Handout #1 - The Prologue to “The Canterbury Tales”

THE COOK

They had a Cook along, whose skill was known
In boiling chicken with the marrow bone;
The king he was of culinary art:
He knew the use of flavorings, keen and tart;
Could roast and bake and broil and boil and fry;
Could make good soup, and triumphed at a pie!
It seemed a pity that upon his shin
He had a running sore, for he could win
At making rich blancmange,1 and never fail
To judge the different grades of London ale.

THE SHIPMAN

A Shipman rode his horse as best he could!
Bad gales and storms at sea he had withstood:
His weather-beaten face made this quite plain.
He knew the coast from Jutland down to Spain,
Or Hull to Carthage,2-- dangers and the tides,
The harbors and the pilotings besides;
With many a tempest had his beard been shaken.
Full many a draft of wine he’d deftly taken
While merchant slept, and many a mother’s son
Had walked the plank in sea fights he had won.
Smuggler and pirate both he’d been, in fine,
This hardy skipper of the Madeline.

THE PHYSICIAN

And various others took this pilgrimage:
A skilled Physician, pompous, rich, and sage;
Astrology he knew, and by the spell
Of stars, his patients’ ailments he could tell;
And his prescriptions gave the druggist trade --
For each, brisk business for the other made!
His fad was dieting and moderate fare;
He did not read his Bible much, I’d swear!3

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1 blancmange: French for “white food”; not a dessert as today, but a concoction of minced chicken, rice, milk, sugar, and almonds.
2 Jutland: peninsula on the mainland of Denmark
3 Hull: a seaport in northern England
4 Carthage: a port in North Africa.
Though fine his clothes, he hoarded well the pence
That he'd collected in the pestilence;
For gold is used in doses, I've heard tell:
That must be why he loved his gold so well.

THE WIFE OF BATH

A Wife of Bath did much to keep us gay
With tales of love and love charms, on the way --
A lively soul, who knew the inmost art
Of how to win a spouse and hold his heart;
For she had had five husbands in her time,
Not counting scores of lovers in her prime!
She'd grown a little deaf, but nought she cared:
Now forth to foreign lands each year she fared,
Since fate decreed she seek out every shrine.
(Her teeth grew far apart -- a certain sign
That she should travel far!) She'd seen Boulogne,
And Rome, and Palestine, Spain, and Cologne.
Abundant gold she had, for she could weave
So well, that even in Flanders, I believe,
You could not find her match. She liked fine gear,
And o'er the parish wives to domineer.
She took precedence on the relic days
In offering alms to manifest her praise.
If any dame went first, so wroth was she
That in her heart she lost all charity!
The towering headdress worn upon her hair
On Sunday weighed a full ten pounds I'd swear!
She kept the other pilgrims all in gales
Of laughter, listening to her merry tales.

5 In medieval times, doctors, and other men interested in science, were commonly thought to be skeptical of religion.
6 pestilence: the Black Death, which ravaged all Europe in the fourteenth century.
7 gold: It was an actual medieval belief that gold dissolved in medicine was a remedy for certain ailments.
8 Wife of Bath: A wife was a matron, or married woman. Bath is a town in the southwest of England known for its medicinal springs.
9 Boulogne: a city in northern France on the English Channel.
10 Cologne: a German city on the Rhine River.
11 Flanders: old Flemish name for Belgium
12 relic days: Certain Sundays were set apart for offering homage to religious relics, such as the bones of dead saints.
THE PARSON

A kindly Parson took the journey too.
He was a scholar, learned, wise, and true
And rich in holiness though poor in gold.
A gentle priest: whenever he was told
That poor folks could not meet their tithes that year,
He paid them up himself; for priests, it’s clear,
Could be content with little, in God’s way.
He lived Christ’s gospel truly every day,
And taught his flock, and preached what Christ had said.
And even though his parish was widespread,
With farms remote, and houses far asunder,
He never stopped for rain or even for thunder;
But visited each home where trouble came:
The rich or poor to him were all the same.
He always went on foot, with staff in hand;
For as their minister, he took this stand:
No wonder that iron rots if gold should rust!
That is, a priest in whom the people trust
Must no be base, or what could you expect
Of weaker folk? The Shepherd must perfect
His life in holiness that all his sheep
May follow him, although the way is steep,
And win at last to heaven. Indeed, I’m sure
You could not find a minister more pure.
He was a Christian both in deed and thought;
He lived himself the Golden Rule he taught.

THE PLOWMAN

The brother of the Parson came along:
A Plowman used to work, and very strong.
A kindly, simple laboring man was he,
Living in peace and perfect charity.
With all his heart he loved God best, and then
His neighbor as himself. For poorer men
He’d thresh and dig and plow -- work all the day
In heavy toil without expecting pay:
It was enough if Christ approve his deed.
He rode a mare, the poor man’s humble steed.

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13 tithes: taxes for the Church, consisting of one-tenth of the individual’s yearly income or production.
THE MILLER

The Miller, Robin, was thickset lout,
So big of bone and brawn, so broad and stout
That he was champion wrestler at the matches.
He’d even break a door right off its latches
By running at it with his burly head!
His beard, broad as a spade, was fiery red;
His mouth, a yawning furnace you’d suppose!
A wart with bristly hairs stood on his nose.
A clever scamp he was, with “thumb of gold”
To test the flour he ground; for when he tolled
His share of grain, he sneaked the payment thrice!
The jokes and tales he told were not so nice.
A drunk and vulgar rogue he proved to be.
But yet he played the bagpipe cleverly,
And to its tune he led us out of town.
A blue hood wore he, and a short white gown.

THE MANCIPLE

There was a Manciple among the band:
He bought provisions, as I understand,
For thirty lawyers at an Inn of Court.
This steward was a canny man; in short,
Shrewd as the lawyers were, he fooled them all,
Got rich on fat commissions -- made a haul!

THE REEVE

The Reeve, or bailiff, rode a horse called Scot.
Tall, thin, clean-shaven, and his temper hot,
He was the despot of his lord’s estate,
And hounded all the tenants into hate.
They feared him like the plague; but yet, you see,
Farming he understood from A to Z;
For he knew by the drought and by the rain
The yielding of his seed and of his grain;
His master’s sheep, his stock, his horses too,

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14 Manciple: a servant who bought provisions for a college or an Inn of Court. The latter was a society of lawyers and law students.
15 Reeve: estate manager
His poultry, swine, and cows, this bailiff knew. He managed all so well that he himself Was slowly gathering in the lord’s own wealth -- Contrived to lend his master craftily What was his own and rightful property!

A Norfolk man, he came from Baldeswell. A carpenter he’d been, so I’ve heard tell.

**THE SUMMONER**

A Summoner whose duties are to search, And bring to court, offenders ‘gainst the Church -- A kind of church policeman -- joined us there. He had a fiery face -- enough to scare The children with its blotched and pimpled skin, Its scurfy eyebrows, and its beardless chin. His eyes were little, and were much too narrow; His temper quick; he peered just like a sparrow. Garlic and onions were his special taste; And when with drafts of wine his wits were braced, He shouted Latin phrases learned in court, And “*Questio quid juris!*" he’d exhort. (For like a parrot he was really dense; He’d learned the words, but could not grasp the sense.) He’d set a garland on his round bald head, And made a buckler out of cake and bread!

**THE PARDONER**

The Pardoner, who came along with him, Carried a wallet filled up to the brim With pardons hot from Rome and relics old (At least, he said they were), and these he sold To poor believers back in lonely towns, And priests as stupid as the country clowns: A pillowcase he called Our Lady’s veil; He showed a fragment of the very sail Of Peter’s boat; a cross weighed down with stones;

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17 Baldeswell: a town in Norfolk.
18 “*Questio quid juris!*”: “The question is, what is the law?”
19 Pardoner: a preacher licensed to grant indulgences for sins in return for offerings to the church.
20 wallet: a large leather pouch or sack.
21 Peter’s boat: St. Peter was, of course, a fisherman before he became a disciple of Christ.
And in a glass he had pig’s-knuckle bones!
And yet in church he read the lesson well,
And sang the offertory like a bell:
He knew that when that anthem had been sung,
He then must preach, and polish up his tongue
To make the silver tinkle in the plate.
A noble churchman this, the reprobate!
His hair hung down in stringy yellow locks:
His priest’s hood he had trussed up in his box,
For he observed the new bare-headed style.
He and the Summoner did the way beguile
By brisk duets: they sang the latest hit,
“Come hither, love, to me!” Our ears were split!
The Pardoner’s voice was shrill as any goat;
The other sang the bass deep in his throat.

Now that I’ve told you shortly, in a clause,
The rank, the dress, the number, and the cause
Why these were all assembled at the inn
Called Tabard -- near the Bell -- I must begin
And tell you what we did that selfsame night,
And later of the pilgrimage I’ll write.
But first I pray you of your courtesy
If they appear ill-bred, do not blame me;
For anyone, you know, who tells a tale
He heard another speak, should never fail
To use the selfsame words and matter too,
Or else be found a liar and untrue:
Plato himself has said -- if Greek you read --
The words must be the cousin to the deed.
So even if the language be not fine,
But rude or coarse, the fault is theirs not mine;
And if some questions of their rank arise
Through my poor wit, I here apologize.

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22 *Plato*: a Greek philosopher (427?-347 B.C.). Chaucer could not read Greek, but he knew Plato through Latin translations.

23 Chaucer is here apologizing for the fact that the pilgrims do not tell their tales in order of rank, as would have been considered proper in medieval society.
THE HOST

Our Host\textsuperscript{24} gave us good cheer. He served a meal
That gratified us all, and made us feel
(Especially when we had drunk his wine)
In high good humor, genial and benign.
A handsome man this host was, I declare;
A fine official he’d be anywhere;
A portly, keen-eyed man, whose speech was bold,
But such as sound experience would uphold
In common sense; a merry fellow, too;
For when the feast was ended, and he knew
That each of us had settled our account,
His amiability began to mount,
And in a jovial mood, he had his say:

“Well, gentlemen, I have enjoyed your stay.
To tell the truth, I have not seen this year
A group so jolly as you’ve gathered here.
In fact I’d like to conjure up some scheme
That would amuse, and win me your esteem.
Ha! of a plan I’ve just this moment thought:
A good pastime -- and it shall cost you naught.
“You go to Canterbury. Heaven speed you!
The blissful martyr’s self reward and heed you!
You mean, I’m sure, unless my memory fails,
To liven up the way by telling tales;
For certainly to ride along alone
In utter dumbness, silent as a stone,
Is not a bit of fun in pilgrimages.
Now by my father’s soul (he’s dead, these ages),
In truth I’ve hit upon the very thing!
Don’t be afraid; it hasn’t any string.
Just take a vote and let me know your mind.”
We did not think it worth our while to find
Objections to his friendliness, and so
Declared we all desired his plan to know.

“Well, this it is, my lords. Suppose we say
That each of you tell four tales by the way,
Two as you go, and two as you return;
And then the one whose tale is best will earn
A festive supper here at Tabard Inn,
Paid by the rest. Now that’s a prize to win!”
We heartily agreed, and took him up.
But first we set the price at which we’d sup
On our return; you see, we thought it wise

\textsuperscript{24} The Host has been almost certainly identified with a real innkeeper named Harry Bialy who had an inn at Southwark in Chaucer’s time.
To fix beforehand, just how much the prize
Should cost us all. And it was understood
That he should manage all, for well he could.
So then we went to bed. And next we knew
The dawn had come; and all our motley crew
The busy Host assembled, like a cock
That gathers all his hens and leads the flock.
Then forth we ambled at a snail-like pace
Until we reached St. Thomas’ watering place;
And here our Host pulled up his horse, and said:
“Well, here we are. Now you have made me head;
If evensong and morning song agree,
You must obey the orders given by me.
Whoever is a rebel to my will,
We’ll cast accounts, and make him foot the bill.
Here are the lots: who gets the shortest straw
Must be the first to speak. Now let us draw.
“Sir Knight,” he said, “my master and my lord,
Let’s see how Lady Luck will you award.
Come near,” quoth he, “my lady prioress;
And you, sir clerk, don’t be so modest --yes,
We’ll all take turns. Here, sir, the first is yours.
Now, mind, the shortest cut first tale ensures.”
We drew the lots; and, as was only right,
The shortest straw of all fell to the Knight.
It was good luck, indeed, a happy choice;
It made us all applaud and much rejoice.
When this good man perceived that it was true,
He did not “Hem!” and “Ha!” as lesser do,
But said: “Well, since I must begin the game,
Why, welcome be the lot, in God’s good name!
Now let us ride, and hark to what I say.”
And with that word we rode along the way;
And he began a pleasant tale in rhyme;
He told it thus: “Now, once upon a time...”

Here endeth the prolog of this book....

25 St. Thomas’ watering place - less than two miles from the Tabard Inn, a well where pilgrims to Canterbury often stopped and refreshed themselves.
26 If you feel this morning as you did last night