



Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*

EX DONO MELISSA DYER-BILLINGS
ENGLISH IV

BOOK-A-MINUTE CLASSICS

THE CANTERBURY TALES

Just sit right back and you'll hear a tale,
A tale of a journey long,
Of pilgrims headed 'cross the land,
Nine and twenty strong.

The Knight was a most distinguished man,
The Skipper brave and sure,
The Doctor had a love of gold,
The Friar was a wh _ _ _ .
The Friar was a wh _ _ _ .



The travelers, they found an inn,
The Tabard, was its name;
If not for the segues of the Host,
The story would be lame.
The story would be lame.

The pilgrims set out on their course,
St. Beckett's shrine they sought;
With the Wife of Bath, the Miller too,
The Summoner, and the Reeve,
The Pardoner, and the rest,
To Canterbury they go!

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

(1343? - 1400)

- Known as the "Father of English Literature" & "England's Greatest Poet"
- First English poet to use **heroic couplets** – *rhymed couplets in iambic pentameter*
- Wrote poetry in the **vernacular** - *the language native to a place* – thus making the **English** language respectable
- Background:
 - From a merchant (middle) class family
 - Fluent in French, Latin, Italian, and Middle English
 - Had an active life as a public servant
 - The 1st person to be buried in what's now known as the "Poet's Corner" of Westminster Abbey



THE CANTERBURY TALES

- Chaucer's most ambitious work – his **Masterpiece**
- Written between 1386-1395, in Middle English
- Presents the *best contemporary picture of life in 14th century England* by providing **social commentary** – writing that provides insight into society, its values, and customs through the virtues and faults of each character



GENRES IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

POETRY – a *narrative* collection of poems including:

Allegory – story in which the characters, settings, and events stand for abstract or moral concepts; *types of allegory* include: *parables*, *fables*, *exempla*, and *beast epics*

Character Portraits

Estates Satire – deals with the three **estates** - *part of the feudal system in the Middle Ages* - or **classes** of people

Exemplum – moralized tale used by medieval preachers to point out morals or illustrate doctrines

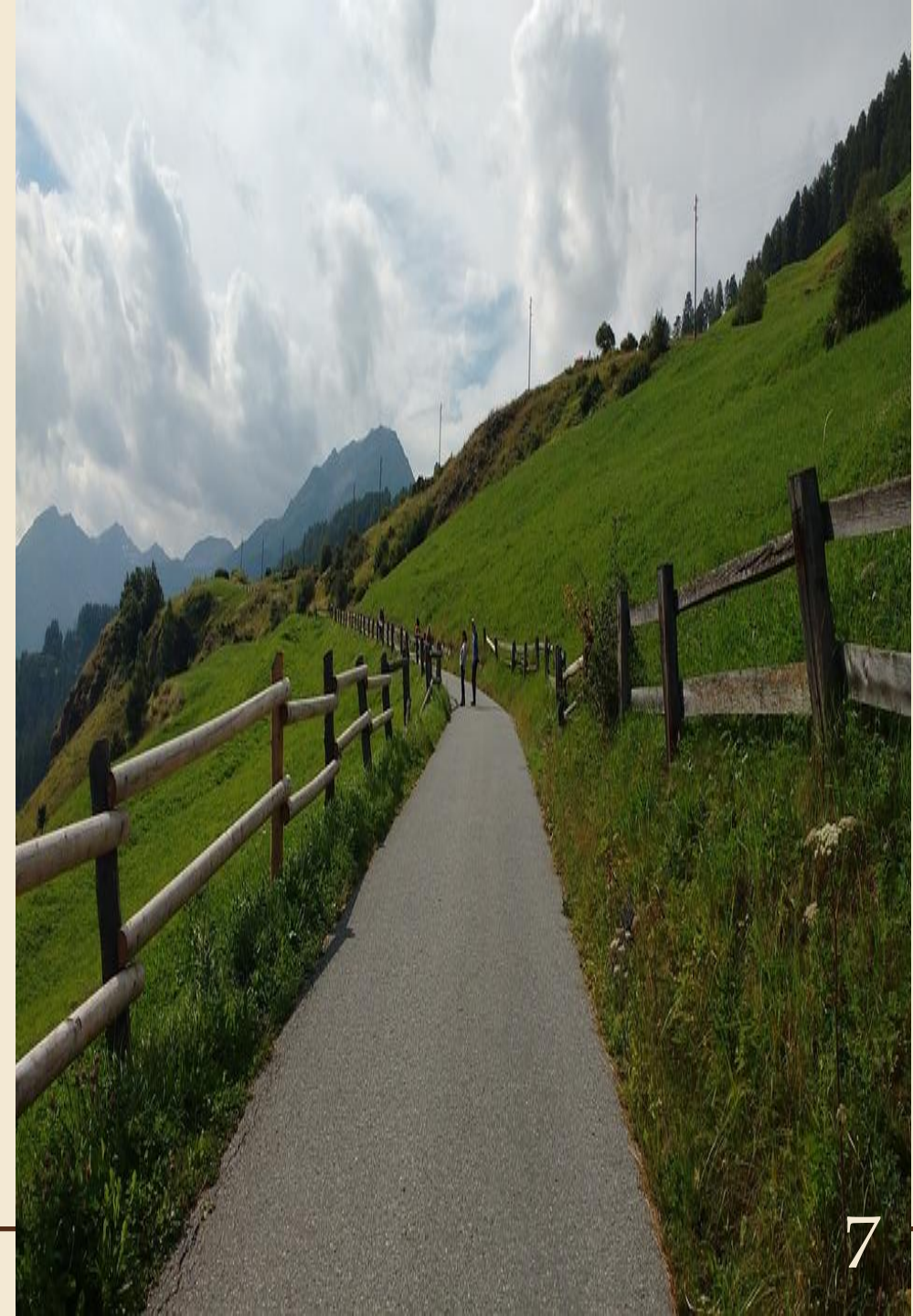


GENRES IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

- **Fabliau(x)** -- humorous sly satire popular in medieval France written in eight-syllable couplets that dealt familiarly with the clergy, ridiculed womanhood, always has human characters, and maintained a realistic tone and manner
- **Parody** -- a composition imitating another, usually serious, piece of literature
- **Romance** – medieval verse narrative chronicling the adventures of a brave knight or other hero who must undertake a quest and overcome great danger for the love of a noble lady or a high ideal
- **Sermons**
- **Stories of Saints' Lives** – eulogistic accounts of the miraculous experiences of the saints popular in the medieval world

JOURNEY MOTIF

- **Odyssey** -- a journey with random, high adventure, almost without a purpose
 - ex: Homer's *Odyssey*
- **Quest** -- a journey with a purpose – to get or do a specific thing
 - ex: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
- **Pilgrimage** -- a supposedly spiritual journey with a goal
 - ex: Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*; Dante's *The Divine Comedy*
- **Voyage** -- a journey that always leads the traveler home (literally/symbolically, internally/physically)
 - ex: Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- **Picaresque** -- a journey with random adventures – but *always* a vehicle for **SATIRE**
 - ex: Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*





PLOT DEVICES IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

- **Pilgrimage** – a religious journey to worship at the shrine of Thomas a Beckett in Canterbury, England
- **Framework Story** – a story (or stories) within a story

People from all feudal classes - *Court, Church, and Common* meet at the **Tabard Inn** in **Southwark** a suburb of London and travel together on pilgrimage

THE PROLOGUE OF THE CANTERBURY TALES



- **The Prologue**

- Introduces the **pilgrims** (Chaucer's characters)
- Explains why the pilgrims **travel together**
- Explains why they **tell stories**

Chaucer reveals each character to us by:

- **Direct Characterization**

- Telling us directly what the character is like
- Describing how the character looks and dresses

- **Indirect Characterization**

- Presenting the character's words and actions
- Revealing the character's private thoughts and feelings
- Showing how other people respond to the character

THEMES & SYMBOLS IN *THE PROLOGUE*

- **Themes:**
 - The *sacred* and *secular* purposes of the journey
 - The pervasiveness of *courtly love*
 - The *corruption* of the Church
- **Symbols:**
 - **Spring** – new beginnings, fresh starts
 - **Clothing** – reveals the *personality, character, & social status* of each pilgrim



OLD ENGLISH

ENGLISH LANGUAGE CHANGES

Old English (Anglo-Saxon) about the year 1,000:

Guess the English translation and write it below the word.

Fæder ure, þu þe eart on heofonum, si þin nama
gehalgod. Tōbecume þin rice. Gewurþe dīn willa on
eordan swā swā on heofonum. Urne gedæghwāmlican hlāf
syle us tō dæg. And forgyf us ure gyltas, swā swā
wē forgyfæd ūrum gyltendum. And ne gelæd þu us
on costnuge, ac ālys of yfele. Sōþlice.

Middle English (Wycliff Bible) 1380:

Oure fadir that art in heuenes halowid be thi name, thi kingdom come to, be thi wille don erther as in heuene, yeue to us this day oure breed our other substaunce, & foryeue to us oure dettis, as we foryeuen to oure dettouris, & lede us not into temptacion: but dlyuer us from yuel, amen.

MODERN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CHANGES

MIDDLE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CHANGES

Early Modern English (King James Bible) 1611:

Our father which art in heaven, hallowed by thy Name. Thy kingdome come. Thy will be done, in earth, as it is in heauen. Give vs this day our dayly bread. And forgiue vs our debts, as we forgiue our debtors. And leade vs not into temptation, but dfeliver us from euill: For thine is the kingdome, and the power, and the glory, for euer. Amen.

THE CANTERBURY TALES THE PROLOGUE



Whan that Aprill with his shoures sote^o
The droghte^o of Marche hath perced to the rote,^o
And bathed every veyne^o in swich licour,^o
Of which vertu^o engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus^o eek with his swete breeth
Inspired^o hath in every holt^o and heeth^o
The tendre croppes,^o and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronne;¹
And smale fowles^o maken melodye,
That slepen al the night with open yë^o—
So priketh hem Nature in hir corages²—
Than longen^o folk to goon^o on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,³
To ferne halwes,^o couthe^o in sondry londes;
And specially, from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
The holy blisful martir⁴ for to seke,^o
That hem hath holpen,^o whan that they were seke.^o

*sweet showers
dryness / root
vein / such moisture*

*By power of which
the west wind
Breathed into / wood /
heath
sprouts*

*birds
eye(s)*

Then long / go

far-off shires / known

*seek
helped / sick*

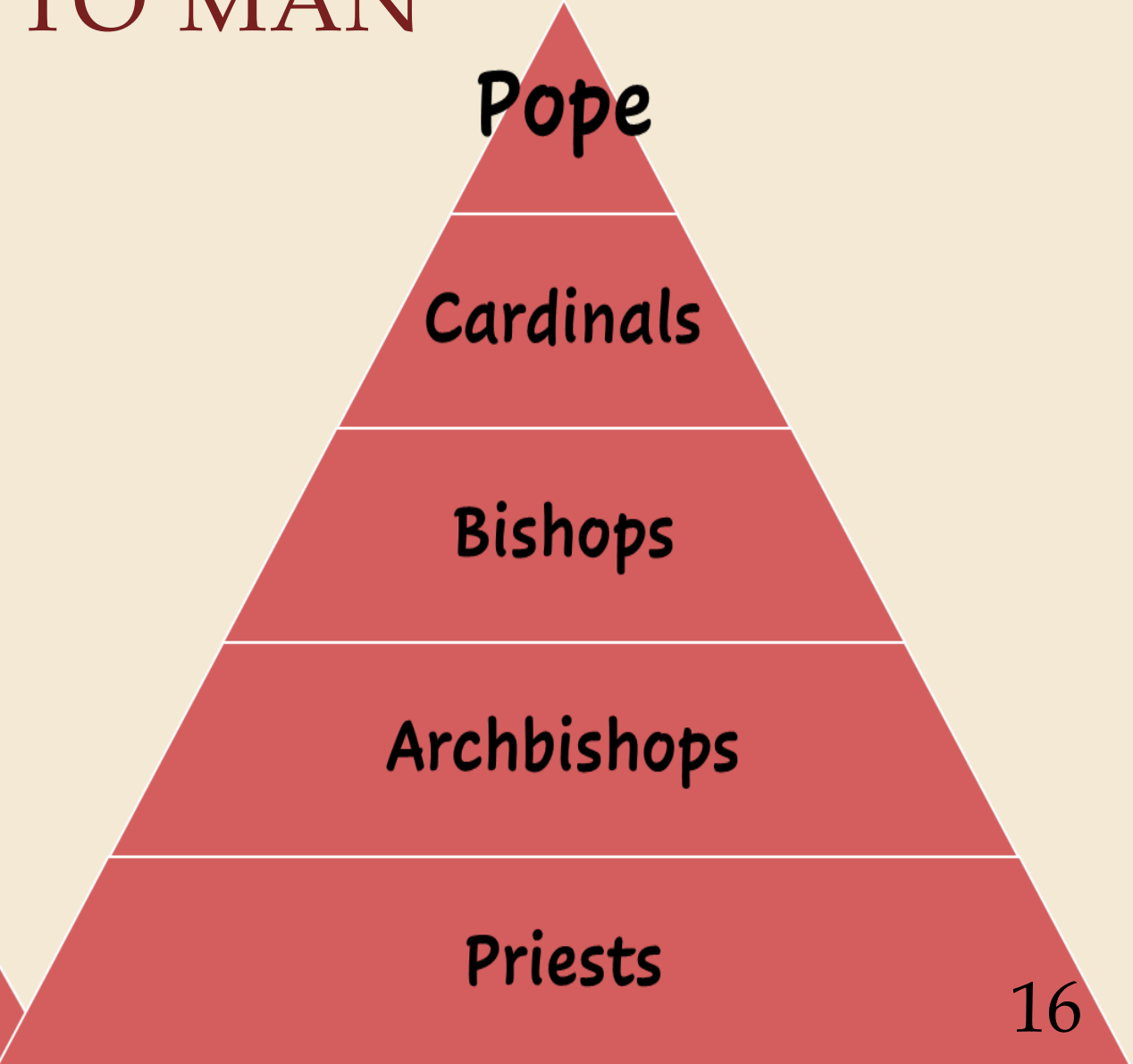
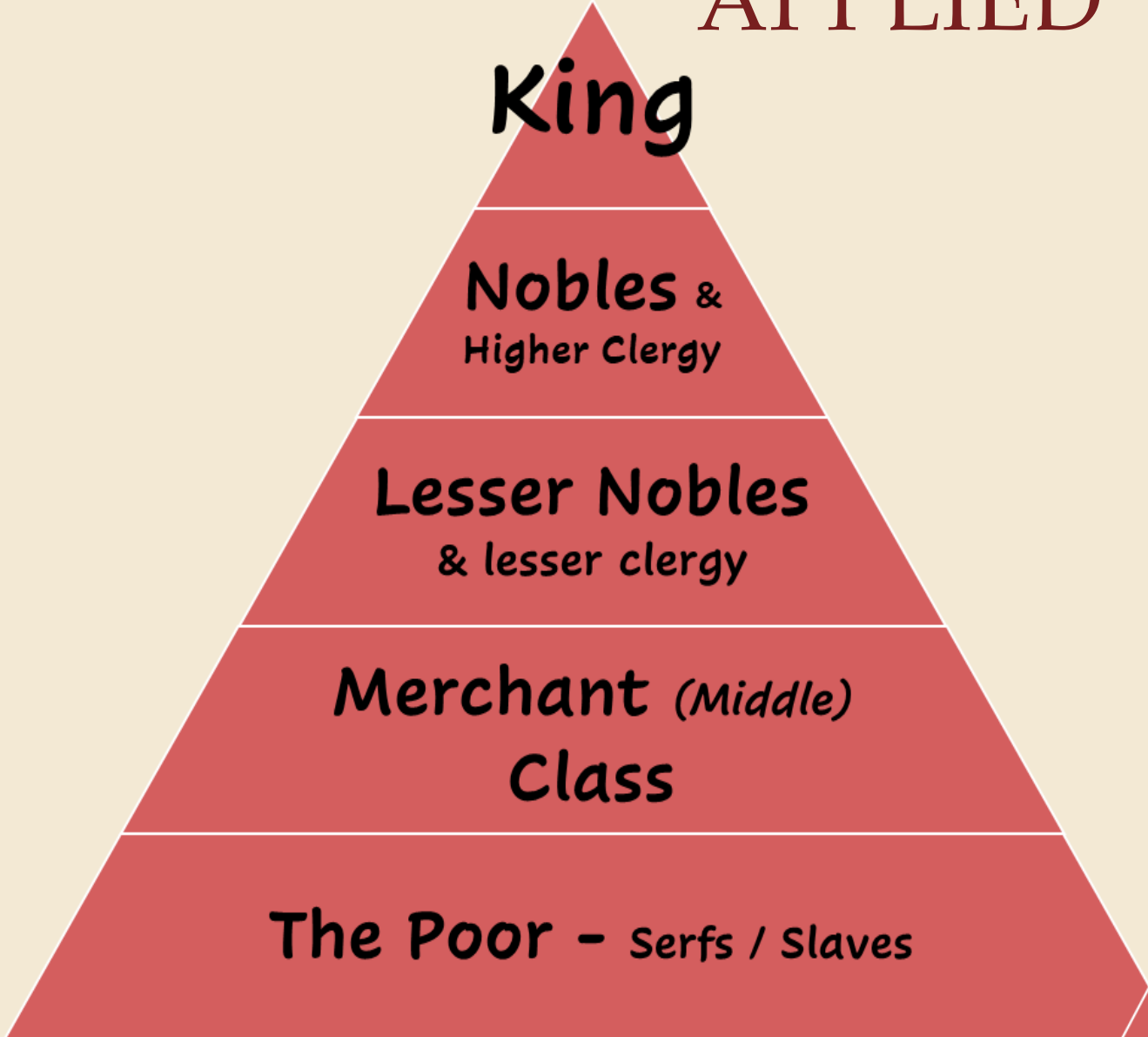
MEDIEVAL MAN'S PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS

- **Divine Right of Kings**
 - Doctrine that kings derive their authority from God, not their subjects – so rebellion was the worst of political crimes for you were trying to thwart God's will
- **Great Chain of Being**
 - A strict, religious hierarchical structure of all matter of life, believed to have been decreed by God. The chain starts from God and progresses downward through all living entities to the minerals of the earth itself.

THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING

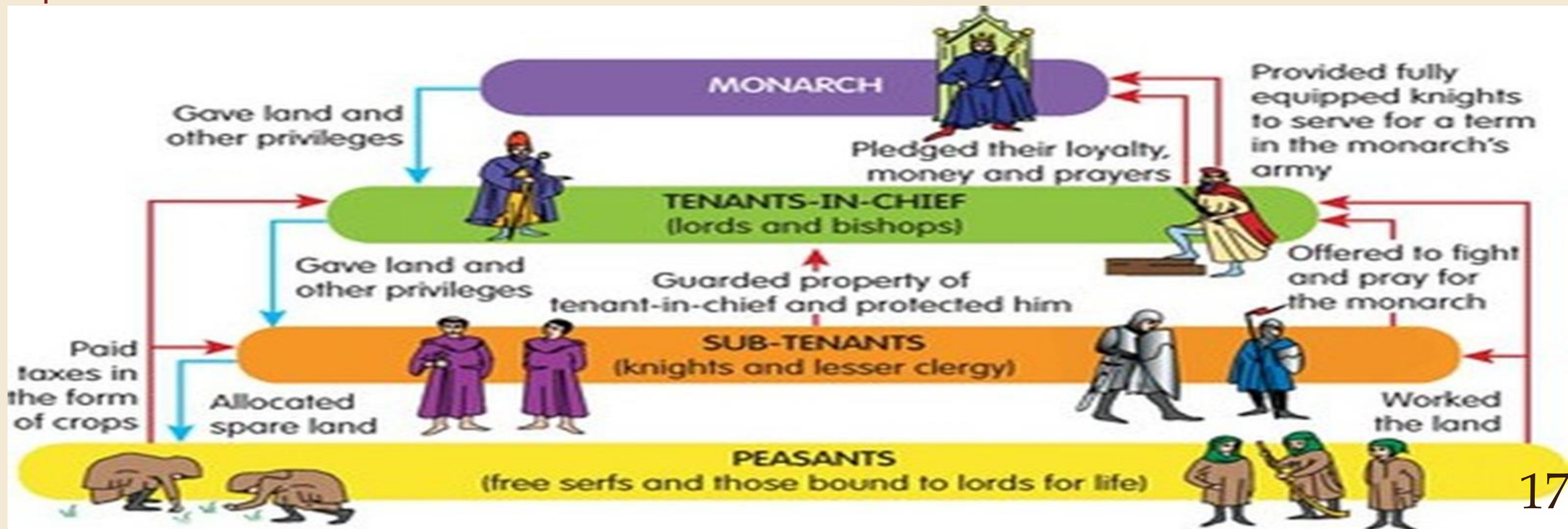


THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING APPLIED TO MAN



SOCIAL CLASSES WITHIN THE FEUDAL SYSTEM

Different social classes were important in the life of the feudal system. At the top of the **feudal pyramid** was the *monarch*, next the *nobles – lords and bishops*, then the *lesser nobles and knights*, and finally the *peasants* at the bottom. Each class of people owed something to a higher power – in return for a service or protection.



MEDIEVAL MAN'S BELIEF IN NUMEROLOGY

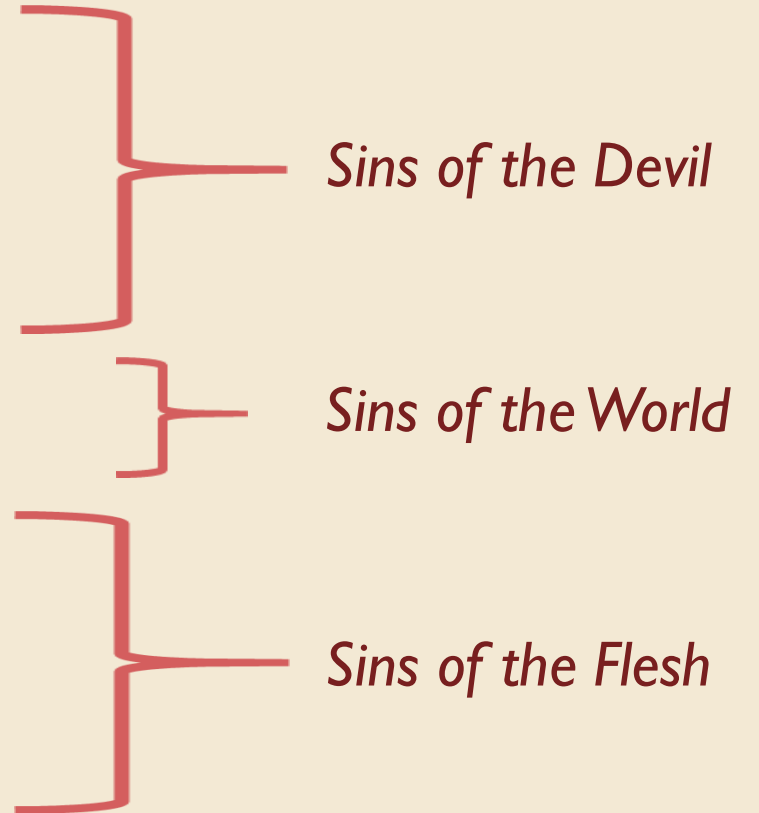
Medieval man was superstitious and believed in **numerology** – numbers usually held **symbolic significance**:

- The **number 3** was a **symbol** of the **Holy Trinity** – *Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost*. It also represented the **Afterlife** – *Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell*.
- To **square** a number was, in medieval terms, to **perfect** it.
- The **number 4** represented the **earthly world** – *four elements (earth, air, water, fire), four Gospel writers, etc.*
- The **sum** of these (**$3 + 4 = 7$**) represented all of **existence** and **time** – *7 days of creation, 7 days of the week, 7 deadly sins, and 7 cardinal virtues.*
- The **product** of these (**$3 \times 4 = 12$**) represented **perfection** -- *12 months of the year, 12 astrological (zodiac) signs.*



SEVEN DEADLY SINS

- **Pride**
- **Envy**
- **Wrath**
- **Avarice** (*Greed*)
- **Lust**
- **Gluttony**
- **Sloth**





SEVEN CARDINAL VIRTUES

- **Prudence** *wise, cautious in practical affairs*
- **Justice** *moral, rightness, ethical*
- **Temperance** *moderation or abstinence in yielding to one's appetites (alcoholic drink)*
- **Fortitude** *mental/emotional strength in facing difficulty, adversity, danger, or temptation courageously*
- **Faith** *belief in God or in the doctrines*
- **Hope** *to place trust in God*
- **Charity** *giving of help, money, food, etc. to those in need*

FOUR VOWS OF THE CHURCH



Vow of Poverty:

One promises to own nothing personally but rather to live modestly and so not be attached to material or worldly possessions. In this simplicity and detachment, one may attach oneself without encumbrances to God.



FOUR VOWS OF THE CHURCH

Vow of Chastity:

One promises not to marry or be sexually active (*or interested in sex*) so that one may attach oneself to God alone.



FOUR VOWS OF THE CHURCH

Vow of Obedience:

One promises to obey the Rule of the Order and the directives of one's calling. In this way, one loses one's own will and follows rules that leads one more directly to God than one might be able to achieve on one's own. The Rule sets up a regiment of manual labor, prayer, study, and service. It also provides customs that should make one modest and humble.



FOUR VOWS OF THE CHURCH

Vow of Stability:

In some orders, one promises to live within the confines of the cloister or parish, following the daily routine prescribed by the cloister or parish. In this way one shelters oneself from the temptations of the world and, without distraction, focuses on God.



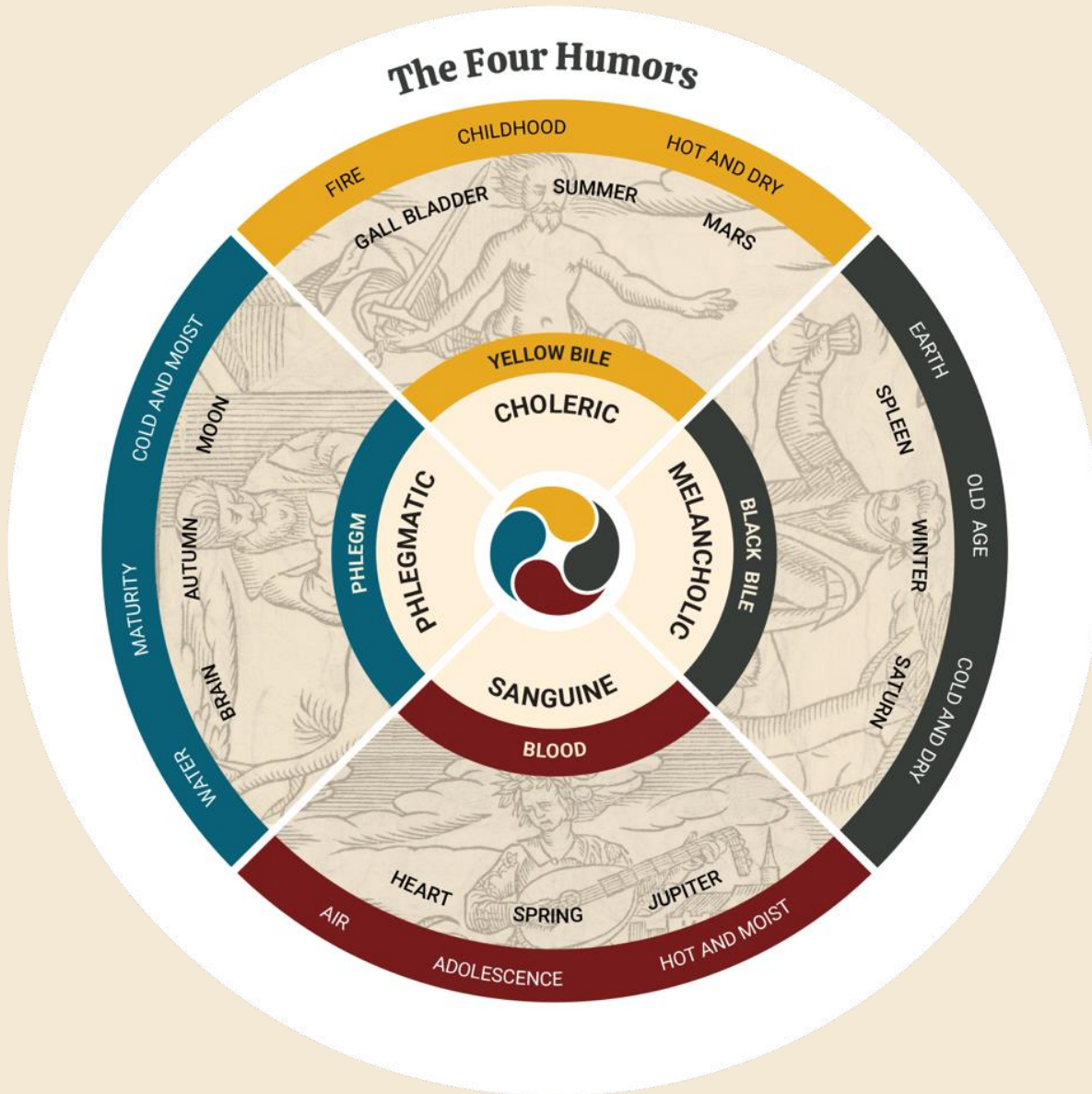
FOUR ORDERS OF FRIARS

Four Orders:

There were four orders of friars who supported themselves by begging: *Dominicans, Franciscans, Carmelites, and Augustinians.*

The oldest order of friars, founded by **St. Francis** in 1209, had been established to administer to the spiritual needs of the sick and the poor.

MEDIEVAL PRACTICE OF MEDICINE



The practice of medicine was crude, to say the least, in the Middle Ages – doctors used **astrology** and the concept of the **Four Humors** – *bodily fluids* – to diagnose illnesses because medical autopsies were forbidden by the Church in this time period.

This method of diagnosis and treatment continued for several hundred years, even causing the death of the first American President, George Washington in 1799 from a throat infection – because his physicians thought he had too much blood and therefore, bled him to death.

FOUR HUMORS

MELANCHOLIC

- Seated in black bile
- Cold & dry
- Earth
- Depressed, low in spirits
- Dark & Brooding

SANGUINE

- Seated in the blood
- Hot & moist
- Air
- Cheerful & hopeful
- Reddish complexion

PHELMATIC

- Seated in the phlegm
- Cold & moist
- Water
- Slow or stolid temperament
- Languorous

CHOLERIC

- Seated in yellow bile
- Hot & dry
- Fire
- Angry, irritable, on a short fuse
- Yellowish tint to complexion

CHAUCER'S PILGRIMS LEAVING SOUTHWARK



SHRINKLITS: THE CANTERBURY TALES

BY MAURICE SAGOFF

Whan that Aprille with his shoures sote

--In April, when it's muddy underfoot—

Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages

--Then folks go off to spend their hard-earned wages—

(The older language has an evocation

That loses just a little in translation,

Perhaps you noticed?) Anyhow, this crowd

Of pious pilgrims, Canterbury-bound,

Told tales *en route*—replete with merry stories,

Fables and folktales, satires, allegories,



Some with a moral tone and some uncouth

And raunchy, like the *Miller's Tale*, forsooth,

Wherein a Carpenter, a dullish blade

Is rudely cozened and a cuckold made

By Nick and Ab, a pair of city slickers

Who scheme to get into his young wife's knickers...

Some Fun!

Ah, Chaucer, how thou did'st refine

With style and wit the early metric line!

Endowing literature with lasting glory--

Plus the Original Traveling Salesman's Story.