

## The Characters in the Prologue

'The Prologue' is a portrait-gallery of varied people. We are furnished with full information about the characters—their name, nature, vocation, age, status, manner, dress, fortune, habits, feeling, interests, purpose, achievements, accidents, etc. The portraits are not only minute but also vivacious. They are a cosmos to represent the whole of the medieval England. Yet they are eternal and universal. They are as living today as they were then. They represent the universal. They represent the universal greed, malice, selfishness, jealousy, hardwork, laziness, valour, self-sacrifice and the like. They are both types and individual, and herein lies God's plenty.

### THE KNIGHT

#### Chaucer's Portrayal

The Knight is introduced by Chaucer first of all probably because he was the first in the medieval social ranks. He is an ethical character, representing the virtues of chivalry and valour. He is polite, courteous and brave. He was a great warrior who had participated in many military campaigns and had travelled far and wide in order to fight. Many times he had sat at the head of the table as the most distinguished person among those of various nations. He had participated in a number of battles and crusades in defence of the Christian faith and had won laurels. Several times he had fought in single combat and had killed his adversary every time.

Besides chivalry he loved generosity and modesty. He had never uttered any foul word in all his life. He was truly a perfect knight. As far as his equipment is concerned, he had fine horses. He wore a doublet of coarse cloth which at that time was all soiled.

Chaucer presents the Knight as a real representative were required to be wise, provident, just and pure. They were expected to serve Christianity against the infidels and the barbarians. They were not only to be champions of the church, but also protectors of the weak and examples of moral virtue. There is no doubt that Chaucer's Knight fulfills all these conditions. We may also say that Chaucer gives us an idealized portrait in the case of the Knight. He presents this character without humour, without irony or satire.

#### Critic's Comment

"Knight, a man in the Middle age, usually of noble birth who was raised to an honourable military rank after serving as a page and squire. Chaucer's Knight is a renowned warrior who took part in many a crusade winning fame

in each and every battle. He is a typical crusader of the Middle Ages. He is the first to be described by Chaucer, perhaps, because the poet himself was a soldier in his youth and 'loved *Chivalie*'. While describing him Chaucer, might be having in his mind the Duke of Hereford, afterwards King Henry IV, who took active and distinguished part in the crusades. Some critics, however, think that Chaucer's description of the Knight is based in the main on Froissart's picture, of Peter, King of Cyprus."

### THE SQUIRE

#### Chaucer Portrayal

The Squire attending on the Knight was Knight's own son. He was a young man of about twenty, with curly hair and an average height. He was a young man of great ability and great strength. He had given a good account of himself in battle and this he did to win his Lady's favour as he loved that lady. He was, indeed, a great lover. He loved so hotly that he could hardly sleep at night. His garments were embroidered like a meadow, full of fresh flowers, white and red. In his leisure time, he would sing or play on a flute. He was as fresh as is the month of May. He was a highly accomplished and lovable young man. He could not only sing songs but compose them too. He could dance, draw and write well. He was courteous, modest, and useful. Among his duties was carving before his father at the table: he was expected to cut roasted meat into small pieces for his father to eat.

Critic's comments "Squire (in the middle Ages) was a young man who was Knight's attendant until he himself became a Knight. Generally a Knight's son served as a page in an aristocratic family. A page was a boy in training for knighthood. After he had served as a page in a noble family from his seventh to fourteenth year, he received his sword and girdle from the priest's hands at the altar. Various duties were then assigned to him in the household, or he was made a personal attendant on his lady till he was strong enough to follow his Lord to the wars. A Squire, or 'Squire of the Body' to a Knight had several duties to perform. He had, for instance, to hold the knight's stirrup when he mounted, to carry his helmet for him and to lead his war horse when he rode on a palfrey. He had also to arm the knight for battle and to attend him in the fight. In his lord's house a Squire had to help entertain the guests, to attend on those of high rank and to carve meat."

### THE YEOMAN

#### Chaucer's Portrayal

The Yeoman was a forester. He was the Knight's servant. He wore a coat and hood of green. He carried carefully with him a bunch of peacock arrows. He could, like a real yeoman, tackle the bow and the arrows. His arrows never dropped their feather low and in his hand he carried a mighty bow. His face was brown and his head was like a nut. His hair was cut very short; and he had a brown face. He understood woodcraft thoroughly. A silver medal of St. Christopher shone upon his breast. He carried a sword, a buckler, a dagger and a horn.

### Critic's Comment

"A 'Yeoman' in Chaucer's time was 'an attendant or assistant to and official'. It was in the 15th century that the word came to acquire its modern meaning of 'a small landowner'. Chaucer's Yeoman carries not only a sword, a buckler and a bow, but also a horn, which suggests that he was a Forester. His beautiful dagger and silver brooch show that he was a man of substance. Perhaps he had come with the Squire to meet the Knight and to attend him on his pilgrimage to Canterbury."

## THE PRIORESS

### Chaucer's Portrayal

There is also a nun, a Prioress, called Madam Eglantine. She was simple and coy, given to affectation. For example, she said *the service* divine in a nasal tone. She did not know the French of Paris, but could speak French of the school of Stratford Atte Bowe very well. She had fine table manner and let no morsel fall on her dress. She was refined and delicate and did not soil her fingers in sauce. In her manners she was pleasant and amiable and tried her best to imitate the behaviour of the court. She was stately and dignified. She was of such a charitable nature that she wept to see a mouse in trouble, dead or bleeding. She had small hounds whom she fed well and she wept if one of them died, or someone struck it sharply. Her mouth was small and soft and her forehead was nearly a span wide. She was certainly not undergrown, i.e., she was rather fat. She was fashionably dressed. She wore coral beads studded with green and from it hung a beautiful golden brooch with the inscription "love conquers all".

She had a nun and three priests as her attendants.

### Critic's Comment

"Prioress is head of a religious house for nuns next below abbess. Chaucer's Prioress is the head of a small nunnery, and so her inclusion in a company of pilgrims is quite appropriate. An abbess would have been too great a personage for such a company. Since young ladies of rank received part of their education in nunneries, it was essential for the head of a convent to know the manners of aristocracy. That is why Chaucer's Prioress takes pains 'to counterfeté sheere of court' and desires to command respect by observing court manners. She has excellent table manners, does not wet her fingers in her sauce and lets not a particle of grease deposit in her wine cup. But she is also kind-hearted and sentimental. She is good-looking and loves to wear fashionable clothes. 'Ful fetys was her cloke' and also her 'wympul'. She wears a beautiful coral rosary around her arm from which there hangs a gold brooch with the inscription, 'Amor vincit omnia'.

The description of the Prioress is full of ironical touches. Nowhere in the *Prologue* is Chaucer's irony so delicate and so gentle.

## THE MONK

## Chaucer's Portrayal

The Monk was one of the finest of his kind. He liked to roam about in the country and hunting was his favourite sport. He was a really manly man who might have made a real good abbot. He had quite, few nice horses in his stable. When he rode, his bridle tingled as clearly and loudly as the chapel bell. This monk allowed the order of St. Maure or the order of St. Benet as something outmoded. He preferred to follow the new and the modern. He bothered his head little about the scriptural text that says that hunters are not holy men and that any uncloistered monk is merely a fish out of water. He did not care even a fig for such a text. Chaucer thinks that the monk's views were sound and agreeable. Why should he study and burn the midnight oil over books, as St, Augustine asks? Did it mean any service to the world? Let Augustine be left alone with his labours. The monk, therefore, preferred to be a good rider. He had greyhounds with him that were as swift as birds. For him the fun lay in riding at a fence of hunting a hare. His sleeves were garnished at the hand with finest available fur in the country.

He had an elaborately made golden pin which was meant to fasten his hood under his chin and at the larger end there was a lover's knot. His head was bald which was like a looking glass. His face shone as if he had been anointed. He looked a perfect lord, fat and fashionable. His prominent eyeballs never seemed to settle and they seemed to glitter like the flames beneath a kettle. His boots were supple and his horse was in fine condition. He was a prelate worth an exhibition. He was not pale like a tormented soul. He liked a fat roasted swan best. His horse was as brown as a berry.

After outlining in detail the Monk's extremely irreligious activities, Chaucer says : "Now certainly he was a fair prelate." The inconsistency is intentional and we find Chaucer frequently writing in this tongue-in-cheek manner.

## Critic's Comments

*The monks of Chaucer's time were notorious for their luxurious habits. They "were worldly and well to do". says Treve, "living lives of sauntering comfort in the monastery, or roaming the land dressed like layman, to hunt game or look after their estates..." Having themselves abandoned the manual labour practiced by their predecessors, they maintained armies of servants to carry on the daily routine of their great establishments... The ordinary monk lived luxuriously by the standards of the age, dressed smartly and was fond of good food". The monasteries accumulated vast riches and wealth had a degenerating effect on the monastic life. There were scandals in the monasteries and the monks were commonly believed to be unchaste. According to Langland, Chaucer's great contemporary, the monk of his time was :*

*A rider, a roamer by streets,  
A leader of the lovedays, and a land buyer,  
A pricker on a palfrey from manor to manor,  
An heap of hounds at his arse as he a lord were.*

Chaucer's monk illustrates the monastic life in England in the fourteenth century. He pursues the pleasures of the senses instead of leading a retired, contemplative life of self-abnegation, as expected of him.

### THE FRIAR

#### Chaucer's Portrayal

There also came a Friar. He was a wanton and merry fellow. The most striking fact about his persona appearance was that

*His eyes twinkled in his head aright,  
As do the stars in the frosty night.*

In all the four orders of friars there was none to equal him in gossip and flattery. He was a noble pillar of his order. He was very well-acquainted with rich franklins, rich women and barmaids, As to lepers and beggar women, he considered it below his dignity to have acquaintance with them. It was not profitable to have dealings with people who could give no money. Chaucer ironically remarks that he was a very good beggar and accepted even a penny from a widow who had nothing else to give. He led a life of pleasure to the disregard of his religious duties. He carried with him a large number of knives and pins to make hair curly for pretty maids and sang sweetly and merrily to attract them.

Chaucer says that this Friar had performed a large number of marriages of young women at his own cost (probably because they had been his mistresses). The irony in this portraiture continues till the very end. This Friar was, we are told, authorised by a papal licence to hear confession. Most sweetly did he hear a confession and grant an absolution. He promptly gave penance when he knew that he would get a good remuneration. If he got enough money from a sinner, he would boldly assert that the sinner was repentant of his sins. Although the Friar was immoral and corrupt in his ways, yet Chaucer is able to establish the Friar's humanity and even his likeability. This he does by pointing out the Friar's love of music and song and his frolic steps to please pretty maids.

#### Critic's Comment

"The medieval Friar was a religious mendicant belonging to one of the four orders, viz. Franciscans or Grey Friars, Dominicans or Black Friars, Carmelites or White Friars, and Augustinians. They were called Grey, Black, or White from the colour of their dress. The movement was started by St. Francis of Assisi who founded the Franciscan order, His idea was to establish a brotherhood of missionaries filled with true religious zeal and wedded to poverty. Poverty or non-possession was enjoined on the Friar, so that they

could whole-heartedly devote themselves to their religious duties. Unlike the rich monks of the Middle Ages, the Friars were expected to be poor, ascetic and self-denying. Monks were expected to lead a retired life of life of study and contemplation in their monasteries, while the duty of the Friars was to go out and preach and fight heresy. The Friars were a great religious force in the thirteenth century, and commanded respect of the people. But by the time Chaucer had come to write his *Canterbury Tales*, they had shed the early idealism of their reformist movement, and had become as corrupt as the monks. Chaucer's Friar illustrates the general corruption that had set in the brotherhoods of the Friars. "The Friar", says Bowden, "is one of the most strongly individualized figures Chaucer introduces to us; he is also one of the most typical."

## THE MERCHANT

### Chaucer's Portrayal

The Merchant is depicted by Chaucer as a typical businessman, who expresses his opinion in a most solemn manner, always claiming an increase in his business profits. He was an exporter. He also made profits by lending money on interest. He was conscious of his own importance and sat high on a horse. He had a forked beard, and was richly and fashionably dressed. He could argue well and manage his business quite successfully. People could not detect that he was in debt. The Merchant was truly a "worthy" Man.

### Critic's Comment

"Chaucer describes a clever and unscrupulous merchant who constantly thinks and talks of his profits. Probably he is a Merchant of the Staple and is engaged in foreign trade. The Staple was a government organization.....which fixed the town in which the staple products of England. Such as wool, hides, and tin, might be sold to foreigners so as to facilitate the collection of customs." In the days of Chaucer, the foreign staple was at Middleburgh and the English merchant engaged in export had to transport their goods thither. That is why Chaucer's merchant desires that the sea should be swept clean of pirates between Oswell and Middleburgh, so that his goods may reach the destination safely. The merchant is not only engaged in the export trade, but he also sells foreign money in exchange against the law of the land. But in spite of his export trade and illegal money transactions he is heavily in debt, though he is clever enough to hide this fact and put up an appearance of wealth. Though clever and unscrupulous, he is not a very successful businessman."

## THE CLERK OF OXFORD

### Chaucer's Portrayal

There was an Oxford scholar who had studied logic long ago. His horse was thinner than a rake and he himself was not too fat. He had a sober and hollow look. The over-coat which he wore was almost worn out. He had yet

not taken holy orders and he was hardly practical enough for a secular job. He preferred to have books by Aristotle by his bed than nice and luxurious clothes and other such things. Though he was a philosopher, he had not found the philosopher's stone that turns everything into gold. Whatever money he took from his friends he spent on books and his learning and studies. Indeed his only love was study and he never spoke more than what was necessary. His speech was always formal, elegant, respectful, short, lofty and to the point. The thought of moral virtue always coloured his speech and he was always prepared to learn and to teach.

It should be remembered that Chaucer employs no irony or satire in the description of the Clerk. Chaucer respects him without reservations and has given to him the simplest, finest and brightest eulogy that any scholar-teacher has ever had : "*And he would gladly learn and gladly teach.*"

### **Critic's Comment**

"The term clerk was applied to any ecclesiastical student. Chaucer's clerk was a student of Oxford University. He has finished the study of Logic, the principal subject in the course prescribed for the B. A. degree in those days. We can, therefore, presume that he has already taken his B. A. degree, and is now preparing for the Master's degree. He is a real scholar and values books more than wealth. He is poor since he has not yet got a benefice and is too unworldly to get a job outside the church. Hence for pursuing his study he depends on the charity of his friends. He is modest, reserved and reticent, and speaks only when necessary. He talks mostly of moral virtue. Obviously Chaucer appreciates the clerk's love of learning and his unworldliness. But we cannot say that through the character of the clerk the Poet is describing himself. For one thing, though Chaucer was a scholar, he was not so fond of "Aristotle and his philosophie" as the clerk is. Secondly, Chaucer himself was not as unworldly as the clerk."

## **THE SERGEANT OF LAW**

### **Chaucer's Portrayal**

The Sergeant of Law was an able attorney who could recall every word and comma of every judgment, a feat which earned him high distinction and handsome fees. As for his dress, he wore a motley coat belted with a girdle of silk with small stripes; and he rode his horse in an "unpretentious manner".

The lawyer was wary and wise, but in his cunning, not his goodness, that is emphasised. Discreet he was, and of great reverence, "he seemed so, his words were so wise." He had acquired a large number of robes and much wealth from his clients because of his knowledge and his high reputation, but we cannot help feeling that there was an element of fraud in his practice of law. Furthermore, we are told that no buyer of land, as great as this lawyer, was known to exist anywhere. When he bought any piece of land, he managed to acquire unrestricted possession of it. Nor could anyone challenge his ownership of land in a court of law because his drafting of legal documents was immaculate. Obviously the lawyer did not acquire all his property by honest methods. There was nowhere so busy a man as this lawyer and he

seemed busier than he was; ironically it means that he pretended to be busier than actually he was.

### Critic's Comments

"Sergeants-at-law", says Pollard, "were the king's servants in legal matters, chosen from among barristers of sixteen years standing and on their appointment had to give a feast of almost royal magnificence, at which the King himself was sometimes present. From among them were chosen the judges of the Courts of King's Bench and Common Place. The sergeants who were not judges could continue to plead in court and win fees and robes from suitors". He is a member of the highest rank of lawyers. He is famous both for his erudition and his success at the law courts. He knows thoroughly well the law of the land and also the judgments that have been pronounced since the time of King William. Owing to his deep and extensive study of law and fame as a lawyer, he has several times been appointed justice of the Assize by the King's letters patent. But he is not a permanent Judge of the Court of King's Bench or Common Place, and continues to plead. But he uses his knowledge of law and skill as a lawyer to increase his wealth and acquire property through illegal means. He represents the dishonesty of his class for which lawyers in general were held in contempt in Chaucer's time. About them Wycliffe says : "In men law reigneth much gilt, for they maintain falseness for winning and make lords to maintain wrong".

## FRANKLIN

### Chaucer's Portrayal

Chaucer's franklin is healthy, wealthy and hospitable and is an important man in his countryside. He loves good food and all the other pleasures of life.

A franklin was a free tenant of the Crown, holding his lands without the obligation of military service or rent. Chaucer's Franklin had a white beard and a 'sangwyn' (ruddy) complexion. He might be regarded as the very son of Epicurus who held that pleasure was the basis of perfect happiness, To live pleasurably was therefore his custom. He began his morning with a rich dish, namely, a sop of cake in wine. The finest food and drink were available in his house. He was so hospitable that he might be called Saint Julian of his county. Nobody had a better wine-cellar than this Franklin. There was such an abundance of eatables and wines in his house that one would think that "It snowed in his house, of meat and drink." He kept many fat partridges in baskets and cultivated many kinds of fish in ponds. His sauces were pungent and sharp and the dinner table in his house stood ready all the day long.

The Franklin was a substantial person in every way. He presided at sessions of justices of the peace, had been a member of parliament and had functioned as a treasurer. "He was a model among landed gentry".

"Franklin was the name given in feudal times to a country landowner who was independent of the territorial lord, and performed many of the minor functions of local government, such as serving as magistrate.

## THE GUILDSMEN

### Chaucer's Portrayal

The five Guildsmen depicted by Chaucer belonged to different trades. They wore similar livery indicating their fraternity. The clothes of all these persons were newly trimmed. They had knives, mounted, not with brass but with silver. Their girdles and their pouches accorded well with their knives. Each of them seemed a sufficiently good citizen to sit in a guild-hall on the dais. Each of them, by virtue of the knowledge he had, was fit to be an alderman. They had enough property and income. Their wives liked to be called 'Madams'; they wished their mantles to be carried for them by girls in the manner of high-born ladies.

The Guildsmen have been described by Chaucer in a collective portrait; they are not individualised, or differentiated from one another.

### Critic's Comments

"Gilds (or Guilds) were professional or socio-religious associations. The 'professional' or 'craft' gilds aimed at the fostering and protection of various trades. In towns and wealthier villages people of one craft or trade formed a gild of their own. Thus, there were traders gilds and craftsmen's gilds and in all large cities and towns there was a gild-hall. But there were also gilds of another type, which were permeated by religious ideas. Their members were not necessarily all of one craft. Persons of different crafts or of trades were united into such brotherhoods by a common religious or social ideal. Chaucer's guildsmen follow different crafts and each one of them is, in all probability a member of a 'craft' gild. But they also belong to a religious fraternity and wear its livery on their pilgrimage. Theirs is a 'parish' not a 'craft' gild."

## THE COOK

### Chaucer's Portrayal

"The five guildsmen with certain social pretensions had brought a cook with them. But he was engaged only 'for the nones' i.e. tiserna the guildsmen in case of need. He was, perhas, the proprietor of an eating-house, who desiring to go on a pilgrimage reach to Canterbury, had consented to be the guildsmen's cook. Though an efficient cook, he is a man of undesirable character. He frequently gets drunk. As the pilgrims near Canterbury he becomes so drunk that he falls from his horse." The Guildsmen had with them a Cook, in order to be able to eat good food on the journey. They took the Cook with them in case of any deficiencies in the inns on the road. The Cook was to boil the chickens with the marrow bones and prepare sharp-tasting spices and flavours. He could roast and boil and broil and fry, and make a stew and bake a pie. He was such an expert in preparing spiced chicken that he could equal the performance of the best. He was found of drinking London ale. Unfortunately, he had an ulcer on his chin.

## THE SHIPMAN

### Chaucer's Portrayal

Chaucer's shipman is a huge man and somewhat uncouth. He wears a wroollen gown, falling upto his knees. His dagger hangs on a lace passing around his neck and under his arm. The hot summer has made his colour brown. He could read the stars and knew how to fight well. But he did not ride a horse well. He looked like a fish out of water as he sat on his horse. He had drawn many draughts of wine at Bordeaux, while the merchant, the owner, was asleep. He had no scruples; he drowned his victims, if he fought and overpowered them on the high seas. He knew the sea routes very well. He was brave and prudent in his enterprises. Chaucer's shipman is competent, cruel and unscrupulous. He owns a small ship named 'Megdalen', which plies between Dartmou and Spain. He is a seaman of rare ability, knows all the dangers with which his route is beset as also the streams, harbours and the positions of the moon and the stars. Pity is foreign to his nature. When into the sea he is hardy and fearless. His ship was caught in many a storm at sea, but he looked on tempests and was never shaken.

### THE DOCTOR OF PHYSIC

Chaucer's physician quickly discovers the cause of particular disease, and prescribes his remedy accordingly. But his principal concern is his gain and he and his apotherary help each other in making money. A pestilence proves a boon to him; for then he gets an opportunity to earn a lot. He is thrifty and saves what he earns during a plague period. But he is a lukewarm Christian and cares more for gold than for the study of the scriptures.

The Doctor of Medicine was a great authority on the treatment of various diseases. He had thoroughly studied the science of influence of the stars on human affairs; and especially on the health of individual. He watched his patients very carefully during the time of the different conjunctions of the planets so as to apply his remedies at the most appropriate moment. He was skillful in choosing the time for making talismans for his patients. He knew the cause of every sickness. He could judge whether a sickness was due to an excess of heat or cold or moisture in the patient's body.

The Physician had his chemists all of whom were ready to send him drugs and medicines because he and they mutually helped one another to make profit out of this trade. The friendship between him and them was of long standing. The Physician knew the authors of the principal medical text book. But he had little knowledge of the Bible. He was somewhat miserly and had saved all the money that he had earned during the time of the plague. He loved gold, because gold was an ingredient in preparing certain medicines (the touch of irony here is to be noted).

### **Critic's Comment**

"The science of medicine in Chaucer's days was closely related to astrology. It was believed that every part of the human body was under the domination of one of the twelve Signs of Constellations. Thus, Aries was supposed to govern the head, Taurus the neck and so on. The knowledge of these influences on the human body was essential for the medieval doctor; for he had to choose the part of the body at which to bleed his patient according to the sign then in the ascendant. He had also to calculate the time which was astrologically the most favourable for the application of his remedies. The doctor of the Middle Ages, therefore, was an astrologer-physician and had the knowledge of medicine. Chaucer's Doctor of Physic, like any other doctor of the Middle Ages, is well versed in astrology. He keeps his patients waiting until the proper time for the application of his remedies. Diseases in those days were supposed to be caused by an imbalance of the four qualities, viz, 'hot', 'cold', 'moist' and 'dry'. The excess of any one of these upset their due proportion and made a man ill.

## **THE WIFE OF BATH**

### **Chaucer's Portrayal**

The Wife of Bath was somewhat deaf, but was an excellent seamstress and weaver. She made a point of being first at the altar of offering in church. Her kerchief must have weighed ten pounds and she wore scarlet red stockings. She had been married five times besides her lovers. She had been on pilgrimages to Jerusalem thrice and also visited the holy springs at Rome, Bologna, Galice and Cologne. She was gap-toothed and rode a horse easily. She enjoyed good fellowship and would readily laugh aloud, crack coarse jokes and talk.

Chaucer had used humour in portraying the Wife of Bath, who can be compared to Shakespeare's humorous character, Falstaff. She is one of the most famous characters.

### **Critic's Comment**

"The Wife of Bath, notwithstanding her coarseness and want of decorum is one of the interesting characters of Chaucer. Bath in Chaucer's days was a centre of cloth trade. No wonder, therefore, that the wife, employed in cloth-making, became a remarkably skillful weaver in course of time. She has had five husbands in succession besides a number of lovers. She married her first husband at the age of twelve and the last when she was forty. But she knew how to rule each one of her five husbands. After the death of each husband, she inherited his property and thus, became a rich woman." She sits astride her horse with a veil over her face, a large hat on her head and a foot-mantel round her large hips freely of the approved devices of love-making which she knows thoroughly well.

## THE PARSON

### Chaucer's Portrayal

Chaucer's Parson is a study in sheer goodness. The Parson is in some ways a parallel to the Knight : the parson exhibits virtue in the ecclesiastical world, whereas the Knight represents virtue in the secular world. Most of the other ecclesiastical characters in the Prologue, notably the Pardoner and the Summoner, are thoroughly corrupt. Perhaps it was Chaucer's intention to delineate the failings of individual persons, not the institution to which they belonged and in describing the good Parson he tells us by implication that the church did have servants, who faithfully carried out its commands.

The parson was poor in a worldly sense but rich in holy thoughts and holy work. He was a man of learning. He would rather give his own scarce money to his poor parishoners than to demand tithes from them. His principle was to live the perfect life first and then to teach it. His life was the perfect example of the true Christian priest and by his own example, he taught, but first practised the gospel himself. He truly preached the gospel of Christ, and sincerely looked after the spiritual welfare of his flock. He never shirked visiting the parishoners because of rain or thunder, sickness or trouble. He visited the high and the low and he went to them on foot, with a staff in his hand. He actually practised what he preached. He did not go to St. Paul's Cathedral in London in order to work as a singer of Masses for the souls of others, nor did he try to make extra money by working as priest in the service of some guild. The Parson never excommunicated anybody in order to force payment of the tithes due to him. On the contrary, he helped his poor parishoners with money from his collection of tithes. He was kind-hearted and wonderfully industrious. He wanted to show people the way to heaven. But if any one persisted in his sinful ways, the Parson rebuked him sharply. He expected no ceremonial receptions or a show of profound respect from people.

### Critic's Comments

"The Poor Parson is an ideal Parish Priest. According to some critics, he combines in his character the marked traits of Wycliffe of the Lollards. Chaucer must have known Wycliffe and met the Wycliffites. His portrayal of the Parson might have been inspired by the missionary zeal and religious sincerity of the Lollards. Skeat, however, thinks that 'Chaucer in his description of the Parson, contrasts the piety and industry of the secular clergy with the wickedness and laziness of the religious orders, of monks. But, as Pollard observes, Chaucer's characters are individuals, "and we cannot fairly say that because he drew a good parish priest....a good knight, and a good clerk he meant to hold up knights, parish priests, or clerks for our admiration as contrasted with other professions.'" The Parish Priests in Chaucer's days were poorly paid. In 1354 Archbishop Islip limited their fees

to seven marks a year as a maximum. Eight years later the Parliament reduced their annual income to six marks. Poverty drove them to take recourse to objectionable means of eking out their income. They farmed out their income. They farmed out their benefice and sought more lucrative employment in private chapels and houses of the nobles. Poverty forced many even to steal. Chaucer's Parson is saint among usual sinners."

### THE PLOWMAN

#### Chaucer's Portrayal

The Plowman was the Parson's brother and this relationship is deliberate on Chaucer's part, since they both represent the virtue of their respective occupations. The Plowman was a small tenant farmer, who lived in perfect peace and charity. He loved God with all his heart. He was always honest with his neighbours and promptly paid his tithes to the church.

The Plowman had worked for a long time conveying cartloads of dung from one place to another. He lived a life of peace and charity. Next to God he loved his fellow-men. He would not mind digging or repairing a ditch to help a poor man in the name of Christ. He paid his tithes in a perfectly honest manner.

Chaucer here does not reflect the general attitude of the upper classes toward the peasantry.

#### Critic's Comment

"Chaucer's ploughman is a small tenant, poor like his brother, the Parson and like him an ideal christian. He takes delight in manual labour, loves God and is patient in adversity. A true Christian, as he is, he loves his neighbours like himself. He helps the poor for the love of Christ and threshes, digs and delves for them without any payment. He regularly pays his tithes to the church. The Parson and the Ploughman are two ideal characters in Chaucer's world, and represent the poet's idea of a good priest and a good Christian."

### THE MILLER

#### Chaucer's Portrayal

"The medieval Miller enjoyed a monopolistic privilege. The entire corn grown on a manor was taken to the manor's mill to be ground. This custom continued almost till the eighteenth century. In the absence of any competition, the miller grew bold and openly cheated his customers. The roll for grinding corn was about four lbs, for every sack of flour, but usually the miller took more, at times even thrice as much. Chaucer's Miller represents his class and is as dishonest as the other members of his trade. He is a 'stout man' with immense physical strength, an ugly face and coarse manners."

The Miller was a very strongly built fellow with big bones and muscles. He displayed them excellently. He was short-shouldered. He proved the strength of his body wherever he went. At wrestling matches, he always won

the prize. He had broad arms and was thickly built. He would break open a door by running and striking his head against it. On the tip of his nose he had a wart on which grew a tuft of red hair. He had a large mouth and large nostrils. He carried a sword and a buckler by his side.

In delineating the Miller, Chaucer puts a lot of emphasis on his physical appearance. But by saying that he had large nostrils he indicates his lust and by his large mouth his profanity. The Miller was a loose talker who indulged in obscene jokes and indecent stories. He was a cheat also, he stole his customers' flour, at the same time charging them three times the actual fee for milling their corn. He had the proverbial thumb of gold. He wore a white coat and a blue hood, had musical taste and could play on the bagpipe well.

## THE MANCIPLE

### Chaucer's Portrayal

The Manciple was steward for a law school (or dormitory for lawyers) in London and was in charge of purchasing the food. He was not as learned as the lawyers, but was so shrewd in buying that he had been able to put aside a tidy little sum for himself. Whether he bought the provision in cash or on credit, he was always the gainer. He was in the service of more than sixty masters, who were experts in law and were full of legal discernment, but he had the brains to outwit them all. The Manciple was bound to be shrewd. His duties included accounting for the foodstuffs in the kitchen and the cook. This speaks of Chaucer's realism in characterization.

### Critic's Comments

"The Manciple is a servant of a college for lawyers, or an inn of court, and is entrusted with the purchasing of provisions. His position is lower than that of the steward and the cook under whose direction he makes his purchase. He is illiterate, but is so clever that he can befool even learned lawyers. His portrait is not drawn in any detail. Chaucer speaks only of his cunning."

## THE REEVE

### Chaucer's Portrayal

The Reeve portrayed by Chaucer was a slender, choleric man. His beard was shaved as closely as could be. His hair was cropped closely around his ears, and top docked in front like that of a priest. His legs were long and very lean, like a staff. There was no calf. He would know well, in dry or rainy season, the yield of his seedgrain. His lord's sheep, his cattle, his dairy, his swine, his horses, his stock and his poultry were wholly under the management of this Reeve and he had been giving the accounts according to his agreement since his lord was twenty years of age. He was never in arrears. There were all afraid of him, as of the Death. His dwelling was a pleasant one upon a heath. It was shaded with green trees. He should buy lands better than his lord. He had made himself rich secretly. He knew how to please his master cunningly, by giving and lending him from his own property, and get thanks from him, and also a coat and hood. He came from Norfolk, from a near a town they call Baldswell. His coat tucked up like that of a friar. He ever rode in the rear of the company.

"The steward, the baliff and the reeve were all officers appointed to look

after a lord's estate. The steward was the principal manager of the estate and the bailiff and the reeve came under him. The bailiff's duty was to supervise the agricultural operations on the state and to see that the corn was properly stocked and the cattle looked after. The reeve was a serf of the bailiff. According to Prof. Skeat, a reeve came next to the manor. Chaucer's Reeve, however, is not a mere serf. As Prof. Robinson suggests, he is superior to a bailiff and exercises even some of the functions of a steward. He keeps his lord's accounts and is the officer-in-charge of his crops, stocks, dairy and animals."

The Reeve was the manager and accountant of a lord. he was subordinate to the Steward. The portrait of the Reeve is vivid and life-like. he seems to have been drawn from life. In the opinion of Prof. Manly, he had been drawn after the Reeve of Sir William Beauchamp.

"Later in '*The Canterbury Tales*' the Reeve and the Miller have a violent quarrel. The Miller's Tale is an attack on the Reeve, who feels enraged. Subsequently the Reeve attacks the Miller in the tale that he tells. It also becomes clear that these two men had known each other before the meeting at the Tabbard Inn. It may be pointed out, too, that one of these two men leads the procession of pilgrims, while the other stays at the end of it. They are sharply contrasted in appearance, one short and thick, the other long and thin."

## THE SUMMONER

### Chaucer's Portrayal

Chaucer presents the Summoner's physical disorders in a way which suggests inner or spiritual corruption. He chooses the Summoner's ailments with the contemporary medical explanations of them in mind. For instance, the Summoner is portrayed as having a pimpled face, a fire-red complexion, scabby brows and a shaggy beard. There was no medicine or ointment or cream that could cure him of the pimples or of the lumps of flesh on his cheeks. Children were afraid of his visage. Besides the Summoner had coarse tastes. He was fond of eating garlic, onions and leeks, and drinking strong wine, red as blood. Chaucer makes fun of him by pointing out that, when the Summoner was drunk, he would speak no word but Latin of which he knew only a few expressions particularly the one that means "the question is what law applies" and repeating it constantly.

The Summoner was morally corrupt. He would allow a fellow to keep a mistress for twelve months just for a quart of wine. And he could also take advantage of a girl by seducing her. He taught people not to feel afraid of the Arch-deacon's curse (That is, exommunication) because he expressed the view that, paying a good round sum, a fellow could get release from that curse. Within his jurisdiction, the Summoner had control over the young people of his district because he knew their secrets and acted as their adviser.

In the character of the Summoner, we get a combination of physical ailments, gastronomic excesses, lechery, religious hypocrisy and impiety and good fellowship.

### Critic's Comment

The Ecclesiastical Courts of the Bishop, or of his subordinate, the

Archdeacon, exercised much power in the Middle Ages. It dealt exclusively with Church affairs and punished offences like witchcraft, usury, simony, neglect of the sacraments and withholding of tithes. The Archdeacon generally punished the offenders with fine, but grave offences were punished with excommunication. The person excommunicated was imprisoned by civil authorities. The Summoner's duty was to summon offenders before the court. He earned more than his lawful fees by threatening to bring people before the Archdeacon for real or imaginary crimes. People, out of fear of the ecclesiastical court, gave him substantial bribe. Chaucer's Summoner, besides being a rogue, is also a buffoon. He wears a large garland round his head and has a huge cake hanging like buckler by his side.

### THE PARDONER

#### Chaucer's Portrayal

Chaucer's portrait of the is very humorous. His Pardoner had hair as yellow as wax. His locks hung in thin shreds and they spreads over his shoulders. He wore no hood. He thought he was dressed all in the new fashion. He had glaring eyes as those of a hare. He had stitched on his cap a vernicle. His wallet lay before him in his lap, brimful of pardons brought all fresh from Rome. He had a voice as shrill as that of a goat. He had no beard, nor was likely ever to have it. His face was as smooth as if it was recently shaved. There was no such other Pardoner between Berwick and Ware. In his bag he had a pillow-case which he said was the veil of Virgin Mary. He also said he had a piece of the sail used by St. Peter when he went out upon the sea till Jesus Christ caught him. He had a cross of latten, set with stones and some pig's bones in a glass. With these relics, he got out of poor people more money in a day than they earned in two months. By flattery and tricks, he made men his dupes. He was a noble dignitary of the church. He could read well a lesson or a story, but best of all he song an offeratory. When the song was sung, he would polish his tongue well, to get as much money as he could. Hence he sang merrily and loudly.

#### Critic's Comments

"A Pardoner was a person in the Middle Ages who was licensed to sell papal indulgences. In the early Church, a penitent in order to receive absolution had to do some penance for a certain period according to the gravity of his sin. But later on a remission of ecclesiastical penance, not of sin, was granted to one who paid money for an approved charitable purpose. The amount paid was supposed to be equivalent to the penance. A certificate of such payment was called a pardon or 'indulgence'. The indulgences were written on parchments and were marked with the Pope's seal. The money collected by the sale of indulgences was supposed to go to the Church for religious purposes like the repair or construction of churches or the support of the brethern. Pardoners were sent to all over Europe to sell indulgences so

The Prologue

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that money could be obtained for building and repairing churches. Difficulty, however, was created by a host of unauthorised Pardoners who, under a false licence from the Pope or Bishop, sold forged indulgences. Besides, they carried with them relics to the veneration of which, they said, special indulgences had been attached. Thus, they cheated the ignorant out of their money. Even the authorised Pardoners sold indulgences at a price considerably higher than that fixed by the Pope, thus making a lot of profit for themselves. The sale of genuine or forged indulgences continued till the Reformation. The indiscriminate sale of indulgences by Tetzel and other papal agents in the 16th century was one of the grievances which led to the Reformation.

### CHAUCER AS A PILGRIM

#### Chaucer's Portrayal

Chaucer, in talking about himself in the role of a pilgrim, assumes the pose of a simple man, devoid of literary pretensions, who will simply entertain his readers. Chaucer is both a pilgrim and the man who is to record the events, including the tales told by the various members of the group, that occur in the course of the journey. Explaining his method of narration, Chaucer hopes for "courtesy" from his readers. He hopes that the readers will not disapprove too much of his candour and his fidelity in reproducing the tales as he heard them no matter how crude the language might be. Not only the language but situations in some of the tales do come might be crude and Chaucer gives us a graceful warning to that effect. But he is able to cite both Christ and Plato in support of his method, thus subtly suggesting that he does, after all, know what he is doing. Christ spoke broadly enough in the holy writ and Christ was not immoral. Plato said that "words should be cousin to the deed."

Chaucer employs a tone of mock-modesty in speaking of himself. The humour here comes from the fact that a great technician is apologizing for his lack of technique and that a skilful artist asks us not mind his mistakes : My wit is short, ye may wel understonde, ( that is, "My brains are weak, you can well understand")

#### THE HOST

The Host, whose name is Harry Bailey, was a merry a man who liked good company and good stories. He was a very jovial person and was well liked by the pilgrims. He was an effective organiser and fit to have been a marshall in a hall. The Host had bright eyes and was bold of speech, was intelligent and well educated; and he lacked nothing of real manhood.

The Host's importance in the '*Prologue*' lies in his proposal to the pilgrims that they should entertain themselves on the journey to Canterbury and back by telling tales. After seeing to his guests' comfort and also attending to the bills (for he was always a practical man), he explained the

terms of his proposal. Through the Host, Chaucer proposed an immense task for himself that was never finished. Of the one hundred and twenty tales that were proposed only twenty were completed.

### Conclusion

These, then, were the principal members of the party about to leave for Canterbury. That evening the Host of Tabard Inn served the company an excellent dinner after which he suggested that, to pass the journey more pleasantly, each member of the party should tell two tales on the way to Canterbury. On the return trip each member of the company should tell two more tales. The man who told his story best was to be given a sumptuous dinner by the other members of the party. The Host added that to keep the journey bright and merry, he would accompany them to Canterbury and in all things he was to be the judge of what was best for the group. All members of the company agreed to his proposal to act as governor of the journey.

Early next morning the party departed. Two miles away at St. Thomas-a-Watering, the Host silenced the group and announced that they would draw straws to see in which order the tales would be told. The Knight drew the shortest straw. The Knight agrees to tell the first tale and here ends the Prologue and begins the first tale.

If Chaucer had completed his original plans namely, that of each pilgrim telling two tales going and two while coming back, there would have been approximately 120 tales in all.

The Prologue gives an admirable description of the uncomplicated life of England in the Middle Ages. Here are portraits of all levels of English life. In this group Chaucer brings together all the foibles and virtues of men and the manners and morals of his time with remarkable clarity.

Throughout 'The Prologue', Chaucer alternately praises or chides the travellers with deftly drawn word-portraits which provide insights into the life of his time.

Before Chaucer there were other groups of tales such as Boccaccio's *Decameron*, but never was there such a diversity of people within the same group. It is then a stroke of genius that Chaucer uses the device of the religious pilgrimage to bring together such a diverse group.

The shrine of St. Thomas-a-Becket to which the pilgrims are going was reputed to have great healing qualities. Thus, some of the pilgrims are undoubtedly going for health considerations rather than religious. For example, the Wife of Bath was somewhat deaf, the Pardoner was beardless, the Cook had a sore, the Summoner had boils and other skin trouble, the Miller had an awful wart on his nose, the Reeve was choleric, etc.

1. A hall was a lord's manor, where the Marshal served as the household's Chief Organiser for the guest and their food and drink.