

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-316-61550-8 — The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales
 Geoffrey Chaucer, Edited by David Kirkham, Valerie Allen
 Excerpt
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THE GENERAL PROLOGUE TO THE CANTERBURY TALES



Chaucer paints a picture, in one long sentence, of the world waking up to spring: he talks about the season itself, plants, Zephyrus the warm west wind, the sun in its progress through the zodiac, and birds, all before he mentions people and their springtime wish to visit foreign parts on pilgrimage. Finally, he narrows the focus to a particular place, Canterbury, where St Thomas the martyr is buried.

Here biginneth the Book of the Tales of Caunterbury

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
 The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
 And bathed every veine in swich licour
 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth 5
 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 melodie,
 That slegen al the night 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 15
 Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
 The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
 That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.



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- Chaucer introduces himself directly as pilgrim into his narrative, for the first of many times. What is his mood as he meets his chance companions? How do you know? List the words and phrases that give you this evidence, and then check your conclusions with a partner.
- Read lines 35–42 carefully, and note Chaucer's motives, his intention and his caution about claiming absolute knowledge.
- Read aloud lines 35–39 several times in your ordinary pronunciation. Does the reading seem to you to limp, or even trip you up at some points? Check your list of points against those of a partner and discuss what could be altered in your reading to make the verse read evenly.
- Chaucer describes his intentions as 'acordaunt to resoun' (l. 37)—that is, rational or logical. What do you think this suggests about his purpose? Is it just to entertain?

19	bifil it happened	29	esed atte beste made very comfortable
21	wenden travel	31	everichon every one
22	corage spirit	33	made forward agreed
25	sondry various	34	as I you devise as I shall tell you
	by aventure yfalle come together by chance	35	nathelees nevertheless
27	wolden wanted or intended to [A word with a stronger meaning than its modern descendant 'would'.]	38	condicioun the disposition, character and behaviour
28	wide roomy, comfortable	40	degree rank or place in society [See the section on p. 94.]
		41	array dress and/or condition

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Chaucer arrives at the Tabard Inn, which was in Southwark, at the southern end of London Bridge. This was the only bridge across the River Thames in the fourteenth century and was a convenient starting point for any journey southwards from London. He declares his intention of describing the character and rank of each of the 29 fellow pilgrims he finds there. His account of the pilgrims lasts for nearly 700 lines; it is towards the end of The General Prologue that he returns to telling us about setting out on the pilgrimage.

Bifil that in that seson on a day,
 In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay 20
 Redy to wenden on my pilgrimage
 To Caunterbury with ful devout corage,
 At night was come into that hostelrie
 Wel nine and twenty in a compaignie,
 Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle 25
 In felaweshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle,
 That toward Caunterbury wolden ride.
 The chambres and the stables weren wide,
 And wel we weren esed atte beste.
 And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste, 30
 So hadde I spoken with hem everichon
 That I was of hir felaweshipe anon,
 And made forward erly for to rise,
 To take oure wey ther as I yow devise.
 But natheless, whil I have time and space, 35
 Er that I ferther in this tale pace,
 Me thinketh it acordaunt to resoun
 To telle yow al the condicioun
 Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,
 And whiche they weren, and of what degree, 40
 And eek in what array that they were inne;
 And at a knight than wol I first biginne



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- Read aloud the description of the Knight, in lines 43–66, using your own modern pronunciation. Look up any unfamiliar words in the glossary on page 95. You might need to go to a good modern dictionary for the full meaning of some of them (e.g. 'cristendom', 'hethenesse').
- If there is a recording available of *The General Prologue* being read as Chaucer would have pronounced it, listen to the first few lines and practise imitating the pronunciation.
- Use the glossary and a dictionary to ensure you know the meaning of lines 51–66. Read these lines out using your own pronunciation. Try imitating a recording, if one is available.
- To what extent would you say the presentation of the Knight is that of an ideal rather than a particular person?
- As you read the rest of the descriptions, think about how each of the characters matches the professed ideals of their way of life.

43	worthy [The word is used straightforwardly here; with some other characters it is used with varying degrees of irony.]		
45	chivalrie [A complicated term indicating skill in battle combined with respect for the laws and decencies of war.]		overlord to whom he could look for protection, and to whom he swore allegiance and to whom he owed both work and a willingness to fight when called upon. In this case the phrase also suggests the Knight is doing God's work, as God is also his lord.]
46	trouthe honesty, perseverance and faithfulness to his calling [His vocation as a knight of God—with a suggestion of keeping a promise.]	48	ferre further
	honour high respect because of an exalted character	49	cristendom the area where Christianity held sway
	freedom behaviour and speech worthy of his position [noble, generous and liberal]	52	hethenesse all other areas apart from Christendom
	curteisie gentleness [well-bred manners, unselfishness, concern for others]	53	hadde the bord bigonne had presided at a dinner or a feast to honour him
	[These complex terms sum up the ideal of a knight's behaviour and manners.]	54	aboven alle nacions above knights from all other nations
47	lordes werre [He owed a duty of service to his overlord, and had to fight when called on. Under the feudal system, everyone had an	59	reyseed gone on raids
		63	Grete See the Mediterranean
			In listes thries, and ay slain his foo three times he had fought victoriously as a champion of Christianity in the lists [in formal single combat with Muslim champions]—he had always slain his foe.

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The Knight is socially the most senior person present. Dedicated knights were supposed to spend their lives doing God's work in defence of Christianity. This knight has fought at Alexandria in Egypt, at Satalie and Lyas in modern Turkey, in Lithuania (Lettow) and Russia (Ruce), at Granada and Algeciras in Spain, at Balmarie in Morocco and Tramissene in Algeria. The battles were real and recent, but a single person could hardly have been to all of them. Chaucer wants to show that this knight's life has been spent heroically and selflessly, fighting in support of his lord and against non-Christians, sometimes even in alliance with other non-Christians, such as the Lord of Palatie (the ruler of Balat, in modern Turkey).

A Knight ther was, and that a worthy man,
 That fro the time that he first bigan
 To riden out, he loved chivalrie, 45
 Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.
 Ful worthy was he in his lordes werre,
 And therto hadde he riden, no man ferre,
 As wel in cristendom as in hethenesse,
 And evere honoured for his worthiness. 50
 At Alisaundre he was whan it was wonne.
 Ful ofte time he hadde the bord bigonne
 Aboven alle nacions in Pruce;
 In Lettow hadde he reysed and in Ruce,
 No Cristen man so ofte of his degree. 55
 In Gernade at the seege eek hadde he be
 Of Algezir, and riden in Belmarie.
 At Lyeys was he and at Satalie,
 Whan they were wonne; and in the Grete See
 At many a noble armee hadde he be. 60
 At mortal batailles hadde he been fiftene,
 And foughten for oure feith at Tramissene
 In listes thries, and ay slain his foo.
 This ilke worthy knight hadde been also
 Sometime with the Lord of Palatie 65
 Again another hethen in Turkie.

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- What extra information do lines 67–78 give us about the Knight's character?
- Look again at lines 70–71. There are four negatives in these lines. What effect do they have on Chaucer's assertion about the Knight?
- Read aloud lines 73–78 with a partner or in a small group. What impression do they give you of the Knight's appearance?
- Look back at Chaucer's declaration of intent in lines 38–41. Has he described the Knight in the manner he promised?
- Look carefully at the Knight's manners in dealing with people generally. How do you think these manners reflect his vocation as a knight and his qualities in battle?
- What conclusions can you draw from the state of the Knight's clothing and equipment?

67	sovereyn prys great reputation	73	array dress
69	port bearing, manner	75	fustian thick cloth, serviceable rather than rich
70	He nevere yet no vileynie ne saide he had never said anything evil or coarse	76	gipon tunic
71	wight person		bismotered stained
72	He was a verray, parfit gentil knight he was a perfect knight and gentleman ['Gentil' suggests the courteous manners and honourable behaviour suited to his rank.]	77	habergeon coat of chain mail worn over the tunic
			viage journey



▲ A castle built by Christian Crusaders in the Middle East: 'At many a noble armee hadde he be.'

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The Knight has joined the pilgrimage immediately after arriving home from action abroad. The religious and legal dispensation for wartime killing lapsed as soon as battle was over; on emerging from battle he had to do penance and seek forgiveness.

And everemoore he hadde a sovereyn prys;
 And though that he were worthy, he was wys,
 And of his port as meeke as is a maide.
 He nevere yet no vileynie ne saide 70
 In al his lif unto no maner wight.
 He was a verray, parfit gentil knight.
 But, for to tellen yow of his array,
 His hors were goode, but he was nat gay.
 Of fustian he wered a gipon 75
 Al bismotered with his habergeon,
 For he was late ycome from his viage,
 And wente for to doon his pilgrimage.



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- Read aloud the description of the Squire. Do you notice any difference in the language Chaucer uses here and the language he used to describe the Knight?
- Make a list of everything Chaucer tell us of the Squire's appearance, character and actions, and write a paragraph summarizing this information. Compare your lists and paragraph with your partner's.
- List the differences between the Squire and his father: How do you account for them?
- The Squire would have been somewhere between 14 and 18 years old. Think about your own appearance, character and actions and then write a paragraph about yourself, using your paragraph about the Squire as your model. Then try to put some of what you have written into lines with Chaucer's rhythms and rhyme.
- A squire's education was demanding, encompassing chivalry, service to those he owed service, singing, dancing, playing a musical instrument, drawing, writing verses, jousting, hunting, hawking, being a master of hawks, horses and hounds. He had to be stable in character; temperate, generous and with a charitable consideration of others. How does this compare with the education of a 'young gentleman' today?

80	bachelor a learner or apprentice [A bachelor of arts is similarly a lower degree than a master of arts.]	89	embrouded was he, as it were a meede his clothes were embroidered with meadow flowers [His appearance is shown to be very fashionable, with a short gown and long sleeves—very impractical for his way of life. Such fashions were frowned on among the middle-aged of the time, but were much encouraged by the fashion-conscious King Richard II.]
81	lokkes crulle as they were leyd in presse curly hair; as if it had been artificially curled [by being laid in curling irons]	91	floytinge playing the flute
84	delivere agile	95	endite write verses
85	chivachie campaigning on horseback [His campaigns in Flanders, Artois and Picardy (the same general area as the battles of the First World War) may have had something to do with Chaucer's own youthful experience of fighting in northern France, during the Hundred Years War with France (1337–1451).]	96	juste joust
87	as of so litel space in such a short time	97	purtreye mentally conceive
88	In hope to stonden in his lady grace in hopes of winning his lady's favour	99	nightertale night time
		100	lowely, and servisable humble and willing to serve
			and carf biforn his fader carved his father's meat [Carving was considered a gentle and civilized art, and was a recognized form of service for the Squire.]

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The Squire is an apprentice knight, learning from his father how to prepare himself for knighthood and how to behave in a manner fitting his high status. Chaucer clearly makes him an admirable example of his kind, but he is also a young lover, a singer, a musician, a writer of songs and a producer of drawings. He is conscious of fashion and is an ardent wooer of young women. Chaucer emphasizes his youthful vigour and freshness, in contrast with the rather sombre preoccupations of his father after a lifetime of hard service. This freshness also contrasts with many of the more worn and cynical pilgrims whose descriptions follow. He is the only one who is 'as fressh as is the month of May'.

With him ther was his sone, a yong Squier,	
A lovyere and a lusty bachelor,	80
With lokkes crulle as they were leyd in presse.	
Of twenty yeer of age he was, I gesse.	
Of his stature he was of evene lengthe,	
And wonderly delivere, and of greet strengthe.	
And he hadde been sometime in chivachie	85
In Flaundres, in Artois, and Picardie,	
And born him weel, as of so litel space,	
In hope to stonden in his lady grace.	
Embrouded was he, as it were a meede	
Al ful of fresshe floures, white and reede.	90
Singing he was, or floytinge, al the day;	
He was as fressh as is the month of May.	
Short was his gowne, with sleeves longe and wide.	
Wel koude he sitte on hors and faire ride.	
He koude songes make and wel endite,	95
Juste and eek daunce, and weel purtreye and write.	
So hoothe he lovede that by nightertale	
He sleep namoore than dooth a nightingale.	
Curteis he was, lowely, and servisable,	
And carf biforn his fader at the table.	100

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- The Yeoman is described almost entirely in visual terms. Read his description carefully, noting all the details. Behind the details, what impression do you get of his appearance and character?

102	for him liste ride so for it pleased him [the Knight] to ride in this way [i.e. with only one servant]	110	visage face Of wodecraft wel koude he al the usage he knew all the practices of woodcraft
104	pecok arwes arrows with peacock feathers kene sharp	111	bracer wristguard, used when firing an arrow
105	thriftily efficiently	112	bokeler buckler, shield
106–7	Wel koude . . . with fetheres lowe he could look after his equipment properly: the feathers on his arrows did not droop, and would guide the arrows accurately	114	harneised mounted
109	A not heed a round head, shaped like a nut	115	a Cristopher a medal of St Christopher sheene shiny
		116	bawdrik belt



▲ ‘Of wodecraft wel koude he al the usage.’