The name Middle English refers to the English language in its phase of change from Old to Modern English and to the literature written in English during that time. Within these four centuries, medieval civilization reached its full development and began to decline. By the fifteenth century, its social institutions had become outdated, and England was at the threshold of the modern age.

**POLITICAL EVENTS**

The medieval political order came to England with William of Normandy, the last of England's foreign conquerors. In a sense, however, William's coming from France was not a foreign invasion at all. He did not regard himself as a foreign conqueror for good reasons: he had a legitimate claim to the throne through his mother, and Edward the Confessor (1042-66) had named him royal heir fifteen years before. In October of 1066, William crossed the Channel to claim what he, along with many Englishmen, regarded as his own title by right of birth and royal decree.

At Hastings the Normans met a determined body of English troops led by the newly crowned Harold and composed mostly of southern militia. The battle remained long in doubt. Harold's main army, forced to march south the length of England after having beaten off a band of Norwegian invaders, fought courageously but was not at full strength. Here William won perhaps the most significant battle of English history.

William's successors for the next three hundred years were, for the most part, strong rulers and capable administrators. Since William did not give up his French territory when he became king of England, his royal successors until 1204 were both kings of England and dukes of Normandy. In 1152 the marriage of Henry II (ruler of England, Normandy, and Anjou) to Eleanor of Aquitaine gave their heir, in addition, a claim to the French throne. For more than a century, English rulers and nobility engaged in military campaigns in France to make good this claim.

During this "Hundred Years' War" (1337-1453), the English won many battles. Spectacular victories under the Black Prince, eldest son of Edward III, at Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1356) and later under Henry V at Agincourt (1415) helped to bring much of France under English control.

The early English successes against France were due largely to advances in military techniques. European war tactics still revolved around the armored, mounted knight and the fortified castle. The French armies fought conventionally, relying on cavalry charges by armored nobles to make way for hand-to-hand fighting by peasant foot soldiers. Under the Black Prince, a small mobile core of infantry was flanked by wings of archers. When the French cavalry charged, they found themselves in a crossfire of arrows. The English infantry then drove quickly into the disordered enemy ranks. These yard-long arrows, shot from six-foot bows, could pierce any armor and were reasonably accurate up to two hundred yards. The longbow thus rendered the armored knight ineffective. Another innovation, gunpowder, was soon to make castles and other stone fortifications obsolete.
During the reign of Edward III’s grandson, the incompetent Henry VI (1422-61, 1470-71), England’s political fortunes began to turn. Abroad, England lost all her holdings in France except the port of Calais. At home, she suffered civil turmoil. Rivalry for the throne between the dukedoms of Lancaster and York, lines issuing from two of Edward III’s seven sons, erupted in a series of bloody skirmishes. This thirty-year conflict became known as the Wars of the Roses (1455-85) from the red and white roses that were the insignias of the two contending branches of the royal family. Later generations were to regard these years of strife over the throne as divine punishment for the 1399 deposing and murder of Richard II by the usurping Lancastrian Henry IV, his cousin. This dark period of fighting among four generations of Edward III’s heirs ended with the death in battle of the hated Yorkist Richard III (1483-85), who ruled as ruthlessly as he had gained power.

In 1485, Henry Tudor, earl of Richmond, left Brittany, to which he had fled, and landed in Wales at the head of some Breton troops to challenge Richard for the throne. Richmond, Edward III’s great-great-grandson in the line of Lancaster, defeated his great-uncle, Richard III, at Bosworth Field. He later married the slain Yorkist’s granddaughter, Elizabeth, and thus united the warring houses in a new dynasty. This dynasty adopted as its emblem the double rose, in which the white rose of York was superimposed on the red of Lancaster. The ascension of the Tudor Henry VII (1485-1507) brought an end both to the civil hostilities and to the English Middle Ages.

The Norman Conquest of 1066 imposed the feudal system on England. Feudalism was a political arrangement based on a scale of privileges and responsibilities. The king owned all the land and, in effect, leased it to the great nobles, who in turn leased it to the lesser nobles and they to the serfs, along with guarantees of protection and justice. This land and these benefits were held in return for certain services: from the nobility, military support; from the serfs, a portion of their harvest or of their labors in the nobleman’s fields. The basic social and economic unit was the manor, a self-sufficient estate ruled by a nobleman and administered by a steward, the highest ranking servant.

William instituted feudalism with great force of will. Replacing discontented English nobility with French, he created a new aristocracy more dependent upon the crown than any before it. Politically, the nation became strongly centralized.
In the twelfth century Henry II established procedures that insured certain rights for the English people. Chief among these was the right of trial by a jury of neighbors without extra court expense. The common man was also given the option of having his dispute settled in a royal court rather than in the feudal courts, which were subject to the whim of the presiding official, often the nobleman himself. This standardization of judicial procedures by Henry established the rule of precedent (the principle that the decision reached by a judge in one case becomes a guideline for judges in subsequent similar cases), the basis of English and American common law.

The medieval church had its own law—canon law—and its own courts. The church ruled on moral and doctrinal offenses as well as on such legal agreements as marriages. According to a provision known as “benefit of clergy,” any accused person who could show that he was a member of the clergy (ordinarily by reading a passage of Latin) could escape the criminal law. A clergyman being tried in church courts also had the right to appeal to Rome without royal permission. These privileges put the clergy out of reach of civil justice in England. Canon law triumphed over common law, the church over the crown.

In 1215 the common rights established by Henry were confirmed in one of the great documents of English freedoms, the Magna Carta. King John (1199-1216) was forced by his great nobles to acknowledge the right of judgment by peers (specifically the right of a prisoner to a jury trial without payment of a fee) and the right of regular visits by royal judges to all parts of the realm so that those unable to travel to London could still have a fair trial. John’s yielding to his barons set a precedent for limited monarchy in England. The nobility were no longer willing to be excluded from great decisions. The old Anglo-Saxon council of wise men—the witan—had re-emerged as a check on the king. In the next fifty years the council of nobles gradually took on a governmental as well as an advisory function and evolved into a House of Lords.

During the reign of Henry III, a revolt of the great nobles against the king brought further advances in representative government. A general assembly called in 1265 by the leader of the barons, Simon de Montfort, gave birth to the House of Commons. The assembly included not only the great lords but also country gentlemen and representatives of towns. Thereafter, such gatherings, known as parliaments, would include both lords and “commons.”


**SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS**

During the second half of the next century, severe hardship accelerated social change. For two terrible years (1348-49), the bubonic plague, or Black Death, destroyed a third of England’s population. Transmitted from rats to human beings by fleas, the plague recurred sporadically until 1666, when a great fire sterilized London. The resulting drop in population caused a serious labor shortage which undermined
the economic foundation of the feudal system. Peasants left their manors to find more profitable occupations in towns. There they were permitted to bargain with their new employers.

The Peasants' Revolt of 1381, though quashed, showed a rising unrest and a new sense of importance among the common workers. As towns grew, people accumulated wealth and a powerful commercial class began to emerge. With the expansion of trade, England began to take a commanding position among the nations of Europe. As the new middle-class merchants and professionals became wealthy, many bought land and began to live in the style of the lesser aristocracy, and some were even made knights. As towns increased in size and wealth, organizations of workers known as trade guilds gained political influence. Consequently, there emerged a political power structure that competed with that of the aristocracy: one based on wealth and accomplishment rather than on land and birth.

Meanwhile peasants became yeomen, or independent landowning farmers. Specializing in the use of the longbow, they formed an elite corps of archers. Their prowess with this weapon brought England great success against the armored cavalry of France.

RELIGION

The four centuries after the death of William I brought confusion and change to the medieval church in England as well as on the Continent. From 1095 to 1291 the papacy sponsored a series of expeditions to the Holy Land to capture Moslem-held
territory sacred to Christendom. The best-known expedition was the third crusade, led by Richard I (the "Lion-Hearted"). Its purpose was the recapturing of Jerusalem from Saladin, Moslem ruler of Egypt and Syria. Richard conquered Cyprus, Acre, and Joppa en route but could not take Jerusalem. A three-year truce granted western pilgrims access to the holy places. Thus European Catholics had gained a position from which they could later advance into the Holy Land.

After the end of the truce in 1195, interest in crusading waned and eventually disappeared. The fourth crusade ended with the sacking of Constantinople, capital of the old Eastern Roman Empire and holy city of Eastern Catholicism, or the Greek Byzantine Church. This unprompted and barbaric action of Western against Eastern Catholics produced a split between the two factions that has persisted for more than seven hundred years. After the Moslems recaptured Tripoli and Acre in 1289-91, the Crusades, which had come to be motivated by political and economic greed as well as by religious zeal, collapsed as an enterprise.

An even greater embarrassment to the western church was the division within. For seventy years Roman Catholicism had no universally recognized supreme authority. During the Great Schism (1375-1415) two, and eventually, three rival popes claimed the obedience of Christendom. For forty years (1409-49), papal absolutism was challenged by councils of clergy claiming powers previously held only by popes. In addition, intense rivalry among lesser clergymen of various ranks and affiliations produced even more internal strife and confusion.

In the fourteenth century powerful voices rose to condemn the church. Chief among them was that of the Oxford theologian John Wycliffe (c. 1324-84). A keen thinker, fervent nationalist, and bold servant of Christ, Wycliffe went beyond those
before him in the scope and severity of his criticism. He attacked the holding of political office by the clergy; denied the church's claims of political authority and legal immunity; called for the abolition of groups of priests who had renounced the world to live in monastic brotherhoods; challenged many church celebration days and rituals as having no biblical warrant; called for the church to give up its vast wealth; declared that the pope was fallible and unnecessary; questioned the doctrine of transubstantiation, according to which the bread and wine of the Mass are transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ; and called for the translation of the Scriptures into the language of the common man. Wycliffe did not stop with condemning the worldliness and immorality of the clergy. He challenged the Roman system itself.

Wycliffe has been called "the morning star" of the Protestant Reformation. His followers, later referred to as "Lollards," taught the supreme authority of the Scriptures as interpreted by the individual believer and spread the gospel of salvation by faith a century before Luther. Hounded by church authorities, many were burned as heretics 150 years before the Protestant persecutions in England broke out under Mary I (1553-58). Wycliffe is best known for the first complete English translation of the Scriptures (c. 1382).

The challenge that began in England with Wycliffe in the fourteenth century resumed in Bohemia with his disciple John Huss in the fifteenth and climaxed in Germany with Martin Luther in the early sixteenth. By the end of the Middle Ages, the church could no longer rally all Europe under its political banner. More importantly, it lost its role as the spiritual leader of society. It was only a matter of time—God's time—until true religion, supported by secular power and popular zeal, would break the hold of Catholicism in northern Europe.

CULTURE

During the Middle English period, English culture became diversified and internationalized. The English language took in large amounts of the French vocabulary of the Norman aristocracy. The Crusaders brought back Arabic learning and vocabulary in medicine, mathematics, and classical studies. A rich native literature sprang up in the late fourteenth century, drawing from and rivaling that of medieval Italy and France.

Language

By the mid-fourteenth century, the English language had regained the respect of the upper classes. The Parliament of 1362 opened with a speech in English and ordered that all lawsuits be argued in English. Since 1066 the official business of the realm had been conducted in French and the records kept in Latin. The new official language was an English whose grammatical forms had been simplified and whose vocabulary had been greatly enriched by French.

Fortunately English was reinstated in time to be put to use by three great poets in the latter half of the century. The author of Piers Plowman, a satirical allegory of medieval life, and the author of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, a story of knightly adventure and temptation, wrote in the West Midland dialect. Geoffrey Chaucer,
most notable of the three and author of *The Canterbury Tales*, wrote in the East Midland dialect. This latter dialect, specifically that of London and the Thames valley, eventually prevailed as the literary standard. Since 1450 it has been the medium of almost every important writer in English.

**Learning**

The Norman invasion drew England within the intellectual as well as political circle of continental Europe. Medieval philosophy and theology blended in a system known as scholasticism. Basic to scholasticism was the use of reason to support faith. Scholastic theologians spent their lives trying to fuse the philosophy of Aristotle with the doctrine of the church. England produced such brilliant scholastic writers as Duns Scotus and Roger Bacon in the thirteenth century and William of Occam and John Wycliffe in the fourteenth.

The thirteenth century brought English learning a new stimulus from farther east as well. When Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1204, Byzantine monks fled west with manuscripts of classical Greek writings unknown in medieval Europe or known only in Latin translations of poor Arabic versions. Many of these monks settled in Rome and Florence, which became centers of classical studies. English scholars went to Italy to study the Greek language and literature and returned to establish the new learning at home. Those who acquired this learning were called humanists because of their devotion to the subjects traditionally known as the humanities, rather than (like modern humanists) because of an agnostic secular outlook. In conjunction with another medieval development, the invention of printing by movable type (c. 1450), humanism spurred Biblical scholarship and translation and thereby hastened the spread of the gospel throughout sixteenth-century Europe.

The thirteenth century also saw the founding of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, where the subject matter was primarily the seven liberal arts: the *trivium*—grammar (Latin), logic, and rhetoric—and the less important *quadrium*—arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. The subject matter also included the three Aristotelian philosophies: natural (science), moral (the principles of
right character and conduct), and metaphysical (matter concerning the origin and destiny of man). The main function of this curriculum was to train "clerks," or clergymen, to serve God in church or state. Most students expected to be ordained on graduation, regardless of whether they intended to become practicing priests. Graduates could pursue studies in law or medicine as well. Although medieval university learning seems quaint and superstitious by modern standards, it was an improvement over the curriculum of the abbeys and cathedral schools, which it largely replaced.

Literature

Popular For three hundred years after the Norman invasion, literature in English was composed only by the common people, whose works were not preserved for posterity. Upper-class literature was written in French. When English literature regained prestige in the fourteenth century, it reflected ordinary life of the common man. It centered on native heroes such as Robin Hood and King Arthur. It moralized. Significantly the major achievement of middle English literature is Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.

The characteristic short poem was the ballad, a concise, anonymous narrative poem intended to be sung. The ballad is characterized by simple verse forms, brevity of narration, understatement, and stylized repetition. Its subject matter is often tragic, presented from the common man's view, and provides no direct statement of its theme. The best ballads, though transmitted orally and haphazardly, rank among the finest short poetry in English.

The typical long narrative poem was the romance. This meandering tale of adventure celebrated the exploits and manners of a questing knight and emphasized the ideals of a civilized society. These actions, manners, and ideals constituted a socio-religious code of conduct which we call chivalry. This code prescribed the duties of a Christian knight toward the weak and his behavior in certain social situations, especially the wooing of women. The romance generally includes elements of the supernatural—enchanted, giants, dragons, prophetic visions, magic tokens—and often romantic love, which was subject to special "rules." These rules required the complete submission of a man to his lady love. As a test of his earnestness and worth, he was required to perform any service the lady asked of him. The romance flourished in France among the aristocracy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. When it reached England in the fourteenth century, it adapted to popular taste.

Derivative Medieval court poets turned to continental writers as models rather than to their Old English forebears, whose language and style were by then unfamiliar. Rhyme soon prevailed over the four-stress alliterative measure. Poets writing for sophisticated audiences often looked to France for verse forms, genres, and even themes.

Varied These continental influences along with the merging of popular and courtly points of view gave Middle English literature greater diversity than Old English in subject matter, genres, styles, and tones. The reader of Middle English literature may meet at every turn something new from the richly varied life of medieval England.

Didactic Though Middle English imaginative literature is not darkly sober like
most Old English literature, it generally has serious meaning. To understand Middle
English literature, we must look for didacticism (instruction) within gaiety. Medieval
audiences of this literature, which was often read aloud at large gatherings, ex-
pected to find a kernel of edifying truth within the outer shell of entertaining fiction.
In some cases medieval writers employed satire, or corrective ridicule, in their works.

Social A new age of physical hardship and social change is likely to produce litera-
ture of social criticism. Chaucer’s poetry, for example, implies certain moral judg-
ments of the social reality it reflects. Even the ballads often imply approval or dis-
approval of the characters they embody or events they narrate. Sir Patrick Spens’s
nobility of character shines in contrast to the evil intrigues of court. Malory attributes
the ruin of Arthur’s kingdom to the misplaced idealism and moral looseness of the
knights.

Literature that applies moral standards to social conditions often uses ridicule in
attacking the causes of these conditions. The result is social satire. If the issues are
controversial enough that the writer feels it necessary to avoid an outright statement
of his viewpoint, he may convey his ideas indirectly through allegory. The most
characteristic secular literature of the Middle English period is social satire with al-
egorical overtones. Its moral standards derive partly from Scripture and partly from
the discipline of the medieval church.

Chaucer’s “‘Nun’s Priest’s Tale,’” for example, is a social satire that can be un-
derstood both as a tale about a rooster, a hen, and a fox and as an allegory of the fall
of man. The medieval writer’s encompassing of multiple layers of significance in his
story derives at least in part from the medieval church’s method of studying allegori-
cal portions of Scripture.

Medieval literature should have a special appeal to twentieth-century Christians.
God’s people have always been concerned with social integrity. Though we recog-
nize that the hope of a nation is not in social or political reform and that the present
world order is destined for judgment, we have the examples of Christ and the proph-
ets in denouncing social evils. Protestants sympathize with the satiric attack on a
religious institution responsible for so much of the world’s blindness and for such cruel
and unrelenting persecution of those who could see. Christians easily accept the
allegorical mode, for they naturally think analogically. We search the Scriptures for
persons like ourselves and situations like our own that can serve as examples. Al-
legory is congenial to the mind that sees spiritual significance in earthly experience.
The fundamentalist believer is well equipped to read Middle English literature with
understanding and profit—to read it in the way it was meant to be read.
Geoffrey Chaucer  
c. 1343-1400

The writer whose work most fully reflects the attitudes and concerns of the Middle English period is Geoffrey Chaucer, the chief poet of his age. A contemporary and likely acquaintance of Wycliffe, he also put confidence in the vernacular, entrusting his literary reputation to the English language (the East Midland dialect used by Wycliffe). Like Wycliffe he was befriended by the powerful John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, and favored by the crown. His writings, like Wycliffe’s, are critical of religious fraud and combine aristocratic and popular points of view.

Unlike Wycliffe, Chaucer is both moralist and humorist. No Middle English writer—or, perhaps, English writer of any period—fulfills better than he the ideal of concealed seriousness, of levity with a point. His satire contains equal parts of humor and moral indignation. It shows also personal distance and breadth. Like an artist, he stands back from his subject—social man—and views it whole.

His greater detachment and breadth of view are due, first, to the fact that Chaucer was not committed, like Wycliffe, to radical reform. Though his works show a similar disgust with social abuses and religious hypocrisy, they do not advocate institutional change nor do they question, as a rule, social and religious orthodoxy. Second, his aims were literary as well as moral. He sought to give pleasure with profit. Third, he was a man of much wider experience than the “evangelical doctor.”

This experience acquainted Chaucer with virtually every area of national life and all types of persons. Born the son of a well-to-do London wine merchant with connections at court, he received a gentleman’s education and was placed as a page in the household of the countess of Ulster, wife of Lionel, son of Edward III. Later he entered the household of John of Gaunt, brother of Lionel, and took as his wife one of the queen’s ladies-in-waiting, whose sister eventually married John of Gaunt. By 1368 he was part of the royal household, engaged in diplomatic service for the king.

Chaucer’s duties at these great noble houses acquainted him well with aristocratic life. His tenures as Controller of Customs for the port of London (1374-86) and Clerk of the King’s Works (1389-91), requiring maintenance of the royal buildings and city drainage system, involved him administratively in the life of the city he had known personally from birth. His term as justice of the peace and knight of the shire (member of Parliament) in the county of Kent (1385-86) familiarized him with village life and the activities of Parliament. An appointment as deputy forester of a royal game preserve in Somerset (1391-c.1396) gave him experience in manor life. His participation as a youth in expeditions to the Continent under King Edward in the Hundred Years’ War taught him something
of military life. Like most great writers, he knew well the world of books and the world of men.

This variety of experience prepared Chaucer to recognize and interpret social change. He was born into a segment of society—the middle class—that had no place in the medieval social pyramid, which consisted of only the several levels of nobility and the common class. He rose rapidly in the ranks of the aristocracy, becoming a friend and trusted attendant of the most powerful men of his time and eventually marrying into the nobility. His career was made possible by the breaking up of the medieval social order.

Although Chaucer personally profited from the change, he nevertheless remained conservative in outlook, committed to the ideals of the past. His conservatism may have been due to the fact that those who rise suddenly in society tend to be the most rigidly aristocratic in their attitudes. Or perhaps Chaucer was repelled by what he saw of worldly self-seeking. Whatever the cause, his writings associate social ambition with greed, pretense, and inhumanity and judge personal integrity by traditional standards. His social conservatism appears in the incisive character portraits of the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales.

Chaucer’s development as a writer shows a growing independence from foreign influences. His career is commonly divided into a French period (c. 1361-71), an Italian period (1372-86), and an English period (1387-1400). This division can be misleading; for his earlier works, though derivative, make creative departures from their French and Italian originals, and the tales of his English period often follow continental sources. But the outline is useful, especially if we bear in mind that its divisions are not absolute and that his writings show a cumulative gain.

In 1372, the year in which Wycliffe received his doctorate from Oxford, Chaucer went on a diplomatic mission to Italy and encountered the flourishing literary culture of the Italian Renaissance. His writings of the next seven years show an Italian influence. By 1387 he was at work on a literary project for which he had no exact foreign models and whose basic materials are native English. It was to be a frame tale, a group of tales unified by a central situation. With The Canterbury Tales English literature truly came of age.
The General Prologue

The plan of The Canterbury Tales is revealed in its General Prologue, an introductory section creating a fictional frame for the tales that follow. Here Chaucer in his own voice presents the characters who tell the tales and the situation that occasions their telling. The time of year is the spring, when nature renews itself and when man, the noblest of nature's creatures, goes on pilgrimages. In this representation of a religious journey as the 'spring' behavior of man, satirical undercutting appears at the outset. The first forty lines place human society, of which the pilgrimage is a microcosm, against the background of nature. Nature, in the spring, is responding gloriously to the laws of God. The remainder of The General Prologue shows the unnaturalness and lawlessness of fourteenth-century English social behavior.

The pilgrimage was an appropriate choice in a number of ways. Structurally it served the practical purpose of associating a variety of tales in a single composition while providing for progression and climax as the travelers approach their destination. It served the ends of social satire by allowing the representation of a cross-section of society. Journeys bring together on familiar terms persons who would never meet in the normal course of life. Chaucer's pilgrims are, for the most part, social types representing all of English society except the very highest and lowest ranks. Their interaction consequently suggests class relationships.

The gallery of portraits has more than historical interest, however. It presents human as well as social types: a veritable parade of humanity. The seventeenth-century poet-critic John Dryden well observed, 'Their general characters are still remaining in mankind, and even in England, though they are called by other names than those of Monks and Friars, and Canons, and Lady Abbesses, and Nuns: for mankind is ever the same, and nothing is lost out of nature, though everything is altered.'

In particular, the Prologue continues to give pleasure because of Chaucer's consummate artistry. The whole is rendered in some of the most exquisite poetry that has been written by Englishmen. To catch the lift, we must remember to pronounce the final -e (except before a vowel) and final -es and -ed. Also, certain suffixes pronounced as one syllable today (-ion, -iul) were pronounced as two syllables in Chaucer's time. The effort is worthwhile, for Chaucer's poetry must be read aloud accurately in the original to be fully appreciated and to reveal the closeness of his London dialect to modern English. Accordingly, the first forty-two lines of The General Prologue appear below in the original Middle English as well as, with the other poetry, in the vigorous verse translation of Theodore Morrison.
Middle English Version

Whan that April with his shoures soote*
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veye* in swich licour*
Of which vertu* engendred* is the flour:

Whan Zephirus* cek* with his sweete breath
Inspired hath in every holt* and heeth*
The tendre croppes,* and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,*
And smale foweles maken melodye.

That slepen al the nyght with open ye* 10
(So priketh hem nature* in hir corages*):
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres* for to seken straunge strondes,*
To ferne halwes,* kowthe* in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir* for to seke,
That hem hath holpen* whan that they were seeke.*

Bifel* that in that seson on a day,
In Southwerk* at the Tabard* as I lay
Redy to wenden on my pilgrimage
To Caunterbury with ful devout corage,
At nyght was come into that hostelrye
Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye,
Of sondry* folk, by aventure yfalle*
In* felawshiphe, and pilgrimes were they alle,
That toward Caunterbury wolden* ryde.
The chambres and the stables weren wyde,*
And wel we weren esed atte beste.*

And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste,
So hadde I spoken with hem everichon*
That I was of hir* felawshipe anon,*
And made forward* eryly for to ryse,
To take oure wey ther as I you devyse.*

But natheles, whil I have tymne and space,
Er that I fether in this tale pace,*
Me thynketh it* acordaunt to resoun*
To telle you al the condicioun
Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,
And whiche they weren, and of what degree,
And eek in what array that they were inne;
And at a knyght than wol I first bigynne.

Translation
As soon as April pierces to the root
The drought of March, and bathes each bud and shoot
Through every vein of sap with gentle showers
From whose engendering* liquor spring the flowers;
When zephyrs* have breathed softly all about
Inspiring every wood and field to sprout,
And in the zodiac the youthful sun
His journey halfway through the Ram has run;
When little birds are busy with their song
Who sleep with open eyes the whole night long,
Life stirs their hearts and tingles in them so,
On pilgrimages people long to go
And palmer to set out for distant strands
And foreign shrines renowned in many lands.
And specially in England people ride
To Canterbury from every countryside
To visit there the blessed martyred saint
Who gave them strength when they were sick and faint.

In Southwark at the Tabard one spring day
It happened, as I stopped there on my way,
Myself a pilgrim with a heart devout
Ready for Canterbury to set out,
At night came all of twenty-nine assorted
Travelers, and to that same inn resorted,
Who by a turn of fortune chanced to fall
In fellowship together, and they were all
Pilgrims who had it in their minds to ride
Toward Canterbury. The stable doors were wide,
The rooms were large, and we enjoyed the best,
And shortly, when the sun had gone to rest,
I had so talked with each that presently
I was a member of their company
And promised to rise early the next day
To start, as I shall show, upon our way.

But none the less, while I have time and space,
Before this tale has gone a further pace,
I should in reason tell you the condition
Of each of them, his rank and his position,
And also what array they all were in;
And so then, with a knight I will begin.

[The Pilgrims]

The pilgrims, as a whole, illustrate social change, especially change of which Chaucer disapproves. They are divided into two general groups, those with traditional social identities governed by an ideal and those with nontraditional social identities limited only by their resourcefulness. The pilgrims of the first group illustrate change (especially decline) from the original conception of their roles. Those of the second group are mostly recent, specialized social types that have come into existence for the sake of serving traditional society but in actuality are parasitic. The pilgrims divide roughly into the exemplars (both genuine and hypocritical) and the experts.

The more traditional pilgrims reflect the medieval social pyramid: the nobility (the Knight and the Squire), the commoners (the Yeoman), and the clergy (the Prioress, the Monk, and the Friar). They show change in both the ideal and the practical aspects of their vocations.

A KNIGHT was with us, and an excellent man,
Who from the earliest moment he began
To follow his career loved chivalry,
Truth, openhandedness, and courtesy.
He was a stout man in the king's campaigns
And in that cause had gripped his horse's reins
In Christian lands and pagan through the earth.
None farther, and always honored for his worth.
He was on hand at Alexandria's fall.

He... Preface: The Knight had battled the
pagan on the three great frontiers of four-
teenth-century Christendom: against the
Moors in the 1340s in Spain and North Afri-
can; against the Saracens in the 1360s in the
Middle East; and during the 1360s against
the Tartars in Prussia, Russia, and Lithuania.
It is possible, but unlikely, that a single
warrior could have ranged so far over such
a span of time. The Knight is obviously an
ideal figure.
He had often sat in precedence to all
The nations at the banquet board in Prussia.
He had fought in Lithuania and in Russia,
No Christian knight more often; he had been
In Moorish Africa at Benmarin,
At the siege of Algeciras in Granada,
And sailed in many a glorious armada
In the Mediterranean, and fought as well
At Ayas and Attalia when they fell
In Armenia and on Asia Minor's coast.
Of fifteen deadly battles he could boast,
And in Algeria, at Tremessen,
Fought for the faith and killed three separate men
In single combat. He had done good work
Joining against another pagan Turk
With the king of Palathia. And he was wise,
Despite his prowess,* honored in men's eyes,
Meek as a girl and gentle in his ways.
He had never spoken ignobly all his days
To any man by even a rude inflection.
He was a knight in all things to perfection.
He rode a good horse, but his gear* was plain,
For he had lately served on a campaign.
His tunic was still spattered by the rust
Left by his coat of mail, for he had just
Returned and set out on his pilgrimage.

His son was with him, a young SQUIRE, in age
Some twenty years as near as I could guess.
His hair curled as if taken from a press.
He was a lover and would become a knight.
In stature he was of a moderate height
But powerful and wonderfully quick.
He had been in Flanders, riding in the thick
Of forays in Artois and Picardy,*
And bore up well for one so young as he,
Still hoping by his exploits in such places
To stand the better in his lady's graces.
He wore embroidered flowers, red and white,
And blazed like a spring meadow to the sight.
He sang or played his flute the livelong day.
He was as lusty as the month of May.
His coat was short, its sleeves were long and wide.
He sat his horse well, and knew how to ride,
And how to make a song and use his lance,
And he could write and draw well, too, and dance... .
He was modest, and helped whomever he was able,
And carved as his father's squire at the table.

But one more servant had the Knight beside,
Choosing thus simply for the time to ride:
A YEOMAN,* in a coat and hood of green.
His peacock-feathered arrows, bright and keen,
He carried under his belt in tidy fashion.
For well-kept gear he had a yeoman's passion.
No draggled feather might his arrows show,
And in his hand he held a mighty bow.
He kept his hair close-cropped, his face was brown.
He knew the lore of woodcraft up and down.
His arm was guarded from the bowstring's whip
By a bracer, gaily trimmed. He had at hip
A sword and buckler,* and at his other side
A dagger whose fine mounting was his pride,
Sharp-pointed as a spear. His horn he bore
In a sling of green, and on his chest he wore
A silver image of St. Christopher,*
His patron, since he was a forester.

There was also a Nun, a PRIORESS.
Whose smile was gentle and full of guilelessness.
"By St. Loy!" was the worst oath she would say.
She sang Mass well, in a becoming way,
Intoning through her nose the words divine,*
And she was known as Madame Eglantine.*
She spoke good French, as taught at Stratford-Bow,*
For the Parisian French she did not know.
She was schooled to eat so primly and so well
That from her lips no morsel ever fell.
She wet her fingers lightly in the dish
Of sauce, for courtesy was her first wish.
With every bite she did her skillful best
To see that no drop fell upon her breast.
She always wiped her upper lip so clean
That in her cup was never to be seen
A hint of grease when she had drunk her share.
She reached out for her meat with comely air.
She was a great delight, and always tried
To imitate court ways, and had her pride,
Both amiable and gracious in her dealings.
As for her charity and tender feelings,
She melted at whatever was piteous.
She would weep if she but came upon a mouse
Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bleeding.
Some little dogs that she took pleasure feeding
On roasted meat or milk or good wheat bread
She had, but how she wept to find one dead
Or yelping from a blow that made it smart,*
And all was sympathy and loving heart.*
Neat was her wimple* in its every plait,
Her nose well formed, her eyes as gray as slate.
Her mouth was very small and soft and red.
She had so wide a brow* I think her head
Was nearly a span broad,* for certainly
She was not undergrown,* as all could see.
She wore her cloak with dignity and charm,
And had her rosary about her arm,
The small beads coral and the larger green,
And from them hung a brooch of golden sheen,*
On it a large A and a crown above;
Beneath, "All things are subject unto love,"*
A PRIEST accompanied her toward Canterbury,
And an attendant Nun, her secretary.
There was a MONK, and nowhere was his peer,
A hunter, and a roving overseer.*
He was a manly man, and fully able
To be an abbot.* He kept a hunting stable,
And when he rode the neighborhood could hear
His bridle jingling in the wind as clear
And loud as if it were a chapel bell.
Wherever he was master of a cell*
The principles of good St. Benedict,*
For being a little old and somewhat strict,
Were honored in the breach, * as past their prime.
He lived by the fashion of a newer time.
He would have swapped that text for a plucked hen
Which says that hunters are not holy men, *
Or a monk outside his discipline and rule*
Is too much like a fish outside his pool;
That is to say, a monk outside his cloister.*
But such a text he deemed not worth an oyster.*
I told him his opinion made me glad.
Why should he study always and go mad,
Mewed* in his cell with only a book for neighbor?
Or why, as Augustine* commanded, labor
And sweat his hands? How shall the world be served?
To Augustine be all such toil reserved!
And so he hunted, as was only right.
He had greyhounds as swift as birds in flight.
His taste was all for tracking down the hare.
And what his sport might cost he did not care.
His sleeves I noticed, where they met his hand,
Trimmed with gray fur, the finest in the land.
His hood was fastened with a curious pin
Made of wrought gold and clasped beneath his chin,
A love knot at the tip. His head might pass,
Bald as it was, for a lump of shining glass,
And his face was glistening as if anointed.
Fat as a lord he was, and well appointed.*
His eyes were large, and rolled inside his head*
As if they gleamed from a furnace of hot lead.
His boots were supple, his horse superbly kept.
He was a prelate to dream of while you slept.
He was not pale nor peaked like a ghost.*
He relished a plump swan as his favorite roast.
He rode a palfrey* brown as a ripe berry.
   A FRIAR was with us, a gay dog and a merry,
Who begged his district* with a jolly air.
No friar in all four orders* could compare
With him for gallantry; his tongue was wooing.
Many a girl was married by his doing,
And at his own cost it was often done.
He was a pillar,* and a noble one,
To his whole order. In his neighborhood
Rich franklins* knew him well, who served good food,
And worthy women welcomed him to town;
For the license that his order handed down,
He said himself, conferred on him possession
Of more than a curate's power of confession.*
Sweety the list of frailties he heard,
Assigning penance with a pleasant word.
He was an easy man for absolution
Where he looked forward to a contribution,
For if to a poor order a man has given
It signifies that he has been well shriven,*
And if a sinner let his purse be dented
The Friar would stake his oath he had repented.
For many men become so hard of heart
They cannot weep, though conscience makes them smart.
Instead of tears and prayers, then, let the sinner
Supply the poor friars with the price of dinner.
For pretty women he had more than shrift.*
His cape was stuffed with many a little gift,
As knives and pins and suchlike. He could sing
A merry note, and pluck a tender string,
And had no rival at all in balladry.
His neck was whiter than a fleur-de-lis,*
And yet he could have knocked a strong man down.
He knew the taverns well in every town.
The barmaids and innkeepers pleased his mind
Better than beggars and lepers and their kind.*
In his position it was unbecoming
Among the wretched lepers to go slumming.
It mocks all decency, it sews no stitch
To deal with such riffraff; but with the rich,
With sellers of victuals,* that’s another thing.
Wherever he saw some hope of profiting,
None so polite, so humble. He was good,
The champion beggar of his brotherhood.
Should a woman have no shoes against the snow,
So pleasant was his ‘‘In principio’’.*
He would have her widow’s mite before he went.
He took in far more than he paid in rent
For his right of begging within certain bounds.
None of his brethren trespassed on his grounds!
He loved as freely as a half-grown whelp.*
On arbitration-days* he gave great help.
For his cloak was never shiny nor threadbare
Like a poor cloistered scholar’s.* He had an air
As if he were a doctor* or a pope.
It took stout wool to make his semicope*
That plumped out like a bell for portliness.
He lisped a little in his rakishness*
To make his English sweeter on his tongue.
And twanging his harp to end some song he’d sung
His eyes would twinkle in his head as bright
As the stars twinkle on a frosty night.*
Hubert this gallant Friar was by name.
Among the rest a MERCHANT also came.
He wore a forked beard and a beaver hat
From Flanders. High up in the saddle he sat,
In figured cloth, his boots clasped handsomely.*
Delivering his opinions pompously,
Always on how his gains might be increased.
At all costs he desired the sea policed
From Middleburg in Holland to Orwell.*
He knew the exchange rates, and the time to sell
French currency,* and there was never yet
A man who could have told he was in debt
So grave he seemed and hid so well his feelings
With all his shrewd engagements and close dealings.
You’d find no better man at any turn;
But what his name was I could never learn.

There was an Oxford STUDENT too, it chanced,Already in his logic well advanced.*
He rode a mount as skinny as a rake,And he was hardly fat. For learning’s sake
He let himself look hollow and sober enough.
He wore an outer coat of threadbare stuff,For he had no benefice* for his enjoyment
And too unworldly for some lay employment.
He much preferred to have beside his bed
His twenty volumes bound in black or red
All packed with Aristotle* from end to middle
Than a sumptuous wardrobe or a merry fiddle.
For though he knew what learning had to offer
There was little coin to jingle in his coffer.*
Whatever he got by touching up a friend*
On books and learning he would promptly spend
And busily pray for the soul of anybody
Who furnished him the wherewithal for study.*
His scholarship was what he truly heeded.
He never spoke a word more than was needed,
And that was said with dignity and force,
And quick and brief. He was of grave discourse,
Giving new weight to virtue by his speech,
And gladly would he learn and gladly teach.
There was a LAWYER, cunning and discreet,
Who had often been to St. Paul’s porch to meet
His clients. He was a Sergeant of the Law,
A man deserving to be held in awe,
Or so he seemed, his manner was so wise.
He had often served as Justice of Assize
By the king’s appointment, with a broad commission,*
For his knowledge and his eminent position. 305
He had many a handsome gift by way of fee.
There was no buyer of land as shrewd as he.
All ownership to him became fee simple.*
His titles were never faulty by a pimple,
None was so busy as he with case and cause,
And yet he seemed much busier than he was.
In all cases and decisions he was schooled
That were of record since King William ruled.*
No one could pick a loophole or a flaw
In any lease or contract he might draw.
Each statute on the books he knew by rote.
He traveled in a plain, silk-belted coat.
A FRANKLIN traveled in his company.
Whiter could never daisy petal be
Than was his beard. His ruddy face gave sign
He liked his morning sop of toast in wine.
He lived in comfort, as he would assure us,
For he was a true son of Epicurus*
Who held the opinion that the only measure
Of perfect happiness was simply pleasure.
Such hospitality did he provide.
He was St. Julian* to his countryside.
His bread and ale were always up to scratch.*
He had a cellar* none on earth could match.
There was no lack of pasties* in his house.
Both fish and flesh, and that so plenteous
That where he lived it snowed of meat and drink.
With every dish of which a man can think,
After the various seasons of the year,
He changed his diet for his better cheer.
He had coops of partridges as fat as cream,
He had a fishpond stocked with pike and bream.
Woe to his cook for an unready pot
Or a sauce that wasn't seasoned and spiced hot!
A table in his hall stood on display
Prepared and covered through the livelong day.
He presided at court sessions* for his bounty
And sat in Parliament often for his county.*
A well-wrought dagger and a purse of silk
Hung at his belt, as white as morning milk.
He had been a sheriff and county auditor.
On earth was no such rich proprietor!

There were five GUILDSMEN,* in the livery*
Of one august and great fraternity,*
A Weaver, a Dyer, and a Carpenter,
A Tapestry-maker and a Haberdasher.
Their gear was furbished new and clean as glass.
The mountings of their knives were not of brass
But silver. Their pouches were well made and neat,
And each of them, it seemed, deserved a seat
On the platform at the Guildhall, for each one
Was likely timber* to make an alderman.*
They had goods enough, and money to be spent,
Also their wives would willingly consent
And would have been at fault if they had not.
For to be "Madamed"* is a pleasant lot,
And to march in first at feasts for being well married,
And royally to have their mantles carried.

For the pilgrimage these Guildsmen brought their own
COOK to boil their chicken and marrow bone
With seasoning powder and capers* and sharp spice.
In judging London ale his taste was nice.*
He well knew how to roast and broil and fry,
To mix a stew, and bake a good meat pie,
Or capon* creamed with almond, rice, and egg.
Pity he had an ulcer on his leg!*  378

[Shrewd Practitioners]

A SKIPPER was with us, his home far in the west.
He came from the port of Dartmouth, as I guessed.
He sat his carthorse pretty much at sea
In a coarse smock that juggled on his knee.
From his neck a dagger on a string hung down
Under his arm. His face was burnished brown
By the summer sun. He was a true good fellow.
Many a time he had tapped a wine cask mellow
Sailing from Bordeaux while the owner slept.
Too nice* a point of honor he never kept.
In a sea fight, if he got the upper hand,
Drowned prisoners floated home to every land.
But in navigation, whether reckoning tides,
Currents, or what might threaten him besides,
Harborage, pilotage, or the moon’s demeanor,*
None was his like from Hull to Cartagena.*
He knew each harbor and the anchorage there
From Gotland* to the Cape of Finisterre*
And every creek in Brittany and Spain,*
And he had called his ship the Madeleine.*
With us came also an astute PHYSICIAN.
There was none like him for a disquisition*
On the art of medicine or surgery,
For he was grounded in astrology.
He kept his patient long in observation,
Choosing the proper hour for application
Of charms and images by intuition,*
Of magic, and the planets' best position.*
For he was one who understood the laws
That rule the humors, and could tell the cause
That brought on every human malady,
Whether of hot or cold, or moist or dry.
He was a perfect medico, for sure.
The cause once known, he would prescribe the cure, 405
For he had his druggists ready at a motion
To provide the sick man with some pill or potion—
A game of mutual aid, with each one winning.
Their partnership was hardly just beginning!* 410
He was well versed in his authorities,
Old Aesculapius, Dioscorides,
Rufus, and old Hippocrates, and Galen,
Haly, and Rhazes, and Serapion,
Averroës, Bernard, Johannes Damascus,
Avicenna, Gilbert, Gaddesden, Constantinus.* 420
He urged a moderate fare on principle,
But rich in nourishment, digestible;
Of nothing in excess would he admit.
He gave but little heed to Holy Writ.* 425
His clothes were lined with taffeta; their hue
Was all of blood red and of Persian blue,
Yet he was far from careless of expense.
He saved his fees from times of pestilence,
For gold is a cordial, as physicians hold,
And so he had a special love for gold. 430

[AUTHORITIES ON LOVE AND DUTY]

A WORTHY WOMAN there was from near the city
Of Bath, but somewhat deaf, and more's the pity.
For weaving she possessed so great a bent
She outdid the people of Ypres and of Ghent.
No other woman dreamed of such a thing
As to precede her at the offering.
Or if any did, she fell in such a wrath
She dried up all the charity in Bath.
She wore fine kerchiefs of old-fashioned air,
And on a Sunday morning, I could swear,*
She had ten pounds of linen on her head.
Her stockings were of finest scarlet-red,
Laced tightly, and her shoes were soft and new.
Bold was her face, and fair, and red in hue.
She had been an excellent woman all her life.
Five men in turn had taken her to wife. . . .
She had traveled freely; many a distant stream
She crossed, and visited Jerusalem
Three times. She had been at Rome and at Boulogne,
At the shrine of Compostella, and at Cologne.*
She had wandered by the way through many a scene.
Her teeth were set with little gaps between.*
Easily on her ambling horse she sat.
She was well wimpled,* and she wore a hat
As wide in circuit as a shield or targe.*
A skirt swathed up her hips, and they were large.
Upon her feet she wore sharp-roweled spurs.
She was a good fellow; a ready tongue was hers.
All remedies of love she knew by name,
For she had all the tricks of that old game.
There was a good man of the priest’s vocation,
A poor town PARSON of true consecration,
But he was rich in holy thought and work.
Learned he was, in the truest sense a clerk
Who meant Christ’s gospel faithfully to preach
And truly his parishioners to teach.
He was a kind man, full of industry,
Many times tested by adversity
And always patient. If tithes were in arrears,
He was loth to threaten any man with fears
Of excommunication; past a doubt
He would rather spread his offering about
To his poor flock, or spend his property.
To him a little meant sufficiency.
Wide was his parish, with houses far asunder,*
But he would not be kept by rain or thunder,
If any had suffered a sickness or a blow,
From visiting the farthest, high or low,
Plodding his way on foot, his staff in hand.
He was a model his flock could understand,
For first he did and afterward he taught.
That precept from the Gospel he had caught,
And he added as a metaphor thereto,
"If the gold rusts, what will the iron do?"
For if a priest is foul, in whom we trust,
No wonder a layman shows a little rust.
A priest should take to heart the shameful scene
Of shepherds filthy while the sheep are clean.
By his own purity a priest should give
The example to his sheep, how they should live.
He did not rent his benefice for hire,*
Leaving his flock to flounder in the mire,
And run to London, happiest of goals,
To sing paid masses in St. Paul's for souls,*
Or as chaplain from some rich guild take his keep,
But dwell at home and guarded well his sheep
So that no wolf should make his flock miscarry.
He was a shepherd, and not a mercenary.
And though himself a man of strict vocation
He was not harsh to weak souls in temptation,
Not overbearing nor haughty in his speech,
But wise and kind in all he tried to teach.
By good example and just words to turn
Sinners to heaven was his whole concern.
But should a man in truth prove obstinate,
Whoever he was, of rich or mean estate,
The Parson would give him a snub* to meet the case.
I doubt there was a priest in any place
His better. He did not stand on dignity*
Nor affect in conscience too much nicety,*
But Christ's and His disciples' word he sought
To teach, and first he followed what he taught.
There was a PLOWMAN with him on the road,
His brother, who had forked up many a load
Of good manure. A hearty worker he,
Living in peace and perfect charity.
Whether his fortune made him smart or smile,
He loved God with his whole heart all the while
And his neighbor as himself.* He would undertake,
For every luckless poor man, for the sake
Of Christ to thresh and dig and dig by the hour
And with no wage, if it was in his power.
His tithes on goods and earnings he paid fair.
He wore a coarse, rough coat and rode a mare.

There also were a Manciple, a Miller,
A Reeve, a Summoner, and a Pardoner,
And I—this makes our company complete.
As tough a yokel as you care to meet
The MILLER was. His big-beefed arms and thighs
Took many a ram put up as wrestling* prize.
He was a thick, squat-shouldered lump of sins.
No door but he could heave it off its pins
Or break it running at it with his head.*
His beard was broader than a shovel, and red
As a fat sow or fox. A wart stood clear
Atop his nose, and red as a pig's ear
A tuft of bristles on it. Black and wide
His nostrils were. He carried at his side
A sword and buckler. His mouth would open out
Like a great furnace,* and he would sing and shout
His ballads and jokes of harlotries and crimes.
He could steal corn and charge for it three times,
And yet was honest enough, as millers come,
For a miller, as they say, has a golden thumb.*
In white coat and blue hood this lusty clown,
Blowing his bagpipes, brought us out of town.
The MANCIPLE† was of a lawyers’ college,
And other buyers might have used his knowledge
How to be shrewd provisioners, for whether
He bought on cash or credit, altogether
He managed that the end should be the same:
He came out more than even with the game.*
Now isn’t it an instance of God’s grace
How a man of little knowledge can keep pace
In wit with a whole school of learned men?
He had masters to the number of three times ten
Who knew each twist of equity and tort:*
A dozen in that very Inn of Court
Were worthy to be steward of the estate
To any of England’s lords, however great,
And keep him to his income well confined
And free from debt, unless he lost his mind,
Or let him scrimp, if he were mean in bounty;†
They could have given help to a whole county
In any sort of case that might befall;
And yet this Manciple could cheat them all!
The REEVE† was a slender, fiery-tempered man.
He shaved as closely as a razor can.
His hair was cropped about his ears, and shorn
Above his forehead as a priest’s is worn.
His legs were very long and very lean.
No calf on his lank spindles could be seen.*
But he knew how to keep a barn or bin,
He could play the game with auditors and win.
He knew well how to judge by drought and rain
The harvest of his seed and of his grain.
His master’s cattle, swine, and poultry flock,
Horses and sheep and dairy, all his stock,
Were altogether in this Reeve’s control.
And by agreement, he had given the sole
Accounting since his lord reached twenty years.
No man could ever catch him in arrears.
There wasn't a bailiff,* shepherd, or farmer working
But the Reeve knew all his tricks of cheating and shirking.
He would not let him draw an easy breath.
They feared him as they feared the very death.
He lived in a good house on an open space,
Well shaded by green trees, a pleasant place.
He was shrewder in acquisition than his lord.
With private riches he was amply stored.
He had learned a good trade young by work and will.
He was a carpenter of first-rate skill.
On a fine mount, a stallion, dappled gray,
Whose name was Scot, he rode along the way.
He wore a long blue coat hitched up and tied
As if it were a friar's and at his side
A sword with rusty blade was hanging down.
He came from Norfolk, from nearby the town
That men call Bawdswell. As we rode the while,
The Reeve kept always hindmost in our file.*

A SUMMONER in our company had his place.
Red as the fiery cherubim his face.
He was pocked and pimpled, and his eyes were narrow.
He was lecherous and hot as a cock sparrow.
His brows were scabby and black, and thin his beard.
His was a face that little children feared.
Brimstone* or litharge* bought in any quarter,
Quicksilver,* ceruse,* borax, oil of tartar,
No salve nor ointment that will cleanse or bite
Could cure him of his blotches, livid white,
Or the nobs and nubbins sitting on his cheeks.
He loved his garlic, his onions, and his leeks.
He loved to drink the strong wine down blood-red.*
Then would he bellow as if he had lost his head,
And when he had drunk enough to parch his drouth,*
Nothing but Latin issued from his mouth.
He had smattered up a few terms, two or three,
That he had gathered out of some decree—
No wonder; he heard law Latin all the day,*
And everyone knows a parrot or a jay
Can cry out "Wat" or "Poll"* as well as the pope;
But give him a strange term, he began to grope.
His little store of learning was paid out,
So "Quoestio quod juris"* he would shout. . .
If he liked a scoundrel, no matter for church law.
He would teach him that he need not stand in awe
If the archdeacon* threatened with his curse—
That is, unless his soul was in his purse,
For in his purse he would be punished well.
"The purse," he said, "is the archdeacon's hell."*†
Of course I know he lied in what he said.
There is nothing a guilty man should so much dread
As the curse that damn his soul, when, without fail,
The church can save him, or send him off to jail.*
He had the young men and girls in his control
Throughout the diocese; he knew the soul
Of youth, and heard their every last design.*
A garland big enough to be the sign
Above an alehouse balanced on his head,
And he made a shield of a great round loaf of bread. 640
There was a PARDONER of Rouncivall*
With him, of the blessed Mary's hospital,
But now come straight from Rome (or so said he).
Loudly he sang, "Come hither, love, to me."*†
While the Summoner's counterbass trolled out profound—*
No trumpet blew with half so vast a sound.
This Pardoner had hair as yellow as wax,
But it hung as smoothly as a hank* of flax.
His locks trailed down in bunches from his head,
And he let the ends about his shoulders spread,
But in thin clusters, lying one by one.
Of hood, for rakishness, he would have none,
For in his wallet* he kept it safely stowed.
He traveled, as he thought, in the latest mode,
Disheveled. Save for his cap, his head was bare,
And in his eyes he glittered like a hare.
A Veronica* was stitched upon his cap,
His wallet lay before him in his lap
Brimful of pardons from the very seat
In Rome. He had a voice like a goat’s bleat.
He was beardless and would never have a beard.
His cheek was always smooth as if just sheared....
No pardoner could beat him in the race,
For in his wallet he had a pillow case
Which he represented as Our Lady’s veil;
He said he had a piece of the very sail
St. Peter, when he fished in Galilee
Before Christ caught him, used upon the sea.
He had a latten* cross embossed with stones
And in a glass he carried some pig’s bones,
And with these holy relics, when he found
Some village parson grubbing his poor ground,
He would get more money in a single day
Than in two months would come the parson’s way.
Thus with his flattery and his trumped-up stock*
He made dupes* of the parson and his flock.
But though his conscience was a little plastic*
He was in church a noble ecclesiastic.
Well could he read the Scripture or saint’s story,
But best of all he sang the offertory.
For he understood that when this song was sung.
Then he must preach, and sharpen up his tongue
To rake in cash, as well he knew the art,
And so he sang out gaily, with full heart.
The remaining 144 lines of The General Prologue tell how the innkeeper himself becomes a pilgrim. At supper he proposes a plan according to which the winner of a storytelling contest will be treated to a free dinner at the others' expense on the return from Canterbury. Obviously a business scheme, it will bring back to his inn the entire company for another meal and presumably for another night's lodging. Thus the conclusion underscores the covetous, calculating spirit of the age satirized in the portraits of the worldly pilgrims.

The Nun's Priest's Tale

The beast fable, a moral tale in which animals act the parts of human beings, was developed as a formal genre of literature by Physiologus in the second century. Large anthologies of such fables were available for readers seeking entertainment as well as for clergymen preparing sermons in Chaucer's day. A single cycle of such tales dealt with the escapades of Reynard the fox. The satiric potentials of the beast fable are obvious: the very notion that animals can behave in a human way is deflating to human pride.

"The Nun's Priest's Tale" adds to the satiric potentials of the beast fable those of the mock epic, which treats a trivial subject in heroic terms. Its hero, a rooster, perches impressively among his harem in his royal hall. His near ruin, occasioned like mankind's by the bad advice of a female, is an event of cosmic as well as community importance. Formal descriptions, learned allusions, theological speculation, extended comparisons, and digressive anecdotes suspend the action at critical points and slow the pace.

This embellishment enormously burdens the frail plot. Its effect is to give a comic momentousness to the workings of feathered fate. This momentous significance is focused conveniently at the end by the double moral put into the mouths of the cock and the fox. The cock will not be flattered into closing his eyes to sing when he should be looking, and the fox will not talk when he should hold his peace.
Once a poor widow, aging year by year,
Lived in a tiny cottage that stood near
A clump of shade trees rising in a dale.
This widow, of whom I tell you in my tale,
Since the last day that she had been a wife
Had led a very patient, simple life.
She had but few possessions to content her.
By thrift and husbandry of what God sent her
She and two daughters found the means to dine.
She had no more than three well-fattened swine,
As many cows, and one sheep, Moll by name.
Her bower and hall* were black from the hearth-flame
Where she had eaten many a slender meal.
No dainty morsel did her palate feel
And no sharp sauce was needed with her pottage.
Her table was in keeping with her cottage.
Excess had never given her disquiet.
Her only doctor was a moderate diet,
And exercise, and a heart that was contented.
If she did not dance, at least no gout* prevented;
No apoplexy* had destroyed her head.
She never drank wine, whether white or red.
She served white milk and bread loaves brown or black,
Singed bacon, all this with no sense of lack,
And now and then an egg or two. In short,
She was a dairy woman of a sort.
  She had a yard, on the inside fenced about
With hedges, and an empty ditch without,
In which she kept a cock, called Chanticleer.
In all the realm of crowing he had no peer.
His voice was merrier than the merry sound
Of the church organ grumbling out its ground*
Upon a saint’s day. Stouter was this cock
In crowing than the loudest abbey clock.
Of astronomy instinctively aware,
He kept the sun’s hours with celestial care,
For when through each fifteen degrees* it moved,
He crowed so that it couldn’t be improved.
His comb, like a crenelated* castle wall,
Red as fine coral, stood up proud and tall.
His bill was black; like polished jet it glowed,
And he was azure-legged and azure-toed.
As lilies were his nails, they were so white;
Like burnished gold his hue, it shone so bright.
This cock had in his princely sway and measure
Seven hens to satisfy his every pleasure,
Who were his sisters and his sweethearts true,
Each wonderfully like him in her hue,
Of whom the fairest-feathered throat to see
Was fair Dame Purtlet. Courteous was she,
Discreet, and always acted debonairly.
She was sociable, and bore herself so fairly,
Since the very time that she was seven nights old,
The heart of Chanticleer was in her hold
As if she had him locked up, every limb.
He loved her so that all was well with him.
It was a joy, when up the sun would spring,
To hear them both together sweetly sing,
"My love has gone to the country, far away!"
For as I understand it, in that day
The animals and birds could sing and speak.

Now as this cock, one morning at daybreak,
With each of the seven hens that he called spouse,
Sat on his perch inside the widow's house,
And next him fair Dame Purtlet, in his throat
This Chanticleer produced a hideous note
And groaned like a man who is having a bad dream;
And Purtlet, when she heard her husband scream,
Was all aghast, and said, "Soul of my passion,
What ails you that you groan in such a fashion?
You are always a sound sleeper, Fie, for shame!"

And Chanticleer awoke and answered, "Dame,
Take no offense, I beg you, on this score.
I dreamt...[that] I was in a plight so sore
Just now, my heart still quivers from the fright.
Now God see that my dream turns out all right
And keep my flesh and body from foul seizure!
I dreamed I was strutting in my yard at leisure
When there I saw, among the weeds and vines,
A beast, he was like a hound, and had designs
Upon my person, and would have killed me dead.
His coat was not quite yellow, not quite red,
And both his ears and tail were tipped with black
Unlike the fur along his sides and back.
He had a small snout and a fiery eye.
His look for fear still makes me almost die.
This is what made me groan, I have no doubt."
"For shame! Fie on you, faint heart!" she burst out...
"I cannot love a coward, as I'm blest!"
Whatever any woman may protest,
We all want, could it be so, for our part,
Husbands who are wise and stout of heart,
No blabber, and no niggard.* and no fool,
Not afraid of every weapon or sharp tool, . . .
How dare you say, for shame, to your true love
That there is anything you ever feared?
Have you no man's heart, when you have a beard?
Alas, and can a nightmare set you screaming?
God knows there's only vanity in dreaming! . . ."

[For most of the next 265 lines (two-fifths of the entire narrative) Partlet and Chanticleer debate the significance of dreams, Partlet attributing them to natural causation (indigestion) and Chanticleer to supernatural. Partlet prescribes an herb remedy, showing wifey concern for her husband's health. Chanticleer counters with a long string of instances, drawn from learned 'authorities,' in which disregard of dreams proved ruinous. Then, to be certain that he has silenced Partlet once and for all on the matter of dreams, he flatters her, saying, 'For when I see the beauty of your face--(You are so scarlet red around your eyes) It makes me forget my dread of death.') His self-assurance restored, he flies from his perch and begins his daily routine without the slightest concern for what had troubled him. At last the Priest picks up the thread of the story.]

After the month in which the world began,
The month of March, when God created man,*
Had passed, and when the season had run through
Since March began just thirty days and two,
It happened that Chanticleer, in all his pride,
While his seven hens were walking by his side,
Lifted his eyes, beholding the bright sun,
Which in the sign of Taurus* had then run
Twenty and one degrees and somewhat more,
And knew by instinct, not by learned lore,
It was the hour of prime.* He raised his head
And crowed with lordly voice, "The sun," he said,
"Forty and one degrees and more in height
Has climbed the sky. Partlet, my world's delight,
Hear all these birds, how happily they sing,
And see the pretty flowers, how they spring.
With solace and with joy my spirits dance!"
But suddenly he met a sore mischance,
For in the end joys ever turn to woes.
Quickly the joys of earth are gone, God knows,
And could a rhetorician's art indite it,*
He would be on solid ground if he should write it,
In a chronicle, as true notoriously! 
Now every wise man, listen well to me.
This story is as true, I undertake,
As the very book of Lancelot of the Lake
On which the women set so great a store.*
Now to my matter I will turn once more.
    A sly iniquitous fox, with black-tipped ears,
Who had lived in the neighboring wood for some three years,
His fated fancy swollen to a height,
    Had broken through the hedges that same night
Into the yard where in his pride sublime
    Chanticleer with his seven wives passed the time.
Quietly in a bed of herbs he lay
    Till it was past the middle of the day,
Waiting his hour on Chanticleer to fall
    As gladly do these murderers, one and all,
Who lie in wait, concealed, to murder men.
    O murderer, lurking traitorous in your den!
    O new Iscariot, second Ganelon,*
False hypocrite, Greek Sinon,* who brought on
The utter woe of Troy and all her sorrow!
    O Chanticleer, accursed be that morrow
When to the yard you flew down from the beams!
    That day, as you were well warned in your dreams,
Would threaten you with dire catastrophe.
But that which God foresees must come to be,
    As there are certain scholars who aver.
Bear witness, any true philosopher,
    That in the schools there has been great altercation
Upon this question, and much disputation
By a hundred thousand scholars, man for man.
    I cannot sift it down to the pure bran
As can the sacred Doctor, Augustine,
Or Boëthius, or Bishop Bradwardine.*
Whether God's high foreknowledge so enchains me
    I needs must do a thing as it constrains me—
"Needs must"—that is, by plain necessity;
Or whether a free choice is granted me
    To do it or not do it, either one,
Though God must know all things before they are done;
Or whether his foresight nowise can constrain
Except contingently, as some explain;*
I will not labor such a high concern.
My tale is of a cock, as you shall learn,
    Who took his wife's advice, to his own sorrow,
And walked out in the yard that fatal morrow.
Women have many times, as wise men hold,
Offered advice that left men in the cold.
A woman’s counsel brought us first to woe
And out of Paradise made Adam go
Where he lived a merry life and one of ease.
But since I don’t know whom I may displease
By giving women’s words an ill report,
Pass over it; I only spoke in sport.

There are books about it you can read or skim in,
And you’ll discover what they say of women.
I’m telling you the cock’s words, and not mine.
Harm in no woman at all can I divine.*

Merrily bathing where the sand was dry
Lay Partlet, with her sisters all near by,
And Chanticleer, as regal as could be,
Sang merrily as the mermaid in the sea;
For the Physiologus* itself declares
That they know how to sing the merriest airs.

And so it happened that as he fixed his eye
Among the herbs upon a butterfly,
He caught sight of this fox who crouched there low.
He felt no impulse then to strat or crow,
But cried “Cuckoo!” and gave a fearful start
Like a man who has been frightened to the heart.
For instinctively, if he should chance to see
His opposite, a beast desires to flee,
Even the first time that it meets his eye.

This Chanticleer, no sooner did he spy
The fox than promptly enough he would have fled.
But “Where are you going, kind sir?” the fox said.
“Are you afraid of me, who am your friend?
Truly, I’d be a devil from end to end
If I meant you any harm or villainy.
I have not come to invade your privacy.
In truth, the only reason that could bring
This visit of mine was just to hear you sing.
Beyond a doubt, you have as fine a voice
As any angel who makes heaven rejoice.
Also you have more feeling in your note
Than Boëthius,* or any tuneful throat.
Milord* your father once—and may God bless
His soul—your noble mother too, no less,
Have been inside my house, to my great ease.
And verily sir, I should be glad to please
You also. But for singing, I declare,
As I enjoy my eyes, that precious pair,  
Save you, I never heard a man so sing  
As your father did when night was on the wing.  
Straight from the heart, in truth, came all his song,  
And to make his voice more resonant and strong  
He would strain until he shut his either eye,  
So loud and lordly would he make his cry,  
And stand up on his tiptoes therewithal  
And stretch his neck till it grew long and small.  
He had such excellent discretion, too,  
That whether his singing, all the region through,  
Or his wisdom, there was no one to surpass.  
I read in that old book, Don Burnel the Ass,*  
Among his verses once about a cock  
Hit on the leg by a priest who threw a rock  
When he was young and foolish; and for this  
He caused the priest to lose his benefice.*  
But no comparison, in all truth, lies  
Between your father, so prudent and so wise,  
And this other cock, for all his subtlety.  
Sing sir! Show me, for holy charity,  
Can you imitate your father, that wise man?**  
Blind to all treachery, Chanticleer began  
To beat his wings, like one who cannot see  
The traitor, ravished by his flattery.  
Alas, you lords, about your court there slips  
Many a flatterer with deceiving lips  
Who can please you more abundantly, I fear,  
Than he who speaks the plain truth to your ear.  
Read in Ecclesiastes,* you will see  
What flatterers are. Lords, heed their treachery!  
This Chanticleer stood tiptoe at full height.  
He stretched his neck, he shut his eyelids tight,  
And he began to crow a lordly note.  
The fox, Don Russell, seized him by the throat  
At once, and on his back bore Chanticleer  
Off toward his den that in the grove stood near,  
For no one yet had threatened to pursue.  
O destiny, that no man may eschew!  
Alas, that he left his safe perch on the beams!  
Alas, that Partlet took no stock in dreams! . . .  
In truth, no lamentation ever rose,  
No shriek of ladies when before its foes  
Ilium* fell, and Pyrrhus* with drawn blade  
Had seized King Priam by the beard and made
An end of him—the Aeneid* tells the tale—
Such as the hens made with their piteous wail
In their enclosure, seeing the dread sight
Of Chanticleer. But at the shrillest height
Shrieked Partlet. She shrieked louder than the wife
Of Hasdrubal,* when her husband lost his life
And the Romans burned down Carthage; for her state
Of torment and of frenzy was so great
She willfully chose the fire for her part,
Leaped in, and burned herself with steadfast heart.
   Unhappy hens, you shrieked as when for pity,
While the tyrant Nero put to flames the city
Of Rome, rang out the shriek of senators’ wives
Because their husbands had all lost their lives;
This Nero put to death these innocent men.
But I will come back to my tale again.
   Now this good widow and her two daughters heard
These woeful hens shriek when the crime occurred,
And sprang outdoors as quickly as they could
And saw the fox, who was making for the wood
Bearing this Chanticleer across his back.
   ‘‘Help, help!’’ they cried. They cried, ‘‘Alas! Alack!
The fox, the fox!’’ and after him they ran,
And armed with clubs came running many a man.*
Ran Coll the dog, and led a yelping band;
Ran Malkyn,* with a distaff in her hand;
Ran cow and calf, and even the very hogs,
By the yelping and the barking of the dogs
And men’s and women’s shouts so terrified
They ran till it seemed their hearts would burst inside;
They squealed like fiends in the pit, with none to still them.
The ducks quacked as if men were going to kill them.
The geese for very fear flew over the trees.
Out of the beehive came the swarm of bees.
Ah! Bless my soul, the noise, by all that’s true,
So hideous was that Jack Straw’s retinue*
Made never a hubbub that was half so shrill
Over a Fleming they were going to kill
As the clamor made that day over the fox.
They brought brass trumpets, and trumpets made of box,
Of horn, of bone, on which they blew and squeaked,
And those who were not blowing whooped and shrieked.
It seemed as if the very heavens would fall!

   Now hear me, you good people, one and all!
Fortune, I say, will suddenly override


Her enemy in his very hope and pride!
This cock, as on the fox’s back he lay,
Plucked up his courage to speak to him and say,
‘‘God be my help, sir, but I’d tell them all,
That is, if I were you. ’Plague on you all!
Go back, proud fools! Now that I’ve reached the wood,
I’ll eat the cock at once, for all the good
Your noise can do. Here Chanticleer shall stay.’’

‘‘Fine!’’ said the fox. ‘‘I’ll do just what you say.’’
But the cock, as he was speaking, suddenly
Out of his jaws lurched expeditiously,*
And flew at once high up into a tree.
And when the fox saw that the cock was free,
‘‘Alas,’’ he said, ‘‘alas, O Chanticleer!
Inasmuch as I have given you cause for fear
By seizing you and bearing you away,
I have done you wrong, I am prepared to say.
But, sir, I did it with no ill intent.
Come down, and I shall tell you what I meant.
So help me God, it’s truth I’ll offer you!’’
‘‘No, no,’’ said he, ‘‘We’re both fools, through and through.
But curse my blood and bones for the chief dunce
If you deceive me oftener than once!
You shall never again by flattery persuade me
To sing and wink* my eyes, by him that made me.
For he that willfully winks when he should see,
God never bless him with prosperity!”

‘‘Ah,’’ said the fox, ‘‘with mischief may God greet
The man ungoverned, rash, and indiscreet
Who babbles when to hold his tongue were needful!’’
Such is it to be reckless and unheedful
And trust in flattery. But you who hold
That this is a mere trifle I have told,
Concerning only a fox, or a cock and hen,
Think twice, and take the moral, my good men!
For truly, of whatever is written, all
Is written for our doctrine, says St. Paul.*
Then take the fruit, and let the chaff lie still.*

Now gracious God, if it should be your will,
As my Lord teaches, make us all good men
And bring us to your holy bliss! Amen.
For Thought and Discussion

1. What is the central symbol of *The Canterbury Tales*, introduced at line 12 of the *General Prologue*? What is the destination of the fictional pilgrims in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*? Who are described as "strangers and pilgrims on the earth" in Hebrews 11:13-16? What destination do these Biblical pilgrims seek? Can you think of any hymns or gospel songs which employ the same central symbol as *The Canterbury Tales*?

2. Discuss Chaucer's portraiture of the Prioress in the *General Prologue*. Which of her qualities and accomplishments does the narrator relate in lines 116-32? By virtue of space allotted to each quality in this passage, what characteristic of the Prioress does the narrator emphasize? Why? Does the Prioress perform any of the charitable deeds one would expect from a person who has supposedly dedicated her life to serving others? Who (or what) are objects of her pity? For whom (or what) does she provide food? Discuss Chaucer's method of satirizing the Prioress. Is Chaucer's satire in this instance genial or harsh?

3. Contrast Chaucer's portrait of the Parson (ll. 461-512) to that of the Prioress in both content and style. Why do you suppose the narrator refers to the Parson's staff (l. 479)?

4. Locate and discuss the significance of the passages in "The Nun's Priest's Tale" in which the narrator directly alludes to the Biblical account of the fall of man and his subsequent redemption. Where, for example, do we see Chanticleer and Partlet perched high on the rafters before "the fall"? How does this passage parallel the Genesis account of man before the fall? In the complete tale, just before Chanticleer flies down from the beams, he complains to Partlet, "Our perch is made so narrow." How does this line parallel the Genesis account? (Cf. also Matt. 7:13-14.) Who lies in wait for the rooster in the barnyard? At what point does the fox seize Chanticleer? How does this feature of the tale parallel Satan's "seizing" of Adam? Is the final outcome of the tale for Chanticleer a sad one or a happy one? Why? How does this feature of the tale parallel the Biblical account of man's fall and redemption? What is the significance of the final line of "The Nun's Priest's Tale" in terms of this theme?

5. Discuss Chaucer's employment of color symbolism in "The Nun's Priest's Tale." Locate references to colors in lines 1-87 of the text, and then discuss their meaning in terms of the theme of the entire tale. (Keep in mind the general significance of the colors red and white as well as of darkness, or blackness, in the Bible. See, for example, Isaiah 1:18.)