

THE GENERAL PROLOGUE

Chaucer did not need to make a pilgrimage himself to meet the types of people that his fictitious pilgrimage includes, because most of them had long inhabited literature as well as life: the ideal Knight, who had taken part in all the major expeditions and battles of the crusades during the last half-century; his fashionably dressed son, the Squire, a typical young lover; the lady Prioress, the hunting Monk, and the flattering Friar, who practice the little vanities and larger vices for which such ecclesiastics were conventionally attacked; the prosperous Franklin; the fraudulent Doctor; the lusty and domineering Wife of Bath; the austere Parson; and so on down through the lower orders to that spellbinding preacher and mercenary, the Pardoner, peddling his paper indulgences and phony relics. One meets all these types throughout medieval literature, but particularly in a genre called estates satire, which sets out to expose and pilory typical examples of corruption at all levels of society. (For more information on estates satire, see "Medieval Estates and Orders" at Norton Literature Online.) A remarkable number of details in *The General Prologue* could have been taken straight out of books as well as drawn from life. Although it has been argued that some of the pilgrims are portraits of actual people, the impression that they are drawn from life is more likely to be a function of Chaucer's art, which is able to endow types with a reality we generally associate only with people we know. The salient features of each pilgrim leap out randomly at the reader, as they might to an observer concerned only with what meets the eye. This imitation of the way our minds actually perceive reality may make us fail to notice the care with which Chaucer has selected his details to give an integrated sketch of the person being described. Most of these details give something more than mere verisimilitude to the description. The pilgrims' facial features, the clothes they wear, the foods they like to eat, the things they say, the work they do are all clues not only to their social rank but to their moral and spiritual condition and, through the accumulation of detail, to the condition of late-medieval society, of which, collectively, they are representative. What uniquely distinguishes Chaucer's prologue from more conventional estates satire, such as the *Prologue to Piers Plowman*, is the suppression in all but a few flagrant instances of overt moral judgment. The narrator, in fact, seems to be expressing chiefly admiration and praise at the superlative skills and accomplishments of this particular group, even such dubious ones as the Friar's begging techniques or the Manciple's success in cheating the learned lawyers who employ him. The reader is left free to draw out the ironic implications of details presented with such seeming artlessness, even while falling in with the easygoing mood of "felaweship" that pervades Chaucer's prologue to the pilgrimage.

FROM THE CANTERBURY TALES

The General Prologue

Whan that April with his¹ showres soote² its / fresh
The drouhte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veine¹ in swich² licour,² such / liquid
Of which vertu² engendred is the flour;
5 Whan Zephyrus eek³ with his sweete breeth also
Inspired³ hath in every holt³ and heeth³ grove / field

1. I.e., in plants.
2. By the power of which.

3. Breathed into. "Zephyrus": the west wind.

The tendre croupes,⁴ and the yonge sonne⁴ shoots
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale fowles⁵ maken melodye birds
10 That sleepen al the night with open ye⁶— eye
So priketh hem⁶ Nature in hir corages⁵— them
Thanne longen folk to goon⁷ on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seeken straunge strondes
To ferne halwes,⁶ couthe⁶ in sondry⁶ londes; known / various
15 And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Canterbury they wende,
The holy blisful martyr⁷ for to seeke
That hem hath holpen⁸ whan that they were seke.⁹ helped / sick
Bifel⁸ that in that seson on a day, It happened
20 In Southwerk⁸ at the Tabard as I lay,
Redy to wenden on my pilgrimage
To Canterbury with ful⁹ devout corage, very
At night was come into that hostelrye
Wel nine and twenty in a compaignye
25 Of sondry folk, by aventure⁹ yfalle chance
In felawshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle
That toward Canterbury wolden⁹ ride. would
The chambres and the stables weren wide,
And wel we weren esed⁹ at the beste.⁹ accommodated
30 And shortly,⁹ whan the sonne was to reste,¹
So hadde I spoken with hem everichoon⁹ in brief
That I was of hir felawshipe anon,⁹ every one
And made forward² erly for to rise, at once
To takeoure way ther as³ I you devise.⁹ describe
35 But nathelees,⁹ whil I have time and space,⁴
Er⁹ that I ferther in this tale pace,⁹ nevertheless
Me thinketh it accordant to resoun⁵ before / proceed
To telle you al the condicioun
Of ech of hem, so as it seemed me,
40 And whiche they were, and of what degree,⁹ social rank
And eek⁹ in what array that they were inne: also
And at a knight thanne⁹ wol I first biginne. then
A Knight ther was, and that a worthy man,
That fro the time that he first bigan
45 To riden out, he loved chivalrye,
Trouthe and honour, freedom and curteisye.⁶
Ful worthy was he in his lordes werre,⁹ war
And therto hadde he riden, no man ferre,⁹ farther
As wel in Cristendom as hethenesse,⁷

4. The sun is young because it has run only half-way through its course in Aries, the Ram—the first sign of the zodiac in the solar year.

5. Their hearts.

6. Far-off shrines. "Palmeres": palmers, wide-ranging pilgrims—especially those who sought out the "straunge strondes" (foreign shores) of the Holy Land.

7. St. Thomas à Becket, murdered in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170.

8. Southwark, site of the Tabard Inn, was then a suburb of London, south of the Thames River.

9. In the best possible way.

1. Had set.

2. I.e., (we) made an agreement.

3. Where.

4. I.e., opportunity.

5. It seems to me according to reason.

6. Courtesy. "Trouthe": integrity. "Freedom": generosity of spirit.

7. Heathen lands. "Cristendom" here designates specifically only crusades waged by the nations of Roman Catholic Western Europe in lands under other dispensations, primarily Arabic, Turkish, and

Ne though I speke hir wordes proprely;^o
 For this ye knowen also wel as I:
 Who so shal telle a tale after a man
 He moot^o reherce,^o as neigh as evere he can,
 735 Everich a word, if it be in his charge,^o
 Al speke he¹ nevere so rudeliche and large,^o
 Or elles he moot telle his tale untrewe,
 Or feine^o thing, or finde^o wordes newe;
 He may nought spare² although he were his brother:
 740 He moot as wel saye oo word as another.
 Crist spak himself ful brode^o in Holy Writ,
 And wel ye woot no vilainye^o is it;
 Eek Plato saith, who so can him rede,
 The wordes mote be cosin to the deede.
 745 Also I praye you to foryive it me
 Al^o have I nat set folk in hir degree
 Here in this tale as that they sholde stonde:
 My wit is short, ye may wel understonde.
 Greet cheere made oure Host³ us everichoon,
 750 And to the soper sette he us anoon.^o
 He served us with vitale^o at the beste.
 Strong was the win, and wel to drinke us leste.^o
 A semely man oure Hoste was withalle
 For to been a marchal⁴ in an halle;
 755 A large man he was, with yē steepe,^o
 A fairer burgeis^o was ther noon in Chepe⁵—
 Bold of his speeche, and wis, and wel ytaught,
 And of manhood him lakkede right naught.
 Eek therto he was right a merye man,
 760 And after soper playen he bigan,
 And spak of mirthe amonges othere things—
 Whan that we hadde maad oure rekeninges⁶—
 And saide thus, “Now, lordinges, trewely,
 Ye been to me right welcome, hertely.^o
 765 For by my trouthe, if that I shal nat lie,
 I sawgh nat this yeer so merye a compaignye
 At ones in this herberwe^o as is now.
 Fain^o wolde I doon you mirthe, wiste I⁷ how.
 And of a mirthe I am right now bithought,
 770 To doon you ese, and it shal coste nought.
 “Ye goon to Canterbury—God you speede;
 The blisful martyr quite you youre meede.⁸
 And wel I woot as ye goon by the waye:
 Ye shapen you⁹ to talen^o and to playe,
 775 For trewely, confort ne mirthe is noon
 To ride by the waye domb as stoon;^o
 And therefore wol I maken you disport
 As I saide erst,^o and doon you som confort;
 And if you liketh alle, by oon assent,

1. Although he speak.
 2. I.e., spare anyone.
 3. The landlord of the Tabard Inn.
 4. Marshal, one who was in charge of feasts.
 5. Cheapside, business center of London.

6. Had paid our bills.
 7. If I knew.
 8. Pay you your reward.
 9. Intend.

780 For to stonden at¹ my juggement,
 And for to werken as I shall you saye,
 Tomorwe whan ye riden by the waye—
 Now by my fader^o soule that is deed,
 But^o ye be merye I wol yive you myn heed!^o
 785 Holde up youre handes withouten more speeche.”
 Oure counseil was nat longe for to seeche;^o
 Us thought it was not worth to make it wis,²
 And graunted him withouten more avis,^o
 And bade him saye his voidit^o as him leste.³
 790 “Lordinges,” quod he, “now herkneth for the beste;
 But taketh it nought, I praye you, in disdain.
 This is the point, to speken short and plain,
 That eech of you, to shorte^o with oure waye
 In this viage, shal tellen tales twaye^o—
 795 To Canterburyward, I mene it so,
 And hoomward he shal tellen othere two,
 Of aventures that whilon^o have bifalle;
 And which of you that bereth him best of alle—
 That is to sayn, that telleth in this cas
 800 Tales of best sentence^o and most solas^o—
 Shal have a soper at oure aller cost,⁴
 Here in this place, sitting by this post,
 Whan that we come again fro Canterbury.
 And for to make you the more mury^o
 805 I wol myself goodly^o with you ride—
 Right at myn owene cost—and be youre gide.
 And who so wol my juggement withsaye^o
 Shal paye al that we spende by the waye.
 And if ye vouche sauf that it be so,
 810 Telle me anoon, withouten wordes mo,^o
 And I wol erly shape me^o therefore.”
 This thing was graunted and oure othes swore
 With ful glad herte, and prayden⁶ him also
 That he wolde vouche sauf for to do so,
 815 And that he wolde been oure governour,
 And of oure tales juge and reportour,^o
 And sette a soper at a certain pris,^o
 And we wol ruled been at his devis,^o
 In heigh and lowe; and thus by oon assent
 820 We been accorded to his juggement.
 And therupon the win was fet^o anoon;
 We dronken and to reste wente eechoon^o
 Withouten any lenger^o tarynge.
 Amorwe^o whan that day bigan to springe
 825 Up roos oure Host and was oure aller cok,⁷
 And gadred us togidres in a flok,
 And forth we riden, a litel more than pas,^o
 Unto the watering of Saint Thomas;⁸

1. Abide by.
 2. We didn't think it worthwhile to make an issue of it.
 3. It pleased.
 4. At the cost of us all.

5. Prepare myself.
 6. I.e., we prayed.
 7. Was rooster for us all.
 8. A watering place near Southwark.

830 And ther oure Host bigan his hors arreste,^o
 And saide, "Lordes, herkneth if you leste:^o
 Ye woot youre forward^o and it you recorde:⁹
 If evensong and morwesong^o accorde,^o
 Lat see now who shal telle the firste tale.
 As evere mote^o I drinken win or ale,
 835 Who so be rebel to my juggement
 Shal paye for al that by the way is spent.
 Now draweth cut er that we ferrer twinne:¹
 He which that hath the shorteste shal biginne.
 "Sire Knight," quod he, "my maister and my lord,
 840 Now draweth cut, for that is myn accord.^o
 Cometh neer," quod he, "my lady Prioress,
 And ye, sire Clerk, lat be youre shamefastnesse^o—
 Ne studieth nought. Lay hand to, every man!"
 Anoon to drawn every wight bigan,
 845 And shortly for to tellen as it was
 Were it by aventure, or sort, or cas,²
 The soothe^o is this, the cut fil^o to the Knight;
 Of which ful blithe and glad was every wight,
 And telle he moste^o his tale, as was resoun,
 850 By forward and by composicioun,³
 As ye han herd. What needeth wordes mo?
 And whan this goode man sawgh that it was so,
 As he that wis was and obedient
 To keepe his forward by his free assent,
 855 He saide, "Sin^o I shal biginne the game,
 What, welcome be the cut, in Goddes name!
 Now lat us ride, and herkneth what I saye."
 And with that word we riden forth oure waye,
 And he bigan with right a merye cheere^o
 860 His tale anoon, and saide as ye may heere.

[*The Knight's Tale* is a romance of 2,350 lines, which Chaucer had written before beginning *The Canterbury Tales*—one of several works assumed to be earlier than he inserted into the collection. It is probably the same story, with only minor revisions, that Chaucer referred to in *The Legend of Good Women* as "al the love of Palamon and Arcite." These are the names of the two heroes of *The Knight's Tale*, kinsmen and best friends who are taken prisoner at the siege and destruction of ancient Thebes by Theseus, the ruler of Athens. Gazing out from their prison cell in a tower, they fall in love at first sight and almost at the same moment with Theseus's sister-in-law, Emily, who is taking an early-morning walk in a garden below their window. After a bitter rivalry, they are at last reconciled through a tournament in which Emily is the prize. Arcite wins the tournament but, as he lies dying after being thrown by his horse, he makes a noble speech encouraging Palamon and Emily to marry. The tale is an ambitious combination of classical setting and mythology, romance plot, and themes of fortune and destiny.]

9. You recall it.

1. Go farther. "Draweth cut": i.e., draw straws.

2. Whether it was luck, fate, or chance.

3. By agreement and compact.

The Miller's Prologue and Tale

The Miller's Tale belongs to a genre known as the "fabliau": a short story in verse that deals satirically, often grossly and fantastically as well as hilariously, with intrigues and deceptions about sex or money (and often both these elements in the same story). These are the tales Chaucer is anticipating in *The General Prologue* when he warns his presumably genteel audience that they must expect some rude speaking (see lines 727–44). An even more pointed apology follows at the end of *The Miller's Prologue*. Fabliau tales exist everywhere in oral literature; as a literary form they flourished in France, especially in the thirteenth century. By having Robin the Miller tell a fabliau to "quit" (to requite or pay back) the Knight's aristocratic romance, Chaucer sets up a dialectic between classes, genres, and styles that he exploits throughout *The Canterbury Tales*.

The Prologue

Whan that the Knight hadde thus his tale ytold,
 In al the route^o nas^o ther yong ne old
 That he ne saide it was a noble storye,
 And worthy for to drawn^o to memorye,
 5 And namely^o the gentils everichoon.
 Oure Hoste lough^o and swoor, "So mote I goon,¹
 This gooth aright: unbokeled is the male.^o
 Lat see now who shal telle another tale.
 For trewely the game is wel bigonne.
 10 Now telleth ye, sire Monk, if that ye conne,^o
 Somwhat to quite^o with the Knightes tale."
 The Millere, that for dronken² was al pale,
 So that unnethe^o upon his hors he sat,
 He nolde^o avalen^o neither hood ne hat,
 15 Ne abiden no man for his curteisye,
 But in Pilates vois³ he gan to crye,
 And swoor, "By armes⁴ and by blood and bones,
 I can^o a noble tale for the nones,
 With which I wol now quite the Knightes tale."
 20 Oure Hoste sawgh that he was dronke of ale,
 And saide, "Abide, Robin, leve^o brother,
 Som bettre man shal telle us first another.
 Abide, and lat us werken thriftily."⁵
 "By Goddes soule," quod he, "that wol nat I,
 25 For I wol speke or elles go my way."
 Oure Host answerde, "Tel on, a devele way!⁵
 Thou art a fool; thy wit is overcome."
 "Now herkneth," quod the Millere, "alle and some.⁶
 But first I make a protestacioun^o
 30 That I am dronke: I knowe it by my soun.^o
 And therefore if that I misspeke^o or saye,
 Wite it⁷ the ale of Southwerk, I you praye;

1. So might I walk—an oath.

2. I.e., drunkenness.

3. The harsh voice usually associated with the character of Pontius Pilate in the mystery plays.

4. I.e., by God's arms, a blasphemous oath.

5. I.e., in the devil's name.

6. Each and every one.

7. Blame it on.

group / was not

recall

especially

laughed

pouch

can

repay

with difficulty

would not / take off

know

dear

with propriety

public affirmation

tone of voice

speak or say wrongly