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The General Prologue

The opening is a long, elaborate sentence about the effects of Spring on the vegetable and animal world, and on people. The style of the rest of the Prologue and Tales is much simpler than this opening. A close paraphrase of the opening sentence is offered at the bottom of this page.¹

	When that April with his showers soote	<i>its showers sweet</i>
	The drought of March hath piercèd to the root	
	And bathèd every vein in such liquor	<i>rootlet / liquid</i>
	Of which virtúe engendered is the flower; ²	
5	When Zephyrus eke with his sweetè breath	<i>West Wind also</i>
	Inspirèd hath in every holt and heath	<i>grove and field</i>
	The tender croppès, and the youngè sun	<i>young shoots / Spring sun</i>
	Hath in the Ram his halfè course y-run, ³	<i>in Aries / has run</i>
	And smallè fowlès maken melody	<i>little birds</i>
10	That sleepen all the night with open eye	<i>Who sleep</i>
	(So pricketh them Natúre in their couráges),	<i>spurs / spirits</i>
	Then longen folk to go on pilgrimáges,	<i>people long</i>
	And palmers for to seeken strangè strands	<i>pilgrims / shores</i>
	To fernè hallows couth in sundry lands, ⁴	<i>distant shrines known</i>
15	And specially from every shirè's end	<i>county's</i>
	Of Engèland to Canterbury they wend	<i>go</i>
	The holy blissful martyr for to seek,	<i>St. Thomas Becket</i>
	That them hath holpen when that they were sick.	<i>Who has helped them</i>

1 When April with its sweet showers has pierced the drought of March to the root and bathed every rootlet in the liquid by which the flower is engendered; when the west wind also, with its sweet breath, has brought forth young shoots in every grove and field; when the early sun of spring has run half his course in the sign of Aries, and when small birds make melody, birds that sleep all night with eyes open, (as Nature inspires them to)—*then* people have a strong desire to go on pilgrimages, and pilgrims long to go to foreign shores to distant shrines known in various countries. And especially they go from every county in England to seek out the shrine of the holy blessed martyr who has helped them when they were sick.

2 4: "By virtue (strength) of which the flower is engendered."

3 8: The early sun of Spring has moved partway through the sign of Aries (the Ram) in the Zodiac.

4 13-14: "Pilgrims seek foreign shores (to go) to distant shrines known in different lands." Palmers: pilgrims, from the palm leaves they got in Jerusalem.

At the Tabard Inn, just south of London, the poet-pilgrim falls in with a group of twenty-nine other pilgrims who have met each other along the way.

Befell that in that season on a day
20 In Southwark at The Tabard as I lay
Ready to wenden on my pilgrimage
To Canterbury with full devout couraige,
At night was come into that hostelry
Well nine and twenty in a company

*It happened
inn name / lodged
to go
spirit, heart
inn
fully 29*



25 Of sundry folk by aventure y-fall
In fellowship, and pilgrims were they all
That toward Canterbury wolden ride.
The chambers and the stables weren wide
And well we weren eased at the best.
30 And shortly, when the sunné was to rest,
So had I spoken with them every one
That I was of their fellowship anon,
And madé forward early for to rise
To take our way there as I you devise.

*by chance fallen ...
... Into company
wished to
were roomy
entertained
sun had set

agreement
I shall tell you*

The Canterbury Tales

35 But natheless, while I have time and space, *nevertheless*
 Ere that I further in this talè pace, *Before I go*
 Methinketh it accordant to reason *It seems to me*
 To tell you all the condition *circumstances*
 Of each of them so as it seemèd me, *to me*
 40 And which they weren, and of what degree *And who / social rank*
 And eke in what array that they were in; *also / dress*
 And at a knight then will I first begin.

The Knight is the person of highest social standing on the pilgrimage, though you would never know it from his modest manner or his clothes. He keeps his ferocity for crusaders, battlefields where he has distinguished himself over many years and over a wide geographical area. As the text says, he is not “gay,” that is, he is not showily dressed, but is still wearing the military padded coat stained by the armor he has only recently taken off.

A KNIGHT there was and that a worthy man
 That from the timè that he first began
 45 To riden out, he lovèd chivalry,
 Truth and honour, freedom and courtesy.⁵
 Full worthy was he in his lorde’s war, *lorde’s = king’s or God’s*
 And thereto had he ridden—no man farre *farther*
 As well in Christendom as Heatheness *heathendom*
 50 And ever honoured for his worthiness.

His campaigns.

At Alexandria he was when it was won. *captured*
 Full often time he had the board begun *table*
 Aboven allè nations in Prussia.⁶
 In Lithow had he reisèd and in Russia *Lithuania / fought*

5 45-6: “He loved everything that pertained to knighthood: truth (to one’s word), honor, magnanimity (*freedom*), courtesy.”

6 52-3: He had often occupied the seat of honor at the table of the Teutonic Knights in Prussia, where badges awarded to distinguished crusaders read “Honneur vainc tout: Honor conquers all.” Though the campaigns listed below were real, and though it was perhaps just possible for one man to have been in them all, the list is probably idealized. The exact geographical locations are of little interest today. This portrait is generally thought to show a man of unsullied ideals; Jones (see Bibliography) insists that the knight was a mere mercenary.

- 55 No Christian man so oft of his degree. *rank*
 In Gránad, at the siege eke had he be *Granada / also*
 Of Algesir and ridden in Belmarie.
 At Leyès was he and at Satalie
 When they were won, and in the Greatè Sea *Mediterranean*
- 60 At many a noble army had he be.
 At mortal battles had he been fifteen
 And foughten for our faith at Tramissene
 In listès thricè, and ay slain his foe.⁷ *combat 3 times & always*
 This ilkè worthy knight had been also *same*
- 65 Sometimè with the lord of Palatie
 Against another heathen in Turkey,
 And ever more he had a sovereign prize,⁸ *always*

His modest demeanor.

- And though that he was worthy he was wise, *valiant / sensible*
 And of his port as meek as is a maid. *deportment*
- 70 Ne never yet no villainy he said *rudeness*
 In all his life unto no manner wight.⁹ *no kind of person*
 He was a very perfect gentle knight.
 But for to tellen you of his array:
 His horse was good; but *he* was not gay.¹⁰ *well dressed*
- 75 Of fustian he wearèd a gipoun *coarse cloth / tunic*
 All besmotered with his habergeon, *stained / mail*
 For he was late y-come from his voyáge, *just come / journey*
 And wentè for to do his pilgrimáge.¹¹

7 63: "In single combat (*listes*) three times, and always (*ay*) killed his opponent."

8 64-67: The knight had fought for one Saracen or pagan leader against another, a common, if dubious, practice. *And ever more ...* may mean he always kept the highest reputation or that he always came away with a splendid reward or booty (*prize*).

9 70-71: Notice quadruple negative: "Ne never, no ... no" used for emphasis, perhaps deliberately excessive emphasis. It is not bad grammar. The four negatives remain in Ellesmer's slightly different version: "He never yet no villainy ne said ... unto no manner wight."

10 74: "He (the Knight) was not fashionably dressed." *horse was*: most MSS read *hors weere(n)* = "horses were." I have preferred the reading of MS Lansdowne.

11 75-78: The poor state of the knight's clothes is generally interpreted to indicate his pious anxiety to fulfill a