them, for he could go
And win the ram at any wrestling show.
565 Broad, knotty and short-shouldered, he would boast
He could heave any door off hinge and post,
Or take a run and break it with his head.
His beard, like any sow or fox, was red
And broad as well, as though it were a spade;
570 And, at its very tip, his nose displayed
A wart on which there stood a tuft of hair
Red as the bristles in an old sow's ear.
His nostrils were as black as they were wide.
He had a sword and buckler at his side,
575 His mighty mouth was like a furnace door. 
A wrangler and buffoon, he had a store
Of tavern stories, filthy in the main.
His was a master-hand at stealing grain.
He felt it with his thumb and thus he knew
580 Its quality and took three times his due—
A thumb of gold, by God, to gauge an oat!
He wore a hood of blue and a white coat.
He liked to play his bagpipes up and down
And that was how he brought us out of town.

585 The *Manciple* came from the Inner Temple;
All caterers might follow his example
In buying victuals; he was never rash
Whether he bought on credit or paid cash.
He used to watch the market most precisely
590 And got in first, and so he did quite nicely.
Now isn't it a marvel of God's grace
That an illiterate fellow can outpace
The wisdom of a heap of learned men?
His masters—he had more than thirty then—
595 All versed in the abstrusest legal knowledge,
Could have produced a dozen from their College
Fit to be stewards in land and rents and game
To any Peer in England you could name,
And show him how to live on what he had
600 Debt-free (unless of course the Peer were mad)
Or be as frugal as he might desire,
And make them fit to help about the Shire

559 Summoner: a layman with the job of summoning sinners to church courts.

561 stone: a unit of weight equal to 14 pounds.

 **GRAMMAR AND STYLE**

Review lines 570–575. Notice how Chaucer uses **similes**, or comparisons, to create a remarkably vivid—and unflattering—portrait of the Miller.

576 wrangler (rǎng'glər): a loud, argumentative person; **buffoon** (bə-fōōn'): a fool.

577 in the main: for the most part.

581 thumb of gold: a reference to a proverb, "An honest miller has a golden thumb"—perhaps meaning that there is no such thing as an honest miller.

585 Inner Temple: one of the Inns of Court.

594 his masters: the lawyers that the Manciple feeds.

595 abstrusest: most scholarly and difficult to understand.

597–598 stewards . . . Peer: estate managers for any nobleman.

In any legal case there was to try;
And yet this Manciple could wipe their eye.

- 605 The *Reeve* was old and choleric and thin;
His beard was shaven closely to the skin,
His shorn hair came abruptly to a stop
Above his ears, and he was docked on top
Just like a priest in front; his legs were lean,
610 Like sticks they were, no calf was to be seen.
He kept his bins and garners very trim;
No auditor could gain a point on him.
And he could judge by watching drought and rain
The yield he might expect from seed and grain.
615 His master's sheep, his animals and hens,
Pigs, horses, dairies, stores and cattle-pens
Were wholly trusted to his government.
He had been under contract to present
The accounts, right from his master's earliest years.
620 No one had ever caught him in arrears.
No bailiff, serf or herdsman dared to kick,
He knew their dodges, knew their every trick;
Feared like the plague he was, by those beneath.
He had a lovely dwelling on a heath,
625 Shadowed in green by trees above the sward.
A better hand at bargains than his lord,

604 **wipe their eye:** outdo them.

605 **choleric** (kŏl'ə-rĭk): having a temperament in which yellow bile predominates, and therefore prone to outbursts of anger.

608 **docked:** clipped short.

611 **garners:** buildings for storing grain.

617 **government:** authority.

620 **in arrears:** with unpaid debts.

621 **bailiff:** farm manager; **serf:** farm laborer.

625 **sward:** grassy plot.



He had grown rich and had a store of treasure
 Well tucked away, yet out it came to pleasure
 His lord with subtle loans or gifts of goods,
 630 To earn his thanks and even coats and hoods.
 When young he'd learnt a useful trade and still
 He was a carpenter of first-rate skill.
 The stallion-cob he rode at a slow trot
 Was dapple-grey and bore the name of Scot.
 635 He wore an overcoat of bluish shade
 And rather long; he had a rusty blade
 Slung at his side. He came, as I heard tell,
 From Norfolk, near a place called Baldeswell.
 His coat was tucked under his belt and splayed.
 640 He rode the hindmost of our cavalcade.

633 stallion-cob: a thickset, short-legged male horse.

638 Norfolk (nôr'fək): a county in eastern England.

There was a *Summoner* with us at that Inn,
 His face on fire, like a cherubin,
 For he had carbuncles. His eyes were narrow,
 He was as hot and lecherous as a sparrow.
 645 Black scabby brows he had, and a thin beard.
 Children were afraid when he appeared.
 No quicksilver, lead ointment, tartar creams,
 No brimstone, no boracic, so it seems,
 Could make a salve that had the power to bite,
 650 Clean up or cure his whelks of knobby white
 Or purge the pimples sitting on his cheeks.
 Garlic he loved, and onions too, and leeks,
 And drinking strong red wine till all was hazy.
 Then he would shout and jabber as if crazy,
 655 And wouldn't speak a word except in Latin
 When he was drunk, such tags as he was pat in;
 He only had a few, say two or three,
 That he had mugged up out of some decree;
 No wonder, for he heard them every day.
 660 And, as you know, a man can teach a jay
 To call out "Walter" better than the Pope.
 But had you tried to test his wits and grope
 For more, you'd have found nothing in the bag.
 Then "*Questio quid juris*" was his tag.
 665 He was a noble varlet and a kind one,
 You'd meet none better if you went to find one.
 Why, he'd allow—just for a quart of wine—
 Any good lad to keep a concubine
 A twelvemonth and dispense him altogether!
 670 And he had finches of his own to feather:
 And if he found some rascal with a maid

642 cherubin (chĕr'ə-bĭn'): a type of angel—in the Middle Ages often depicted with a fiery red face.

643 carbuncles (kär'bŭng'kəlz): big pimples, considered a sign of lechery and drunkenness in the Middle Ages.

647–648 quicksilver . . . boracic (bə-rās'ĭk): substances used as skin medicines in medieval times.

650 whelks (hwĕlks): swellings.

656 tags: brief quotations.

658 mugged up: memorized.

660 jay: a bird that can be taught to mimic human speech without understanding it.

664 *Questio quid juris* (kwĕs'tĕ-ō kwĭd yŏŕ'ĭs): Latin for "The question is, What part of the law (is applicable)?"—a statement often heard in medieval courts.

He would instruct him not to be afraid
 In such a case of the Archdeacon's curse
 (Unless the rascal's soul were in his purse)
 675 For in his purse the punishment should be.
 "Purse is the good Archdeacon's Hell," said he.
 But well I know he lied in what he said;
 A curse should put a guilty man in dread,
 For curses kill, as shriving brings, salvation.
 680 We should beware of excommunication.
 Thus, as he pleased, the man could bring duress
 On any young fellow in the diocese.
 He knew their secrets, they did what he said.
 He wore a garland set upon his head
 685 Large as the holly-bush upon a stake
 Outside an ale-house, and he had a cake,
 A round one, which it was his joke to wield
 As if it were intended for a shield.

 He and a gentle *Pardoner* rode together,
 690 A bird from Charing Cross of the same feather,
 Just back from visiting the Court of Rome.
 He loudly sang, "*Come hither, love, come home!*"
 The Summoner sang deep seconds to this song,
 No trumpet ever sounded half so strong.
 695 This Pardoner had hair as yellow as wax,
 Hanging down smoothly like a hank of flax.
 In driblets fell his locks behind his head
 Down to his shoulders which they overspread;
 Thinly they fell, like rat-tails, one by one.
 700 He wore no hood upon his head, for fun;
 The hood inside his wallet had been stowed,
 He aimed at riding in the latest mode;
 But for a little cap his head was bare
 And he had bulging eye-balls, like a hare.
 705 He'd sewed a holy relic on his cap;
 His wallet lay before him on his lap,
 Brimful of pardons come from Rome, all hot.
 He had the same small voice a goat has got.
 His chin no beard had harbored, nor would harbor,
 710 Smoother than ever chin was left by barber.
 I judge he was a gelding, or a mare.
 As to his trade, from Berwick down to Ware
 There was no pardoner of equal grace,
 For in his trunk he had a pillow-case
 715 Which he asserted was Our Lady's veil.

673 Archdeacon's curse: excommunication—an official exclusion of a person from participating in the rites of the church. (An archdeacon is a high church official.)

681 duress (doo-rēs'): compulsion by means of threats.

682 diocese (dī'ə-sīs): the district under a bishop's supervision.

685–686 the holly-bush . . . ale-house: Since few people could read in the Middle Ages, many businesses identified themselves with symbols. Outside many taverns could be found wreaths of holly on stakes.

690 Charing Cross: a section of London.

696 flax: a pale grayish yellow fiber used for making linen cloth.

701 wallet: knapsack.

705 holy relic: an object revered because of its association with a holy person.

711 gelding (gēl'dīng): a castrated horse—here, a eunuch.

712 Berwick (bēr'īk) . . . **Ware:** towns in the north and the south of England.

715 Our Lady's veil: the kerchief of the Virgin Mary.

He said he had a gobbet of the sail
 Saint Peter had the time when he made bold
 To walk the waves, till Jesu Christ took hold.
 He had a cross of metal set with stones
 720 And, in a glass, a rubble of pigs' bones.
 And with these relics, any time he found
 Some poor up-country parson to astound,
 In one short day, in money down, he drew
 More than the parson in a month or two,
 725 And by his flatteries and prevarication
 Made monkeys of the priest and congregation. **N**
 But still to do him justice first and last
 In church he was a noble ecclesiast.
 How well he read a lesson or told a story!
 730 But best of all he sang an Offertory,
 For well he knew that when that song was sung
 He'd have to preach and tune his honey-tongue
 And (well he could) win silver from the crowd.
 That's why he sang so merrily and loud.

735 Now I have told you shortly, in a clause,
 The rank, the array, the number and the cause
 Of our assembly in this company
 In Southwark, at that high-class hostelry
 Known as *The Tabard*, close beside *The Bell*.
 740 And now the time has come for me to tell
 How we behaved that evening; I'll begin
 After we had alighted at the Inn,
 Then I'll report our journey, stage by stage,
 All the remainder of our pilgrimage.
 745 But first I beg of you, in courtesy,
 Not to condemn me as unmannerly
 If I speak plainly and with no concealings
 And give account of all their words and dealings,
 Using their very phrases as they fell.
 750 For certainly, as you all know so well,
 He who repeats a tale after a man
 Is bound to say, as nearly as he can,
 Each single word, if he remembers it,
 However rudely spoken or unfit,
 755 Or else the tale he tells will be untrue,
 The things pretended and the phrases new.
 He may not flinch although it were his brother,
 He may as well say one word as another.
 And Christ Himself spoke broad in Holy Writ,
 760 Yet there is no scurrility in it,

716 **gobbet**: piece.

717–718 **when he . . . took hold**: a reference to an incident in which Jesus extended a helping hand to Peter as he tried to walk on water (Matthew 14:29–31).

N PARAPHRASE

Paraphrase the description of the Pardoner in lines 712–726. How exactly does he earn a living?

739 **The Bell**: another inn.

745–756 The narrator apologizes in advance for using the exact words of his companions.

759 **broad**: bluntly; plainly.

760 **scurrility** (skə-rī'lĭ-tē): vulgarity; coarseness.



And Plato says, for those with power to read,
 “The word should be as cousin to the deed.”
 Further I beg you to forgive it me
 If I neglect the order and degree
 765 And what is due to rank in what I’ve planned.
 I’m short of wit as you will understand.

761 Plato (plā'tō): a famous philosopher of ancient Greece.

Our *Host* gave us great welcome; everyone
 Was given a place and supper was begun.
 He served the finest victuals you could think,
 770 The wine was strong and we were glad to drink.
 A very striking man our Host withal,
 And fit to be a marshal in a hall.
 His eyes were bright, his girth a little wide;
 There is no finer burgess in Cheapside.
 775 Bold in his speech, yet wise and full of tact,
 There was no manly attribute he lacked,
 What’s more he was a merry-hearted man.
 After our meal he jokingly began
 To talk of sport, and, among other things
 780 After we’d settled up our reckonings,
 He said as follows: “Truly, gentlemen,
 You’re very welcome and I can’t think when
 —Upon my word I’m telling you no lie—
 I’ve seen a gathering here that looked so spry,
 785 No, not this year, as in this tavern now.
 I’d think you up some fun if I knew how.
 And, as it happens, a thought has just occurred


767 Host: the innkeeper of the Tabard.

772 marshal in a hall: an official in charge of arranging a nobleman’s banquet.

774 Cheapside: the main business district of London in Chaucer’s day.

780 settled up our reckonings: paid our bills.

To please you, costing nothing, on my word.
You're off to Canterbury—well, God speed!
790 Blessed St. Thomas answer to your need!
And I don't doubt, before the journey's done
You mean to while the time in tales and fun.
Indeed, there's little pleasure for your bones
Riding along and all as dumb as stones.
795 So let me then propose for your enjoyment,
Just as I said, a suitable employment.
And if my notion suits and you agree
And promise to submit yourselves to me
Playing your parts exactly as I say
800 Tomorrow as you ride along the way,
Then by my father's soul (and he is dead)
If you don't like it you can have my head!
Hold up your hands, and not another word."

Well, our opinion was not long deferred,
805 It seemed not worth a serious debate;
We all agreed to it at any rate
And bade him issue what commands he would.
"My lords," he said, "now listen for your good,
And please don't treat my notion with disdain.
810 This is the point. I'll make it short and plain.
Each one of you shall help to make things slip
By telling two stories on the outward trip
To Canterbury, that's what I intend,
And, on the homeward way to journey's end
815 Another two, tales from the days of old;
And then the man whose story is best told,
That is to say who gives the fullest measure
Of good morality and general pleasure,
He shall be given a supper, paid by all,
820 Here in this tavern, in this very hall,
When we come back again from Canterbury. 
And in the hope to keep you bright and merry
I'll go along with you myself and ride
All at my own expense and serve as guide.
825 I'll be the judge, and those who won't obey
Shall pay for what we spend upon the way.
Now if you all agree to what you've heard
Tell me at once without another word,
And I will make arrangements early for it."

790 St. Thomas: St. Thomas à Becket, to whose shrine the pilgrims are traveling.

794 dumb: silent.

807 bade him: asked him to.

 **PARAPHRASE**

Restate lines 810–821. What proposal does the Host make to the pilgrims?

830 Of course we all agreed, in fact we swore it
Delightedly, and made **entreaty** too
That he should act as he proposed to do,
Become our Governor in short, and be
Judge of our tales and general referee,
835 And set the supper at a certain price.
We promised to be ruled by his advice
Come high, come low; unanimously thus
We set him up in judgment over us.
More wine was fetched, the business being done;
840 We drank it off and up went everyone
To bed without a moment of delay. **P**

Early next morning at the spring of day
Up rose our Host and roused us like a cock,
Gathering us together in a flock,
845 And off we rode at slightly faster pace
Than walking to St. Thomas' watering-place;
And there our Host drew up, began to ease
His horse, and said, "Now, listen if you please,
My lords! Remember what you promised me.
850 If evensong and matins will agree
Let's see who shall be first to tell a tale.
And as I hope to drink good wine and ale
I'll be your judge. The rebel who disobeys,
However much the journey costs, he pays.
855 Now draw for cut and then we can depart;
The man who draws the shortest cut shall start."

entreaty (ĕn-trĕ'tĕ) *n.* a serious request or plea

P CHARACTERIZATION

Examine the way the pilgrims respond to the Host in lines 830–841. What type of person do you think would appeal to so many?

843 cock: rooster (whose cry rouses people from sleep).

846 St. Thomas' watering-place: a brook about two miles from London.

850 If evensong and matins (măt'nz) **will agree:** if what you said last night is what you will do this morning. (Evensong and matins are evening and morning prayer services.)

855 draw for cut: draw lots.