



Geoffrey Chaucer (1342 - 1400)  
The Canterbury Tales

**General Prologue**

When April's gentle rains have pierced the drought  
Of March right to the root, and bathed each sprout  
Through every vein with liquid of such power  
It brings forth the engendering of the flower;  
When [Zephyrus](#) too with his sweet breath has blown 5  
Through every field and forest, urging on  
The tender shoots, and there's a youthful sun,  
His second half course through the [Ram](#) now run,  
And little birds are making melody  
And sleep all night, eyes open as can be 10  
(So Nature pricks them in each little heart),  
On pilgrimage then folks desire to start.  
The [palmers](#) long to travel foreign strands  
To distant shrines renowned in sundry lands;  
And specially, from every shire's end 15  
In England, folks to [Canterbury](#) wend:  
To seek the [blissful martyr](#) is their will,  
The one who gave such help when they were ill.  
Now in that season it befell one day  
In [Southwark](#) at the [Tabard](#) where I lay, 20  
As I was all prepared for setting out  
To Canterbury with a heart devout,

That there had come into that hostelry  
 At night some twenty-nine, a company  
 Of sundry folk whom chance had brought to fall 25  
 In fellowship, for pilgrims were they all  
 And onward to Canterbury would ride.  
 The chambers and the stables there were wide,  
 We had it easy, served with all the best;  
 And by the time the sun had gone to rest 30  
 I'd spoken with each one about the trip  
 And was a member of the fellowship.  
 We made agreement, early to arise  
 To take our way, of which I shall advise.  
 But nonetheless, while I have time and space, 35  
 Before proceeding further here's the place  
 Where I believe it reasonable to state  
 Something about these pilgrims--to relate  
 Their circumstances as they seemed to me,  
 Just who they were and each of what degree 40  
 And also what array they all were in.  
 And with a Knight I therefore will begin.

.....

There also was a Nun, a [PRIORESS](#),  
 Her smile a very simple one and coy.  
 Her greatest oath was only "By [Saint Loy!](#)" 120  
 Called Madam Eglantine, this Nun excelled  
 At singing when church services were held,  
 Intoning through her nose melodiously.  
 And she could speak in French quite fluently,  
 After the school of Stratford at the Bow 125  
 (The French of Paris wasn't hers to know).  
 Of table manners she had learnt it all,

For from her lips she'd let no morsel fall  
 Nor deeply in her sauce her fingers wet;  
 She'd lift her food so well she'd never get 130  
 A single drop or crumb upon her breast.  
 At courtesy she really did her best.  
 Her upper lip she wiped so very clean  
 That not one bit of grease was ever seen  
 Upon her drinking cup. She was discreet 135  
 And never reached unseemly for the meat.  
 And certainly she was good company,  
 So pleasant and so amiable, while she  
 Would in her mien take pains to imitate  
 The ways of court, the dignity of state, 140  
 That all might praise her for her worthiness.  
 To tell you of her moral consciousness,  
 Her charity was so great that to see  
 A little mouse caught in a trap would be  
 Enough to make her cry, if dead or bleeding. 145  
 She had some little dogs that she was feeding  
 With roasted meat or milk and fine white bread;  
 And sorely she would weep if one were dead  
 Or if someone should smite it with a stick.  
 She was all tender heart right to the quick. 150  
 Her pleated wimple was of seemly class,  
 She had a well formed nose, eyes gray as glass,  
 A little mouth, one that was soft and red.  
 And it's for sure she had a fair forehead--  
 It must have been a handbreadth wide, I own, 155  
 For hardly was the lady undergrown.  
 The beauty of her cloak I hadn't missed.  
 She wore a rosary around her wrist  
 Made out of coral beads all colored green,  
 And from it hung a brooch of golden sheen 160  
 On which there was an *A* crowned with a wreath,  
 With *Amor vincit omnia* beneath.

She brought along another NUN, to be  
Her chaplain, and her PRIEST, who made it three.

.....

As briefly as I could I've told you now 715  
Degree, array, and number, and of how  
This company of pilgrims came to be  
In Southwark at that pleasant hostelry  
Known as the Tabard, which is near the Bell.  
And so with that, it's time for me to tell 720  
Exactly what we did that very night  
When at this inn we'd all come to alight;  
And after that I'll tell you of our trip,  
Of all that's left about our fellowship.  
But first I pray that by your courtesy 725  
You will not judge it my vulgarity  
If I should plainly speak of this assortment,  
To tell you all their words and their deportment,  
Though not a word of theirs I modify.  
For this I'm sure you know as well as I: 730  
Who tells the tale of any other man  
Should render it as nearly as he can,  
If it be in his power, word for word,  
Though from him such rude speech was never heard.  
If he does not, his tale will be untrue, 735  
The words will be invented, they'll be new.  
One shouldn't spare the words of his own brother,  
He ought to say one word just like another.  
Christ spoke broad words himself in Holy Writ,  
And you know well no villainy's in it. 740  
And Plato says, to all those who can read  
Him, that words must be cousin to the deed.  
I also pray that you'll forgive the fact  
That in my tale I haven't been exact  
To set folks in their order of degree; 745

My wit is short, as clearly you may see.  
 Our HOST made welcome each and every one,  
 And right away our supper was begun.  
 He served us with the finest in good food;  
 The wine was strong to fit our festive mood. 750  
 Our Host performed, so it seemed to us all,  
 As well as any [marshal](#) in a hall.  
 A robust man he was, and twinkle-eyed,  
 As fine as any burgess in [Cheapside](#),  
 Bold in his speech, one wise and educated, 755  
 A man whose manhood could not be debated.  
 He also was a merry sort of bloke,  
 As after supper he began to joke  
 And spoke to us of mirth and other things  
 When we had finished with our reckonings. 760  
 "My lords," he then addressed us, "from the start  
 You've been most welcome here, that's from the heart.  
 In faith, this year I've truly yet to see  
 Here at this inn another company  
 As merry as the one that's gathered now. 765  
 I'd entertain you more if I knew how.  
 Say, here's a thought that just occurred to me,  
 A way to entertain you, and it's free.  
 "You go to Canterbury--may God speed,  
 The blissful martyr bless you for the deed! 770  
 And well I know as you go on your way,  
 You plan to tell some tales, to have some play.  
 There won't be much amusement going on  
 If everybody rides dumb as a stone.  
 So as I said, I would propose a game 775  
 To give you some diversion, that's the aim.  
 If it's agreed, by everyone's assent,  
 That you'll stand by the judgment I present,  
 And strive to do exactly as I say  
 Tomorrow when you're riding on your way, 780

Then by my father's soul, who now is dead,  
 You'll have some fun or you can have my head!  
 Let's have a show of hands, no more to say."  
 We let our will be known then right away;  
 We didn't think it worth deliberation 785  
 And gave him leave without a hesitation  
 To tell us what his verdict was to be.  
 "My lords," he said, "then listen well to me,  
 And may this not, I pray, meet your disdain.  
 Now here's the point, speaking short and plain: 790  
 Each one of you, to pass the time of day,  
 Shall tell two tales while you are on the way  
 To Canterbury; then each one of you  
 On the return shall tell another two,  
 About adventures said once to befall. 795  
 And he who bears himself the best of all--  
 That is to say, the one who's judged to tell  
 The tales that in both aim and wit excel--  
 Shall win a supper paid for by the lot,  
 Here in this place, right at this very spot, 800  
 When we return again from Canterbury.  
 For in my wish to make your journey merry,  
 I will myself most gladly with you ride--  
 And at my own expense--to be your guide;  
 And if my judgment one disputes, he'll pay 805  
 For all that we shall spend along the way.  
 If you will grant me that it's to be so,  
 Then tell me in a word that I may know  
 To make my preparations for the start."  
 It was so granted, each with happy heart 810  
 Gave him his oath. We therefore asked our Host  
 To vouchsafe that indeed he'd take the post  
 And function as our governor, to hear  
 Our tales and judge, and make his judgment clear,  
 And set the supper at a certain price; 815

Then we would all be ruled by his device,  
 Come high or low. And so it was agreed  
 By one assent, his judgment we would heed.  
 With that, more wine was fetched for every guest.  
 We drank it, then were ready for some rest 820  
 And went to bed with no more tarrying.  
 Next morning, when the day began to spring,  
 Up rose our Host and roused us like a cock.  
 He gathered us together in a flock,  
 Then forth we rode at but a walking pace 825  
 Out to Saint Thomas's watering place.  
 Our Host there checked his horse and said to all:  
 "My lords, now listen, if you will. Recall  
 The pact, as I remind you, made with me.  
 If evensong and matins both agree, 830  
 Let's see now who shall tell us the first tale.  
 And if I've ever drunk of wine or ale,  
 Whoso resists the judgment I present  
 Shall pay along the way all that is spent.  
 Draw lots before we travel farther, then, 835  
 And he who draws the shortest shall begin.  
 Sir Knight," he said, "my master and my lord,  
 Now draw a lot, to keep with our accord.  
 Come here," said he, "my Lady Prioress,  
 And you, Sir Student--quit your bashfulness 840  
 And studies too. Lay hand to, everyone!"  
 And so the drawing was at once begun.  
 I'll keep it short and tell you how it went:  
 Whether by chance or fate or accident,  
 The truth is that the lot fell to the Knight-- 845  
 A fact in which the rest all took delight.  
 As was required, then tell his tale he must,  
 By the agreement that was made in trust  
 As you have heard. What more is there to know?  
 And when this good man saw that it was so, 850

As one with wisdom and obedient  
To that to which he'd given free assent,  
He said, "Since I'm the one to start the game,  
The lot I drew is welcome, in God's name!  
Now let us ride, and hear what I've to say."  
And with that word we rode forth on our way,  
As he began at once with merry cheer  
To tell his tale, and spoke as you may hear.

855

## The Prioress's Tale

### PROLOGUE

*Domine dominus noster*

"O Lord our Lord, how marvelous thy name,  
Spread so afar through this wide world," said she.  
"Thy precious praise not only they proclaim  
Who are among good men of dignity,  
But from the mouths of babes thy charity  
Is praised as well. Babes sucking at the breast  
May often show their praises like the rest.

455

"Wherefore as best I can or may, in praise  
Of thee and of that whitest lily flower  
Who gave thee birth and is a maiden always,  
To tell a tale I'll labor in this hour--

460



Increasing not her honor by my power,  
For she herself is honor, root and palm 465  
Of bounty (next to Christ), and our souls' balm.

"O mother Maiden, maiden Mother free!  
O bush unburnt, burning in Moses' sight,  
Thou who drew down, through thy humility,  
The Spirit from the Godhead, to alight 470  
In thee, conceiving, as thy heart grew bright,  
The Wisdom of the Father--now this story  
Help me to tell, related for thy glory!

"Lady, thy goodness, thy magnificence,  
Thy power, and thy great humility 475  
No tongue may yet express with competence;  
For sometimes, Lady, ere men pray to thee,  
Thou goest before in thy benignity,  
Securing for us through thy orison  
The light to guide us to thy precious Son. 480

"O blissful Queen, my learning is too weak  
To be declaring thy great worthiness;  
I cannot bear such burden, I would speak  
As does a child who's twelve months old or less,  
One who can scarcely any word express. 485  
That's how I fare, and therefore hear my plea  
To guide my song that I shall sing of thee."

## The Prioress's Tale

A great city of Asia once contained,  
Amid the Christians in majority,  
A Jewry that a local lord maintained 490  
For venal lucre, foulest usury,  
Hateful to Christ and to his company;  
And through its street all men might ride or wend,  
For open was this Jewry's either end.

A little Christian school stood by this place 495  
Down at the farther end, to which would go  
Many a child of Christian blood and grace.  
There they would learn, as yearly they would grow,  
Such things as in that land were good to know--  
That is, they learnt to sing and read, as all 500  
Such children learn to do when they are small.

Among these children was a widow's son,  
A little scholar seven years of age,  
Whose daily wont was to this school to run;  
And if he chanced to see at any stage 505  
An image of Christ's mother, he'd engage  
In that which he was taught: he'd kneel and say  
His *Ave Maria* ere he went his way.

Thus was the youngster by this widow taught  
Our dear and blissful Lady to revere; 510  
And so he kept her near to him in thought--  
A guiltless child learns quickly, seeing clear.  
(Always when I recall this matter, dear  
Saint Nicholas stands ever in my presence,  
So young he was to do Christ reverence.) 515

And while his book this child was studying  
As he sat with his primer in the hall,  
*Alma redemptoris* he heard them sing,

As children learn from the antiphonal;  
Nearer and nearer he would draw, that all 520  
The words he might then hear, and every note,  
Until the first verse he had learnt by rote.

He didn't know what all this Latin meant,  
For in his tender years he was too young;  
One day he begged a friend there to consent 525  
To tell to him this song in his own tongue,  
Or tell him why this song so much was sung;  
That he might so instruct him was his plea  
Many a time on bare and bended knee.

His friend (older than he) said to him thus: 530  
"This song was written, so I've heard them say,  
For our dear Lady, blissful, generous,  
To praise her, and that she be (as we pray)  
Our help and succor when we pass away.  
I can no more expound, I'd only stammer; 535  
I've learnt the song but still know little grammar."

"Then is this song composed in reverence  
For our Lord's mother?" asked this innocent.  
"Now certainly I'll learn with diligence  
The entirety ere Christmastide is spent. 540  
Though from my primer I shall thus relent  
And get three beatings in one hour, I  
Shall learn it all, to honor her on high!"

His friend taught him in secret after school  
From day to day till he knew it by rote; 545  
He boldly sang, and well by any rule,  
He knew it word for word and note for note;  
And twice a day it wafted from his throat  
When off to school and homeward he would start.

On Christ's dear mother he had set his heart. 550

This little child, as you have heard me say,  
As through the Jewry he went to and fro,  
Would merrily be singing every day  
*O Alma redemptoris* as he'd go,  
The sweetness of Christ's mother piercing so 555  
His heart that, praying to her his intent,  
He couldn't keep from singing as he went.

That serpent known as Satan, our first foe,  
Who has his wasp's nest in the Jewish heart,  
Swelled up and said, "O Hebrew people! Woe!  
Is this a thing of honor for your part, 560  
That such a boy should walk at will, and start  
To sing out as he's walking such offense  
To spite you, for your laws no reverence?"

Thenceforth the Jews proceeded to conspire, 565  
Out of this world this innocent to chase;  
They found themselves a murderer for hire,  
Who in an alley took his hidden place;  
And as the child passed at his daily pace,  
This curséd Jew grabbed hold of him and slit 570  
His throat, and cast him down into a pit.

Into a privy place, I say, they threw  
Him, where these Jews would purge their bowels. Wail,  
O curséd Herod's followers anew!  
Your ill intent shall be of what avail? 575  
Murder will out, for sure, it will not fail;  
That God's honor increase, and men may heed,  
The blood cries out upon your curséd deed.

"O martyr, ever in virginity,

Now may you sing and follow ever on 580  
The Lamb white and celestial," said she,  
"Of whom the great evangelist Saint John  
In Patmos wrote. He said that those who've gone  
Before this Lamb and sing a song that's new  
Are those who never carnally women knew." 585

This poor widow awaited all that night  
Her little child, but waited all for naught;  
When morning came, as soon as it was light,  
Her face grown pale with dread and worried thought,  
At school and elsewhere then her child she sought; 590  
She'd finally learn, when she'd gone far and wide,  
That in the Jewry he'd last been espied.

With mother's pity in her breast enclosed,  
She went as if halfway out of her mind  
To every single place where she supposed 595  
It likely that her child there she might find;  
And ever to Christ's mother meek and kind  
She cried. At last, completely overwrought,  
Among the curséd Jews her child she sought.

She piteously inquired, she prayerfully 600  
Asked every Jew who dwelt within the place  
To tell her if her child they'd chanced to see.  
They answered, "Nay." But Jesus by his grace  
Put in her mind, after a little space,  
To cry out for her son, and where she cried 605  
The pit wherein he lay was near beside.

O God so great, so praised in many a hymn  
By mouths of innocents, behold thy might!  
This emerald, of chastity the gem,  
Of martyrdom as well the ruby bright, 610

With throat cut, facing up toward the light,  
The *Alma redemptoris* began to sing  
So loudly that the place began to ring.

The Christian folk who through that Jewry went  
Came by and stopped to wonder at this thing, 615  
And for the provost hastily they sent.  
He came without the slightest tarrying,  
With praise for Christ who is of heaven King,  
And for his mother, honor of mankind;  
And after that the Jews he had them bind. 620

This little child with piteous lamentation  
Was taken up while still he sang. They had  
A great procession then, its destination  
The nearest abbey. By his bier his sad  
And swooning mother lay to mourn the lad, 625  
And scarcely when they had to interfere  
Could they move this new Rachel from his bier.

To pain and shameful death this provost sent  
Each of the Jews known to participate  
In knowledge of the crime. They early went, 630  
For no such cursedness he'd tolerate;  
What evil shall deserve is evil's fate.  
He had them drawn by horses, then he saw  
That they be hanged according to the law.

Upon his bier still lay this innocent 635  
Before the altar while the mass progressed.  
After that, the abbot with his convent  
Made haste that they might lay the child to rest;  
With holy water by them he was blest--  
Yet spoke the child, when sprayed with holy water, 640  
And sang *O Alma redemptoris mater*.

This abbot, who was such a holy man  
As all monks are (or so they ought to be),  
To conjure this young innocent began:  
"Dear child, I'm now entreating you," said he, 645  
"By power of the holy Trinity,  
To tell me by what cause you sing, for it  
Would surely seem to me your throat is slit."

"My throat's cut to my neckbone," then replied  
The child, "a wound that is of such a kind 650  
That long ago indeed I should have died.  
But Jesus Christ, as in books you will find,  
Wills that his glory last and be in mind;  
And for the worship of his mother dear,  
Yet may I sing *O Alma* loud and clear. 655

"This well of mercy, Christ's sweet mother, I  
Have always loved as best as I know how;  
And when I was to forfeit life and die,  
She came to me and bade me give a vow  
To sing this anthem when I die (as now 660  
You have already heard). When I had sung,  
I thought she laid a grain upon my tongue.

"Wherefore I sing, and sing I shall again,  
In honor of that blissful maiden free,  
Till from my tongue they take away the grain. 665  
For afterwards here's what she said to me:  
'My little child, I'll fetch you, as you'll see,  
When that same grain has from your tongue been taken.  
Be not afraid, you will not be forsaken.'"

This holy monk (the abbot's whom I mean) 670  
Pulled out the tongue and took away the grain:

The child gave up the ghost, soft and serene.  
And when he saw this wonder so obtain,  
With salty tears that trickled down like rain  
He, groveling, fell flat upon the ground 675  
And stilly lay there, as if he were bound.

Upon the pavement, too, the whole convent  
Lay weeping, and they praised Christ's mother dear;  
And afterwards they rose and forth they went  
And took away this martyr from his bier; 680  
Inside a tomb of stone, of marble clear,  
They put away his body small and sweet.  
There he remains. God grant we all shall meet!

O youthful [Hugh of Lincoln](#), slain also  
By curséd Jews, as is so widely known 685  
(As it was but a little while ago),  
Pray for us too (in sin we've wayward grown),  
That gracious God, in mercy from his throne,  
Increase his grace upon us as we tarry,  
For reverence of his sweet mother Mary. Amen. 690

end