

# The Pilgrims of *The Canterbury Tales*

**The Narrator** - The narrator makes it quite clear that he is also a character in his book. Although he is called Chaucer, we should be wary of accepting his words and opinions as Chaucer's own. In the General Prologue, the narrator presents himself as a gregarious and naïve character. Later on, the Host accuses him of being silent and sullen. Because the narrator writes down his impressions of the pilgrims from memory, whom he does and does not like, and what he chooses and chooses not to remember about the characters, tells us as much about the narrator's own prejudices as it does about the characters themselves.

**The Knight** - The first pilgrim Chaucer describes in the General Prologue, and the teller of the first tale. The Knight represents the ideal of a medieval Christian man-at-arms. He has participated in no less than fifteen of the great crusades of his era. Brave, experienced, and prudent, the narrator greatly admires him.

**The Wife of Bath** - Bath is an English town on the Avon River, not the name of this woman's husband. Though she is a seamstress by occupation, she seems to be a professional wife. She has been married five times and had many other affairs in her youth, making her well practiced in the art of love. She presents herself as someone who loves marriage and sex, but, from what we see of her, she also takes pleasure in rich attire, talking, and arguing. She is deaf in one ear and has a gap between her front teeth, which was considered attractive in Chaucer's time. She has traveled on pilgrimages to Jerusalem three times and elsewhere in Europe as well.

**The Pardoner** - Pardoner's granted papal indulgences—reprieves from penance in exchange for charitable donations to the Church. Many pardoners, including this one, collected profits for themselves. In fact, Chaucer's Pardoner excels in fraud, carrying a bag full of fake relics—for example, he claims to have the veil of the Virgin Mary. The Pardoner has long, greasy, yellow hair and is beardless. These characteristics were associated with shiftiness and gender ambiguity in Chaucer's time. The Pardoner also a gift for singing and preaching whenever he finds himself inside a church.

**The Miller** - Stout and brawny, the Miller has a wart on his nose and a big mouth, both literally and figuratively. He threatens the Host's notion of propriety when he drunkenly insists on telling the second tale. Indeed, the Miller seems to enjoy overturning all conventions: he ruins the Host's carefully planned storytelling order; he rips doors off hinges; and he tells a tale that is somewhat blasphemous, ridiculing religious clerks, scholarly clerks, carpenters, and women.

**The Prioress** - Described as modest and quiet, this Prioress (a nun who is head of her convent) aspires to have exquisite taste. Her table manners are dainty, she knows French (though not the French of the court), she dresses well, and she is charitable and compassionate.

**The Monk** - Most monks of the Middle Ages lived in monasteries according to the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, which demanded that they devote their lives to "work and prayer." This Monk cares little for the Rule; his devotion is to hunting and eating. He is large, loud, and well clad in hunting boots and furs.

**The Friar** - Roaming priests with no ties to a monastery, friars were a great object of criticism in Chaucer's time. Always ready to befriend young women or rich men who might need his services, the friar actively administers the sacraments in his town, especially those of marriage and confession. However, Chaucer's worldly Friar has taken to accepting bribes.

**The Summoner** - The Summoner brings persons accused of violating Church law to ecclesiastical court. This Summoner is a lecherous man whose face is scarred by leprosy. He gets drunk frequently, is irritable, and is not particularly qualified for his position. He spouts the few words of Latin he knows in an attempt to sound educated.

**The Host** - The leader of the group, the Host is large, loud, and merry, although he possesses a quick temper. He mediates among the pilgrims and facilitates the flow of the tales. His title of "host" may be a pun, suggesting both an innkeeper and the Eucharist, or Holy Host.

**The Parson** - The only devout churchman in the company, the Parson lives in poverty, but is rich in holy thoughts and deeds. The pastor of a sizable town, he preaches the Gospel and makes sure to practice what he preaches. He is everything that the Monk, the Friar, and the Pardoner are not.

**The Squire** - The Knight's son and apprentice. The Squire is curly-haired, youthfully handsome, and loves dancing and courting.

**The Clerk** - The Clerk is a poor student of philosophy. Having spent his money on books and learning rather than on fine clothes, he is threadbare and wan. He speaks little, but when he does, his words are wise and full of moral virtue.

**The Man of Law** - A successful lawyer commissioned by the king. He upholds justice in matters large and small and knows every statute of England's law by heart.

**The Manciple** - A manciple was in charge of getting provisions for a college or court. Despite his lack of education, this Manciple is smarter than the thirty lawyers he feeds.

**The Merchant** - The Merchant trades in furs and other cloths, mostly from Flanders. He is part of a powerful and wealthy class in Chaucer's society.

**The Shipman** - Brown-skinned from years of sailing, the Shipman has seen every bay and river in England, and exotic ports in Spain and Carthage as well. He is a bit of a rascal, known for stealing wine while the ship's captain sleeps.

**The Physician** - The Physician is one of the best in his profession, for he knows the cause of every malady and can cure most of them. Though the Physician keeps himself in perfect physical health, the narrator calls into question the Physician's spiritual health: he rarely consults the Bible and has an unhealthy love of financial gain.

**The Franklin** - The word "franklin" means "free man." In Chaucer's society, a franklin was neither a vassal serving a lord nor a member of the nobility. This particular franklin is a connoisseur of food and wine, so much so that his table remains laid and ready for food all day.

**The Reeve** - A reeve was similar to a steward of a manor, and this reeve performs his job shrewdly—his lord never loses so much as a ram to the other employees, and the vassals under his command are kept in line. However, he steals from his master.

**The Plowman** - The Plowman is the Parson's brother and is equally good-hearted. A member of the peasant class, he pays his tithes to the Church and leads a good Christian life.

**The Guildsmen** - Listed together, the five Guildsmen appear as a unit. English guilds were a combination of labor unions and social fraternities: craftsmen of similar occupations joined together to increase their bargaining power, and live communally. All five Guildsmen are clad in the livery of their brotherhood.

**The Cook** - The Cook works for the Guildsmen. Chaucer gives little detail about him, although he mentions a crusty sore on the Cook's leg.

**The Yeoman** - The servant who accompanies the Knight and the Squire. The narrator mentions that his dress and weapons suggest he may be a forester.

**The Second Nun** - The Second Nun is not described in the General Prologue, but she tells a saint's life for her tale.

**The Nun's Priest** - Like the Second Nun, the Nun's Priest is not described in the General Prologue. His story of Chanticleer, however, is well crafted and suggests that he is a witty, self-effacing preacher.