



Elfin Knight

This is the description of a pilgrim belonging to the clergy taken from the 'General Prologue' to The Canterbury Tales.

Anonymous

- Can you make me a cambric¹ shirt,
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme²
Without any seam³ or needle work⁴?
And you shall be, a true lover of mine.
- 5 Can you wash it in yonder dry well⁵,
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
Where never sprung water nor rain ever fell?
And you shall be, a true lover of mine.
- Can you dry it on yonder thorn⁶,
10 Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
Which never bore blossom⁷ since Adam was born?
And you shall be, a true lover of mine.
- Now you have asked me questions three,
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
15 I hope you'll answer as many for me.
And you shall be, a true lover of mine.
- Can you find me an acre⁸ of land
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
Between the salt water, and the sea sand?
20 And you shall be, a true lover of mine.
- Can you plough⁹ it with a ram's horn¹⁰,
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
And sow¹¹ it all over, with one pepper corn?
And you shall be, a true lover of mine.
- 25 Can you reap¹² it with a sickle of leather¹³,
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
And bind it up¹⁴, with a peacock's feather¹⁵?
And you shall be, a true lover of mine.
- When you have done, and finished your work,
30 Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
Then come to me for your cambric shirt.
And you shall be, a true lover of mine.

1 cambric. Di stoffa bianca e sottile.

2 Parsley ... thyme. Prezzemolo, salvia, rosmarino e timo.

3 seam. Cucitura.

4 needle work. Lavoro di ago.

5 yonder ... well. Pozzo secco laggiù.

6 thorn. Roveto.

7 never ... blossom. Non è mai fiorito.

8 acre. Acre.

9 plough. Arare.

10 ram's horn. Corno dell'ariete.

11 sow. Seminare.

12 reap. Mietere.

13 sickle of leather. Falce di pelle.

14 bind it up. Legarlo.

15 peacock's feather. Piuma di un pavone.



LITERARY COMPETENCE

➤ COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

1 READ the ballad and answer the following questions.

- 1 Who asks the first three questions? Why would it be impossible to make the shirt?
- 2 What does the girl ask the elf to do?
- 3 What are the four things listed in each repeated second line? Which time of the year do they suggest?
- 4 Why do you think both the girl and the elf ask questions? Tick one of the following and explain why you have chosen it.
 - The girl is supernatural too.
 - The questions are tests to see if the other is good enough to marry.
 - Neither is attracted to the other, so they want to make their relationship impossible.

➤ COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

2 COMMENT on the rhythm, rhyme and repetition.

3 IDENTIFY other general characteristics of the ballad in the lines you have read.

4 FOCUS on the refrain. What meaning do the four things in the refrain have? Are they food, medicine, a spell or just pretty herbs?

➤ COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS BETWEEN LITERATURE AND OTHER LINGUISTIC SYSTEMS

5 USE the Net to look for the song *Scarborough Fair* by Simon and Garfunkel (1968), which is a modern version of this ballad (→ Link to Contemporary Culture, p. 28). Then do these activities.

- 1 Which line gives the ballad its new title?
- 2 The first and the last line turn it into a modern love story. Tick as appropriate to complete the summary of this story.
A boy falls in love with a girl and then loses her.
 - The boy wants his girl back, but only if she really loves him.
 - The boy wants his girl back whatever happens.
 - The boy doesn't really want his girl back.
- 3 How do the questions differ from the original version?
- 4 Do the changes alter the meaning of the impossible tasks?
- 5 Does the popularity of this song show that ballads are still universal in their appeal or do you think it was an accidental success? Why?