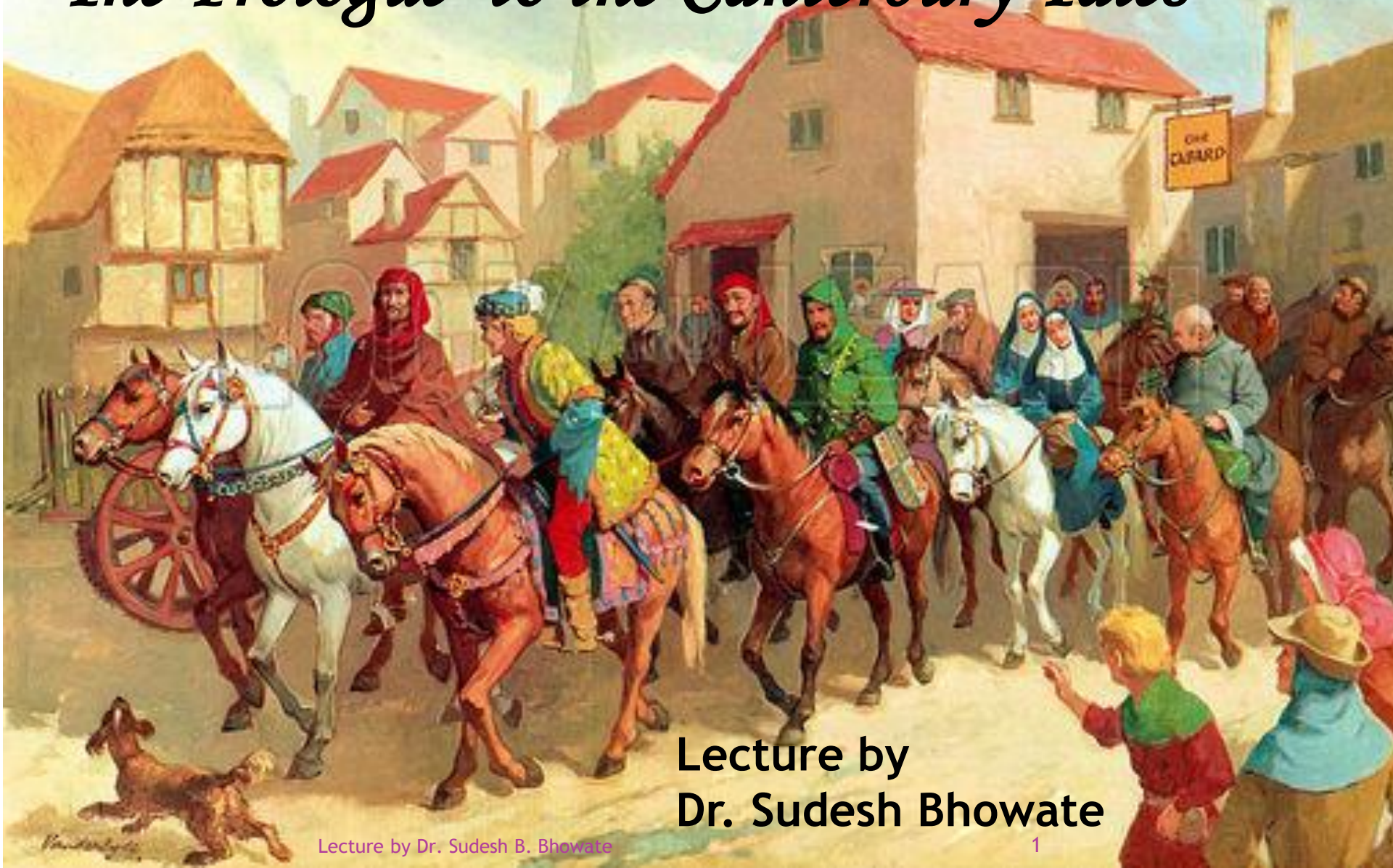


# Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*



Lecture by  
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# **Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400)**

- Known as the father of English Poetry
- A courtier, Office Holder, Soldier, Ambassador & Legislator
- His father John Chaucer was a wine merchant who was related to the royal household
- His association with the royal family helped Geoffrey serve the court lifelong.
- We don't have any information about Chaucer's schooling but we learned that he was a bibliophile and a studious reader.
- It was a certainty that he was acquainted with Latin grammar, rhetoric, logic, classical literature, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy.





- When Chaucer in his teen age he was taken into service of Lionel and later in the service of Duke Clarence.
- At 19 he accompanied Duke of Clarence in the several expedition of Hundred years War.

In the attempt by English army in sieging of Rheims, Chaucer was taken as prisoner and later released on ransom paid by the royal family.

On return he bacame the squire and personal attendant to the King. He was married to Philippa Roet, sister to the wife of John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster.

It is supposed that the marriage was not a happy one. (may be a supposition)

From 1370-1378 he was on diplomatic mission to foreign countries. In 1372 he came to Italy to settle a commercial treaty with Genoa and Florence. Here he met men of letters like, Dante, Petrarch and Boccassio.





- A clear influence of Italian literature could be seen on his style
- In 1379 he was appointed as the controller of customs at the port of London.
- In 1386 he sat in parliament as the knight of the shire of Kent.
- During last phase of his life Chaucer was in economical difficulties
- During last phase his purse was almost empty. King Henry IV increased his pension but he lived only a year to enjoy it.
- He was died on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1400 and was buried in Westminster Abbey. He was the first to occupy the poet's corner in Westminster Abbey.





Main poetical works of Chaucer are broadly divided into three classes: French / Italian / English

### **French Period:**

- He had been to France several times on his diplomatic visits.
- He came under the influence of French masters like Machaut, Guillaume De Lorris, and Jean De Meung.
- The poems of this period were under the French influence and exhibits the zest for life and sense of animation for the glories of love and life.
- The main work of this period is “The Romount of the Rose” a lengthy allegorical poem of about 7700 line.
- The other poems are : deathe of Blanche the Duchess (1369) a poem of about 1300 lines. It was lamenting the death of the wife of john of Gaunt. (His Patron)





## Italian Period:

- The chief work of this period is : **Troilus and Criseyde**
- A poem of 8200 lines (rhyme-royal) adopted from Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*. The story later appealed to even Shakespeare for his drama.

In *Troilus and Criseyde* Chaucer not only given us a full and finished romance but has endowed it with interest of characters as well as incidents and interest of drama as well as of narratives. It is the first love poem in English language.

**The parlement of Fowls:** an allegorical poem of 700 line in rhyme royal is celebrating some princely betrothal on st. Valentine's day.

**The House of fame:** an allegorical poem of 1080 lines describes the caprices of fame.

**The Legend of Good Woman:** it the first known poem in English using heroic couplet. In the prologue of the poem God of love rebuked the poet for doubting the fidelity of woman contained in his "*Roumoure De la Rose* and *Troilus and Criseyde*". The poet repents on found





## English Period (1386-1400)

- The period is known for his masterpiece and monumental work of **Canterbury Tales**.

For the general plan and idea the Chaucer was indebted to Boccaccio but execution and management of tales is thoroughly English.

t nine pilgrims including Chaucer meet at the Tabbard inn in Southwark with the subject of setting out for pilgrimage to the Canterbury.

Twenty nine pilgrims are taken from all classes of people of both sexes and of all ranks.

At the suggestion of the host of Tabbard inn, each pilgrims require to narrate two tales on the outward journey and two on return.

Unfortunately the work remain incomplete. Chaucer could finish



# Chaucer's Prologue to the Canterbury Tales

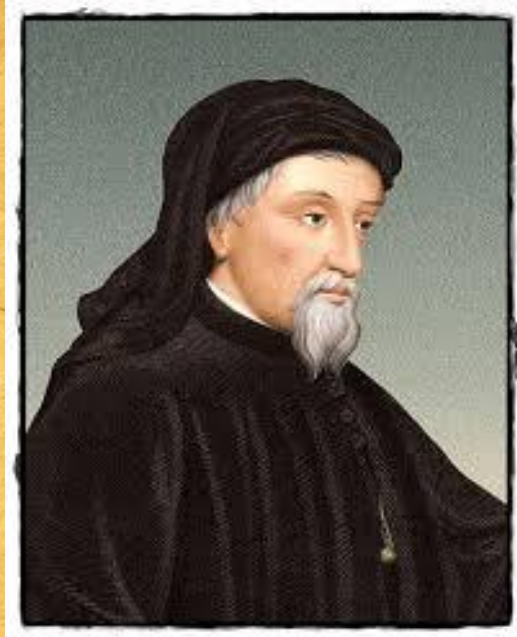




Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote,  
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,  
And bathed every veyne in swich licóur  
Of which vertú engendred is the flour;  
Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth  
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth  
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne  
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronne,  
And smale foweles maken melodye,  
That slepen al the nyght with open ye,  
So priketh hem Natúre in hir corages,  
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,



❑ The narrator is Chaucer himself





- ❑ The narrator is first discovered staying at the Tabard Inn in Southwark (in London), when a company of twenty-nine people descend on the inn, preparing to go on a pilgrimage to Canterbury.
- ❑ After talking to them, he agrees to join them on their pilgrimage.
- ❑ Yet before the narrator goes any further in the tale, he describes the circumstances and the social rank of each pilgrim.
- ❑ He describes each one in turn, starting with the highest status individuals.





A Knyght ther was, and that a worthy man,  
That fro the tyme that he first bigan  
To riden out, he loved chivalrie,  
Trouthe and honóur, fredom and curteisie.





- ❑ The Knight is described first, as befits a 'worthy man' of high status. The Knight has fought in the Crusades in numerous countries, and always been honored for his worthiness and courtesy.
- ❑ Everywhere he went, the narrator tells us, he had a 'sovereyn prys' (which could mean either an 'outstanding reputation', or a price on his head for the fighting he has done).
- ❑ The Knight is dressed in a 'fustian' tunic, made of coarse cloth, which is stained by the rust from his coat of chainmail.





With hym ther was his sone, a yong Squiér,  
A lovyere and a lusty bacheler,  
With lokkes crulle as they were leyd in presse.  
Of twenty yeer of age he was, I gesse.  
Of his statúre he was of evene lengthe,  
And wonderly delyvere and of greet strengthe.



- ❑ The Knight brings with him his son, The Squire, a lover and a lusty bachelor, only twenty years old.
- ❑ The Squire cuts a rather effeminate figure, his clothes embroidered with red and white flowers, and he is constantly singing or playing the flute.
- ❑ He is the only pilgrim (other than, of course, Chaucer himself) who explicitly has literary ambitions: he 'koude songes make and wel endite' (line 95).



A Yeman hadde he and servántz namo  
At that tyme, for hym liste ride soo;  
And he was clad in cote and hood of grene.





- ❑ The Yeoman (a freeborn servant) also travels along with the Knight's entourage, and is clad in coat and hood of green.
- ❑ The Yeoman is excellent at caring for arrows, and travels armed with a huge amount of weaponry: arrows, a bracer (arm guard), a sword, a buckler, and a dagger as sharp as a spear.
- ❑ He wears an image of St. Christopher on his breast.



Ther was also a Nonne, a Prioressse,  
That of hir smylyng was ful symple and coy;  
Hire gretteste ooth was but by seinte Loy,  
And she was cleped madame Eglentyne.





- ❑ The Prioress, called 'Madame Eglantine' (or, in modern parlance, Mrs. Sweetbriar).
- ❑ She could sweetly sing religious services, speaks fluent French and has excellent table manners.
- ❑ She is so charitable and piteous, that she would weep if she saw a mouse caught in a trap, and she has two small dogs with her.
- ❑ She wears a brooch with the inscription 'Amor vincit omnia' ('Love conquers all').
- ❑ The Prioress brings with her her 'chapeleyne' (secretary), the Second Nun.



A Monk ther was, a fair for the maistrie,  
An outridere, that lovede venerie;  
A manly man, to been an abbot able.  
Ful many a deyntee hors hadde he in stable;  
And whan he rood, men myghte his brydel heere  
Gýnglen in a whistlynge wynd als cleere,  
And eek as loude, as dooth the chapel belle,  
Ther as this lord was kepere of the celle.





- ❑ The Monk is next, an extremely fine and handsome man who loves to hunt, and who follows modern customs rather than old traditions.
- ❑ This is no bookish monk, studying in a cloister, but a man who keeps greyhounds to hunt the hare.
- ❑ The Monk is well-fed, fat, and his eyes are bright, gleaming like a furnace in his head.



The Friar



A Frere ther was, a wantowne and a merye,  
A lymytour, a ful solémpne man.

In alle the ordres foure is noon that kan  
So muchel of daliaunce and fair langage.

He hadde maad ful many a mariage  
Of yonge wommen at his owene cost.  
Unto his ordre he was a noble post.



The Friar who follows him is also wanton and merry, and he is a 'lymytour' by trade (a friar licensed to beg in certain districts).

He is extremely well beloved of franklins (landowners) and worthy women all over the town.

He hears confession and gives absolution, and is an excellent beggar, able to earn himself a farthing wherever he went. His name is Huberd.



A Marchant was ther with a forked berd,  
In motteleye, and hye on horse he sat;  
Upon his heed a Flaundryssh bevere hat;  
His bootes clasped faire and fetisly.  
His resons he spak ful solémpnely,  
Sownynge alway thencrees of his wynnyng.  
He wolde the see were kept for any thing  
Bitwixe Middelburgh and Orewelle.  
Wel koude he in eschaunge sheeldes selle.





The Merchant wears a forked beard, motley clothes and sat high upon his horse.

He gives his opinion very solemnly, and does excellent business as a merchant, never being in any debt.

But, the narrator ominously remarks, 'I noot how men hym calle' (I don't know how men call him, or think of him).



A Clerk ther was of Oxenford also,  
That unto logyk hadde longe y-go.  
As leene was his hors as is a rake,  
And he nas nat right fat, I undertake,  
But looked holwe, and ther-to sobrelly.  
Ful thredbare was his overeste courtepy;  
For he hadde geten hym yet no benefice,  
Ne was so worldly for to have office;  
For hym was lévere háve at his beddes heed  
Twénty bookes, clad in blak or reed,  
Of Aristotle and his philosophie,  
Than robes riche, or fíthele, or gay sautrie.



**The Clerk.**





The Clerk follows the Merchant.

A student of Oxford university, he would rather have twenty books by Aristotle than rich clothes or musical instruments, and thus is dressed in a threadbare short coat.

He only has a little gold, which he tends to spend on books and learning, and takes huge care and attention of his studies.

He never speaks a word more than is needed, and that is short, quick and full of sentence (the Middle-English word for 'meaningfulness' is a close relation of 'sententiousness').



A Sergeant of the Lawe, war and wys,  
That often hadde been at the Parvys,  
Ther was also, ful riche of excellence.  
Discreet he was, and of greet reverence—  
He semed swich, his wordes weren so wise.  
Justice he was ful often in assise,  
By patente, and by pleyn commissioun.  
For his science and for his heigh renoun,  
Of fees and robes hadde he many oon.



Sergeant-  
of-law





'A Sergeant of the Law' is a judicious and dignified man, or, at least, he seems so because of his wise words.

He is a judge in the court of assizes, by letter of appointment from the king, and because of his high standing receives many grants.

He can draw up a legal document, the narrator tells us, and no-one can find a flaw in his legal writings.

Yet, despite all this money and social worth, the Man of Law rides only in a homely, multi-coloured coat.



A Frankeleyn was in his compaignye.  
Whit was his berd as is the dayesye;  
Of his complexioun he was sangwyn.  
Wel loved he by the morwe a sop in wyn;  
To lyven in delit was evere his wone,  
For he was Epicurus owene sone,  
That heeld opinioun that pleyn delit  
Was verrailly felicitee parfit.  
An housholdere, and that a greet, was he;  
Seint Julian he was in his contree.





A Franklin travels with the Man of Law.

He has a beard as white as a daisy, and of the sanguine humour (dominated by his blood).

The Franklin is a big eater, loving a piece of bread dipped in wine, and is described (though not literally!) as Epicurus' son: the Franklin lives for culinary delight.

His house is always full of meat pie, fish and meat, so much so that it 'snewed in his hous of mete and drynke'.

He changes his meats and drinks according to what foods are in season



An Haberdasshere, and a Carpenter,  
A Webbe, a Dyere, and a Tapycer,—  
And they were clothed alle in o lyveree  
Of a solémpne and a greet fraternitee.  
Ful fressh and newe hir geere apiked was;  
Hir knyves were chaped noght with bras,  
But al with silver; wrought ful clene and weel  
Hire girdles and hir pouches everydeel.  
Wel semed ech of hem a fair burgeys  
To sitten in a yeldehalle, on a deys.



A Haberdasher and a Carpenter, a Weaver, a Dyer and a Tapycer (weaver of tapestries) are next described, all of them clothed in the same distinctive guildsman's dress. Note that none of these pilgrims, in the end, actually tell a tale.



Carpenter



Carpenter



weaver



dyer



Taypcer





A Cook they hadde with hem for the nones,  
To boille the chiknes with the marybones,  
And poudre-marchant tart, and galyngale.  
Wel koude he knowe a draughte of Londoun ale.  
He koude rooste, and sethe, and broille, and frye,  
Máken mortreux, and wel bake a pye.





A Cook had been brought along to boil the chicken up with marrow bones and spices, but this particular Cook knows a draught of ale very well indeed, according to the narrator.

The Cook could roast and simmer and boil and fry, make stews and hashes and bake a pie well, but it was a great pity that, on his shin, he has an ulcer.



A Shipman was ther, wonynge fer by weste;  
For aught I woot he was of Dertemouthe.  
He rood upon a rouncy, as he kouthe,  
In a gowne of faldyng to the knee.  
A daggere hangynge on a laas hadde he  
Aboute his nekke, under his arm adoun.  
The hoote somer hadde maad his hewe al broun;  
And certeinly he was a good felawe.





A Shipman from Dartmouth is next - tanned brown from the hot summer sun, riding upon a carthorse, and wearing a gown of coarse woolen cloth which reaches to his knees.

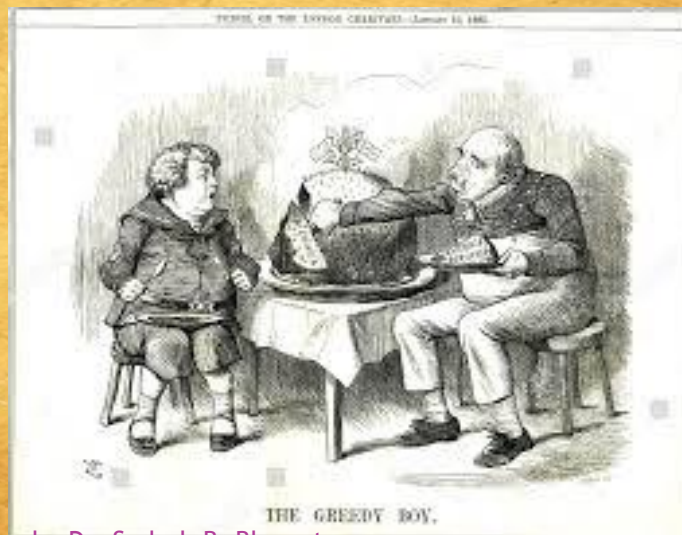
The Shipman had, many times, drawn a secret draught of wine on board ship, while the merchant was asleep.

The Shipman has weathered many storms, and knows his trade: he knows the locations of all the harbors from Gotland to Cape Finistere.

His shape is called 'the Maudelayne'.



With us ther was a Doctour of Phisik;  
In all this world ne was ther noon hym lik,  
To speke of phisik and of surgerye;  
For he was grounded in astronomye.  
He kepte his pacient a ful greet deel  
In houres, by his magyk natureel.  
Wel koude he fortunen the ascendent  
Of his ymáges for his pacient.  
He knew the cause of everich maladye,  
Were it of hoot, or cold, or moyste, or drye,  
And where they engendred and of what humour.





A Doctor of Medicine is the next pilgrim described, clad in red and blue, and no-one in the world can match him in speaking about medicine and surgery.

He knows the cause of every illness, what humor engenders them, and how to cure them.

He is a perfect practitioner of medicine, and he has apothecaries ready to send him drugs and mixtures.

He is well-read in the standard medical authorities, from the Greeks right through to Chaucer's contemporary Gilbertus Anglicus.

The Doctor, however, has not studied the Bible.



A Good Wif was ther of biside Bathe,  
But she was som-del deaf, and that was scathe.  
Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt  
She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt.  
In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon  
That to the offrynge bifore hire sholde goon;  
And if ther dide, certeyn so wrooth was she  
That she was out of alle charitee.





The Wife of Bath was 'somdel deef' and that was a shame.

The Wife of Bath is so adept at making cloth that she surpasses even the cloth-making capitals of Chaucer's world, Ypres and Ghent, and she wears coverchiefs which must (the narrator assumes) have 'weyeden ten pound'.

She had had five husbands through the church door, and had been at Jerusalem, Rome and Boulogne on pilgrimage.

She is also described as 'Gat-tothed', and as keeping good company, she knows all the answers about love: 'for she koude of that art the olde daunce'.



A good man was ther of religioun,  
And was a povre Person of a Toun;  
But riche he was of hooly thoght and werk.  
He was also a lerned man, a clerk,  
That Cristes Gospel trewely wolde preche;  
His parissheis devoutly wolde he teche.  
Benygne he was, and wonder diligent,  
And in adversitee ful pacient;  
And swich he was y-preved ofte sithes.





A good religious man, A Parson of a Town, is next described, who, although poor in goods, is rich in holy thought and work.

He's a learned man, who truly preaches Christ's gospel, and devoutly teaches his parishioners.

He travels across his big parish to visit all of his parishioners, on his feet, carrying a staff in his hand.

He is a noble example to his parishioners ('his sheep', as they are described) because he acts first, and preaches second (or, in Chaucer's phrase, 'first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte').

The narrator believes that there is no better priest to be found anywhere



With hym ther was a Plowman, was his brother,  
That hadde y-lad of dong ful many a fother;  
A trewe swynkere and a good was he,  
Lyvyng in pees and parfit charitee.  
God loved he best, with al his hoole herte,  
At alle tymes, thogh him gamed or smerte.  
And thanne his neighebor right as hymselfe.





With the Parson travels a Plowman (who does not tell a tale), who has hauled many cartloads of dung in his time.

He is a good, hard-working man, who lives in peace and charity, and treats his neighbor as he would be treated.

He rides on a mare, and wears a tabard (a workman's loose garment).



The Millere was a stout carl for the nones;  
Ful byg he was of brawn and eek of bones.  
That proved wel, for over-al, ther he cam,  
At wrastlyng he wolde have alwey the ram.  
He was short-sholdred, brood, a thikke knarre;  
Ther nas no dore that he nolde heve of harre,  
Or breke it at a rennyng with his heed.





A Miller comes next, in this final group of pilgrims (now at the bottom of the class scale!).

He is big-boned and has big muscles, and always wins the prize in wrestling matches.

There's not a door that he couldn't lift off its hinges, or break it by running at it head-first.

He has black, wide nostrils, carries a sword and a buckler (shield) by his side, and has a mouth like a great furnace.

He's good at stealing corn and taking payment for it three times. But then, Chaucer implies, there are no honest millers.



A gentil Maunciple was ther of a temple,  
Of which achátours myghte take exemple  
For to be wise in byynge of vitaille;  
For, wheither that he payde or took by taille,  
Algate he wayted so in his achaat  
That he was ay biforn and in good staat.





A noble Manciple (a business agent, purchaser of religious provisions) is the next pilgrim to be described, and a savvy financial operator.

Though a common man, the Manciple can run rings round even a 'heep of lerned men'.

The Manciple, his description ominously ends, 'sette hir aller cappe': deceived them all.





The Reve was a sclendre colerik man.  
His berd was shave as ny as ever he kan;  
His heer was by his erys round y-shorn;  
His top was dokked lyk a preest biforn.  
Ful longe were his legges and ful lene,  
Y-lyk a staf, ther was no calf y-sene.  
Wel koude he kepe a gerner and a bynne;  
Ther was noon auditour koude on him wyne.





The Reeve, a slender, choleric man, long-legged and lean ("ylyk a staf").

He knows exactly how much grain he has, and is excellent at keeping his granary and his grain bin.

There is no bailiff, herdsman or servant about whom the Reeve does not know something secret or treacherous; as a result, they are afraid of him 'as of the deeth'



A Somonour was ther with us in that place,  
That hadde a fyr-reed cherubynnes face,  
For sawcefleem he was, with eyen narwe.  
As hoot he was and lecherous as a sparwe,  
With scaled browes blake and piled berd,—  
Of his visage children were aferd.  
Ther nas quyk-silver, lytarge, ne brymston,  
Boras, ceruce, ne oille of tartre noon,  
Ne oynement that wolde clense and byte,  
That hym myghte helpen of his whelkes white,  
Nor of the knobbes sittynge on his chekes.





The Summoner is next, his face fire-red and pimpled, with narrow eyes.

He has a skin disease across his black brows, and his beard (which has hair falling out of it) and he is extremely lecherous.

There is, the narrator tells us, no ointment or cure, or help him to remove his pimples.

He loves drinking wine which is as 'red as blood', and eating leeks, onions and garlic. He knows how to trick someone



With hym ther rood a gentil Pardoner  
Of Rouncivale, his freend and his compeer,  
That streight was comen fro the court of Rome.  
Ful loude he soong, "Com hider, love, to me!"  
This Somonour bar to hym a stif burdoun;  
Was nevere trompe of half so greet a soun.  
This Pardoner hadde heer as yelow as wex,  
But smothe it heeng as dooth a strike of flex;  
By ounces henge his lokkes that he hadde,  
And therwith he his shuldres overspradde.





Travelling with the Summoner is a noble Pardoner, his friend and his companion and the last pilgrim-teller to be described.

He sings loudly 'Come hither, love to me', and has hair as yellow as wax, which hangs like flaxen from his head.

He carries a wallet full of pardons in his lap, brimful of pardons come from Rome.

The Pardoner is sexually ambiguous - he has a thin, boyish voice, and the narrator wonders whether he is a 'geldyng or a mare' (a eunuch or a homosexual).



A semely man Oure Hooste was with-alle  
For to been a marchal in an halle.  
A large man he was with eyen stepe,  
A fairer burgeys was ther noon in Chepe;  
Boold of his speche, and wys, and well y-taught,  
And of manhod hym lakkede right naught.  
Eek thereto he was right a myrie man,  
And after soper pleyen he bigan,  
And spak of myrthe amonges othere thynges,  
Whan that we hadde maad our rekenynges;  
And seyde thus: "Now, lordynges, trewely,  
Ye been to me right welcome, hertely;  
For by my trouthe, if that I shal nat lye,  
I saugh nat this yeer so myrie a compaignye  
At ones in this herberwe as is now.





The Host is the last member of the company described, a large man with bright, large eyes - and an extremely fair man.

The Host welcomes everyone to the inn, and announces the pilgrimage to Canterbury, and decides that, on the way there, the company shall 'talen and pleye' (to tell stories and amuse themselves).

Everyone consents to the Host's plan for the game, and he then goes on to set it out.



What the Host describes is a tale-telling game, in which each pilgrim shall tell two tales on the way to Canterbury, and two more on the way home;

whoever tells the tale 'of best sentence and moost solas' shall have supper at the cost of all of the other pilgrims, back at the Inn, once the pilgrimage returns from Canterbury.

The pilgrims agree to the Host's suggestion, and agree to accord to the Host's judgment as master of the tale-telling game. Everyone then goes to bed.



The next morning, the Host awakes, raises everyone up, and 'in a flock' the pilgrimage rides towards 'the Wateryng of Seint Thomas', a brook about two miles from London.

The Host asks the pilgrims to draw lots to see who shall tell the first tale, the Knight being asked to 'draw cut' first and, whether by 'aventure, or sort, or cas', the Knight draws the straw to tell the first tale.

The pilgrims ride forward, and the Knight begins to tell his tale



*Thank You*