

Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims

Doug Strong

*At Nyght was come into that hostelrye
Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye,
Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle
In felaweshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle,
That toward Caunterbury wolden ryde.
(23-27 CT)*

The Canterbury Pilgrims

- I. The Knight
- II. The Squire
- III. The Yeoman
- IV. The Prioress
- V. The Nun
- VI. A Priest
- VII. Another Priest
- VIII. One more Priest
- IX. The Monk
- X. The Friar
- XI. The Merchant
- XII. The Clerk of Oxford
- XIII. The Sergeant of the Law
- XIV. The Franklin
- XV. The Habadasher
- XVI. The Weaver
- XVII. The Carpenter
- XVIII. The Dyer
- XIX. The Carpet Maker
- XX. The Cook
- XXI. The Sea Captain
- XXII. The Doctor
- XXIII. The Wife of Bath
- XXIV. The Parson
- XXV. The Plowman
- XXVI. The Reeve
- XXVII. The Miller
- XXVIII. The Manciple
- XXIX. The Pardoner
- XXX. The Summoner
- XXXI. The Host

The make up of any given group of pilgrims was likely to be similar to the company created by Geoffrey Chaucer. The majority of the people going on pilgrimage were likely to be representatives of the religious orders and the newly emerging middle class. The first estate is represented only by two members who are at the bottom stratum of that class-- a poor knight and his son the squire. The peasant class is represented by two members though one is also in the religious orders--the Parson and the Plowman. You might ask yourself "Why is this? Didn't top and bottom classes go on pilgrimage?" The answer question is yes and no. The top half of upper class tended to travel separately from the "rabble" and the bottom half of the upper class and the peasant class had no money with which to go on pilgrimage. Pilgrimages were expensive! If you wanted to go on pilgrimage you had to get away from whatever you were doing. Peasants were tied to the land so only the most devout and those who were free-men (like the plowman) were able to get away. Those from any class who could get away still had to contend with a lack of money. The nobility did not have jobs *per se*. Many had to rely on meager incomes from what ever land they might own, if any. So the majority of people who were able to go on pilgrimages were wealthy members of the merchant class and those who, due to there religious orders were expected to go as part of there duties.

A breakdown of the pilgrims' rank

Nobility

The Knight
The Squire

Religious orders

The Prioress
The Nun
A Priest
Another Priest
One More Priest
The Monk
The Friar
The Clerk of Oxford
The Parson (see also peasant class)
The Pardoner
The Summoner

Middle Class

The Yeoman
The Merchant
The Sergeant of the Law
The Franklin
The Habadasher
The Weaver
The Carpenter
The Dyer
The Carpet Maker
The Cook
The Sea Captain
The Doctor
The Wife of Bath
The Reeve
The Miller
The Manciple
The Host

Peasant Class

The Plowman
The Parson (see also religious orders)

The reasons that someone went on a pilgrimage were as varied as the people themselves. In the middle ages many people were devoutly religious. Though not all of them were. There is a tendency to think that we, modern people, are more worldly than our medieval counterparts. This simply is not so. Our medieval ancestors had the same needs, desires, hopes and fears that we do, with only subtle temporal differences. Many of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims were going on pilgrimage in order to fulfill social needs, like our modern vacations. Still others were going on pilgrimage to meet financial needs. Servants like the yeoman and the cook were brought along as part of their jobs and people like the pardoner and the summoner were going along because they saw devout religious pilgrims as easy marks for their sale of religious services and trinkets.

The pilgrims' reasons for going on pilgrimage.

Religious Reasons

The Knight
The Clerk of Oxford
The Parson
The Plowman

Social Reasons

The Squire
The Prioress
The Monk
The Friar (see also Illegitimate Financial Reasons)
The Merchant
The Sergeant of the Law
The Franklin
The Haberdasher
The Weaver
The Carpenter
The Dyer
The Carpet Maker
The Sea Captain
The Doctor
The Wife of Bath
The Reeve
The Miller
The Manciple

Legitimate Financial Reasons

The Nun
A Priest
Another Priest
One More Priest
The Yeoman
The Cook
The Host

Illegitimate Financial Reasons

The Friar (see also Social Reasons)
The Pardoner
The Summoner

Many of Chaucer's company were what might be called "Professional pilgrims." Among these would be the Summoner and the Pardoner who sold fake saints' relics and false pardons to unsuspecting pilgrims. The Wife of Bath who had been on pilgrimages most of her life (whenever she wasn't getting married.) She had been on pilgrimages to Jerusalem three times, as well as pilgrimages to Rome, Boulogne, Cologne, and to the Shrine of St. James de Compostella in Spain. The final professional pilgrim would be the Host. He ran the Tabard Inn in Southwark (London) and specialized in acting as a "tour guide" to the Shrine of St. Thomas a Becket in Canterbury Cathedral-- the most famous and popular pilgrimage site in all of England.