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"Whan That They Were Seeke": Balance Between Physical and Spiritual in the Pilgrims of the *Canterbury Tales*

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Oral Presentation 1.4

**“WHAN THAT THEY WERE SEEKE”: BALANCE BETWEEN PHYSICAL
AND SPIRITUAL IN THE PILGRIMS OF THE *CANTERBURY TALES***

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When reading the Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, one encounters many levels of meaning, both obvious and subtle. Chaucer has written into his description of the pilgrims' bodies many clues and signs by which to interpret their inner characters and motivations. High importance is placed on the theoretical balance between the physical and the spiritual needs of people, and conflict occurs constantly between the parts of them that are material and immaterial. In medieval medical thought, disease was caused by such imbalance, and was itself a sign of spiritual illness, a correlation which would have been familiar to Chaucer. Therefore, the bodily descriptions of Chaucer's pilgrims are key to understanding the health of their souls, and also to interpreting their motives for joining this voyage to Canterbury, to "holpen them whan that they were seeke" (GP 17). As we'll see, if all of them are journeying toward spiritual wellness, some of them have a much longer way to go than others.