



# CHAUCER'S PILGRIMS

A TALK BY LIZA PICARD TO THE HISTORY SOCIETY

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## Who was Chaucer?

Chaucer lived from 1340 to 1400. This was a time full of change and upheavals: war in fits and starts against the French; the great pandemic in 1349 ('the Black Death') which killed about half the population; attempts by the Establishment to try to stop wages rising and serfs moving to seek better conditions of life, which, in turn, led to the Rebellion in 1381. Chaucer entered the Royal Service as a lad of 17 and steadily made his way up the greasy pole. His wife's sister was married to the King's son, 'John of Gaunt'. Chaucer found time for a second career – in writing, often translating continental literature, sometimes writing originals of his own.

But he is best known for his *Canterbury Tales*. He began them in 1387. He sometimes stopped writing them for a while, and then took them up again – almost as a hobby. Chaucer led the linguistic field in using a dialect of Anglo-Saxon rather than Latin or French. It grew into the language we speak today. The *Canterbury Tales* were designed to be read aloud.

*Liza's comments:* If you feel inspired to try reading it, you'll find that as long as you know a few key words, you can get the general gist ... I recommend it for mental exercise as a change from torts and contracts. On the surface, at a first reading, the portraits are innocent enough, but when you think of them carefully, afterwards, almost every one had a hidden message – and not always a charitable one.'

## Who were these pilgrims?

In this too brief summary of a wonderfully entertaining talk, we are going to mention just four of the characters Liza discussed – and leave it to readers to find out more about the pilgrims and her researches when, in the not too distant future, *Chaucer's People* is published.

### The Wife of Bath

The 14th century brought a radical change in England's overseas trade – from the centuries-old export of raw wool to a new industry in cloth made in England and competing in the European market. It was in this trade that the Wife of Bath was engaged. Chaucer fills in some personal details. We get a precis of the duties of married people. A husband should be able to satisfy his wife's sexual appetite. The Wife of Bath had had five husbands so far and was looking around for her sixth. Maybe that was why she had come on the pilgrimage. She blamed her rampant sexuality on her stars: 'by vertue of my constellation that made me, I could not withdraw my chamber of Venus from a good fellow.'

She had been on many foreign pilgrimages. Liza explained the veneration of relics by the medieval pilgrims: 'The best kinds of relics were body parts of saints. The best of all would have been part of the bodies of Mary the Mother of God or her Son, but unfortunately for the market in relics they had both been taken up to heaven in the flesh, after their deaths, leaving nothing of themselves behind. Except –



Detail from the mural by Ezra Winter in the Library of Congress.

just one tiny piece of skin that Jesus had left behind when he was circumcised. Actually several pilgrimage sites made rival claims, but by its very nature I think there can have been only one, so the others were – an appalling thought to a pious pilgrim – fakes. Many of the devout pilgrims must have known that these relics couldn't have been authentic – they must have been produced by fraudsters who were simply after money. Yet they longed passionately to believe the relics were true, and they were overjoyed to see them and kneel before them. Here is where the medieval mind is most impenetrable to us born in the secular age of reason.'

### The Knight

Most of the men in Chaucer's audience would have done military service, so they would have settled down in their seats, thinking to hear war stories from an old soldier. But the Knight wasn't quite what they expected. He began all right – he was 'a worthy man' who had from boyhood loved 'chivalry, truth and honour, freedom and courtesy'.

'But, and here came the surprise, 40 years after Crecy and 30 years after Poitiers, why are these great battles not listed, with pride, in the Knight's service record? Instead, Chaucer gave him a list of very different battles ... mostly during campaigns aimed at loot, with rape and murder thrown in for good measure. Not a scintilla of chivalry, truth and honour, freedom or courtesy.' Liza added: 'there's a fascinating book called *Chaucer's Knight* by Terry Knight who co-wrote *The Life of Brian* and turns out to be an erudite medieval scholar.'

### The Prioress – Amor Vincit Omnia

She 'ticked all the right boxes of medieval pulchritude: shining grey eyes, a straight little nose, a small red mouth ... she was charmingly soft hearted. Her table manners

were impeccable – not the first accomplishment we would look for in someone dedicated to the service of God, but handy if, as a Prioress, she had to entertain grandee visitors'.

'Chaucer didn't have to tell his audience much about nuns, most of them must have had sisters or other relatives in convents. They were useful places for unwanted females.' Nuns tended to come from affluent families. 'The life inside was not too bad, usually ... What did nuns do all day? The domestic work of the convent was seen to by the lay sisters. Coming from the households that they did, the nuns would not have known how to do housework or cooking or suchlike. But they could produce beautiful embroidery. A little light gardening passed the time. They might run a school for children up to the age of nine, when the boys went off to learn manly things such as warfare, and the girls stayed behind to learn ladylike accomplishments and brush up their French.'

'Convents often had to accommodate guests sent to them by the royal household. They could hardly say no. But these guests brought with them a train of servants and friends, and horses and pets and wardrobes of the latest fashion, so that it must have been hard for a girl to concentrate on divine worship, even if she wanted to.'

### The Man of Law

'A Serjeant of the Law was there – the one you've all been waiting for'. Serjeants were the top rank of lawyers, from whom most appointments to the Bench were made. Chaucer's example was a skilful conveyancer who knew all the statutes and judgments by heart, back as far as the Conquest. But – and here comes the typical Chaucerian dig – he 'semed busier than he was'. He was his own advertising agent. ■