

# Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales (1387-1400)<sup>1</sup>

- OWilliam Langland's *Piers Plowman* as an Allegory: Do Good/Do Better/Do Best
- ODream Vision: "Dream of the Rood" (Cynewulf, 8th Century)
- ODirect Homely Language
- **OFirst-Personal Narrator**
- O 1 Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*. Trans. David Wright. New York: Oxford UP, 1998.



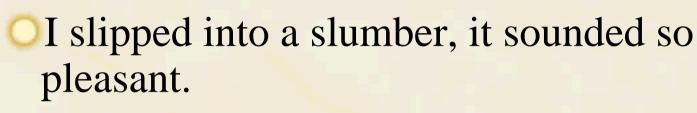
- Old English and Alliteration: Stresses and Caesura (2,2/3 stresses)
- Oldon Norman Conquest: Greek and Roman (French)
- OLangland: Alliterative Revival in Western England (Countryside)

#### The Beginning of Piers Plowman

- In a summer season when the sun was mild
- OI clad myself in clothes as I'd become a sheep;
- OIn the habit of a hermit unholy of works,
- Walked wide in this world, watching for wonders.



- OAnd on a May morning, on Malvern Hills,
- OThere befell me as by magic a marvelous thing;
- OI was weary of wandering and went to rest
- At the bottom of a broad bank by a brook's side,
- OAnd as I lay lazily looking in the water



- OThere came to me reclining there a most curious dream
- OThat I was in a wilderness, nowhere that I knew;
- OBut as I looked into the east, up high toward the sun,



- OI saw a tower on a hill-top, trimly built,
- OA deep dale beneath, a dungeon tower in it,
- With ditches deep and dark and dreadful to look at,
- OA fair field full of folk I found between them,
- Of human beings of all sorts, the high and the low
- Working and wandering as the world requires.

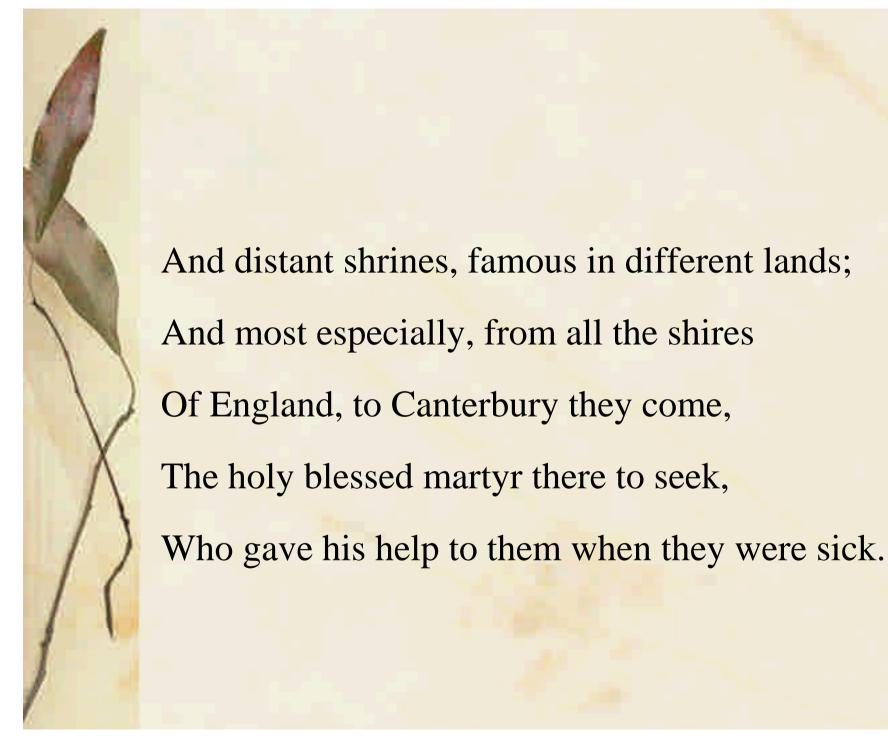
# The Canterbury Tales

- OLanguage: Vernacular Literature (London)
- OChurch: A Roman Catholic
- OThe Seven Deadly Sin: The Miller's Tale (Lust), The Nun's Priest's Tale (Pride)
- OStructure of The Canterbury Tales

# General Prologue

When the sweet showers of April have pierced
The drought of March, and pierced it to the root,
And every vein is bathed in that moisture
Whose quickening force will engender the flower;
And when the west wind too with its sweet breath
Has given life in every wood and field

To tender shoots, and when the stripling sun Has run his half-course in Aries, the Ram, And when small birds are making melodies, That sleep all the night long with open eyes, (Nature so prompts them, and encourages); Then people long to go on pilgrimages, And palmers to take ship for foreign shores.



# Question 1

ODryden claims that Chaucer is the Father of English poetry. Even though what we have comes from David Wright's translation. Can you see the rhyme scheme of the above lines?

# Place and Pilgrims, Lines 19-26

It so happened at this season, that one day In Southwark at the Tabard where I stayed Ready to set out on my pilgrimage To Canterbury, and pay devout homage, There came at nightfall to the hostelry Some nine-and-twenty in a company, Folk of all kinds, met in accidental Companionship, for they were pilgrims all;

# Question 2

OWhy is the device of pilgrim good for Chaucer to portray his society?

# The Knight, Lines 42-78

And with a knight, then, I shall first begin.

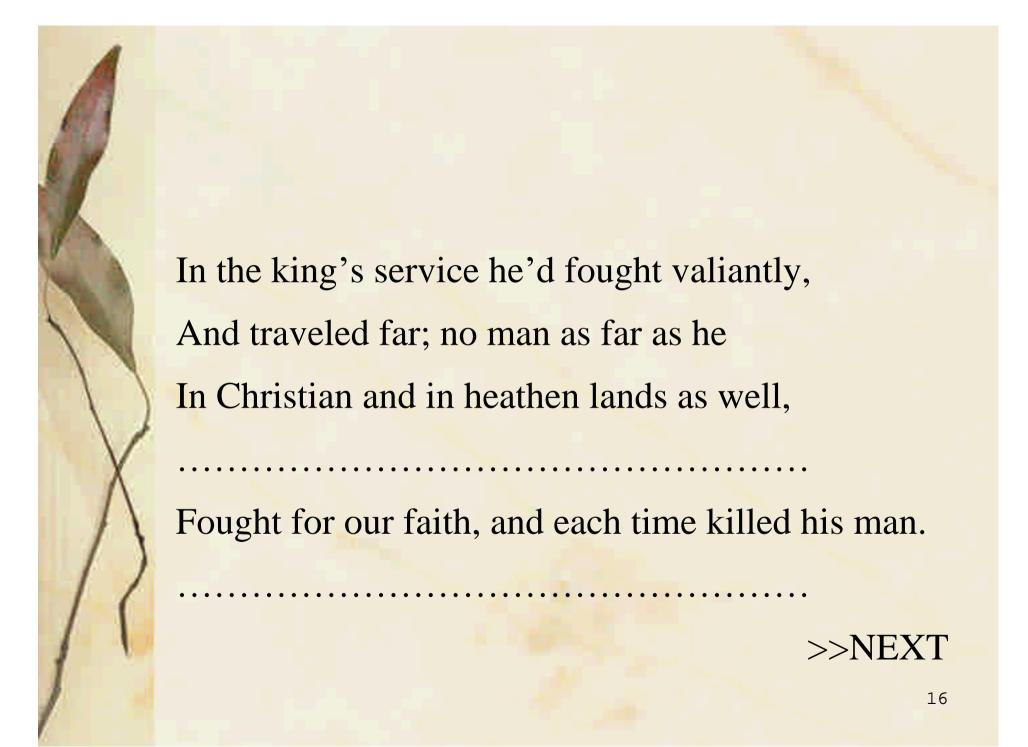
There was a knight, a reputable man,

Who from the moment that he first began

Campaigning, had cherished the profession

Of arms; he also prized trustworthiness,

Liberality, fame, and courteousness.



But as for his appearance and outfit, He had good horses, yet was from from smart. He wore a tunic made of coarse thick stuff, Marked by his chainmail, all begrimed with rust, Having just returned from an expedition, And on his pilgrimage of thanksgiving.

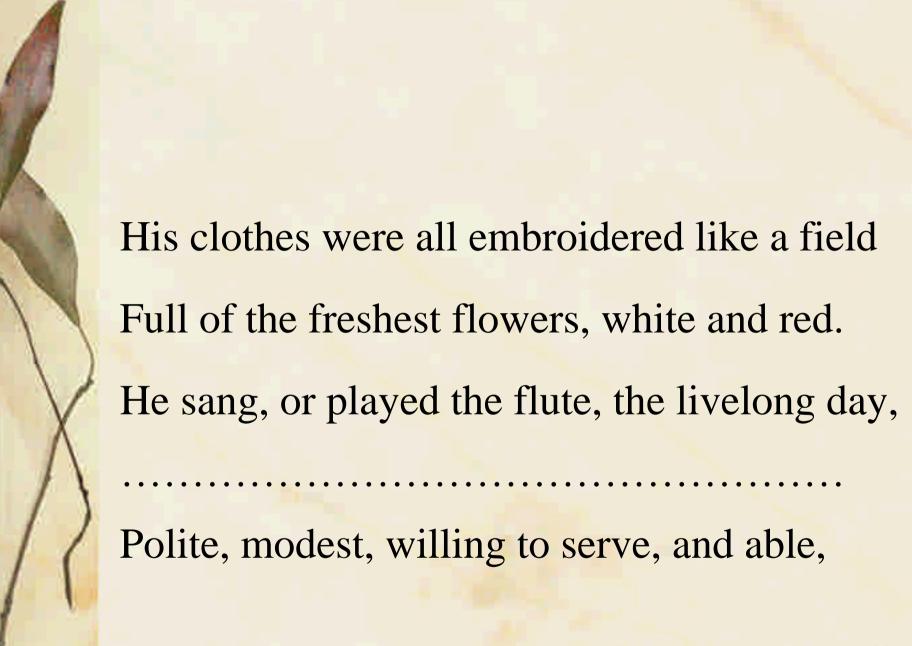
# Question 3

In *Piers Plowman*, Peter the plowman knows the way to Truth and acts as the guide. Still, Peter will not take people (including a knight) to see Truth before everyone has done his/her own job. For himself, Peter will first plow his own halfacre of land. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the leader of the pilgrims is the knight. What criticism might William Langland aim at Chaucer's knight?

### The Knight's Squire, Lines 79-99

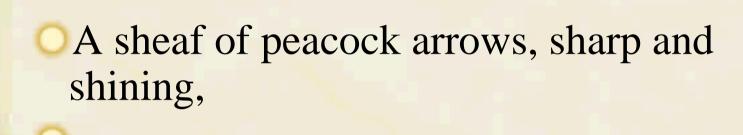
With him there was his son, a young squire,
A lively knight-apprentice, and a lover,
With hair as curly as if newly waved;
I took him to be twenty years of age.

He'd taken part in cavalry forays



#### The Yeoman, Lines 101-11

- The Knight had just one servant, a yeoman,
- OFor so he wished to ride, on this occasion.
- OThe man was clad in coat and hood of green.
- OHe carried under his belt, handily,
- OFor he looked to his gear in yeoman fashion,

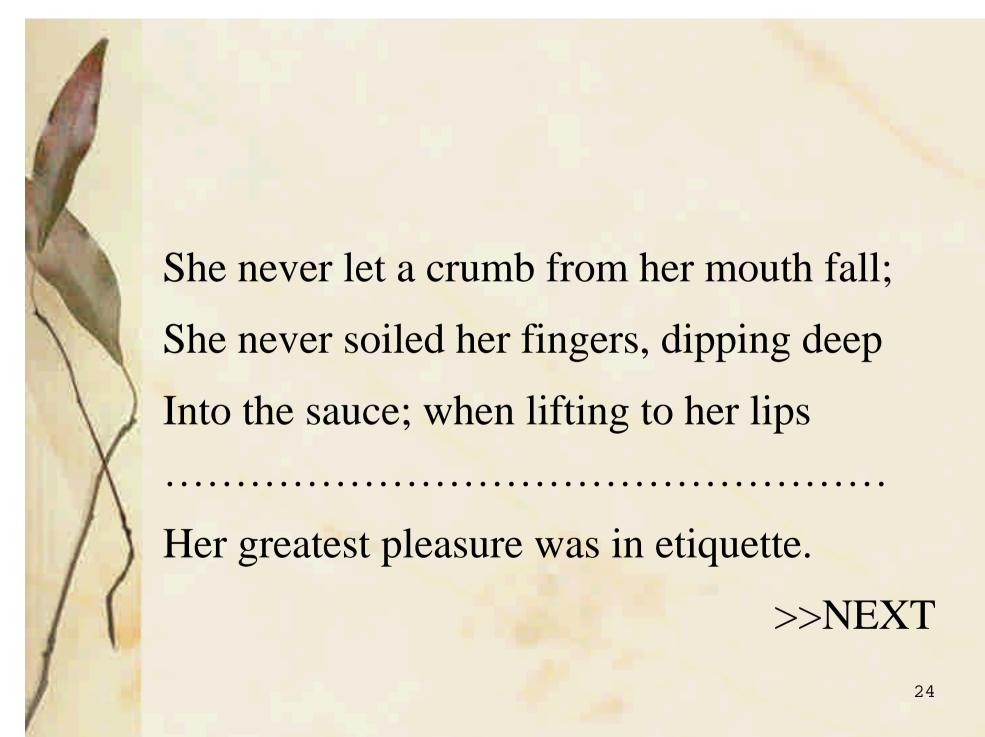


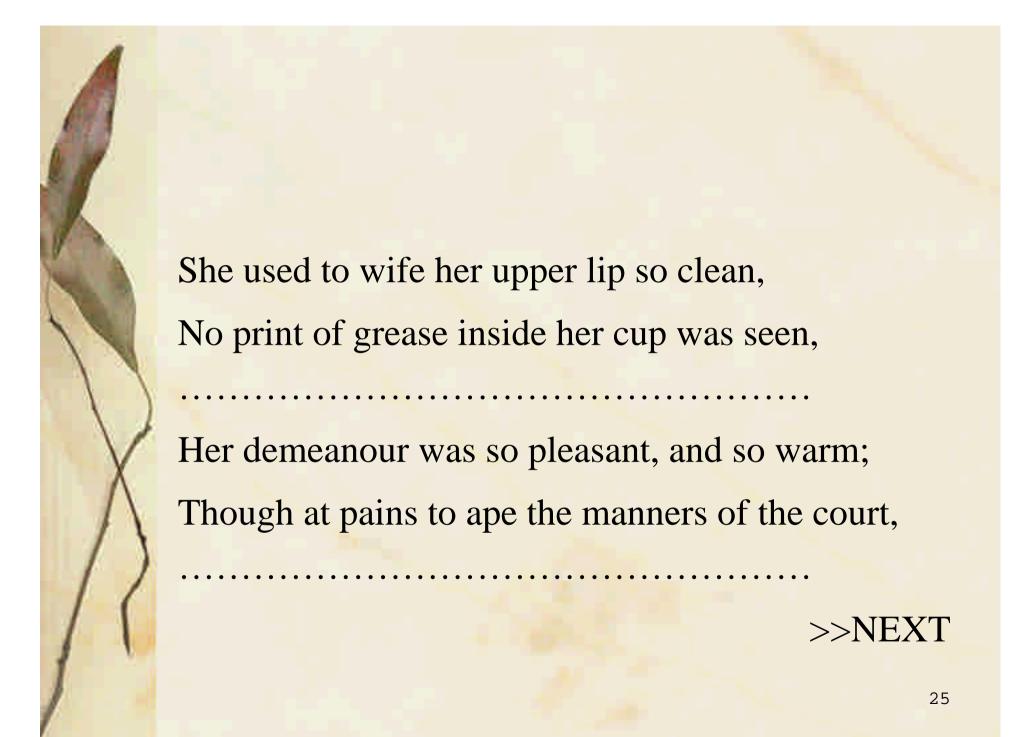
- OAnd on his breast a medal: St. Christopher,
- OThe woodman's patron saint, in polished silver.
- OHe bore a horn slung from a cord of green,
- OAnd my guess is, he was a forester.

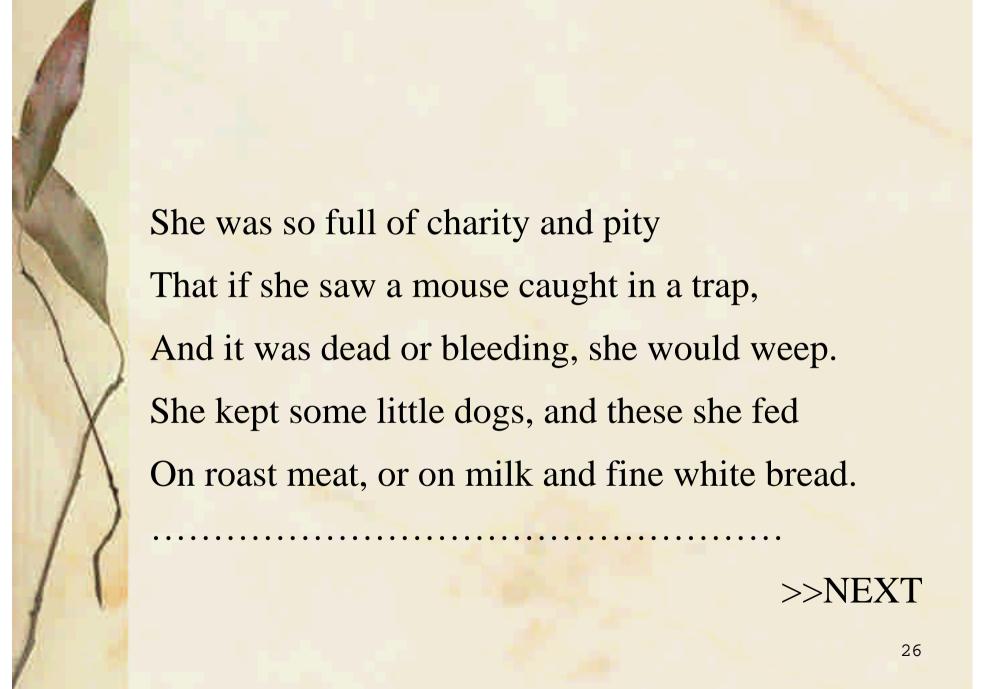
### The Nun, Lines 118-65

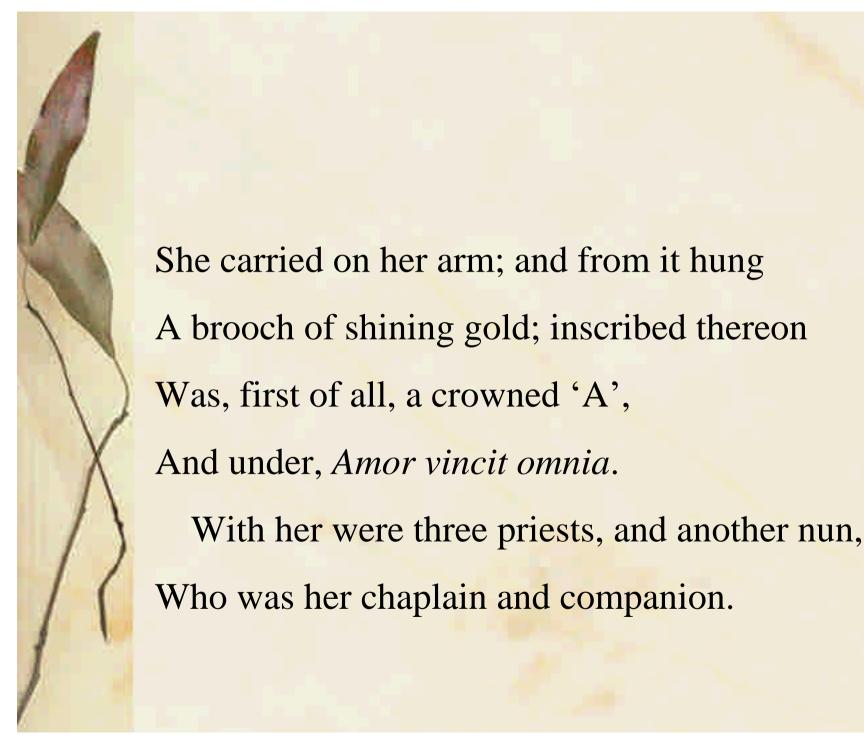
There was also a nun, a prioress,

And she spoke French well and elegantly
As she'd been taught it at Stratford-at-Bow,
For French of Paris was to her unknown.
Good table manners she had learnt as well:







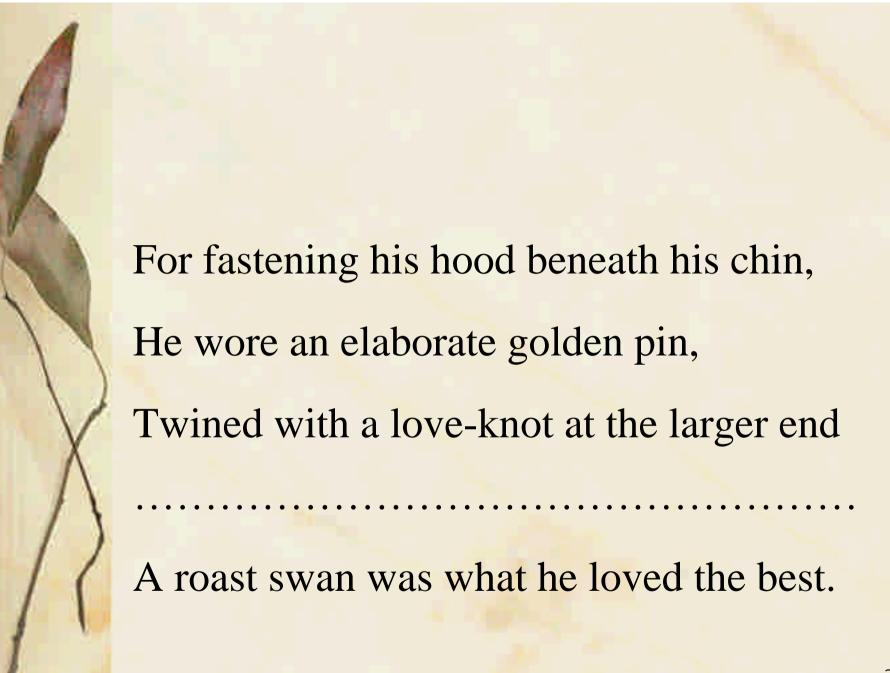


### The Monk, Lines 165-206

There was a monk, a nonpareil was he,
Who rode, as steward of his monastery,
The country round; a lover of good sport,
A manly man, and fit to be an abbot.
He'd plenty of good horses in his stable,
And when he went out riding, you could hear
His bridle jingle in the wind, as clear
And loud as the monastery chapel-bell.

This monk I speak of let old precepts slide, And took the modern practice as his guide. He didn't give so much as a plucked hen For the maxim, 'Hunters are not pious men',

I noticed that his sleeves were edged and trimmed With squirrel fur, the finest in the land.



#### The Friar, Lines 208-13, 244-48

There was a begging friar, a genial merry

In all of the four Orders there was none
So versed in small talk and in flattery:
Any many was the marriage in a hurry
He'd had to improvise and even pay for.

It wouldn't do, for on his his position,
One of his ability and distinction,
To hold acquaintance with diseased lepers.
It isn't seemly, and it gets you nowhere,
To have any dealings with that sort of trash,



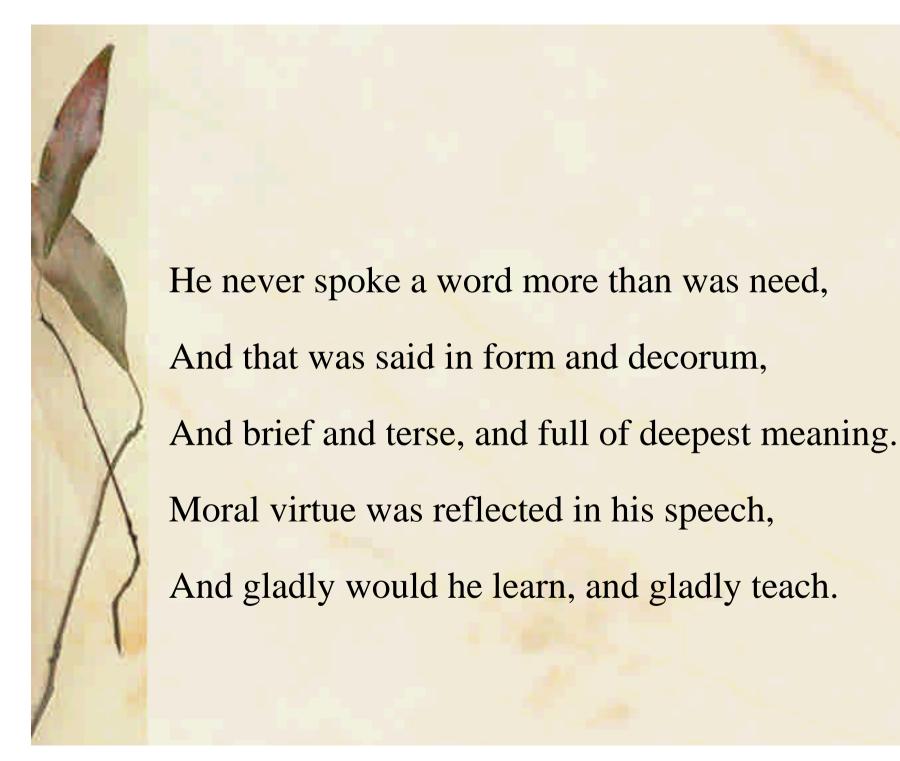
# Question 4

OCan you explain how Chaucer attacks the medieval church humorously?

#### The Scholar, Lines 287-310

There was a scholar from Oxford as well,
Not yet an MA, reading Logic still;
The horse he rode was leaner than a rake,
And he himself, believe me, none too fat,
But hollow-cheeked, and grave and serious.

Threadbare indeed was his short overcoat:
A man too unworldly for lay office,
Yet he'd not got himself a benefice.
For he'd much rather have at his bedside
A library, bound in black calf or red,



### The Wife of Bath, Lines 447-78

There was a business woman, from near Bath,

But more's the pity, she was a bit deaf;

So skilled a clothmaker, that she outdistanced

Even the weavers of Ypres and Ghent.

In the whole parish there was not a woman Who dared precede her at the almsgiving, And if there did, so furious was she, That she was put out of all charity.

Her headkerchiefs were of the finest weave,
Ten pounds and more they weighed, I do believe,
Those that she wore on Sundays on her head.
Her stockings were of finest scarlet red,
Very tightly laced; shoes pliable and new.
Bold was her face, and handsome; florid too.



She had been respectable all her life,

And five times married, that's to say in church,

Not counting other loves she'd had in youth.

Of whom, just now, there is no need to speak.

A riding-skirt round her enormous hips, Also a pair of sharp spurs on her feet. In company, how she could laugh and joke! No doubt she knew of all the cures for love, For at that game she was a past mistress.

### Question 5

Chaucer's language is very suggestive. What is Chaucer's attitude toward this famous wife of Bath?

### The Priest, Lines 479-534

And there was a good man, a religious.

He was the needy priest of a village,
But rich enough in saintly thought and work.

And educated, too, for he could read;
Would truly preach the word of Jesus Christ,

He practiced first what later he would teach. >>NEXT

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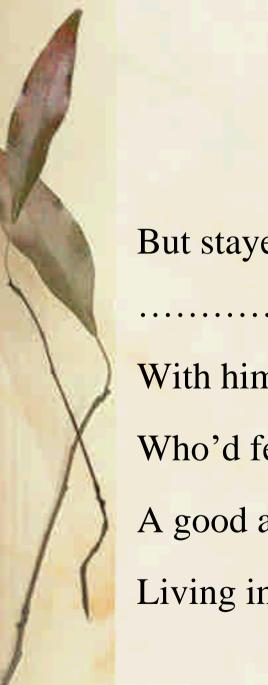
He never let his benefice for hire

And left his sheep to flounder in the mire

While he ran off to London, to St Paul's

To seek some chantry and sing mass for souls,

Or to be kept as chaplain by a guild;



But stayed at home, and took care of his fold

With him there was his brother, a ploughman,

Who'd fetched and carried many a load of dung;

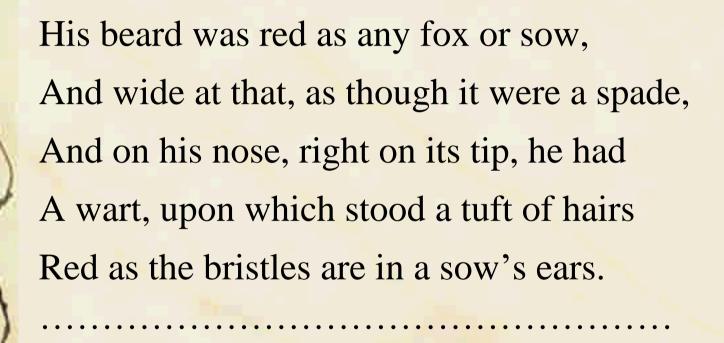
A good and faithful labourer was he,

Living in peace and perfect charity.

### The Miller, Lines 547-65

The miller was a burly fellow—brawn And muscle, big of bones as well as strong.

He was barrel-chested, rugged and thickset, And would heave off its hinges any door Or break it, running at it with his head.



Well versed in stealing corn and trebling dues,

He had a golden thumb

### The Summoner, Lines 625-53

- A Summoner was among us at the inn,
- OWhose face was fire-red, like the cherubim;
- OAll covered with carbuncles; his eyes narrow;

O A most engaging rascal, and a kind,



- OAs good a fellow as you'd hope to find:
- OFor he'd allow—given a quart of wine—
- OA scallywag to keep his concubine
- OA twelvemonth, and excuse him altogether.

# The Pardon-Seller, Lines 671-706

With him [the summoner] there was a peerless pardon-seller

Who'd come straight from the Vatican in Rome.

Loudly he sang, "Come to me, love, come hither!"

His voice was like a goat's, plaintive and then.

He had no beard, nor was he like to have; Smooth was his face, as if he had just shaved. I took him for a gelding or a mare. As for his trade, from Berwick down to Ware You'd not find such another pardon-seller. For in his bag he had a pillowcase Which had been, so he said, Our Lady's veil; >>NEXT •••••••••••

But with these relics, when he came upon

Some poor up-country priest or backwoods parson,

In just one day he'd pick up far more money

Than any parish priest was like to see

In two whole months.

### Question 6

OChaucer praises a priest, but he attacks a friar, a monk, a nun, and a pardon-seller. In your opinion, what might be Chaucer's attitude toward the Church?

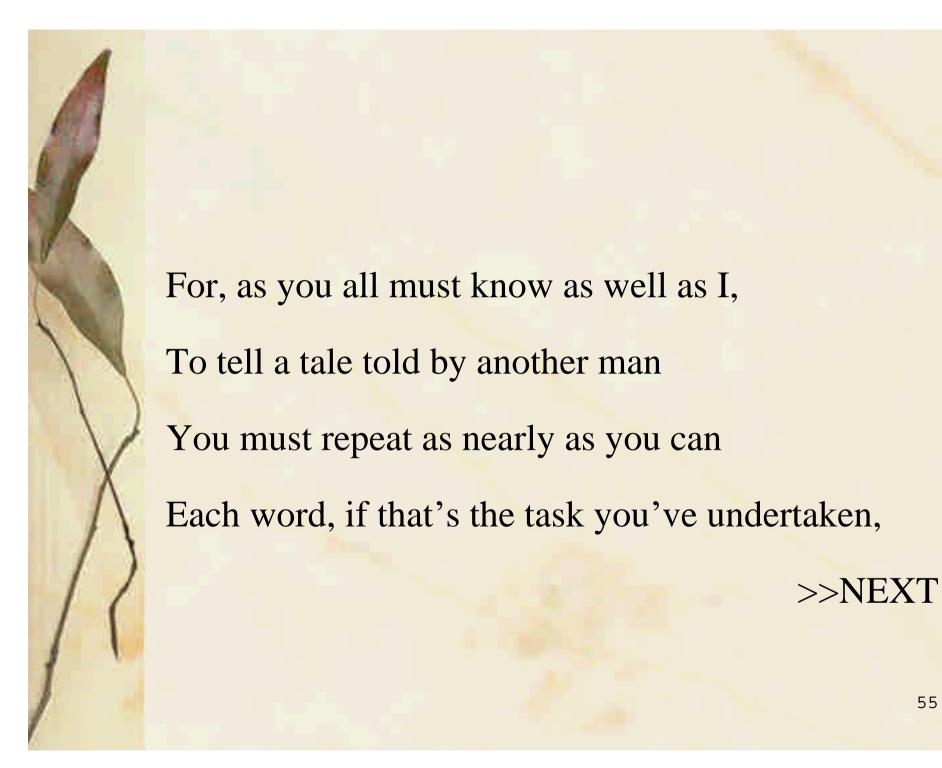
### Chaucer's Realism, Lines 727-38

But first I beg you, not to put it down

To my ill-breeding if my speech be plain

When telling what they looked like, what they said,

Or if I use the exact words they used.





However coarse or broad his language is;
Or, in the telling, you'll have to distort it
Or make things up, or find new words for it.

You can't hold back, even if he's your brother.



- Whatever word is used, you must use also.
- OChrist Himself spoke out plain in Holy Writ,
- OAnd well you know there's nothing wrong with that.
- OPlato, as those who read him know, has said,
- O'The word must be related to the deed.'



- OAlso I beg you to forgive it me
- OIf I overlooked all standing and degree
- OAs regards the order in which people come
- OHere in this tally, as I set them down:
- OMy wits are none too bright, as you can see.

### Question 7

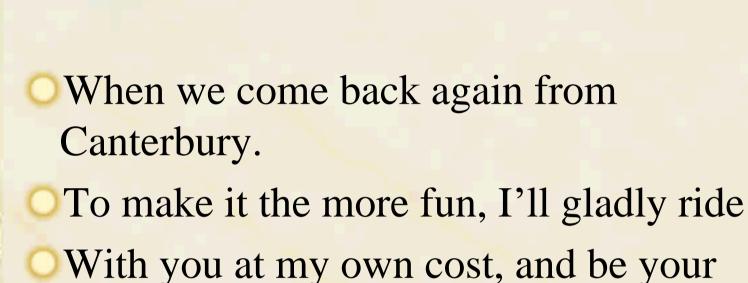
Chaucer claims to be realistic in his description of the pilgrims. He also tries to justify himself for his use of coarse language. Do you agree with his self-defense?

## The Host and the Rule, Lines 790-808

- O'Ladies and gentlemen,' began our host,
- O'Do yourselves a good turn, and hear me out:
- OBut please don't turn your noses up at it.
- OI'll put it in a nutshell: here's the nub:
- OIt's that you each, to shorten the long journey,



- Shall tell two tales en route to Canterbury,
- And coming homeward, tell another two,
- OStories of things that happened long ago.
- Whoever best aquits himself, and tells
- OThe most amusing and instructive tale,
- OShall have a dinner, paid for by us all,
- OHere in this inn, and under this roof-tree,



guide.

- OAnd anyone who disputes what I say
- Must pay all our expenses on the way!