THE CANTERBURY PILGRIMS

The CANTERBURY pilgrims have been with us now for nearly 600 years. Until the nineteenth century, people were content to enjoy them, but with the rise of Anglistic scholarship the men of learning, if not the general reading public, began to pick them to pieces. They are still at it. Their studies have flooded us with good things, and in the process we professional students, at least, run the risk of drowning. The ordinary reader is willing enough to skip a footnote, and it does not bother him much if he misses the exact point of this or that detail. Not so the scholar, who is unhappy if anything escapes him, and feels ashamed if he misunderstands anything, however insignificant it may be. His passion for full and accurate knowledge, like any other compulsion of the human mind, has both a good and a bad side. The great danger is that we may become so absorbed in our study of the parts that we lose sight of the whole. This danger is ever present in any kind of exact scholarship. It threatens us here and now. But if we bear it constantly in mind, we may hope to reduce the hazards of our undertaking and reach a better understanding and appreciation of Chaucer's literary art than would otherwise be possible.

Let us begin by looking at the Canterbury pilgrims as a whole. What have they in common, other than their status as pilgrims to the shrine of Thomas Becket? Three things, as far as I can make out. First, they are
In a companye,
A 25 Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle
In felawshiphe,

but still a company. This fellowship of theirs is the most important thing about them. On it all else depends. Secondly, they are English. In the fourteenth century the Canterbury pilgrimage was made by many not of English nationality, but Chaucer’s pilgrims have no foreigners among them. Thirdly, they are commoners. They vary much in social status, but not one of them belongs to the nobility.

How does Chaucer treat the pilgrims in the general prolog? Most of them (21, to be exact) he describes individually. Five of them, the burgesses, he describes as a group. And four of them (or five, if you count Chaucer himself) he mentions but does not describe. The following of the prioress, as you will remember, consists of a nun and three priests. These four pilgrims are not described in the general prolog, and we hear no more of them anywhere in the text, except for Sir John, the teller of the nun’s priest’s tale, who is described, and identified as the nun’s priest, in the headlink of his tale, and described again in the endlink. The legend of Saint Cecily is given to the second nun (that is, to the nun who accompanies the prioress) in the rubrics that go with the tale, but in the prolog of the tale itself the narrator calls himself a son of Eve, and it seems evident that Chaucer wrote this tale originally for a man. The five burgesses are not described as individuals at all, but we have a delightful group description of them (A 361-378):

An haberdassher and a carpenter,
A webbe, a dyere, and a tapicer
Were with us eek, clothed in o liveree,
Of a solemne and greet fraternitee.
Ful fresh and newe hir gere apyked was;
Hir knyves were ychapéd nought with bras,
But al with silver, wroght full clene and weel,
Hir girdles and hir pouches every deel.
Wel semed ech of hem a fair burgeys
To sitten in a yeldhalle on a deys.
Everich, for the wisdom that he can,
Was shaply for to been an alderman,
For catel hadde they ynogh and rente,
And eek hir wyves wolde it wel assente;
And elles certein were they to blame.
It is ful fair to been yclept 'ma dame,'
And goon to viglyes al bifoře,
And have a mantel royalliche ybore.

This is the first and the last we hear of the burgesses. Their servant the cook tells a tale (or begins one), and otherwise plays a part in the story of the pilgrimage, but his five masters are never once mentioned again.

It is worth noting that though the burgesses are described as a group, no two of them follow the same trade. The same principle holds for the 21 pilgrims who get individual descriptions: among them we find only one knight, only one miller, only one cook, etc. In the little group of five made up of the prioress and her attendants, however, things are markedly different: this group consists of two nuns and three priests. One may argue, it is true, that the two nuns differ a good deal in status, since one of them has the exalted position of prioress. The threeness of the priests cannot be explained away so readily, but it remains true that only one of them appears elsewhere and he is there spoken of, not as one of the nun’s priests but simply as the nun’s priest. Finally, the group of burgesses includes a carpenter, and since the reeve likewise is a carpenter by trade it would be hard to deny that two of Chaucer’s pilgrims are carpenters. Here again one may get out of the difficulty, after a fashion, by arguing that the reeve has risen in the world and that his work as a
carpenter belongs to the days of his youth. But the reeve himself, in his quarrel with the miller, makes so much of his trade that we are forced to agree with him and call him a carpenter. Be it noted, too, that the canon's yeoman is added to the squire's in the course of the pilgrimage.

What does all this come to? We conclude that Chaucer's general scheme forbade duplication, much less triplication, but that he felt free to depart from this scheme now and then if he found such a departure convenient. In other words, Chaucer refused to be hampered by what the Germans call systemzwang. He was willing to be reasonably systematic, but not rigorously so. We shall find this easygoing technic characteristic of Chaucer's art.

If in general a given profession, calling, trade, or occupation is represented by one pilgrim only, what is that pilgrim's relation to his fellow-practitioners? Is he meant to be truly representative or typical of his calling? For instance, is the plowman to be taken as a typical peasant? Let us see what Chaucer has to say about the plowman:

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A 529 With him ther was a plowman, was his brother,  
That hadde ylad of dong ful many a fother.
A trewe swinker and a good was he,  
Livinge in pees and parfit charitee.
God loved he best with al his hole herte  
At alle tymes, thogh him gamed or smerte,
And thanne his neighebour right as himselve.
He wolde thresshe, and therto dyke and delve,  
For Cristes sake, for every povre wight,
Withouten hyre, if it lay in his might.
His tythes payed he ful faire and wel,
Bothe of his propre swink and his catel.
In a tabard he rood upon a mere.
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Obviously the plowman is no ordinary peasant. He is the best of all possible peasants, a superlatively good man in that station of life to which it has pleased God to call him. He is a faithful and competent worker, a pious and
conscientious Christian, a self-sacrificing neighbor, a man admirable in every respect. The other pilgrims are equally superlative, though most of them lack the moral perfection of the plowman. Kittredge in his first Johns Hopkins lecture of 1914\footnote{These lectures were published in 1915 under the title Chaucer and his Poetry. My quotations from them refer to this book.} explains these characterizations thus:

Chaucer had an immense enthusiasm for life in this world; . . . Whatever was good of its kind was a delight to him. And he had such stupendous luck in always meeting nonpareils! There was no better priest than the Parson anywhere; no such Pardoner from one end of England to the other; never so great a purchaser as the Man of Law. If you sought from Hull to Carthage, you couldn’t find a mariner to match the Shipman. The Wife of Bath was so excellent a cloth-maker that she actually beat the Dutch. The Sumner’s bass voice was more than twice as loud as a trumpet. The Friar was the best beggar in his convent. . . . [p. 32].

The superlative quality of Chaucer’s pilgrims is beautifully brought out in the passage which I have just quoted. The explanation given is less satisfying. When Kittredge speaks of Chaucer’s stupendous luck he is only jesting, of course; the luck was of Chaucer’s own making, as Kittredge knew perfectly well. But it is not enough to explain Chaucer’s characterizations as an outgrowth of his enthusiasm for life, and his delight in whatever was good of its kind. The pilgrims are actually superlative for literary reasons. From time immemorial it has been the custom in story-telling to make the characters heroic, larger than life, extraordinary rather than ordinary people. The hero is commonly stronger and nobler than other men; the villain is a devil incarnate. The stories current in Chaucer’s own day regularly conform to this model. Nobody in the fourteenth century would have thought of doing otherwise. Chaucer conformed with the rest. His pilgrims, if they were to be of interest to the reading public, had to be
unusual, striking, remarkable in every possible way, and so they are.

Before leaving the point it may be well to take another illustration, and for this I choose the description of the knight:

A 43 A knight ther was, and that a worthy man,
That fro the tyme that he first bigan
To ryden out, he loved chivalrye,
Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisye.
Ful worthy was he in his lorde werre,
And therto hadde he riden (no man ferre)
As wel in Christendom as hetenesse,
And ever honoured for his worthinesse.

His campaigns in Christendom are mentioned but not specified or dwelt upon, for Chaucer wishes to make of him a great champion of Christianity against the heathen. The tale of his campaigns in hetenesse runs thus:

A 51 At Alisaundre he was, whan it was wonne;
Ful ofte tyme he hadde the bord bigonne
Aboven alle naciouns in Pruce.
In Lettow hadde he reysed and in Ruce,
No Cristen man so ofte of his degree.
In Gernade at the sege eek hadde he be
Of Algezir, and riden in Belmarye.
At Lyeys was he, and at Satalye,
Whan they were wonne; and in the Grete See
At many a noble armee hadde he be.
At mortal batailles hadde he been fiftene,
And foughten for our feith at Tramissene
In listes thryes, and ay slayn his fo.
This ilke worthy knight had been also
Somtyme with the lord of Palatye,
Ageyn another hethen in Turkye:
And evermore he hadde a sovereyn prys.

His fighting for the faith had taken him to the frontiers of Christendom and beyond, in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Such a record as this is surely unexampled and makes of
our knight a Christian hero indeed, a man worthy of all admiration. But the glory which he had gained in warfare did not go to his head:

A 68 And though that he were worthy, he was wys,
   And of his port as meke as is a mayde,
   He never yet no vileinye ne sayde
   In al his lyf, unto no maner wight.
   He was a verray parfit gentil knight.

Chaucer not only makes his knight perfect, he calls him perfect in so many words.

Yet human perfection has its limits, and the knight fails on one occasion to live up to Chaucer’s description of him. Or it would be better to say that Chaucer here, as often, finds it convenient to depart from the rigors of consistency. The knight, it appears, is not perfect after all. Even though

   He never yet no vileinye ne sayde
   In al his lyf unto no maner wight,

he breaks the habits of a lifetime to stint the monk of his tale.

B 3957 Ho! quod the knight, good sir, namore of this!
   That ye han seyd is right ynough, ywis,
   And mocchel more!

This piece of rudeness does not go without defense, of course. The knight justifies himself by presenting his views on story-telling, views which, in his opinion, are not peculiar to himself but are widely held. He says,

   For litel hevinesse
   Is right ynough to mocchel folk, I gesse.
   I seye for me, it is a greet dise
   Wheras men han ben in greet welthe and ese
   To heren of hir sodeyn fal, allas!
   And the contrarie is joie and greet solas,
   As whan a man hath been in povre estaat,
   And clymbeth up, and wexeth fortunat,
Here we get what amounts to a new characterization of the knight in terms of his literary taste, a characterization put in the knight's own mouth and therefore highly authoritative—who could know better than he himself does what it is that he likes and dislikes? And we discover that our military hero has the taste of a child, or at any rate of a thoroughly unsophisticated person, when it comes to works of literary art. Tragedy he cannot abide. A story must end happily, or he will have none of it. He feels so strongly about this (or so Chaucer would have us think) that his feelings overcome his gentility and make him commit a gross breach of good manners.

There are various ways of looking at this incident in the story of the pilgrimage. One may say that Chaucer has made the knight more human by making him less perfect, and this is undoubtedly true, but it seems altogether likely that the change in characterization is no more than a by-product of the action. But if the interruption itself is the important thing, what was Chaucer's reason for having such a thing happen? Interruption of a speaker in the midst of his speech may be looked upon as a dramatic device which amuses the audience and enlivens the action. The speaker is the victim (the butt) of a jest, and his discomfiture makes you laugh. Chaucer cast himself in the part of such a victim or butt when he had the host interrupt him in the midst of the tale of Sir Thopas. The host stints Chaucer of his tale because he finds it not to his taste. He denounces it in the most vigorous terms:

B 2109  No more of this, for goddes dignitee,
         Quod oure hoste, for thou makest me
         So wery of thy verray lewednesse
         That, also wisly god my soule blesse,
Myn eres aken of thy drasty speche;
Now swiche a rym the devel I biteche!
This may wel be rym dogerel, quod he.
Why so? quod I, why wiltow lette me
More of my tale than another man,
Sin that it is the beste rym I can?
By God, quod he, for pleynly, at a word,
Thy drasty ryming is nat worth a tord;
Thou doost nought elles but despendest tyme.
Sir, at o word, thou shalt no lenger ryme.
Lat see wher thou canst tellen aught in geste,
Or telle in prose somwhat at the leste
In which ther be som mirthe or som doctrine.

We have here a pattern of stinting which Chaucer found so effective that he repeated it, with variations, later on, using the knight, instead of the host, to do the dirty work, and making the monk the victim or butt of the jest. That the knight and the monk are the two men of highest rank and greatest distinction among the pilgrims only adds to the comic effect.

But the device has another purpose besides, the most important purpose of all, I think. Chaucer’s rime of Sir Thopas is indeed a literary gem, one of the most delightful and successful parodies in the English language. But Chaucer did not care to finish it. He had done what he wanted to do to his full satisfaction, and to keep on doing it to the length of a whole metrical romance seemed to him needless. Why labor a parody, once you have made your points? The device of stinting came in handy here. By using it, Chaucer could leave his parody unfinished and put the blame for its unfinished state on the host. This was a little hard on the host, no doubt, who had to be represented as disliking a very choice specimen of literary art. But the host’s shoulders were broad, and Chaucer had no scruples.

The device of stinting was used a second time for a like
reason. Chaucer had composed for the monk’s mouth as many tragedies as he wanted to do. The general theme, *de casibus virorum illustrium*, is endless; history and story alike afford a plentiful supply of men in great place who fall. An easy and amusing way of ending the series of falls is to have it broken off. Chaucer makes the knight do the stinting partly for variety’s sake and partly because he thereby heightens the dramatic effect. To have so gentle a person as the knight do so rude a thing makes the stinting far more dramatic than it could possibly be if put in the hands of the host, from whom politeness was not to be expected.

Kittredge in the fifth of his Johns Hopkins lectures gives another explanation. He says,

The Monk belonged to the “gentles,” and the Host was not so ready to interrupt him as in the case of Chaucer, who was a somewhat ambiguous personality, even to the omniscient Bailly. Not altogether because Harry was considerate. He stood in no awe of Dan Piers; the preliminaries demonstrate that. He was simply at his wit’s end. . . . the situation was just a trifle beyond his control; and so the natural leader [i.e. the knight] asserted himself, as many a time on the perilous edge of battle when it raged. [p. 164].

This view illustrates a mistake into which literary critics fall all too often: the mistake of treating the characters in a work of literary art as if they were actual human beings instead of creatures of the artist’s fancy. The host failed to stint the monk, not because the situation was beyond his control, but because Chaucer, when he used for the second time the narrative device of interruption, used it (for artistic reasons) with variation instead of repeating it mechanically.

After the knight spoke up, the host had a good deal to say, in his usual impudent style, but his literary opinions need not be taken any more seriously here than in the case of Sir Thopas. His comments on both tales are meant to
be funny. They are not meant to be literary criticism. Actually the monk’s tale is not tedious. The knight objects to it for another reason, as we have seen. The knight’s views, unlike the host’s, are meant to be literary criticism of a sort. The knight expresses in all seriousness the attitude of the general unsophisticated public toward literary art. His esthetic naiveté gives us the right to smile, and that is probably what Chaucer wanted us to do.

There is something else about the knight’s perfection that needs a word or two, if not extended comment. Chaucer calls him a perfect knight, not a perfect man, and the distinction is important. His perfections are those of knighthood. For that very reason his weakness in the literary realm does not matter much; we do not expect a soldier to have a keen and discriminating appreciation of the niceties of literature. The perfections of the other pilgrims likewise do not range far afield; they stay within, or not far without, the orbit of their respective occupations. The miller’s talents as a wrestler, and as an opener of doors, have no direct connection, it is true, with his thumb of gold, but they befit this calling, and his station in life, well enough, whereas in the knight such talents would be out of place. In real life, of course, misfits abound; many people follow a trade or profession which they dislike and to which they are ill suited. Not so in Chaucer. His pilgrims thoroughly enjoy what they do and they do it supremely well. In that sense they are typical; it would be hard to imagine the knight, for instance, as anything but a knight. His characteristics are determined by the ideals of his specific profession.

But what of pilgrims like the monk, the friar, and the pardoner? Are they not misfits in their clerical profession? From one point of view, yes. But Chaucer, it would seem, did not find the monastic or the mendicant life sympathetic, much less the sale of indulgences. Upon these
departments (so to speak) of the Church he looked with a cold and realistic eye. He saw them as they were in the fourteenth century, of course, and what he saw was not edifying. Chaucer took the standards of conduct then prevalent as he found them, and made his monk, his friar, and his pardoner to fit. All three are eminently successful men. They have all gone far in their respective professions.

The monk is described in the general prolog as

a fair for the maistrye,

And Chaucer quickly makes this description more specific: the monk is

A 167 A manly man, to been an abbot able.

He has already risen high, though not yet an abbot. He is an outrider (that is, an inspector), and the keeper of a cell (that is, the head of a dependent monastery). Chaucer goes so far as to call him a lord, a title usually given only to abbots and bishops among the clergy. In short, our monk is no common soldier in the ranks. He has made good (to use a bit of modern business slang) and has risen almost to the top. His success goes to show that he has chosen the right career for himself. He is by no means a misfit; on the contrary, he is a perfect fit.

The perfection of his fit comes out in another way. He is happy in his profession. He enjoys being a monk. If he were a misfit he could hardly get such satisfaction out of monastic life. His way of being a monk was not the old-fashioned way, one must admit, but

A 175 This ilke monk leet olde things pace,
And held after the newe world the space.

He saw no reason to stick to his cloister and follow the dull routine of prayer, study, fasting, and manual labor fixed by the old rule:
What sholde he studie, and make himselven wood,
Upon a book in cloistre alwey to poure,
Or swinken with his handes, and laboure,
As Austin bit? How shal the world be served?
Lat Austin have his swink to him reserved.

And in fact the monk did no swinking. Instead, he went hunting, and he gratified his taste for fine clothes, choice food, blooded horses, and the like. In sum, he lived like a lord (or perhaps it would be better, these days, to say he lived as lords used to live), and the effects of this good living were manifest in his person. As Chaucer puts it,

He was a lord ful fat and in good point.

The host describes him to much the same effect:

I vow to god, thou hast a ful fair skin.
It is a gentil pasture ther thou goost;
Thou art nat lyk a penaunt or a goost.
Upon my feith, thou art som officer,
Som worthy sexteyn or som celerer,
For by my fader soule, as to my doom,
Thou art a maister whan thou art at hoom,
No povre cloisterer ne no novys,
But a governour, wyly and wys,
And therwithal of brawnes and of bones
A welfaring persone for the nones.

Here is a perfect picture of a successful man, if ever there was one. Be it noted in passing that the monk, when he comes to tell a tale, changes character. The man who scorns to stick his nose in a book turns exceedingly bookish. His story smells strongly of the lamp, and we get not so much as one whiff of the hunting field. Here again Chaucer chooses to be inconsistent.

The monk is worldly but not wicked. The friar is just as worldly as the monk and wicked besides. The difference between them answers to the difference between
their orders. The monk represents a religious aristocracy. He lives on the income from inherited wealth, and his style of living, irreligious though it be, has a certain dignity about it, a distinction characteristic of institutions and individuals whose possessions have been in the family for a long time. The rents are not used as the pious givers of the capital endowments intended, but time has dulled the edge of memory and custom has lent a kind of warrant to the misuse of the funds. The monks, like the secular landed proprietors, do not have to work for a living and can devote themselves to activities congenial to their tastes and suited to their capacities. And their inheritance brings with it something more than mere wealth: a measure of sophistication and cultivation which enables them to live graciously as well as pleasantly.

The friar, on the other hand, belongs to a mendicant order, an order which, in theory at least, derives its income not from endowments but from begging. Our friar accordingly spends his working hours currying favor with people who he hopes will give him something. His practice of the mendicant art does not bring him any store of heavenly treasure; certainly he does not have the virtue of humility. But he reaps substantial earthly gains, and the life he leads suits him to perfection. He has mastered the art of begging. It is his profession and he knows all the tricks. To quote,

A 221  Ful swetely herde he confessioun,
    And plesaunt was his absolucioun;
    He was an esy man to yeve penaunce
    Ther as he wiste to han a good pitaunce;
    For unto a povere ordre for to yive
    Is signe that man is wel yshrive.
    For if he yaf, he dorste make avaunt
    He wiste that a man was repentaunt.
    For many a man so hard is of his herte
    He may nat wepe althogh him sore smerte;
    Therfore, in stede of weping and preyeres,
    Men moot yeve silver to the povere freres. . . .
And overal, ther as profit sholde aryse,
Curteys he was, and lowly of servyse;
Ther nas no man nowher so vertuous.
He was the beste beggere in his hous;
For thogh a widwe hadde noght a sho,
So plesaunt was his in principio
Yet wolde he have a ferthing er he wente.
His purchas was wel bettre than his rente.

And the friar's powers of persuasion are not restricted to monetary matters. He is an expert seducer of young women, for one thing. He also knows how to get into the good graces of important people. Indeed, he is such a tremendous success in his profession that he has become an important person himself. In Chaucer's words, "he was like a master or a pope." And he associated by preference with other important people, neglecting the work with the poor to which a friar was supposed to devote himself.

The pardoner was the worst of the lot, as his profession was the most contemptible. Chaucer pictures him, too, as a tremendous success, a salesman supremely good at his task because perfectly suited to it. He is the ideal pardoner, if one may speak of ideals in such a connection. He was also admirably equipped with the tools of his trade. His wallet was brim-full of pardons "come from Rome all hot," and he also had a choice collection of relics, among them a pillow-case

Which that, he seyde, was our lady veyl.
He seyde he hadde a gobet of the seyl
That seynt Peter hadde, whan that he wente
Upon the see, til Jesu Crist him hente.
He hadde a croys of latoun, ful of stones,
And in a glas he hadde pigges bones.
But with thise relics, whan that he fond
A povre person dwelling upon lond,
Upon a day he gat him more moneye
Than that the person gat in monthes tweye.
And thus, with feyned flattery and japes,
He made the person and the peple his apes.
But trewely to tellen, atte laste,
He was in chirche a noble ecclesiaste.
Wel coude he rede a lessoun or a storie,
But alderbest he song an offertorie,
For wel he wiste, whan that song was songe,
He moste preche, and wel aflyle his tonge,
To winne silver, as he ful wel coude;
Therfore he song so meriely and loude.

Chaucer's own characterization of the pardoner in the general prolog is supplemented by an extraordinarily frank and elaborate piece of self-characterization, the prolog of the pardoner's tale. By putting this devastating description in the pardoner's own mouth Chaucer gains an effect dramatic in the extreme, though at the expense of verisimilitude. Kittredge, it is true, denies that there is any sacrifice of verisimilitude here. In the last of his Johns Hopkins lectures he argues that the pardoner

is simply forestalling the reflections of his fellow-pilgrims. "I know I am a rascal," he says in effect, "and you know it; and I wish to show you that I know you know it." Like many another of us poor mortals, the Pardoner is willing to pass for a knave, but objects to being taken for a fool. To deceive mankind is his business, but this time no deception is possible, and he scorns the role of the futile hypocrite. [p. 214].

This argument does not lack ingenuity, but it has a modern ring. The truth of the matter is, Chaucer does not much concern himself with verisimilitude as we understand the term. He makes no serious effort to be true to life, when he characterizes his pilgrims. One and all, they are too good to be true. Such remarkable specimens of humanity as they are simply cannot be found in actual life. Chaucer's pilgrims belong to literature, and in presenting them Chaucer follows the conventions of literature, the conventions of his own day.
One of these conventions is that of self-characterization. This particular convention goes back to the very beginnings of English literature. We find it in *Beowulf*, for instance. In later times it belonged especially to the drama. By way of illustration I may mention Belial’s characterization of himself in the *Castle of Perseverance*. Such a self-characterization commonly appears as the first speech, or the first important speech, of the character, a speech which serves to make clear to the audience just who the character is and what kind of character he is. Chaucer follows this procedure: when the pardoner takes the center of the stage, in response to the host’s request that he tell a tale, he begins by telling the pilgrims about himself. He does a very thorough job of self-description; by the time he has finished his prolog we know him through and through. Of course the readers of the general prolog are well informed about him already, but Chaucer is taking no chances: some may have skipped or missed the earlier passage and some may have forgotten it by this time.

The pardoner’s exposure of himself does not stand isolated in the *Canterbury Tales*. Parallel to it is the long and extremely frank prolog of the wife of Bath’s tale, where the wife gives us what is perhaps the most elaborate piece of self-characterization in the English language. Another striking case is that of the reeve, which has a quality all its own:

**A 3864**

So thee’k, quod he, ful wel coude I yow quyte
With blering of a proud milleres ye,
If that me liste speke of ribaudye.
But ik am old, me list not play for age;
Gras-tyme is doon, my fodder is now forage,
This whyte top wryteth myne olde yeres,
Myn herte is also mowled as myne heres,
But-if I fare as dooth an open-ers;
That ilke fruit is ever leng the wers,
Til it be roten in mullok or in stree.
We olde men, I drede, so fare we;
Til we be roten can we nat be rype;
We hoppen ay, whyl that the world wol pype.
For in oure wil ther stiketh ever a nayl,
To have an hoor heed and a grene tayl,
As hath a leek; for thogh our might be goon,
Our wil desireth folie ever in oon,
For whan we may nat doon, than wol we speke.
Yet in our ashen olde is fyr yreke:
Foure gledes han we, whiche I shal devyse,
Avaunting, lying, anger, coveityse;
Thise foure sparkles longen unto elde.
Our olde lemes mowe we! been unwelde,
But wil ne shal nat faillen, that is sooth,
And yet ik have alwey a coltes tooth,
As many a yeer as it is passed henne
Sin that my tappe of lyf bigan to renne.
For sikerly, whan I was bore, anon
Deeth drogh the tappe of lyf and leet it gon;
And ever sith hath so the tappe yronne
Til that almost al empty is the tonne.
The streem of lyf now droppeth on the chimbe;
The sely tonge may wel ringe and chimbe
Of wrecchednesse that passed is ful yore;
With olde folk, save dotage, is namore.

Here what begins as self-characterization turns into a characterization of old people generally. The passage brings these no comfort, but it ends with a metaphor so beautiful that one almost forgets how hideous the picture is meant to be.

We have looked at three representatives of the Church: the monk, the friar, and the pardoner. With them goes the summoner, who though not in holy orders belongs to the Church group, since he is a functionary of the ecclesiastical courts. The summoner is presented as the pardoner's friend and traveling companion, and the association is appropriate, since the two are equally unscrupulous. But Chaucer includes among his pilgrims several others
who have devoted themselves to the service of the Church, and four of these are described: the prioress, the parson, the clerk, and the nun's priest. The rest of the present chapter will deal with these four pilgrims.

The prioress is the female counterpart of the monk, but since her worldliness is that of a woman, it takes a shape very different from his. She is interested above all in elegance and refinement of manners, with the royal court as her model. One might describe her as the most ladylike of all ladylike ladies. Chaucer's description of her is the most delicately, daintily humorous passage in the Canterbury Tales. He takes her lightly, but he does not do anything so gross as poking open fun at her would be. The name he gives her, Eglentyne, has no religious associations, so far as I know; it goes back to the chansons de geste, and fits the lady to perfection.

It is noteworthy that religion hardly enters into Chaucer's description of the prioress. In this respect the description differs radically from what is said about the other pilgrims who follow the religious life. In so far as Chaucer touches on religion at all in his words about the prioress, he gives it a worldly twist. Thus, in the familiar lines,

A 122  Ful wel she song the service divine,  
Entuned in hir nose ful semely,

the devotional act has been turned into a performance, with propriety as its central feature. The prolog of the prioress's tale, however, is devotional enough. One is reminded of the contrast between the monk of the general prolog, scornful of books, and the monk who, in the prolog of his tale, defines tragedy with the utmost learning.

But if Chaucer in describing the prioress says nothing about her religious feeling he does make much of her tenderheartedness, or conscience, as he calls it:
But, for to speken of hir conscience,
She was so charitable and so pitous,
She wolde wepe if that she sawe a mous
Caught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.
Of smale houndes had she, that she fedde
With rosted flesh, or milk and wastel-breed,
But sore weep she if oon of hem were deed
Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte;
And al was conscience and tendre herte.

Here the superlative quality which we find in all Chaucer’s pilgrims is beautifully exemplified. The prioress is not only tenderhearted; she carries this tenderness of feeling to its uttermost limits when she weeps at the sight of a dead mouse in a trap. One is inevitably reminded of eighteenth-century sentimentalism. Kittredge, in his fifth Johns Hopkins lecture, links the tenderheartedness of the prioress with frustration. He says (p. 178),

What can the prioress know of a mother’s feelings? Everything, though she is never to have children, having chosen, so she thought, the better part. But her heart goes out, in yearnings which she does not comprehend or try to analyze, to little dogs, and little boys at school. Nowhere is the poignant trait of thwarted motherhood so affecting as in this character of the prioress.

No doubt this is an excellent piece of modern psychological analysis, though one finds it rather risky to put back into the fourteenth century such an interpretation of the nun’s behavior. But Kittredge goes even further. He says of the prioress, “Her little dogs went with her on the journey, and she watched over them with anxious affection” (p. 177). But there is no statement to that effect in the text, and in the absence of such a statement we have no right to presume that the puppies as well as their mistress took part in the pilgrimage. The prioress exists as a character of fiction only, and her actions should be strictly confined to those recorded in the text; they should not be augmented by hypothetical biographical details.
The nun’s priest is not described in the general prolog, but the host, when he calls upon him to tell a tale, gives us a brief description of him:

B 4000 Com neer, thou preest, com hider, thou sir John,
Tel us swich thing as may our hertes glade,
Be blythe, though thou ryde upon a jade.
What though thyn hors be bothe foul and lene,
If he wol serve thee, rekke nat a bene;
Look that thyn herte be mery evermo.

Here the host, with his usual impudence, brings out the fact that the nun’s priest has a miserably poor mount, and this is only another way of saying that the priest has no great store of this world’s goods. Evidently, however, sir John takes his poverty in good part:

Yis, sir, quod he, yis, host, so mote I go,
But I be mery, ywis, I wol be blamed.
And right anon his tale he hath attamed,
And thus he seyde unto us everichon,
This swete preest, this goodly man, sir John.

The prolog of the nun’s priest’s tale thus ends with a single line in which Chaucer himself describes sir John as a sweet-spirited priest and an excellent man. In the epilog of the tale the host adds a little to the picture:

See, whiche braunes hath this gentil preest,
So greet a nekke and swich a large breest!
He loketh as a sperhauk with his yen.
Him nedeth nat his colour for to dyen
With brasil, ne with grayn of Portingale.
Now sire, faire falle yow for youre tale!

From this we learn more about the priest’s physique than about his character, but what is said of his character is highly favorable.

The other two clerics, the parson and the clerk, both appear in the general prolog, where they are praised in the
highest terms. The parson is presented as an ideal parish priest; the clerk, as an ideal man of learning. The description of the parson begins thus (A 477 ff.):

A good man was ther of religioun,
And was a povre persoun of a town,
But riche he was of holy thoughte and werk.
He was also a lerned man, a clerk,
That Cristes gospel trewely wolde preche;
His parisshens devoutly wolde he teche.

It will be noted that the ideal includes learning as well as poverty, piety, and devotion to duty. Other notable features of the description are its length (no less than 52 lines) and its consistently serious tone. The clerk, on the other hand, is disposed of in 24 lines, livened with touches of humor. The description of the clerk begins as follows (A 285 ff.):

A clerk ther was of Oxenford also,
That unto logik hadde long ygo.
As lene was his hors as is a rake,
And he was nat right fat, I undertake,
But loked holwe, and therto soberly.
Ful thredbar was his overest courtepy,
For he had geten him yet no benefyce,
Ne was so worldly for to have offyce.
For him was lever have at his beddes heed
Twenty bokes, clad in blak and reed,
Of Aristotle and his philosophye,
Than robes riche or fithele or gay sautyre.

His poverty, like that of the nun’s priest, is marked by the leanness of his horse, but for the clerk Chaucer is not content with this touch; he goes on to speak of the hollow look and the threadbare coat of the man of learning, features particularly appropriate in one who had devoted himself to scholarship and the academic life.

It is a matter of no little interest that Chaucer’s good
clerics, truly religious men, are all poor, whereas the bad clerics, and the worldlings, all live in comfort or even in luxury. Chaucer seems to have taken poverty for an outward sign of holiness. The loathly lady in the wife of Bath’s tale, be it noted, points out to her husband that

D 1178  The hye god, on whom that we bileve,
         In wilful povert chees to live his lyf.

The man of law, however, in the prolog of his tale, pictures poverty as an unmitigated evil. One could hardly imagine him choosing to be poor, but then he was a man of law, not a man of God. For the creature comforts, pets, fine clothes, gold ornaments and the like of the two worldlings (the monk and the prioress) there is less excuse, since they had taken the vow of poverty, but one might plead that technically speaking they had not broken this vow, since, in theory at least, they had no possessions, though the orders to which they belonged were wealthy enough to provide them with luxuries as well as the necessities of life. Moreover, Chaucer does not accuse the worldlings of avarice, and he treats their worldliness with a kind of amused tolerance. The friar and the pardonner belong to a very different category, that of wicked, vicious clerics. They make money hand over fist, by fraud, deceit, and trickery of the basest and most despicable kind. For them there is no excuse, no saving grace. Their gains are ill gotten indeed.