The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales: “all the condicioun of each of them”

Dr. Robert Zaslavsky

Preface

Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1340-1400) is one of the three writers who tower over all others in British Literature.\(^1\) The Canterbury Tales is the Chaucerian work that towers over all other Chaucerian works. The General Prologue to that work is the portion of it that casts its shadow over all the rest of it, even including that part of it that remained unwritten because Chaucer’s death prevented him from finishing it.

Chaucer’s choice of form for The Canterbury Tales is a brilliantly inspired trope that provides the kind of surface simplicity that welcomes all readers at the same time that it allows for the kind of inner complexity that will astonish the few discerning readers. By bringing together “by aventure” (by venture or happenstance) on an ostensibly religious pilgrimage various persons, including a version of himself, Chaucer was able to represent a full spectrum of representative societal types and to present through them in their context a comprehensive examination of human beings and human nature. In addition, his inclusion of Chaucer the pilgrim—whom he portrays as a congenial but not piercingly intelligent observer—allows him to deepen the layers of meaning in the telling of the story. It must not be forgotten that the personality of the pilgrim Chaucer—who claims to have no literary judgment at all and ridicules even his own unprepossessing physical appearance—is different from the personality of the actual Geoffrey Chaucer whose work one is reading. In actuality, there are three Chaucers in The Canterbury Tales: (1) Chaucer the pilgrim; (2) Chaucer the narrator; and (3) Chaucer the author. The Chaucer who narrates the tales is a Chaucer who already has completed the pilgrimage that is being made by the Chaucer in the tales, and both of these are different from the ultimate Chaucer, the poet who imagined and presented both Chaucer the pilgrim and Chaucer the narrator.

Since the General Prologue is the portal to the world of the work, it deserves special attention as a possible key and guide to all that follows.

\(^1\) The other two are Shakespeare and Milton.
The General Prologue²

[Introductory Statement (1-42)]

The Prologue opens with a long, flowing sentence that extends through eighteen lines, constituting nine heroic couplets. Its two main portions are marked by the “Whan” (1) that introduces the first part and the “Thanne” (12) that introduces the second. Each main portion in turn is subdivided into two subsections. The dividing lines are indicated by the repeated “Whan” (5) of the first main portion and the “specially” (15) of the second. The structure of the first sentence is the following:

I. (1-11) When (1)
   A. (1-4) When April (1) [the general]
      1. (1-2) with sweet showers has ended completely the March drought,
      (3) and
      2. (3-4) bathed every vein in liquid with flower-engendering power.
   B. (5-11) When Zephyr (the west wind), (5) [the specific]
      1. (5-7a) with its sweet breath has breathed (inspired) tender crops
         [into] every field,
         (7) and
      1. (7b-8) the spring sun is now halfway through Aries (i.e., in the first
         week of April),
      (9) and
      1. (9-11) small birds that sleep with their eyes open (which is nature’s
         protection for them) sing;

II. (12-18) Then (12)
   A. (12-14) Then (12) [the general]
      1. (12) persons yearn to make pilgrimages,
      (13) and
      2. (13-14) palmers yearn to seek strange beaches, going to far-off holy
         places in various lands;
      (15) and specially
   B. (15-18) [the specific] in England, persons from every part of the country
      Seek to go to Canterbury to see the holy blessed martyr (St.
      Thomas Becket) who has healed them when they were sick.

In the first main portion of the sentence (I), the parallelism between the two subsections is indicated by the repetition of the phrase “with sweet” [“with…soote” (1); “with…sweete” (5)].

In addition, since the first main portion begins with “Aprill” (1) and the second begins with “Zephirus” (5), the narrator seems to be suggesting that he will be showing the reader the totality of human experience, namely human experience from A to Z.

The date is indicated as halfway through the zodiac sign of Aries, namely early in the April of the first line (cf. 19). It is possible to construe this reference—supported by the statement in “The Nonnes Preestes Tale” as the earliest reference in British Literature to All Fools Day, a construction that is appealing in a work that targets human folly so unerringly. This may be so. On the other hand, it is equally possible to see here an allusion to Ovid’s *Fasti* (liber IV, 87-90):

nam, qui aver aperit tunc omnia, densaque cedit
frigoris asperitas, fetaque terra patet,
Aprilem memorant ab aperto tempore dictum,
 quem Venus injecta vindicat alma manu.
(for, wherefore spring thence opens all [things], and the dense roughness
of the cold goes [away], and the pregnant earth lies open,
they memorialize April to have been said [i.e., named] from the opened time,
[April] which nurturing Venus claims by [her] hand thrown on [it].)

April, then, is the month in which the earth sprouts forth in its fullness, an apt time for human experience to be exhibited in its fullness.

Furthermore, in both major portions, the thematic movement is parallel, starting from the general and then proceeding to the specific: in the first part, from nature as a whole to specific natural phenomena (wind, sun, birds); in the second part, from humans as a whole to specific English humans. This movement indirectly conveys the following. First, the narrator thereby indicates that all specific behaviors and phenomena will be examined not only in themselves, but also in terms of the general framework that gives them their ultimate meaning. Second, the narrator thereby suggests that there is a parallel between human nature in particular and all nature in general.

In I. A. 1. (1-2), the language conveys the notion that the sweetness of rebirth in spring is not unaccompanied by pain ["perced” (2)]. Since this process extends “to the roote,” one knows that what one witnesses in spring is a complete (top to toe) transformation of the world.

Furthermore, the syllabic repetition in I. A. (1-4) of the letter combination “-our-” ["shoures” (1), “licou” (3), “flour” (4)] expresses in a beautifully poetic way that the showers are what liquefy the earth in order to make the earth flower, both in the literal sense that it produces flowers and in the implied sense that the world (and humans within it) may flourish.

In I. A. 2. (3-4), the use of the word “veyne” (3) suggests that April showers are the life-blood of the world. In addition, the use of the word “vertu” (4) suggests that this is a time of moral rebirth as well as of physical rebirth.

In I. B. 1. (5-7a), the use of the word “Inspired” (6) to describe the salutary influence of the west wind in the production of crops contains a second meaning etymologically within it. The verb “to inspire,” from the Latin, means literally “to breathe into.” The breathing of the wind is reflected in the sixth line by the alliteration of the letter “h,” the letter of vocal breath (“hath,” “holt,” “heeth”). In addition, the word refers to the breath of poetic inspiration, to breathing in poetic images. This latter sense indicates that the crops are both agricultural and literary. In other words, the time is ripe for writing fine poetry.

---

3 “Syn March bigan, thritty dayes and two” (3190).
Furthermore, referring to the sign of Aries as “the Ram” (I. B. 2. 8) carries with it a suggestion of the sexual potency that is in the air in spring. In I. B. 3., the newborn birds are singing, and their song is an announcement of the onset of spring. These baby birds sleep at night with their eyes open because nature “priketh” (pricks/goads)⁴ them in their hearts. There are two possible significances to this wide-eyed nocturnal condition of the birds. First, they may be wide-eyed in anticipation of the new life ahead of them. Second, they may be wide-eyed out of alertness for possible predators, which also come out of hibernation or hiding into the open in spring. It is reasonable to assume that both senses are intended. In other words, one is meant to understand that life or nature is a two-sided coin, of which one side is beauty and wonder and anticipation, while the other side is ugliness and predation and fear.

This concludes the first main portion of the first sentence, a portion that in essence says, “When spring comes….”

At the beginning of II. A., there is the “Thanne” (12) to initiate the completion of the sentence. However, the narrator does not complete the sentence in a way in which one typically would expect. For example, one spontaneously might expect the whole thought to be something like, “When spring comes, then a young person’s fancy turns to thoughts of love.” However, he does not say anything like that. Instead, he quite surprisingly says in effect, “When spring comes, then all persons’ fancies turn to thoughts of making pilgrimages to holy shrines.” Included in all persons are both ordinary folk and professional pilgrims (palmers) whose goal is the Holy Land itself.

Of course (II. B.), the Holy Land is not the only holy pilgrimage available to humans. Indeed, in England, there is a powerful place, Canterbury, where the remains of St. Thomas Becket are interred. This means that one does not need to go to far distant locations to find holy places, because there are holy places nearby, in one’s own backyard, as it were. In other words, holiness can begin at home. This suggests ultimately that one of the key, recurring questions of *The Canterbury Tales* will be the extent to which humans can find holy places within themselves, i.e., the extent to which any human—even in ordinary life—can achieve holiness or moral integrity. That this is a thorny question is indicated by the pun “seke” (17)/“seeke” (18), which implies that seeking may be a sickness, that to “seke” (seek) may be to be “seeke” (sick).

After the packed language and dense expression of the first sentence (1-18), the second sentence (19-27) offers a kind of linguistic relief: it is simple, direct, and open. Whereas the first sentence was complex and logically formal in structure, the second sentence is much more informal, more normal, one might say. So “normal” is the second sentence, in contrast to the first, that the narrator restates the entire first sentence with three simple words: “in that seson” (19).

The initial statement of the second sentence maintains the lack of absolute precision in the dating of the narrative. Not only is the exact date of the month not given, but also there is no indication of the specific year in which the narrative takes place. This vagueness gives the narrative a kind of timeless quality. In addition, it allows the narrator to be relatively free in his historical references.

Then the narrator identifies the inn at which he stopped: the Tabard in Southwark, which it is reasonable to assume was the first major stopover between London and Canterbury (separated by a distance of just over fifty miles).

⁴ The bawdy pun contained in this word supports the reference to the ram and sexual potency.
Since the narrator already has been resting for some time at the inn when the other pilgrims enter for the night, one sees that however fully devout his heart may be, his body is not up to the same full day of riding or walking that the others—arriving so much later than he has—have accomplished. Or perhaps, to look at his condition more positively, his early stopping at the inn represents the difference in endurance between traveling alone and traveling in a group. Indeed, it is a good-sized group, numbering “nyne and twenty” (24). In addition, it is a diverse group, composed of “sondry folk” (25) on their way as pilgrims to the shrine at Canterbury.

The accommodations at the hostel were large and comfortable, so that the pilgrims “weren esed” in the best way possible (28-29).

When the narrator mentions the approaching setting of the sun (30), one sees that the length of a typical traveling day would have been from shortly after sunrise (approximately 6:00 AM) until shortly before sunset (approximately 5:00 PM).

In the brief time between the arrival of the other travelers and bedtime at sunset, the narrator already has managed to speak to all twenty-nine [“everichon” (31)] of the arrivals. Not only has he spoken to them, but also he has managed to insinuate himself into their group for the rest of the journey (32). This suggests that the narrator is a naturally gregarious person and (presumably) a likable enough person that others would be willing to have him as a traveling companion.

The narrator further indicates that they all agree to make an early start the next day on the pilgrimage of which the narrator now promises to give an account (33-34). However, before he tells the tale of the pilgrimage itself, and while he has “tyme and space” (35), he will describe the members of the group (35-42).

The narrator’s reference to “tyme and space” is the first light and delicate suggestion of a sobering thought that hovers in the background of the entire work. It is a suggestion of the narrator’s mortality, of the possibility that death might prevent the completion of the massive work that he has undertaken. Therefore, he will give readers the dramatis personae of his account while he is still alive (still has time) and not yet out of space in the cramped quarters of a grave. The narrator thus hints at an awareness that he may not complete the task of telling the full story of the pilgrimage, i.e., he may run out of time before he can tell—as the reader will in time find out—every tale told on the way. Therefore, one must assume that what one is told here about the individual pilgrims themselves is meant to give one as much information as possible. One further must assume that what one is told here will enable one—as much as possible—to fill in any gaps left by the possible incompleteness of the account of the whole pilgrimage.

In this way, then, the General Prologue is the most important section of The Canterbury Tales, the section that will enable one to supplement one’s knowledge of the tales that one has with an authorially guaranteed guidebook to the tales that one does not have.

The narrator indicates what information he will give about each pilgrim, information that falls under the general heading of their “condicioun” (38), namely their inner character and their external circumstances. In particular, he will tell:

1. what sort of person each was;
2. what the social ranking of each was; and
3. what clothing each wore.
The one item of information that one would expect to be listed here—but which is not—is each person’s name. The failure to promise mentioning names indicates two things about the narrative:

(1) personal names were less important at the time than occupational or professional affiliations; and
(2) the type of person that each represents is more important than the individuality that each might possess.

In other words, the narrator will emphasize universality more than individuality.

The narrator concludes his introductory statement by announcing that he will begin with a knight. This beginning is in harmony with typical social prejudices, which would lead one to expect that the narrator would begin with the pilgrims of the highest social class and then work his way down the social ladder.

[The Knight (43-78)]

The knight is said to be a paradigm of chivalry, a person of “trouthe and honour, freedom and curtesie” (43-46). In the service of his lord (“in his lordes werre”), he has had an exemplary and comprehensive military career (47-66). Through the middle of the fourteenth century, he fought in Spain at Granada (“Gernade”), remaining in that country until the capture of Algeciras (“Algezir”). Shortly thereafter he was in North Africa [Belmarye (Morocco) and Tramyssene (Algeria)]. He fought in fifteen battles—or perhaps in France during the Hundred Years’ War. He was in Asia Minor (“Satalye”), in Egypt (“Alesaundre”), and in Armenia (“Lyeys”). At around the same time, he fought in Turkey (“Palatye”). Then he could be found fighting in Prussia (“Pruce”), Lithuania (“Lettow”), and Russia (“Ruce”). This seems to comprise a military career of forty or so years from the early to middle 1340s well into the 1380s.

In short, the knight fought in every major military engagement in which he could have fought. And—what is especially important—he has survived them all, which is an indication of his prowess and superiority as a fighter. This is the basis for the narrator’s repeatedly emphasizing his worthiness (43, 47, 50, 64, 68). In other words, the narrator presents the knight as a perfect embodiment of the ideal of the knight: he is the complete exemplar of his type.

This is striking because by the fourteenth century, chivalry was in a state of decline, and many knights had become less than ideal figures. Nevertheless, the narrator preserves the ideal and refrains from ridiculing knighthood. This might suggest that the narrator is a conservative upholding the values of the past. On the other hand, one could ask whether Chaucer the author would agree with Chaucer the narrator. Perhaps the cumulative effect of the knight’s prodigious military service is meant to draw the reader toward seeing all this militancy as so much pointless activity, as an empty perpetuation of human hostility at the cost of a desired peace. Chaucer the author had experienced military service and knew the actuality of war firsthand. However, nowhere does Chaucer the narrator indicate that he himself has fought in any war. This lack might make one question the validity of his presentation. In other words, he might

---

5 “At mortal batailles hadde he been fiftene” (61). The precise meaning is indeterminable.
be one of those “conservatives” who extol the glory of war as long as they themselves do not have to fight them.

If that were so, then one could see here the kind of multi-leveled irony that Chaucer the author’s structure allows him to present. In this instance, Chaucer the narrator’s non-satirical idealization of knighthood and war could be a pointer to Chaucer the author’s pacifism. However, even if this were so, Chaucer the author’s pacifism would not be a blind pacifism, but rather it would be the pacifism of a person who understands the power and attractiveness of military service and war, but who will not shrink from also seeing its destructive and dehumanizing aspects. In this way, the presentation is subtle and delicate rather than simple and heavy handed.

In other words, one could say with some justification that this knight is too good to be true. After all, not only is he courageous, but also he is wise (68). In addition, despite his immersion in a life of warfare, his comportment is “as meeke as is a mayde” (69). Furthermore, he has never said anything base or improper (70-71). Finally, even his horse is a model of balanced perfection (74).

Chaucer the author’s ultimate attitude toward such a figure can only be determined by studying his tale.

[The Squire (79-100)]

The next pilgrim described is the knight’s son, who is also acting as his squire. The squire is a “bacheler” (80), namely, a knight-to-be or a knight-in-training. He is around twenty years old (82), so he has been in service for several years already, as is indicated by the mention of his cavalry service (“chyvachie”) in Belgium and France (85-86). In addition, he is skilled at jousting (cf. “Juste,” 96).

With regard to the squire, the focus is on the ideal of courtly love. His youthful ardor is directed toward winning the favor of his lady (88). However, his devotion to his lady does not preclude his interest in other women. He is described as a lusty lover (80), and his stamina at lovemaking is exceptional (97-98).

He is of average height, but very strong (83-84), with fashionably curled hair (81). In addition, he is a cultivated young man: he is a musician (a flautist: 91), who can sing, compose, and play songs (91, 95). Furthermore, he is a portrait artist and writer (96).

On balance, then, however good a rider or fighter the squire may be, he is preeminently what might be called a “ladies’ man.” He takes every opportunity that he can to seduce and conquer young—and perhaps not so young—women. His cultivation seems to be as much a part of his desire to impress and attract women as it is a genuine love of culture in itself.

In any case, he fights well, and he loves well.

Finally, he knows his social place: he carries out the proper squirely duty of carving before his father at mealtime (100).

In the knight and the squire, father and son, one has both two persons and one person. Their blood relationship invites one to look at the squire as an image of what the knight too was in his youth. This invites one to wonder how someone possessing the character that the squire is described as having becomes someone possessing the character that the knight is described as having.

---

6 The saltiness or bawdiness of soldierly talk on campaigns is surely not an invention of the modern era.
7 Such a study is beyond the scope of the present essay.
[The Yeoman (101-117)]

The third designated pilgrim is the yeoman. Since there will be no tale recorded for this pilgrim, what one is told here is all that one will be told about him.

The “cote and hood of grene” that the yeoman wears suggest what is tentatively confirmed later (117), that he is the lord knight’s forester. He has the suntan (“broun visage,” 109) of a person who spends much time outdoors. His equipment indicates that he is expert at “wodecraft” (110) and an excellent archer (104-108). At the same time, he is prepared to engage in military warfare, as his armor indicates (111-114).

However, there is a caveat to be kept in mind: to a certain extent, the equipment that he carries is as much for show as it is for use. The narrator hints at this by calling his buckler and his dagger gaudy (“gay,” 111 and 113). In addition “pecok” feathers (104) would have looked beautiful but would not have been the best feathers to use on arrows.

Finally, the ostentatiously ornate (“of silver sheene,” 115) medal of St. Christopher, the patron saint of travelers and foresters, suggests that he is the kind of person who inclines more to show and superstition than to genuine piety or holiness.

The yeoman completes a secular triad that is comprised of the knight and his attendants.

The next grouping of pilgrims is a heptad of religious figures.

[The Prioress Nun (118-162)]

In this religious grouping, the first figure described is the prioress nun. The account of the prioress nun is quite subtle and gently satiric.

The adjectives “symple and coy” (119) that qualify her smile introduce the suggestion that there is an element of worldly sensuality in this woman that has not been completely eradicated by her religious vocation. In addition, the reference to “Seinte Loy” [Saint Eligius] (120)—a sixth century French saint, famous as a goldsmith and maker of beautiful church decorations, who refused ever to swear any oath because he considered all oaths to be blasphemous—is lightly ironic and reveals a certain inconsistency in the character of the prioress nun. After all, she swears oaths by the very saint who abjured the swearing of oaths completely.

Even her nickname, “Eglentyne” (121), is an atypical name for a nun. Indeed, that she is assigned a name, even a nickname, while the first three pilgrims were left nameless, suggests that one is meant to take special notice of the name. As a flower name (sweetbriar), it reminds one of the setting of the tales as a whole in spring, a season typified by sexual potency.

She sings the religious service very well, but with what one would call a nasal twang, an element of comic undertone that undercuts the seriousness of the activity of praying (122-123).

She is well educated (124-126). At school, she learned to speak French fluently, although she always spoke a stilted school French and never spoke French with the ease and accent of a Parisian or any other native of France. This indicates that despite her education, she is not a well-traveled person. Here, as in the religious service, she can memorize and even imitate extremely well, but she never becomes natural in her performance of what she has memorized.
Then, a full ten lines (127-136)—almost twenty per cent of the space devoted to her—is used to describe her perfect table manners. A bit of food never dropped from her lips, nor were her fingers ever soiled by sauce. In addition, she never failed to wipe her lip carefully so as to remove every trace of grease: her attention to this is so careful that when she drinks, no trace of food ever appears on the lip of her cup. Finally, when she reached for her food, she reached for it very daintily. The narrator describes her fastidiousness in such exquisite detail that one almost has the sense that the narrator is sexually aroused by it all. It is as if he cannot take his eyes off her, as if he finds her intensely desirable.

She comports herself attractively (137-141), but again this requires a conscious effort on her part and does not come naturally to her (139).

Then, in nine lines (142-150), the narrator describes her compassion toward beasts. The least injury to a beast would send her into depths of mourning. Although the narrator seems to be enchanted with her, his description leads one to see the excess in her behavior. Indeed, one is led to conclude—and her tale supports this—that she has far more compassion and feeling for beasts than she does for her fellow humans.

In addition, in the apparent positivity of the narrator’s description of the tender care that she gives her pet dogs, he shows no awareness that nuns were forbidden to keep dogs and that in keeping dogs she is violating one of the rules of her order. In addition, however much the injuring of beasts upsets her, she still has no qualms about feeding her pet dogs cooked meat and eating meat herself.

Now, a full twelve lines (151-162) is used to describe her physical appearance and clothing. Her wimple was pinched or pleated. This is a style that would have been appropriate at court, but nuns were expected to wear plain, unpleated wimples. The forehead that the narrator finds so beautiful should not have been visible, but rather it should have been covered. In addition, when Chaucer the narrator says—in his infatuation with her—that she was not undergrown, one can hear Chaucer the author saying, “She was fat!” The narrator, however, is enchanted by her: he “was war” (157) of her attractiveness.

She carries the devout Catholic’s rosary beads, an aid to humble prayer, but she fancies them up and hangs from them an expensive gold brooch, something that she should have been forbidden to wear (158-160). Furthermore, on the brooch is “a crowned A,” the first letter of the Latin saying, “amor vincit omnia” (“love conquers all things”) (161-162). In its origin, this phrase refers to passionate, normal, human, sexual love. One could explain this away—as some commentators have tried to do—by saying that she means the “amor” to refer to the love of God, but such an explanation is unconvincing in the extreme.

Such is the prioress nun.

[The Retinue of the Prioress Nun (163-164)]

With the prioress nun there is another nun, designated as her chaplain, a kind of personal secretary, and three priests whose presence and duties are not explained. In other words, the prioress nun travels with a kind of entourage, almost like a great lady of court rather than with the simplicity of a nun.
[The Monk (165-207)]

The next pilgrim described is a monk. In the portrait of the monk, the narrator reveals more clearly than before his essential nature and limitations.

The narrator presents the monk as an ideal figure (165-171). He is a kind of monastic land overseer, also riding out as a monastery business inspector. The narrator regards him as “a manly man,” capable of being an abbot (167). In addition, he loves fine horses (168), and he adopts the current fashion—when he rides—of putting bells on the bridle and harness of his horse (169-171).

The cell or sub-monastery of which he was in charge, i.e., of which he was prior, follows the rather confining rules of behavior formulated by Saints Maurus and Benedict (172-173). However, the monk regards those rules as old-fashioned and himself as very modern (174-176). Therefore, he does not hesitate to disregard the rules. He particularly dislikes the ban on hunting (177-178) and the insistence that monks be meek and retiring (179-182). For him, hunting is a passion, and life is to be led recklessly and with gusto.

In an unusual aside (183), the narrator reveals what he said in reaction to the monk’s stating of his opinions: he favors them strongly, calling them good. Here, then, the narrator gives the reader a glimpse of his actual conversational interchange with the monk. He shows himself to be enthusiastic in his approval of the monk’s point of view. Therefore, the narrator too must be an avid hunter and must regard himself as an adventurous person, which would explain why he responds especially strongly to these same characteristics in the monk.

After the aside, the narrator resumes by giving what seems to be a relatively direct report—although still in the third person—of the monk’s attitudes (184-192). First, the monk sees no point in driving himself mad (“wood,” 184) by studying books closely. One should not lose sight of the fact that one of the book studies that the monk finds so distasteful would be the study of the Bible (184-185). Second, he sees no point in manual labor, which St. Augustine praised so highly (186-188). To the monk, what counts are this world and its pleasures (187-188). Instead of studying and working, which he regards a meaningless activities, he prefers to ride out with his prize greyhound hunting dogs to track down and kill rabbits, regardless of the cost involved (189-192).

His ornate monk’s robe is more the robe of an upper class lord than that of a poor monk (193-194). To add ornament to adornment, he fastens his hood with a skillfully crafted—and presumably expensive—gold fastener (195-197).

The monk is fat, presumably from the fine dining of which he is so fond, yet he is what at one time would have been called the fine figure of a man (200). In addition, his eyes glowed like a furnace (201-202), presumably a side effect of his indulgence in fine spirits (the alcoholic type). Furthermore, his boots are of fine, flexible leather, and his horse is well tended (203). Finally, he is not one of those annoying pale and sickly vegetarian monks, but rather he is a healthy, meat-eating man’s man whom the narrator manifestly finds congenial.

Here again we have a glimpse of the narrator’s attitudes: his favorable evaluation of corpulence and epicurism—whether in a woman (the prioress nun) or in a man (the monk)—suggests that for him, portliness and the wealth and pleasure-seeking that lead to it are positive signs of worldly success, and the narrator seems to be a man for whom worldly success trumps more spiritual considerations.
In the narrator’s description of the monk, the multi-leveled irony of *The Canterbury Tales* shines through with particular clarity. Chaucer the narrator idolizes the monk as a model of good living. The monk lives as the narrator lives—or would desire to live. At the same time, Chaucer the author is suggesting that such abuses on the part of the clergy as one sees in the monk should not be tolerated. The monastic life was meant to be a life of simplicity spent in devotion to God and to God’s works. The monk is a living mockery of that ideal. Therefore, it is appropriate that he should be linked with the friar, another abuser of his religious position.

[The Friar (208-269)]

The friar is loose living and jolly (208). His position is that of limiter, i.e., a person given the exclusive right to beg in a designated area (209). In addition, he is a wonderful conversationalist, a wonderfully gregarious individual (210-211). Furthermore, he has officiated at many marriages “of yonge wommen,” marriages whose cost he himself assumed (212-213). This makes him a pillar of his order (214).

Since one finds out some lines later that he likes to make a profit and to accumulate money, one must ask why he would give up so much of his own money, even in the service of such an apparently noble cause. The reasonable conjecture is that he had had sex with these young women, and they had become pregnant. Therefore, he wanted to hurry up and marry them to someone, so that they could pretend that their husbands were the fathers of these children. If this is so, then the remark of the narrator that the friar is a stalwart of his order—which he seems to intend as sincere praise—is drenched in irony for the reader, as Chaucer the author well knew and intended.

The friar was well liked by—and an intimate acquaintance of—the local franklins (squires, country landed gentlemen) and the “worthy” women of the town (215-217). He is licensed to hear confession, and his penances are easy (218-224). For the friar, the sign that someone is “wel yshryve” (well shriven, properly confessed) is that the person gives money to the monastic order whose representative is the friar confessor (225-228). After all, according to the friar, some individuals are not naturally inclined to show repentance by weeping and praying. Therefore, the least that one can do for such helpless individuals is to take their money instead (229-232). In addition, out of the goodness of his heart, the friar carries in his cape kitchen knives and sewing pins to give to the needy women, women whose needs—presumably—the friar met also in ways other than providing them with cutlery and needles (233-234).

The friar was also an excellent musician, both a violinist and a prizewinning ballad singer (235-237). These skills were undoubtedly among those characteristics that endeared him to the women to whose needs he ministered so assiduously.

His neck was pale white (238), which indicates that he avoided being out in the sunlight. Evidently his ministry focused on indoor activities motivated by less than pious intentions.

---

8 The word “worthy” and its related words (“worth,” “worthiness”) recur frequently in the General Prologue, with varying degrees of irony.
Nevertheless, he had prodigious strength: “he strong was as a champioun” (239). The friar’s strength is an outward sign of his inner virility.

This earthly friar knew all the bars, bar owners, and bartenders better than he knew the sick (lazars/lepers) or the poor (female beggars) (240-242). Such “a worthy man” (243) knew that it served no purpose to associate with the sick and the poor. It was far better and more meaningful to associate with the rich and the food sellers (243-248). In particular, wherever it was possible to make a profit, he was courtly and obsequious (249-250). In short, according to the narrator, “Ther nas no man nowher so virtuous” (251). Therefore, from the narrator’s point of view, the friar is a model of virtue.9

One of his outstanding characteristics is that he was a first-rate beggar, the best in his order (252). The proof of his formidable ability at collecting alms is bizarre. According to the narrator, his Bible recitation was so fine—and presumably his other talents were so fine—that even if a poor widow had no shoes for her feet, she would still manage to give him a little money (253-255). He acquired in this way far more money than he needed (256). If his other talents proved ineffective at capturing money, he would rave like a mad dog, presumably so that persons would give him money just to be rid of him (257).

On “love-dayes” (258: legal arbitration and settlement days), the friar was very helpful in settling disputes, acting less like a poor scholar than like a legal expert or even the pope himself (258-261). On these days, his clothing was also impressive, always looking as if it were just ironed—as presumably it was by the grateful women who had sampled his wares (262-263).

He whimsically affected the hint of a lisp in his speaking because he thought that it made his language seem more melodious and high-class (264-265). In addition, he could play not only the violin (cf. 236), but also the harp (266). When he played his harp and sang, his eyes twinkled like the stars (266-268). In other words, he was a born showperson, a consummate actor, with genuine stage presence.

The narrator concludes his description by saying that the friar was called Hubert (269). The name is significant for two reasons. First, it is a pun on the Greek word “hubris” (“insolence”). Second, it is the name of the seventh/eighth century saint who was the patron saint of hunting and hunters.

The second signification allies the friar with the monk, in that both are examples of the deep corruption that infected many members of the Catholic clergy at the time. At the same time, one must take note of the fact that the narrator does not give even a hint of disapproval of either of these persons. The narrator has a very lax sense of morality and piety.

The next several descriptions are shorter than the ones that have been presented so far, but they are written with the same subtlety as the longer ones.

[The Merchant (270-284)]

The merchant is what one might call an exporter/importer, concerned with the exchange of goods between England and other countries. He seems to belong to a group of merchants known at the time as merchant adventurers, an appropriate affiliation here since that group’s nickname was “The Fraternity of St. Thomas of Canterbury.”

---

9 One might be expected to know that the words “virtue” and “virile” derive from the same Latin root, the word “vir” (“man/male”).
The merchant has a forked beard (270). This is a tonsorial fashion statement, a sporting of what was then the latest fashion, although it represents what nowadays would be called a retro look, because it was a revival of what had been the fashion before the Norman Conquest. The adoption of this fashion by the merchant, a member of the newly emerging middle class, represents the reassertion of English pride at a time when English was again the standard language of the nation.

He wears multi-colored clothing, “mottelee” (271), presumably to represent all the different cloths that he trades. In addition, he has a high saddle on his horse (271). This would seem to represent his efforts to elevate himself above the common folk: he is unashamedly on his high horse, so to speak.

He wears an imported hat from Belgium and stylishly clasped boots (272-273). The hat would seem to be a way of graphically declaring that he is well off financially, because only a reasonably well-to-do person could afford such an imported item of clothing. The boots too are ostentatious, because the common boot would have been a simple slip-on boot of plain leather.

He always spoke with utmost impressiveness, never failing to mention the vast profits that he was making (274-275).

He wanted the North Sea (between England and the Netherlands), the sea on which he conducted his business, to be protected so that foreign trade would be kept safe from attacks by pirates (276-277).

In addition, he did very well in the exchange of foreign currency, here English and French (“sheeldes”) (278). If his doing very well at this means that he makes a profit, then he is breaking the law, since only the monarch’s money exchangers were permitted to make such a profit, while all others were expected to perform the service for free, lest they incur the charge of usury.

Having established the merchant’s bona fides, the narrator dubs him a “worthy man” whose wits are well settled (279). In other words, the merchant is a person who always has his wits about him, i.e., he is very shrewd, always calculating how best to gain an advantage and to show himself off to advantage. The example that the narrator gives of his shrewdness is that he is an accomplished liar in his business dealings (280-282), a trait that the narrator finds quite admirable. In particular, he conducts himself in so stately a manner when he conducts his “bargaynes and...chevyssaunce” (bargains and deal-closing) that no one would ever know that he was actually in debt. In other words, he is a kind of medieval Donald Trump, bouncing back and forth between profitability and bankruptcy, but always maintaining the appearance of wealth, and always returning to profitability because of his shrewdness.

Through what Chaucer the narrator says with admiration, one can see that according to the more clear-sighted Chaucer the author, the successful businessperson is a gifted confidence man, a manipulator of appearances to his own benefit and an exploiter of government intervention (such as policing the seas) to protect his own interests.

The narrator begins his conclusion of the description of the merchant by repeating that he is “a worthy man” (283), adding that he does not know the merchant’s name (284). The question that one must ask is why the narrator—who has not promised to give names at all, and who therefore has no need to explain his failure to present anyone’s name—goes out of his way here to declare publicly that he does not know the merchant’s name.
The only reasonable inference is that he actually does know the merchant’s name, but—because he admires the merchant, and because he has suggested that some of the merchant’s dealings violate the law—he does not want to be hauled into court and asked to identify this man on the off chance that the monarch’s money exchangers should wish to prosecute the merchant for usury, which included not only making excessive profits on money, but also making any illegal profits such as the merchant seems to make in his service as money exchanger.

[The Clerk (285-308)]

The next pilgrim described is the clerk. The term “clerk”—originally, “clerik”—was used to describe not only those who had become priests, but also anyone who studied religion and theology formally.

The narrator informs the reader that the clerk is a scholar who has been educated at Oxford, where for a long time he had studied logic (285-286). This is put in a way that suggests that he is still at the college pursuing his studies beyond the completion of his basic degree into advanced studies (i.e., he is the equivalent of what today would be called an advanced graduate student).

In addition, later, in the prologue to his own tale (Clerk’s Prologue, 26-28), the clerk says that he has spent some time in Italy at Padua, then the location of a famous university. There he conversed with the Tuscan poet Petrarch (Clerk’s Prologue, 31 ff.). Therefore, he is quite an accomplished scholar, fluent—one can assume—in at least English, Latin, Italian, and Greek (cf. GP 293-296).

In physical appearance, he is as thin as the thin horse—presumably from lack of adequate food—that he rides (287-288). He is so thin that he looks sunken (“holwe”/hollow) and therefore very serious (289). In addition, his overcoat is old and ragged because he cannot afford a new one (290).

He is poor because he has not yet obtained a “benefice” (a church position with a guaranteed annual income, 291), nor has he been experienced enough in the practical world to have obtained secular employment in the civil government (292).

In short, he is a devoted, lifelong scholar who is not concerned with such trivial nuisances as earning a living.

The little money that he has is spent on books rather than on clothing or amusement (293-296). He is devoted to the philosophy of Aristotle, which he presumably reads in the original Greek (294-295). The narrator scoffs at him by implicitly punning that although he was a philosopher, he did not possess what was called the philosopher’s stone (an alchemical device for turning lesser metals into gold) (297-298).

He lives on whatever his friends see fit to give him in order to maintain him in his studiousness (299-300). This figure of the “beggar” student was not uncommon in medieval England, where—in many instances—the community felt an obligation to support serious study, since there was no regular employment for students as students. Teaching as a profession was not typically an option until one had made a name for oneself, usually not until one was past midlife. Sometimes a family would marry a younger daughter to a scholar for the prestige that it offered, and then the family would support the couple and their children until such time as the husband could find gainful employment, which support could last for as much as twenty-five or thirty years.  

---

10 This is a figure not unlike the Yeshiva bücher of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe.
The clerk on the pilgrimage shows his gratitude for the benefactions of those around him by offering prayers for their salvation (301-302).

This young man focused virtually all his attention on studying (303). In addition, he was extremely taciturn or laconic, saying little, never more than was absolutely needed (304). What he did say was always in proper form, filled with fine sentiments (thoughtful), respectful, and brief (305-306). His chief topic of discourse was “moral vertu,” or what one could call morality and ethics (307).

Finally, his true passions were learning and teaching (308). By teaching here is not meant holding a job as a teacher, but rather conversationally conveying the principles of right thinking and right behavior.

Such a person as the clerk is not the kind of person to whom the narrator is drawn. His description of the clerk has none of the hints of affection and fellow feeling that his other descriptions have had. The narrator does not particularly like the clerk, does not call him “worthy,” and abruptly breaks off his description to move on to the man of law.

It is reasonable to assume that just as Chaucer the narrator’s praise in the earlier descriptions hinted at Chaucer the author’s blame, so here Chaucer the narrator’s lack of enthusiasm for the clerk points to Chaucer the author’s enthusiasm for the same person.

[The Sergeant of the Law (309-330)]

The next pilgrim is the one who has come to be designated the Man of Law, although his official title is Sergeant of the Law. Like the clerk, he is a person of learning, but the resemblance to the clerk ends there.

It is helpful to know something of the profession of this pilgrim. The Sergeants of the Law were roughly equivalent—but not quite identical—to what today would be called lawyers. The Sergeants of the Law (servientes ad legem, persons serving to the law) were the king’s legal officials, and they were selected for their positions after sixteen years of exemplary legal practice. Out of this group, the king chose the judges for the king’s courts. Those who were not regular judges on the king’s court sometimes went around to what would be called circuit courts or assizes. There were not many of these in Chaucer’s time, about twenty, and they were considered the preeminent members of the legal profession, analogous in stature to our Justices of the Supreme Court. In this connection, one must keep in mind that Chaucer, who was himself a lawyer, knows the territory firsthand.

Initially, the narrator presents the Sergeant of the Law as a combination of carefulness and intelligence (of wariness and discretion, on the one hand, and wisdom, on the other hand) (309-313). At the end of the initial description, the narrator adds a parenthetical aside that tells one something else about the narrator’s nature. He says that because of the wisdom of the words of the Sergeant of the Law, the man “semed” (313) to be as the narrator has described him. The way that this is phrased suggests that the narrator is a person of somewhat limited intelligence: he does not actually understand what the lawyer says, but it sounds impressive to him, and so he concludes that the lawyer is wise.
Whatever knowledge or appearance of knowledge the lawyer has is used by him to make tremendous profits and to achieve prominence in his profession (314-315). His professional eminence has been recognized by his having been appointed to a very prestigious position. In addition, he has been given not only high fees by his clients—which implies that his legal maneuverings have earned those clients a great deal of money—but also gifts of fine robes (316-317).

Not only does he make money from his work as a lawyer, but also he speculates on real estate. His speculations have made him enormous profits from buying real estate for which he established—by his legal expertise—such strong ownership claims for himself that his ownership was never restricted or challenged in any way (318-320).

The narrator adds the following ambiguous remark (321-322):

\[
\text{Nowher so bisy a man as he ther nas,}
\]
\[
\text{And yet he semed bisier than he was.}
\]

This comment indicates that the lawyer puzzles the narrator in some sense. The lawyer is the busiest person that anyone ever has seen, yet he was not actually as busy as he seemed to be. Therefore, although the narrator might admire the lawyer’s real estate shrewdness and his ability to make money, he cannot quite grasp the means by which the lawyer accomplishes this. Evidently the narrator is out of his depth when it comes to learning and learned persons. This was not a problem or puzzle with regard to the clerk, to whom the narrator could be neutral or even indifferent because the clerk was not a moneymaker. On the other hand, the learned lawyer is a moneymaker, but he is one who does not use good old, simple, clear methods of making money, such as cheating and lying. Therefore, the narrator does not quite know what to make of him.

The narrator declares that the lawyer has a prodigious memory: he can quote verbatim from every legal judgment that has been handed down in England since the time of William the Conqueror, i.e., every legal judgment handed down for the preceding three hundred fifty years (323-327).

Like the merchant, the lawyer wears a multi-colored coat (“a medlee cote,” 328), namely, a mixed weave robe of brown and green stripes that was the official robe of a Sergeant of the Law (328-329). Such a robe is not quite as ostentatious as the motley coat of the merchant, but it is of a similar type. This robe allies the lawyer with the merchant as a moneymaker. In this way, the raggedy cleric (clerk) is bookended by two multi-colored money earners.

Finally, the narrator does something to end his description of the lawyer that he has not done before: he simply says (330) that he has nothing more to say, without coming to a nice, neat final statement as he has done with the other descriptions so far. This is the final indication of the narrator’s inability to understand the lawyer: he is so confused by the kind of person that the lawyer is that he becomes speechless.

[The Franklin (331-360)]

The next pilgrim is the lawyer’s companion, the franklin.
In medieval England, a franklin was a free landowner who was not part of the nobility, another member of the newly emerging middle class. A franklin's immediate ancestors were either former serfs who had been granted freedom by their lords or independent laborers who had accumulated enough money to buy land and pass it on to their descendants. Hence, the franklins were parvenus (latecomers, Johnny-come-latelies, social upstarts). Therefore, the franklins were in an uncomfortable social limbo: they were likely to be ashamed of their lower class origins, and so they strove hard to assimilate the characteristics of the nobility. Eventually, they gained acceptance enough to be considered equivalent to knights, squires, and lawyers. The franklin here is a person of this type, so in all likelihood his family's upward mobility took place several generations before, so that now the family and he are comfortable and secure in their new and elevated social position.

The franklin’s companionship with the lawyer suggests that they may have done business together (331). Perhaps the lawyer has helped him to secure ownership of land, as a result of which they have become friends on the basis of their business relationship.

The franklin’s beard was white, which indicates that he is well advanced in age (332). In addition, he has a reddish complexion, literally a “sangwyn” complexion (333). This suggests psychologically that he tends to be optimistic and physically that he is a heavy drinker of alcohol.

He had the habit of dunking his bread in wine in the morning (334), presumably—according to the belief current at the time—as a cure for the indigestion that one experiences as part of a hangover from alcoholic over indulgence. Hence, it is not a surprise when the narrator adds that he is a lover of the life of pleasure, so much so that he could be considered the progeny of Epicurus, the philosopher whose theory of pleasure as the highest good caused him to be identified with the pursuit of pleasure, even in forms of which Epicurus himself would disapprove (335-338). For Epicurus, the highest pleasure was the pleasure that accompanied thinking, and this alone could bring happiness (eudaimonia). Nevertheless, his name became associated with pleasure in a narrow sensual sense, and the word that is derived from his name (the word “epicure”) has come to mean someone who loves the so-called finer things in life, especially fine food and drink.

The franklin was a great householder, a regular St. Julian, i.e., he is hospitality itself (339-340). He always served the best bread and ale, and he had the finest wine cellar that one could have (341-342). In addition, his house was always brimming over with the choicest meats, so much so that one could say that his house “snewed” food and drink (343-346). Furthermore, he always had food that was in season, so that his victuals could be the freshest possible (347-348). He kept his own partridges, and his pond was filled with succulent fish (349-350). If his cook did not prepare sufficiently spicy sauces, the franklin punished him severely (351-352). In addition, the cook was on call twenty-four hours a day to prepare food at a moment’s notice, and the table always was stocked with food (353-354).

The franklin was also a prominent figure in his community. He presided over the court sessions held by the justices of the peace (355), and he was even the Parliamentary representative for his county (“knight of the shire,” 356). This indicates that he has used his accumulated wealth as a springboard for a part-time career in politics.
His belt was white, thereby matching his beard. From the belt he had hanging a dagger and a silk purse, two typical adornments for gentlemen of the time (357-358).

He had been a sheriff, a position that signified the king’s appointed manager or administrator of a county (359). As part of his sheriff’s duties, he was the county auditor, a kind of public accountant (359).

All in all, then he was a model sub-vassal (“vavasour,” 360), a member of the lesser nobility who had substantial holdings of land.

This concludes the description of the franklin. Out of its thirty lines, sixteen (just over half) are devoted to the food that the franklin enjoys. Evidently, the narrator’s primary interest in the franklin revolves around eating fine food and drinking fine drink. This suggests that the narrator too is something of an epicure.

[The Guild Members:
Haberdasher, Carpenter, Weaver, Dyer, and Tapestry-weaver (361-378)]

Now the narrator comes to a group of five pilgrims, all of whom belong to the same guild. However, since they have different occupations, they must belong rather to a social and religious guild than to an occupational guild.

This quintet of pilgrims consists of a haberdasher, a carpenter, a weaver, a cloth dyer, and a tapestry-weaver. They are said to wear the livery of the same fraternity, i.e., the adornments of the same social or religious group, a group said to be of some importance (361-364). Their gear is newly trimmed, and even the tips of the sheathes in which they carried their knives were capped with silver rather than brass (365-368). Their attire indicates that they are proud of their social status and that they are endeavoring mightily to separate themselves from the lowest class of workers (e.g., butchers, bakers, other tradespersons, and storekeepers), the class out of which they presumably have emerged and in which their ancestors presumably were.

They had accumulated enough property to qualify for the political office of alderman, a position surpassing in prestige even an office of their own fraternity or guild (369-373). Their wives, who have not come with them on the pilgrimage, would welcome such prestige: it is very pleasant for the women to be addressed with respect as “madame” (“my lady”) and to ride wearing a royal mantle at the front of processions to celebrate festivals (374-378). This is royalty enough for them.

[The Cook (379-387)]

The guild members had brought with them a cook, another symbol of their newly elevated social status. The cook has been hired, according to the narrator, “for the nones,” i.e., for the occasion (379). He is an expert in the use of spices (380-381). If he is so accomplished a culinary artist, one must ask why he takes low-paying employment like this instead of being attached to a household of the nobility. The answer to this question is soon to be provided.

The cook is also a connoisseur of fine ale, here represented by London ale (382), ale that had been famous for a long time and was higher priced than other kinds of ale. Because of his having accepted the position as pilgrimage cook, one can reasonably infer that he has graduated from objective connoisseurship to plain alcoholism, and it is his addiction to drink that must have closed off to him higher forms of employment.
He was an all around cooking expert: he could apply his skill to main courses and to stews and pies (383-384). On the journey, the narrator no doubt has had ample opportunity to taste all these dishes, and he is undeniably impressed.

The narrator is so impressed by the cook’s preparations that he mentions casually and with indifference the gangrenous infection on the cook’s shin (385-387), an infection that points to his dissolute lifestyle and that even may be a symptom of the venereal disease that he may have contracted at the local brothels. The narrator is so blind to any large physical or moral significance that the infection may have that the whiteness of the pus in the infection merely reminds him of the creamed stew (“blankmanger”) that the cook prepares so well.

[The Shipman (388-410)]

The next pilgrim is the so-called shipman, i.e., a sailor.

The shipman comes from far in the west of England, perhaps from Dartmouth, once a major port and a reputed haven for pirates (388-389).

Even riding on a nag (“rouncy”),11 he was a poor rider—riding “as he kouthe”—i.e., he was not accustomed to riding a horse, having spent the bulk of his life at sea (390).

He wears a garment of rough cloth (“faldyn,” 390), and he carries a dagger hanging from a lasso around his neck (392-293). In other words, nothing about him represents respectable town life, and he stands out—as one would say—like a sore thumb.

He is well tanned from spending most of his life outdoors (394). The narrator indicates his liking for the shipman by calling him “a good felawe,” a phrase that suggested at the time a person who was a bit of a rascal (395). What favorably impresses the narrator about the shipman is that he stole the wine that he was carrying from Bordeaux right from under the wine seller’s nose (396-397). The narrator finds this to be admirable, as he does the shipman’s lacking a fussy conscience that worries about fine distinctions between right and wrong (398).

Whenever he fought at sea and gained the upper hand over his foes, he took his prisoners and drowned them all, a cold-bloodedness that the narrator blithely calls sending them home by water (without a boat) (399-400).

His knowledge of sailing (navigation, geography, and meteorology) was impressive and vast (401-409). No one knew the local waters and the Mediterranean Sea better than this shipman did. In addition, the narrator mentions in passing that he too has a beard, which allies him with the merchant and the franklin, and he has kept his beard safe through the most violent storms.

His boat was called The Madeleine (“the Maudelayne,” 410). The name of the boat is perhaps the single most significant detail about the shipman. “Madeleine” is the French form of “Magdalene,” which constitutes an allusion to Mary Magdalene, the reputed prostitute—although there is no Biblical foundation for this—out of whom Jesus exorcised seven devils, presumably one for each of the seven deadly sins, as a result of which she became one of Jesus’s most devoted followers. This suggests—although the narrator seems blind to this—that the shipman is on the pilgrimage in order to atone for his wayward life, which would make him—in today’s phraseology—a born-again Christian.

---

11 Cf. GP, line 670 below.
[The Physician (411-444)]

The next pilgrim is the physician or “doctour of phisik” (literally, teacher of the natural things).

The narrator introduces the physician with a phrase that he uses for the physician alone: “With us” (411). The physician, then, is the only person said to be with the group as a whole. This gives him a unique status. It suggests that the physician is there less as a pilgrim and more as the medical consultant for the whole group and that he has been asked along to tend to whatever illnesses might arise on the journey.

He is a preeminent expert in his field, one whose knowledge of medicine and surgery is unmatched for the time (412-413).

The foundation of his knowledge is “astronomye” (414), which would have been—as the following lines suggest—primarily what today would be called astrology, with perhaps a smattering of astronomy proper.

When he treated someone, he watched over that person and selected the astrological hours that would be most favorable to treatment (415-418). Part of that treatment consisted of making “ymages” (418). The images may have been either representations of the patient (like the wax figurines made by conjurers with harmful intent) or charms (talismans) representing the constellations or the signs of the zodiac (or representing things that are symbolically associated with the zodiacal signs). Their power or virtue depended upon the aspects of the planets at the time that they were made (cf. “ascendent,” 417). The “magyk natureel” (416) to which the narrator refers was a legitimate science. The phrase “natural magic” literally means “the skill of a mage (knower) regarding nature,” a sense of the term that remained current until at least the seventeenth century.

The physician is a medically omnicompetent diagnostician: he knows “the cause of everich maladye” (419). The foundation of his knowledge was the humor theory that prevailed for so many centuries (420-421). This claim is not as chimerical as it sounds. One of the advantages of the humor system was that its very simplicity was a virtue because it allowed the diagnostician to look at illnesses free from the constraints of excessively determined categories.

In the narrator’s opinion—and this opinion would have been shared by his traveling companions—this man is a perfect practitioner, a consummately gifted representative of his profession (422). He knows the causes and roots of all diseases and injuries, and he knows the remedies for all of them (423-424).

To aid him in providing his cures, he has a team of apothecaries or pharmacists who can produce the medicines that he needs (425-426). This arrangement is enormously profitable for all those involved in it (427). Indeed, this community of mutual interest was a practice of long standing.

That he is not a fake or a quack is indicated by his vast knowledge of all major medical experts, ancient and modern, from Aesculapius and Hippocrates (whose oath physicians still take) to his contemporary Gilbertine (Gilbertus Anglicus) (429-434).

He is as attentive to his own health as he is to the health of his patients: he eats a moderate diet with no excess, a diet that is easily digestible and nutritious (435-437). In other words, he is a living exemplar of the motto “Physician, heal thyself.”

12 This situation still prevails today in the relationship between pharmaceutical companies or pharmacists and doctors or hospitals.
The fact that he pays little attention to the Bible suggests that he is—as were many physicians at the time—an atheist, namely someone who replaces the study of God with the study of nature (438). According to a proverb then current, “Ubi tres medici, duo athei.”

His finely lined clothing is colored sanguine (blood red) and sky blue (439-440). These colors represent the two facets of his knowledge: the human body and the heavenly bodies.

He spends as moderately as he eats (441). He has earned much money from the medical services that he has performed during the plague (of which there had been outbreaks in 1362, 1369, and 1376) (442). His love of money or gold is related—ironically—to his devotion to medicine (443-444). At the time, aurum potabile (“drinkable gold”) was a medicine of highly regarded effectiveness, and therefore, his accumulation of gold represents a vast storehouse of potential medicine.

[The Wife of Bath (445-476)]

The Wife of Bath is perhaps the most complicated personality on the pilgrimage. She combines vigorous sexuality with a desperate quest for security. She is both amusing and pathetic. She is one of the supreme comic figures in all English literature, and—like all well drawn comic figures—there are undercurrents of tragedy in her life.

The wife comes from a suburb of the town of Bath (445). In Anglo-Saxon English the term “wife” meant “female,” but by Chaucer’s time its meaning had begun to narrow to “married female.” The Wife of Bath herself may be the one who solidified that linguistic development, because—as will become apparent—she is, in a sense, essentially a wife (a professional married woman, so to speak).

She has the misfortune to be partially deaf (446). Later, in the prologue to her tale (WoFB, Prol., 634-636), one finds out from her that she became deaf as the result of a fistfight that she had with her fifth husband. The cause of the fight was his insistence on reading aloud at night from a book about the wickedness of women, starting from Eve and moving forward through history. The wife became so infuriated after several hours of this that she angrily grabbed the book and started ripping pages out of it. Her husband reacted by punching her on the ear, thereby causing her deafness in one ear. She retaliated, they fought, and finally they made peace with each other. Then he agreed to burn the offending book. However, now he is dead, and she is single again.

She had such a knack for cloth-making that she surpassed the continental European (Belgian) cloth-makers (447-448), many of whom had migrated to England in the fourteenth century. It is not surprising that she has this knack, because western England, especially the region of Bath, was considered the major cloth-making district in England at the time.

In her parish, no wife went to the offering (at the church altar) before she did (449-450). This was taken seriously at the time, because the order of proceeding to the offering was taken as a sign of the relative ranks of female parishioners, the first being the highest. However, to strive to be first would have been taken as a sign of the sin of pride. Therefore, the wife of Bath is a very prideful woman. This quality expresses itself in her adverse reaction when someone does beat her to the offering: she becomes so disgruntled that she-withholds her offering altogether (451-452).

13 “Where [there are] three healers, [there are] two atheists.”
Her clothing is new and clearly the latest fashion (453-457). The seductive scarlet red stockings that she wears (456) are the clue to the motive behind her dressing so finely. She is on the pilgrimage not only for religious reasons, but also—as will emerge soon—to find a sixth husband.

Even though she must be close to fifty-years-old, she is still beautiful (458). In addition, she has an independence and aggressiveness in her look. The redness of her face—which is not said to be the redness of her complexion—is caused by her makeup: she is wearing rouge to make her face more attractive. This is another indication that she is using this pilgrimage as the medieval equivalent of a singles bar.

The narrator calls her “worthy,” and the example of her worthiness is that she has been married five times, a sign of her lustfulness, as is the number of lovers that she had in addition to her husbands (459-462). In the prologue to her tale, she says (WofB, Prol., 195-197):

I shal seye sooth, the housbondes that I hadde,  
As thre of hem were goode, and two were bade. 
The thre were goode men, and riche, and olde....

All five of her husbands have died, the three old ones presumably of old age, but the two younger ones of undetermined causes. She was married for the first time, she says (WofB, Prol., 4), when she was twelve-years-old, to a much older man. At her fifth marriage, she was forty, and her husband was twenty, so age evidently has not diminished her vitality or sexuality.

In addition to her being, so to speak, a professional wife, she is also, as it were, a professional pilgrim. She has been to Jerusalem itself, the Holy Land itself, three times (463). Furthermore, she has been to Rome; to Boulogne-sur-mer in France, a site at which an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary was (and still is) worshipped; to Galicia in Spain, where the shrine of St. James of Compostella is located; to Cologne in Germany, the location of the shrine of the three kings, at which the bones of the three magi were said to be buried (464-466). She had much to say about the voyaging that she had done (467). In short—and this is an indication of the enormous wealth that she has inherited from her three rich husbands—she is a seasoned traveler who has been through most of Europe in search of both meaningful religious experience and varied sexual experience.

She is gap-toothed (468), a physical characteristic which she herself (WofB, Prol., 603-605) claims to be a sign of her Venus-like nature, i.e., of her sensuality, of which she is in no way ashamed.

She is an experienced horseperson who sits easily on her high-spirited horse (469). She is nicely wimpled (470), and her huge hat is reminiscent of “a bokeler or a targe” (a shield or a target) (470-471). In other words, she is dressed for love as a knight might be dressed for battle. When it comes to love, she is setting herself up as an appealing target for eligible young men. However, she is no innocent victim: she is well shielded, i.e., well able to defend herself, from any unwanted advances.

---

14 “I shall say the truth of the husbands that I had, / How three of them were good, and two were bad. / The three were good men, and rich, and old....” The goodness of the three was presumably their wealth and nearness to death.

15 One is given here in passing a glimpse at what was the typical marriage ceremony of the time. From a current point of view, it seems strange to say that one has been married “at chirche dore” (460). However, from the tenth to the sixteenth century, the marriage service had two parts: (1) the marriage proper was performed in front of the church door or entrance; (2) the nuptial or wedding mass was then celebrated inside the church at the altar.
She wears a large foot mantle to protect her clothing from mud splashes (472). In addition, she wears the kind of sharp spurs that a man would (473). Hence, she can ride a horse as well as any man can, which also suggests that in love, as in horseback riding, she is very much in the saddle, i.e., she is as much the aggressor as any man is.

In social gatherings, she appreciates a good joke, especially—one may assume—a good bawdy one (474). She is no shy, retiring female, but a fully equal participant with males in all activities.

Furthermore, through her vast experience, she has accumulated the “remedies of love” (475), which means both how to cure oneself of an unhappy or inappropriate infatuation and how to cure oneself of an unwanted pregnancy. In short, she is an expert in “the olde daunce” (476) of the art of love

The next two pilgrims are brothers (cf. 529), a parson and a plowman.

[The Parson (477-528)]

The first brother described is the town parson who, in his poverty and learning, is allied with the clerk, and who, in his genuine repentance, is allied with the shipman. He too—in the midst of a band of corrupt and hypocritical religious figures—stands out prominently.

The narrator describes the parson as a “good man...of religioun,” an individual who is rich in holiness but poor in material goods (477-479). This calls to mind Proverbs 13: 7 (KJV):

There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing:
There is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches.

The parson is a person of learning, and his learning includes the Bible, especially the New Testament (480-481). This opposes him to the physician. In his ministry, he truly preaches and devoutly teaches the gospel of Christ to his parishioners (482).

The parson leads one to see a contrast between the holiness and piety of the secular clergy and the wickedness and corruption of the religious clergy. In addition, he is a simple enough soul so that he is not confusing to the narrator. Indeed, the narrator genuinely is touched by the parson.

The parson is a kind and diligent individual, and he is patient in times of distress, a patience that he has had many opportunities to demonstrate because the circumstances of his life and livelihood have placed him often into adversity (483-485).

He would never recommend—as many clergypersons did in order to wield power over their parishioners—that parishioners be excommunicated for non-payment of tithes (486). Instead, he would take the money out of his own meager funds and pay the tithe for them (487-489).

He does not need much to sustain himself materially, and what others would consider too little, he would consider sufficient (490).

In addition, his parish covered a large territory, with a widely scattered population (491). Yet nothing, not even rain or thunder, would keep him from carrying out his duties of visiting those who were sick or in trouble (491-492). This included even those in his parish who were farthest out, and it did not matter to him whether a person were rich or poor, but he treated all equally (492-494).
His reliability in making his rounds is especially remarkable in light of the fact that he travels on foot and needs the support of a walking cane (495).

In a word, he models proper behavior for his flock, and he gives them a living example of true piety (496). The chief lesson that is conveyed by his example is “Do first, teach later” (497), a motto that briefly echoes Matthew 5:19 (498):

> Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (KJV)

To this Biblical teaching, he added his own principle: if gold rusts, what can one expect iron to do? (499-500) In other words, if the priest in whom one trusts (= the gold/the standard) be crooked (= rusty), then one should not be surprised if an ordinary parishioner (= the iron/a lesser metal) be crooked (= rusty) (501-502). Indeed, nothing is more disgraceful than an evil or corrupt priest presiding over a flock that is righteous or pure (503-504). The true priestly example involves the priest’s being clean (straight/righteous/non-rusty/pure/holy/pious), because only this example shows the flock (the parishioners) how to live a correct life (505-506).

This humble parson has no desire to leave his parish duties and hire someone else (a strange parson) to take over for him, while he in turn hires himself out—as many parsons and priests did—to sing requiem masses for the dead relatives of the wealthy at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, or to serve as chaplain of one of the guilds (507-511). Instead, he remains at home and tends to his flock of parishioners, in order to guard his flock against any evildoers (= wolves) who might lead them astray (512-513). In short, he is a true pastor ("shepherd") and in no way a minister for hire ("mercenario") (514). The parson, then, lives up to the standard that Jesus established when Jesus said of himself (John 10: 11-14, KJV):

> I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.  
> But he that is a hireling, and not the [good] shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, [he, the hireling,] seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth; and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep.  
> The hireling fleeth, because he is a hireling, and careth not for the sheep.  
> I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine [i.e., am known by them].

The poor parson is such a person. His being such distinguishes him from the many priests at the time who earned their entire living by singing masses without ever tending to a parish of their own. Therefore, the parson can say—with Jesus—“I am the good shepherd.”

Although the parson himself is a holy and virtuous individual, he never looks down on sinners (515-516). Indeed, his speech is such as to indicate that he is approachable and unthreatening (517-518). His concern is to give his parishioners a good example of fairness that would draw them toward righteousness or heaven (519-520).
However, none of this should be taken to mean that he is timid or cowardly: if someone proves resistant to the true Biblical teaching, then—regardless of whether the person be rich or poor—the parson would not hesitate to scold that person harshly and severely (521-523).

In short, there has not ever anywhere been a better priest (524). The parson wishes no special privileges or treatment (525). Yet he is not unreasonable, and he understands the minor, natural weaknesses of his flock (526). Simply put, he teaches only the love of Christ and Christ’s twelve apostles, and he lives it before he teaches it, so that no one can accuse him of being one of those priests who say, ‘Do as I say, not as I do’ (527-528).

[The Plowman (529-541)]

The plowman is the parson’s brother (529). He seems to be a small tenant farmer (a sharecropper) or a worker on what were called Lammas lands (village lands rented on a yearly basis). Like his brother, the plowman is presented as an ideal Christian.

Although the plowman has engaged in the filthiest work imaginable, he has remained a plain, simple, good person whose life is characterized by peacefulness and charity (530-532).

He is unwavering in his love of God, both in good times and in bad times, and he loves his neighbor as he does himself (533-535). This description is reminiscent of the reply that Jesus made in the following interchange (Matthew 22: 35-40, KJV):

Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying,
Master, which is the great commandment in the law?
Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment.
And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.
On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.  

Everything that he does, he does with the example of Jesus in mind. Not only would he do his own work, but also he worked for the poor without taking any payment for it (536-538).

In addition, he always pays his tithes on time, both those for his work and those for his property (539-540).

Finally, he wears a simple jacket (“tabard”), and he rides a mare, a very humble mount and one that never would have been ridden by a member of the nobility (541). It is significant that the plowman is wearing a coat that has the same name as the hostel from which the pilgrims depart (cf. GP 20). This sharpens the contrast between the fancy and corrupt life of the city and the simple and pure life of the countryside.

---

16 Lammas was a harvest festival held on the first of August. The term “Lammas” derives from the Anglo Saxon compound “hlaf mass” (loaf mass).
When one reaches the parson and the plowman, one has arrived at the lowest level of society but the highest level of spirituality. The parson and the plowman are the ideals of the lower class that correspond to the knight as the ideal of the upper class.

Now the narrator does something that he has not done before: he announces in advance the next collection of individual persons whom he will describe: the reeve, the miller, the summoner, the pardoner, the manciple, and himself (542-544). As will soon become apparent, these individuals are truly the dregs of society, the pit of corruption at the opposite end of the world, as it were, from the pure spirituality of the country brothers (the parson and the plowman). That the narrator—even with his easy conscience—includes himself in this group is perplexing.\(^{18}\) Why he does so will have to be considered later, in its proper place.

[The Miller (545-566)]

The first of the unsavory individuals to be described is the miller. He is a large individual, both big-boned and strong/muscular (545-546). He has had many opportunities to prove how muscular he is by entering wrestling matches, matches that he always won, always taking away the first prize of a choice ram (547-548). In addition, as his gnarled and broad body revealed, he could break in any door, either by tearing it off its hinges with his arms or by butting it down with his head (549-551). This leads one to realize that the ram that he always won at the wrestling matches was not only the customary first prize, but also was a perfect symbol for himself. This implicit comparison of the miller to a beast leads to a series of explicit comparisons of the miller to other beasts. In addition, that he is initially compared to a ram echoes the heavenly zodiacal ram with which the prologue begins (8). This suggests that the miller represents an earthy and perverse form of the energy and vitality that characterize the springtime.

His beard is as red as a sow’s or a fox’s and as broad as a shovel (552-553). On the very tip of his nose, he has a wart out of which grows a tuft of hair that is as red as the bristles in a sow’s ear (554-556). Furthermore, his nostrils are black and wide (557), which may be meant to evoke the image of an ape.

In short, the miller is about as brutish a human as one can imagine: part fox, part pig, part goat, and part ape.

He carries a sword and shield at his side (558), an affectation that would have been totally inappropriate (even illegal) for someone of his social station. The miller, then, is pure aggressiveness.

His mouth is as large as a big furnace (559), except that instead of belching forth smoke, he simply belches forth gas. In addition, he babbles incoherently and is a crude clown whose fooling and joking are largely obscene (560-561).

The miller is a proficient, pirate-like corn thief (562). Indeed, he has a golden thumb, whose color reflects both the corn that he steals and the gold that he acquires thereby (563).

\(^{18}\) Another perplexity is that the narrator does not describe them in the order in which he pre-announces whom he will describe. The order of description is: the miller, the manciple, the reeve, the summoner, and the pardoner (whose order in the pre-announcement is second, fifth, first, third, and fourth).
He wears a white coat and a blue hood (564). The white coat is the professional clothing of a miller, but the blue hood is a touch of social arrogance.

Finally, he is a good bagpipe player (565), an appropriate instrument for someone whose narrative repertoire—as one learns in his tale—involves the impact of expelling wind or flatulence. When the pilgrims leave the inn, he plays his bagpipe as they leave town (566), ostensibly to entertain his fellow pilgrims, but perhaps also to hide the sound of the rearward piping to which he too may be as subject as he is to the frontward piping of his furnace-like mouth.

[The Manciple (567-586)]

The manciple is a provisioner, a servant who purchases food and other provisions for a college or an inn of court. The manciple here is employed by “a temple,” namely a society of lawyers (567-568). He is very shrewd in carrying out his duties (569). He is so shrewd that he is able always to remain one step ahead of his competitors, as a result of which he has become quite financially well off (570-572).

The narrator asks rhetorically, is it not a marvel that a person of such low shrewdness and cunning should be surrounded by a group of the most brilliant legal minds of the time, and yet financially he makes fools of them all (573-586). He is as worthy as they are of being the steward (seneschal) of an estate, the chief manager under the lord. Not only is this a favorable judgment of the manciple, but also it is an indirect judgment of lawyers insofar as it suggests that the major purpose of their learning is to make as much money as possible.

The narrator is unwavering in his admiration of material acquisition, especially unscrupulous material acquisition.

[The Reeve (587-622)]

The next pilgrim is a reeve from the town of Baldeswell in Norfolk (619-620). It is not precisely clear what the reeve’s job is. On a medieval estate, the lord of the manor was at the top. Under the lord was his chief estate manager, the steward (seneschal). Under the steward, and subordinate to him, was the bailiff, and under the bailiff was the provost. The provost was elected by the peasants (serfs) to be the direct overseer of livestock and grain. Normally, the reeve was an assistant to the bailiff, but many manors did not have a full roster of managers (officers), and so sometimes the titles were used interchangeably. The reeve here seems to be superior to a bailiff, and he even performs some of the duties of the steward. He is presented as dealing directly with the lord, overseeing bailiffs, outwitting auditors, and accumulating property of his own (593-600).

This reeve is thin (both of body and of soul), and he is easily angered (587). His beard and his hair are cut short (588-589). This is a sign of his low social rank, because the men of the nobility typically would have had long hair and full, flowing beards.

His hair is cut in front like the hair of a priest (590), but that is the only thing about him that is priestly. His legs are long and bony, each one looking like a walking stick, so that from top to bottom, he appeared to have no calf (591-592). In a word, he seems to look like a human praying mantis, an insect walking erect like a human.
The reeve’s duties (593-600) are those described above. The description allows one to deduce that the reeve is a rather elderly man. He has been in service to his lord, since the lord was twenty-years-old (601), which must have been quite some time ago, at least thirty years, one would assume. When he entered his lord’s service, he was probably older than his lord. Therefore, he must be close to sixty-years-old.

He is famous for his low cleverness, trickery, and deceitfulness (602-604). All his subordinates fear him (presumably fear his anger as well as his trickery): they fear him like the Black Death, like the plague itself (603-605).

The reeve’s house is in an unusual location, separated from other houses on the estate, and on its own mini-estate (606-607). This indicates his superior status in his lord’s domain. In addition, the reeve’s ability—superior to his lord’s—to accumulate his own private wealth is a sign of the social changes—especially the newly emerging middle class—that were taking place at the time (608-609). He is even in a position to lend money when the lord needs it (610-612). This gives him a power over his lord that no reeve in an earlier time period would have had.

In his youth, the reeve had been a master carpenter (613-614). Presumably he had used his construction abilities as a springboard to a managerial position on the estate.

The reeve rides a fine, spotted steed (615-616). The rusty sword that he carries contrasts with the elegance of his long, Persian blue overcoat (617-618). The rustiness of the sword indicates that he has neither used nor taken care of the sword. In addition, it indicates that he has had the sword for a long time, namely that the sword is perhaps about as old—and rusty—as he is. Indeed, the reeve is rusty both spiritually (in terms of the parson’s image, 499-500) and physically (which may explain why he is on the pilgrimage). His physical frailty is probably the reason for his riding last in the pilgrimage (622): he is old and ill, and he tires easily, so he cannot quite keep up with the others.

Finally, his dress is a secular version of the dress of the friar (621). Hence, he is the equivalent in corruption on the estate to what the friar is with respect to his monastery’s lands.

[The Summoner (623-668)]

The next pilgrim is a summoner (623), a church official who arrested, and brought in for trial, anyone who had broken church law and was scheduled to be tried in the ecclesiastical courts. Not only is the summoner himself inclined to take financial advantage of his position, but also—as will appear—the archdeacon for whom he worked was not above the taking of bribes.

The summoner has a bright red baby face (“cherubynnes face,” 624). In him, the redness is not so much a sign of alcoholism as it is a sign of disease. His disease is the cause of the pimples on his face, the blackened scaling skin on his forehead, and the scraggliness of his beard (625, 627). The disease is the result of his promiscuous sexual behavior: it seems to be a combination of leprosy and venereal disease (626). His uncontrolled sexuality seems to extend to both sexes, i.e., he seems to be bisexual, but with a preference—as will become evident when the pardoner appears—for male homosexual lovers over female heterosexual lovers.

His appearance is so disgusting that children run from him in fear (628). In addition, the disease is so advanced that none of the current medicines have had any effect on it (629-633).
He loves strong food and strong drink (634-635). The foods that he prefers are foods that add bad breath to the offensiveness of his presence. Unfortunately, he easily becomes drunk, and in his drunkenness, he would speak only Latin (636-638). However, he does not speak the Latin with any understanding of it, simply repeating what he has heard and memorized, like a parrot (“jay”) (639-643). If anyone questions him about these robotically repeated sentiments, he never can answer, because his entire philosophy, i.e., his entire knowledge of them, is exhausted in the mere saying of them (644-646).

He is an easy-going and beneficent rascally lecher (“harlot,” 647). The narrator is not put off by his appearance and is favorably impressed by his character: “A better felawe sholde men noght fynde” (648). What especially elicits the narrator’s admiration is the summoner’s practice of giving a young man permission to have a mistress if the young man bribes him with wine (649-651). Of course, the summoner is just as ready as anyone else to keep a mistress, i.e., he practices, as it were, what he preaches (652).

For sins that ordinarily would result in excommunication, money is an acceptable form of repentance for both the summoner and his boss, the archdeacon (653-662). After all, if one’s soul is in one’s purse, then one should be punished in one’s purse, the only soul that truly matters to the summoner and the archdeacon. In other words, the purse is the only heaven and hell about which one needs to be concerned.

The summoner himself does not hesitate to take advantage of the power of his position by extorting sexual favors from the young girls who come to him for advice (663-665). As the narrator puts it, he advised them all, and they did what he advised.

The garland that he wears—since a garland was a common alehouse decoration—signifies his alcoholism, as his shield made out of cake signifies his gluttony (666-668).

In short, the summoner is a walking catalogue of the seven deadly sins. In the face of this grotesque exemplar of deviance and perversion, the narrator is blithely indifferent and easy in his conscience. For the narrator too, one’s purse is one’s soul.

[The Pardoner (669-714)]

The pardoner—one of those who sold papal indulgences—rides with the summoner (669). That the pardoner is said to be a riding partner of the summoner seems to be meant both in a literal sense and—as will become apparent—in a sexual sense.

He comes from the hospital of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Rouncivalle, near Charing Cross (670). The name “Rouncivalle” has as its root the Old French word for riding horse (“rouncy,” OED), and the term “rouncival” developed the meaning of an androgynous person (either a masculine woman or an effeminate man: OED). The use of this term—with its fusion of religious, equestrian, and bawdy senses—is an apt for the mount and the pardoner who rides it.

The pardoner has just returned from Rome, from the court of the Pope, the ultimate authority for absolving sinners who deserve indulgence for sin if they have the right price to pay (671).

He sings loudly, his voice sounding like a trumpet, loud and shrill and unpleasant (672, 674). When he sings, the summoner sings harmony with him, another hint of the sexual relationship between them (673).19

19 Cf. “stif” (673).
He has smooth, flowing blond hair that he shows off by not wearing the hood that he should have worn as the sign of his office (675-681). Presumably he knows that his beautiful hair will draw prospective homosexual lovers to him.

He rides in the latest fashion, another sign of his effeminacy, and, beneath the brim of his alluring cap, he looks out with the glaring, seductive eyes of a hare, a beast that symbolizes lush sexuality (682-685).

Nonetheless, his office obtrudes in the form of his wallet that was “Bretful of pardoun” hot off the presses from Rome (686-687).

His voice is as squeaky as a goat’s (688). In addition, he has no beard, and he seems never to have had one, i.e., he is smooth-faced without shaving (689-690). In other words, he is like a human gelding or mare (691). The suggestion, then, is that he is a castrato. As such, he never would have matured into puberty.

The pardoner is a skillful confidence man, carrying fake religious relics that he uses to extract money from simple country parsons and to make fools (apes) out of simple religious believers (692-706).

Despite his corruption, he is well regarded by ecclesiastics, i.e., he is a particular favorite of many highly placed church officials (707-708). His being favored by ecclesiastical authorities contains a hint that the sexual proclivities of these authorities were similar to his own. In addition, he impresses the ecclesiastics because of his showcraft, i.e., because he is a fine religious performer or actor (709-714).

This concludes the roll call of the pilgrims (thirty individuals), except the narrator himself (making the company thirty-one), whose specific description is superfluous because he has been describing himself implicitly through the way in which he describes the other pilgrims. The canon and the canon’s yeoman will join the pilgrimage later, but the canon will leave in embarrassment about what his yeoman has to say about him, leaving only the canon’s yeoman to continue and tell his tale. Therefore, the total number of pilgrims will be thirty-two.

[Provisional Summary (715-724)]

Now the narrator summarizes what he has said so far and indicates what he will go on to describe.

The narrator asserts that he has described accurately (“smoothly”) and briefly (“in a clause”) not only the rank (“estaat”) and raiment (“array”) and number of pilgrims, but also the cause of their having come together there as pilgrims (715-717). Then, as if to bring the General Prologue full circle, he repeats the name and location of their way station, the Tabard Inn in Southwark (cf. 20), next door to (“faste by”) the Belle Inn (718-719). Why the narrator should add the name of the nearby inn is puzzling. It is not enough to say that this is a way of suggesting the density of inns at this location, which in turn is a way of suggesting the density of pilgrim traffic to Canterbury, although that may be so. It is more to the point to reflect upon the meaning of the names of the inns.

---

20 The cap is embroidered with the image of a female saint, a still further sign of his effeminacy.
21 His scams earn him more money in a day than a country parson earns in two months (703-704).
The word “belle” would call to mind the church bell that calls worshippers to prayer, but it also would evoke the adjectival meaning of “beautiful” (“bel”/“bele”). This juxtaposition would be a reminder that however corrupt many religious practitioners may be, still their religiosity adumbrates a purer spirituality, the kind of spirituality exemplified by the plowman whose garment (“tabard,” 541) is echoed in the name of the narrative’s primary inn.

The narrator then explains what he will tell next and what he will tell after that.

Next (“now”) he will describe how the pilgrims comported themselves during their overnight stay at the Tabard Inn (720-722). After that, he will describe their voyage as they wended their way through the remainder of their pilgrimage (723-724).

[Narrative Apologia (725-746)]

However, before the narrator proceeds to what he has said would be next, he offers a justification or defense (apologia) of his narrative procedure.

First, he appeals to the good manners of his readers, beseeching them not to tar him with the same brush that decency might be wont to use on those whom he describes: their language and behavior may exhibit “vileynye,” but the narrator’s presenting that vileness faithfully and accurately should not make him blameworthy (725-729). After all, the readers know as well as the narrator himself does that narrative integrity and truthfulness require that he reproduce with utmost fidelity every word spoken as it is spoken—however “rudeliche”—lest he commit the narrative sin of lying or inventing substitutes, both of which would violate the demands of verisimilitude (730-736). Even if his own brother should swear like a sailor, the narrator must report that, nor must he gloss over or falsify it in order to spare his brother’s feelings (737-738).

This apologia for the narrator’s prurient interest in linguistic and behavioral vileness is, in a sense, a recourse to narrative indulgences that is the literary equivalent of the sinner’s recourse to papal indulgences. If anyone should doubt that this is an evasion of responsibility, the narrator’s turning his defense—in what immediately follows—into an outlandish *argumentum ad verecundiam* should erase that doubt.

The surprising authorities whom the narrator uses as precedents to buttress his parade of crudeness are Jesus and Plato (739-742).

Christ did not shrink from what the narrator calls bluntness of speech, and such directness—he says—is not vileness (739-740). The narrator’s equation of verbal candor and verbal bawdiness is comically disingenuous.

Second, the narrator invokes Plato’s principle that speeches must be related to the deeds that accompany them (741-742). This seems to be a loose paraphrase of what Timaeus says in Plato’s *Timaeus* (29b3-5; tr. mine):

> Therefore, in this way, both about the image and about its paradigm [i.e., that of which it is an image], one must define that speeches are kindred of the things of which they are interpreters.\(^\text{22}\)

\(^{22}\) τούτων δὲ ὑπαρχόντων αὐτοῦ πάσα ἀνάγκη τὸν κόσμος εἰκόνα τινὸς εἶναι. μέγιστον δὲ παντὸς ἀρέσχαται κατὰ φύσιν ἄρχην. ὦδε οὖν περὶ τε εἰκόνας καὶ περὶ τοῦ παραδείγματος αὐτῆς διοριστέον, ὃς ἄρα τοὺς λόγους, ἦνπερ εἰσιν ἐξηγηταί....

31
This is far from a justification of crudeness of language, yet the narrator turns it toward his own ends.

In addition, since there is no suggestion that the narrator has any scholarly inclination or training, his invocation of a text as abstruse as Plato’s *Timaeus* must be based upon something that he gleaned from conversation on the pilgrimage, probably from the clerk, from whose remark he has taken as much of it as he could understand and use.

To sum up, for justification of linguistic crudeness, the narrator has perverted the parabolic spirituality of Christ and the discreet prudence of Plato. This would pass muster only among those whose knowledge of both teachers is cursory at best, non-existent at worst. No discerning student of Scripture or Plato would be taken in by it.

The narrator had asked for his readers’ “curteisye” (725) toward his bawdiness. Now he asks for their forgiveness toward his failure to follow a narrative order that duplicates the social order, or toward his failure to present the pilgrims according to their social rank (743-745). One would have thought that the reverse would be more apt, namely that the bawdiness would need forgiveness, while the social breach would need courtesy. The reversal suggests that for the narrator, social rank is far more important than decorum or decency. However, his excuse for his lapses is that his mind and memory are shaky and unreliable (746). This is undoubtedly false modesty, although not the false modesty that one would expect: his mind and memory are not “short,” but they are selective, noticing what the narrator’s easy conscience approves, or that to which it is indifferent, but suppressing what is inconvenient, uncomfortable, or potentially legally threatening.23

Having fulfilled his duties as host of the narrative, the narrator now turns to the host of the inn.

[The Host and His Proposal (747-821)]

The host at the inn is unnamed here. It is only in the Cook’s Prologue (4358) that one finds out that his name is Herry Bailly.

Once the pilgrims have gathered and become acquainted, the host cheerfully provides them a bountiful meal (747-749). From the narrator’s point of view, the high point of the meal is the wine (750): when he says “wel to drynke us leste,” he may be using the royal “we.”

The host is a handsome man (751), and his efficiency and competence in the providing of the meal demonstrates that he is well qualified to be “a marshal in a halle” (752), namely a professional food service manager who is adept at overseeing the serving personnel and maintaining order in the hall.24

To the narrator, the host seems to be the very paragon of manliness: tall, clear-eyed, handsome, forthright in speech, sensible, and well educated (753-756). The excellence of the food and wine alone would have been enough to send the narrator into a paroxysm of admiration, but the host seems to have some substance undergirding his culinary expertise and largesse.

23 That this is not to be taken as the apologia of Chaucer the author is evidenced by the presence of the “Retraction” placed at the end of the work as a whole.

24 A marshal of a dining hall would have been a combination, so to speak, maitre d’ and bouncer.
In addition, the host is no dourly efficient functionary. Rather, he is a bon vivant, expansive and jovial (“myrie,” 757). After the pilgrims have completed their meal, the host plays around and speaks mirthfully, showing his irrepressible congeniality even while he settles up accounts with them (758-760).

Then he speaks to the entire “compaignye.” He expresses his joy at the company, which he asserts to be the most convivial in a long time (“this yeer”) (761-765). After wondering how he can repay them in kind, he says that he has thought of a way to give them comfort (“To doon you ese”), a way that he says will “coste noght” (766-768).

Before telling them his proposal, he wishes them an expeditious and trouble-free journey to Canterbury, and he adds his hope that they will find there what they seek (769-770). In so doing, he sketches a comically apt theological division of labor: let God provide the way, but let the blessed martyr answer the prayer.

He believes that as they travel, they should make a commitment to talk, tell tales, and be playful, as is only to be expected, because traveling in stony muteness is conducive neither to ease nor to good cheer (771-774). Such sport is what he proposes for them as their pastime “by the weye.” Indeed, he makes the guarantee that if they consent unanimously to follow his proposal, and if such pastimes do not live up to his promise of providing merriment and ease, he will consider himself guilty of a capital crime against hospitality (777-782). Of course, this is comic exaggeration, but his sincerity is undeniable.

He asks for a show of hands, and the verdict of assent to his proposal is virtually instantaneously proffered, after which the pilgrims ask him of what precisely their entertainment agenda should consist (783-787).

Then he makes a lengthy speech that spells out the details of what he has in mind (788-809).

He begins by asking the company to listen to his proposal with an open mind and without prejudice (788-789). He says that he will come directly to “the poynpt,” speaking briefly and clearly (790).

Then he gives the details of his agenda. First, to soften the rigor of the journey, each pilgrim will agree to tell two stories (“tales”) on the way to Canterbury and two more on the return trip, tales that will tell past “aventures” (791-795).

Since there are thirty-two pilgrims, this would produce a total of one hundred twenty-eight stories. Chaucer completed only twenty-four stories before he died, a total that represents only 18.75% of the projected corpus of tales. The exact temporal sequence in which all twenty-four tales were told cannot be established with complete precision, although a partial order can be established through conversations that bridge the tales and through internal references and clues. What has been produced is a very incomplete work with a very long and complete introduction (General Prologue) and a very brief conclusion (Retraction).

They are: knight,* miller,* reeve,* cook,* sergeant of the law,* wife of Bath,* friar,* summoner,* clerk,* merchant,* squire,* franklin,* physician,* pardoner,* shipman,* priores nun,* narrator,* monk,* nun’s priest,* second nun,* canon’s yeoman,* manciple,* parson,* second nun’s priest, third nun’s priest, plowman, haberdasher, carpenter, weaver, dyer, tapestry-weaver, and yeoman. For those marked with a single asterisk, there is one extant story each, and for the double-asterisked narrator, there are two stories. Those who are not so marked are not represented by an extant story.

If one assumes, reasonably, that none has been lost.
Therefore—to repeat more forcefully what has been suggested earlier (see p. 5)—if one wants to have a sense of what Chaucer the author intended to convey by the work as a whole—whose envisioned completeness in his mind must be assumed—one must understand the General Prologue as thoroughly as possible.

Having outlined his tale-telling agenda, the host now indicates that he will add spice, as it were, to the proceedings by offering a prize to the person whose tales are judged the best, by which he means both the most thoughtful and the most comforting (i.e., both educative and pleasant) (796-798). The prize will be—when the pilgrims return to the inn—a sumptuous meal for the winner, the cost of which dinner will be shared by all the non-winners (799-801).

Furthermore, in the service of rendering as pleasant as possible the journey so constituted, the host gladly offers his own services—at no charge to the pilgrims, since he will pay his own expenses—as major domo, master of the revels, and judge (802-804). However, anyone who takes issue with the host’s decisions on the journey will be penalized with a fine equal to the total of all expenses incurred along the way (805-806). The host, then, may be congenial, but he is also thoroughly serious and professional.

The host concludes with a request that if they agree to his terms, they should let him know immediately, so that he may prepare himself as soon as possible (807-809). They accede unanimously, and with heartfelt enthusiasm, to his proposal, thereby ratifying their agreement: to accept him as their ruler, overseer, and judge; to accept the rates that he sets for the meals that he provides; and to accept whatever he devises for them to do in all things (“heigh and lough”) (810-818).

With this settled, they have a nightcap (“wyn”), after which all retire at once to rest themselves for the journey ahead (819-821).

[The Departure and the Drawing of the Cuts (822-858)]

The next morning, the host arises first, acting as the company’s alarm clock (“cok”), and then he calls the company “toidre alle in a flok” (822-824). The image of a flock is apt because it evokes the notion of a pastoral religious assemblage, and because the Latin word for “flock” (grex, gregis, m.) is the root of the English word “gregarious.” This word fuses the religious and secular dimensions of the pilgrimage, even suggesting that—on some level—the two are mirror images of one another.

The pilgrimage rides out for several miles, taking its stop at the next rest area, the St. Thomas watering place, where the horses may slake their thirst and rest (825-827). The pilgrims too have the opportunity here to lunch and refresh themselves.

Now the host reminds them of their agreement of the evening before, an agreement with which their morning should harmonize by having someone begin the telling of tales when they continue on their way (828-831). He swears by his devotion to drink that whoever resists his decision—as they agreed—will be fined to the tune of all the expenses incurred on the journey (832-834).

The host calls for the drawing of straws or lots (cuts): whoever draws the shortest cut will tell the first tale (835-836). He calls on three specifically to start the drawing (the knight, the prioress nun, and the clerk, in that order), and then all the others as a group are urged to follow them (837-841). Of the three singled out individuals, only the reticent and scholarly clerk needs special urging.
Now all draw cuts, and in brief—as the host says—the knight drew the shortest, “were it by aventure, or sort, or cas” (842-845). In other words, the narrator leaves open the suggestion that the knight’s draw may not have been mere chance, but may have been the result of the host’s sleight of hand. Since everyone is pleased that the knight will initiate the program (846), one wonders how much of their delight is simple relief at having a reprieve, how much is a genuine recognition of the knight’s superiority as a storyteller, and how much of it reflects appreciation for the host’s trickery in rigging the result.

The knight will go first. So it must be with no further ado (847-849). The knight—as a model of prudence and decorum—will abide by the rules of the game (850-852).

The knight speaks, declaring that he welcomes—by God—the role that he has been assigned, and therefore, he urges his fellow travelers to listen to his tale while they ride onward (853-855). They set out at once, and the knight begins his tale telling. Indeed, his tale is the first of those in the text of *The Canterbury Tales* that has come down through the ages.

This ends the General Prologue, from which one has learned not only the character of the pilgrims (except the canon’s yeoman), but also the kind of care and delicacy with which the tales that follow it need to be read.