THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 128: THE CANTERBURY TELLERS

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 128: The Canterbury Tellers. In this episode, we're going to continue our look at the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer. It is one of the most popular and enduring works of Middle English literature. And one of the most fascinating aspects of the poem is the wide variety of characters that are presented. These various pilgrims gather together with a common purpose – to go on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. The pilgrims represent a cross-section of English society in the late 1300s, and Chaucer paints a vivid picture of each one. In the process, we get an incredible insight into the common people and culture of the Middle Ages. But Chaucer didn't just provide descriptions of his pilgrims. He also modified his language to fit the characters. Very often, he chose words that reflected the social class of the characters, and in one particular tale, he actually had his characters speak in their own local dialect. He is considered to be first English writers to do that. So this time, we'll look at the characters of the Canterbury Tales – in other words, the Canterbury Tellers. And along the way, we'll see what Chaucer's language has to tell us about the state of English in the late 1300s.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now this time, I want to focus on the characters presented by Geoffrey Chaucer in the Canterbury Tales. Chaucer's characters represent a cross-section of English society. They come from different classes and from different parts of the country. And Chaucer often modified his language to fit the characters. Characters from the higher classes often speak differently than those from the lower classes. Those of the higher classes often use more French and Latin words, while those of the lower classes tend to use more Anglo-Saxon words and they often use curse words and speech that would have been considered vulgar by those of upper classes.

Beyond the class differences, Chaucer's characters sometimes speak in their own local dialects. But I'm going to focus on the regional differences in the next episode. In fact, next time, we'll conclude out look at the Canterbury Tales with a particular focus on two of the tales – the Miller's Tale and the Reeve's Tale. Those two stories are fascinating because they represent a type of literature that we've never really explored before in the podcast. They are humorous and bawdy stories featuring risqué humor and adult themes. They represent a style of literature known as a fabliau, and Chaucer was a master at telling those types of stories. It's probably one of the reasons why the Canterbury Tales has been so popular over the centuries.

But this time, I want to complete our look at the General Prologue of book. This is the part where Chaucer sets the scene and where he introduces the numerous pilgrims. It is considered to be one of the most vivid depictions of the common people of England by a contemporary writer of that period. As we explore this Prologue, I'm going to focus on how Chaucer paints a picture of the pilgrims through language. And specifically, I'm going to show how his descriptions reflect the class and social differences which existed at the time.

So let's pick up where we left off last time. In the last episode, we looked at the background of the Canterbury Tales, and we examined the first 18 lines of the General Prologue which is probably the most well-known passage in all of Middle English. The passage tells us that it was springtime in England – the time of year that touched people's hearts and encouraged them to go on pilgrimages. It's a beautifully written passage that suggests that we are about to read some grand piece of courtly poetry. But then Chaucer shifts the scene.

From the English countryside in springtime, we're suddenly taken to an inn called the Tabard in Southwark on the south side of London across the river from the main part of the city. Chaucer tells us that he was at that inn preparing for his own pilgrimage to Canterbury. By the way, the Tabard Inn was an actual inn in Southwark. And on this particular evening, we're told that twenty-nine 'sundry folk' – or random people – came to the inn. They had gathered there to spend the night before heading east to the shrine of Thomas Becket in Canterbury. While enjoying each other's fellowship, the various pilgrims agreed to make the trip together the next day. Chaucer then provides a description of each of the gathered pilgrims. He introduces the descriptions with the following passage – first in Modern English:

But nonetheless, while I have time and space,
Before any further in this tale I do pace,
I think it according to reason
To tell you all the condition
Of each of them, so as it seemed to me,
And which they were, and of what degree,
And also in what array they were in,
And at a knight then will I first begin.

Now the same passage in the original Middle English:

But nathelees, whil I have tyme and space,
Er that I ferther in this tale pace,
Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun
To telle yow al the condicioun
Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,
And whiche they weren, and of what degree,
And eek in what array that they were inne;
And at a knyght than wol I first bigynne.

So Chaucer proceeds to describe each of the pilgrims – and he begins with the knight – who is the most noble pilgrim in the group. He begins his description of the knight with the following passage:

A knight there was, and he was a worthy man,
That from the time that he first began
To ride out, he loved chivalry,
Truth and honor, freedom and courtesy.

A knight ther was, and that a worthy man,
That fro the tyme that he first bigan
To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.

So that passage tells us that the knight was 'worthy,' which really meant 'worthy of praise.' So in Middle English, it meant that he was honorable or admirable.

Chaucer then says that the knight loved 'truth and honor, freedom and courtesy.' And that's an interesting description because it alternates between native English words and French loanwords. *Truth* from Old English, *honor* from French, *freedom* from Old English, *courtesy* from French, This shows how Chaucer tended to incorporate French terms when talking about characters from the upper classes – especially French terms associated with the nobility like *chivalry*, *honor* and *courtesy*.

Chaucer then tells us that the knight had a 'sovereyn prys,' which was literally a 'sovereign price,' but it meant superior reputation. Again, *sovereign* and *price* are both French loanwords. Today, *sovereign* is often used to refer to a king or queen or supreme ruler, but originally, it could also refer to someone with a superior skill, or ability or reputation. And *price* is directly related to words like *praise* and *prized*. So Chaucer uses the phrase 'sovereign price' to refer to the knight's superior reputation or excellence. But again, he does so with relatively new French loanwords.

Chaucer then tells us that the knight had never said a bad word to any other person in all his life. Here's the original passage as written by Chaucer:

He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde
In al his lyf unto no maner wight.

That passage literally reads:
He never yet no villainy no said
In all his life unto no manner wight.

So in that passage, Chaucer used a quadruple negative. Again:
He never yet no villainy no said
In all his life unto no manner wight – or person.

As I noted in an earlier episode of the podcast, the rule prohibiting double negatives is a relatively modern rule. In earlier periods of English, double negatives were common, as were triple negatives, and as we see here, even quadruple negatives. All those extra negatives like *no* and *not* and *never* were added for emphasis. And that's what Chaucer did here.

Then he concluded his description of the knight by telling us "He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght" – literally 'He was a very, perfect, gentle knight.' All three of those adjectives – *very*, *perfect* and *gentle* – are French loanwords. By the way, *gentle* didn't mean tender or mild in the

modern sense. It meant noble or distinguished or honorable. It's the same sense that we have in the word **gentleman**. So the knight was perfect and gentle, meaning that he was entirely or completely honorable. But Chaucer doesn't just say that the knight was 'perfect and gentle.' He actually says that he was a 'very' perfect, gentle knight. Now we might assume that he did that for emphasis – that he was attempting to say that the knight wasn't just 'perfect,' he was 'very' perfect. And he wasn't just gentle or noble, he was 'very' gentle. That's how we use the word **very** today, but that's not really what the word meant in the late 1300s.

Again, today the word **very** is used as an intensifier – to indicate something extra – to turn **big** into **very big** or **loud** into **very loud**. And it is such a common word in the language, that we might assume that it is a native English word. But it isn't. It's actually a French loanword that was first borrowed into English in the 1200s. But when it was borrowed, it actually had a slightly different meaning. Originally, it meant 'true.' And that connection makes sense when we consider that the word **very** comes from the same Latin root as the word **verify** which is to confirm something as true. Another closely related word is **verily** which means truly. In fact, **verily** is literally the word **very** with an '-ly' suffix, and it was coined at a time when **very** still meant 'true.' Thus, **verily** means 'truly.' And that's how Chaucer used the word here. When he said that the knight was a 'very, perfect, gentle knight,' he meant that he was a true perfect and gentle or honorable knight.

We still have some of that original sense of the word **very** when we say something like 'that very one.' Someone might say, "Is that the house where you were raised?" And you might respond, "Yes, that very one" – meaning, yes, that is the correct one or true one. So in that way, the word **very** can be used to identify something as unique or special. And from there, it was a relatively short jump for it to be used to specify something that stands out as unusual or extreme. And that modern sense of the word **very** started to evolve in the 1400s. So our 'very, very' common word **very** is a French loanword, and it had a slightly different sense when it was first borrowed into English and when it was used by Geoffrey Chaucer.

By the way, before the word **very** became an intensifier with it modern sense, English speakers had to use other words to express intensity. Sometimes they used the Old English word **swiðe** which has fallen out of use over time. They also used other native English words like **full** or **right**. And the word **right** can still be found as an intensifier in English. In some local dialects, you may hear someone referred to as a 'right good man' or a 'right good woman.' It's just an older way of saying a 'very good man' or a 'very good woman.'

And if a friend is trying to point out someone in a crowd, you might ask say "Where are they?" And the friend might point with emphasis and say "Right there!" Well, again, that's the older use of **right** as an intensifier. We also hear that older use in the title 'Right Honorable' which means the Very Honorable. So **right** was a common intensifier before the adoption of the word **very**. And notice the connection between those two words. Another meaning of the word **right** is correct or true. 'Yes, that's right!' And as I noted, that was also the original sense of the word **very** as well. So you can use either word to express truth as in "That's the very one," or "That's the right one." Or you can use either word to express intensity as in "That's a very good man" or "That's a right good man."

So why did English speakers feel the need to bring the word *very* into the equation at all? Why weren't the existing terms good enough? Well, it was probably because words that are used as intensifiers tend to become dulled with use over time. They're used so often that they tend to become somewhat bland. And when we really want to emphasize something in a special way, we have to look for a new word to express that emphasis or intensity. So today, we might convert 'very bad' into 'awfully bad,' Or we might change 'very good' into 'extremely good.' So we often look around for other ways to express intensity. And that's probably how the word *very* was adopted as an intensifier in the decades after Chaucer wrote the Canterbury Tales.

But again, when Chaucer described a 'very perfect gentle knight,' he simply meant that the knight was a true, perfect gentleman.

After describing the knight, Chaucer turned to the knight's son – the squire. Chaucer writes:

With him there was his son, a young squire,
A lover and a lusty bachelor;
With curled locks of hair, as if they were laid in press.
Of twenty years of age he was, I guess.

Now the same passage in the original Middle English:

With hym ther was his sone, a yong Squier,
A lovyere and a lusty bacheler;
With lokkes crulle, as they were leyd in presse.
Of twenty yeer of age he was, I gesse.

Now I mention this passage because it concludes with the statement, 'I guess' meaning 'I suppose.' At one time, the use of the phrase 'I guess' in this way was considered to be an Americanism. It was very common in early American English and is still common today. And in the 1800s, British commentators often criticized it and ridiculed it as American figure of speech. But here, we can see that Chaucer was actually using it in the late 1300s. So the phrase is actually much older than American English. It just disappeared from common use in England at some point during the intervening centuries.

Chaucer then tells us that the squire wore the latest fashions, played the flute and was an expert horseman.

The knight and squire were also accompanied by a yeoman. He was the knight's servant. We saw in an earlier episode that the word *yeoman* had two different meanings in Middle English. It could refer to a peasant farmer who acquired a bit of wealth through hard work, and it could also refer to the servant of a knight or other noble. Here Chaucer uses it in the latter sense. He tells us that the yeoman had close-cropped hair and carried a large bow and a sword.

Chaucer then tells us that there was a Prioress. A prioress was a superior nun in charge of other nuns in an abbey or convent. So Chaucer's pilgrims included women as well as men. And as a Prioress, this particular woman would have occupied an elevated position within English society during the Middle Ages. Many women in her position came from noble families. And Chaucer's description of her reflects her status and position. He says that she sang the religious services in a manner that was divine. And she spoke French, though it wasn't the proper French of Paris. I've mentioned this quote before, but Chaucer wrote:

And French she spoke full faire and elegantly,
After the school of Stratford-at-Bowe,
for the French of Paris was to her unknown.

And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly,
After the scole of Stratford-atte-Bowe,
For Frenssh of Parys was to hir unknowe.

So this is a subtle commentary on the state of French at the time. To speak French elegantly or fluently was a sign of someone from the upper classes – someone who had been raised in an environment where people spoke French or someone who had a received a formal education in French. But when Chaucer says that she couldn't speak the proper French of Paris, we know that she spoke the traditional Anglo-Norman dialect of French which had been spoken in England for three centuries and which was in sharp decline in England in the late 1300s.

And speaking of French, Chaucer makes a very notable shift in his vocabulary when he gets to the Prioress. He peppers his description of her with lots of French loanwords. He says that she was "ful plesaunt" or 'full pleasant' or 'very pleasant' using the French word *pleasant*. He also uses that word *full* as an intensifier. He says that she was "amyable of port" meaning that she had a kindly demeanor using the French words *amiable* and *port*. He adds, "And peyned hir to countrefete cheere of court" – literally 'And pained her to counterfeit cheer of court,' but it meant 'she took pains to imitate the appearance of courtliness.' That line uses the French words *pain*, *counterfeit*, *cheer* and *court*. Chaucer says that the Prioress was also "estatlich of manere" or 'stately of manner' using the French words *stately* and *manner*. And he says that she wanted to be considered "digne of reverence" or 'worthy of reverence' or 'worthy of respect.' That phrase uses the French word *digne* meaning 'worthy' and the French word *reverence*.

All of those French loanwords were used in just four lines of the poem. Out of a total of 27 words, 11 of them were French loanwords. That about 40% of the words.

Now you may be saying 'So what?,' but that percentage is kind of important. In the last episode, I noted that about 15% of the total words used in the Canterbury Tales are French loanwords. That's a relatively low percentage by today's standard, but it was pretty high for the late 1300s. Now again, that's the overall percentage, but it was not consistent throughout the poem. When Chaucer was dealing with characters from the lower classes, he tended to use very few French words. So that percentage fell, and he mainly used words from Old English or sometimes from

Old Norse. But when Chaucer wrote about elevated characters – those from the upper classes – he tended to use lots of French words, so the percentage of those words jumped up.
In that four line description of the Prioress, the percentage of French words jumped from an overall average of 15% to just over 40%. So almost every other word was a French loanword. And almost all of the descriptive words – the adjectives, adverbs and nouns – were loanwords.

Scholars would say that this was Chaucer writing in his high register. He often modified his language and vocabulary when he wanted to express a sense of nobility or high class. And he did that by using lots of those relatively new French loanwords. So his language varied with the class of the person he was describing or with the class of the person who was speaking.

Now I should note here that Chaucer didn't necessarily say to himself, 'Let me use a French word here to sound fancy.' It was probably the other way around. When he wanted to write in an elevated way or in a higher register, he apparently chose words that he considered to be more sophisticated, and in many cases, those words just happened to be French loanwords.

Now after describing the Prioress, Chaucer notes that she was accompanied by a nun and three priests, though he doesn't provide a specific description of them.

Chaucer then turns his attention to a Monk. He paints a vivid picture of the Monk. He is described as an *outrider* which was a monk who would ride out and supervise the estates of the monastery. Despite his role as a monk, he was a thoroughly modern man who loved hunting. He owned horses and greyhounds for the joy of the hunt. He also wore a robe, but it wasn't a cheap monk's robe. It was trimmed with fine fur. And he fastened his hood under his chin with a gold pin. So much for the vow of poverty.

So the Monk didn't quite adhere to the elevated standards of the Prioress. And we get another step down with the next pilgrim – the Friar. A Friar was a member of one of the major religious orders like the Franciscans or Dominicans. Chaucer doesn't specify which order the Friar belonged to. He earned part of living through begging, so he hung around with merchants because that's where the money was. It was much more lucrative than hanging around with lepers and other beggars. He was also a regular guest as the taverns, and he knew the hosts and barmaids. He gave out knives and pins to the 'young wives.' And Chaucer tells us that "Somwhat he lipsed for his wantownesse / To make his Englissh sweete upon his tonge." In other words, he effected a slight lisp to make his English sound sweet upon his tongue. The implication is that it was a way to endear himself to others – especially to the young women, wives, barmaids.

Chaucer then turns away from the various pilgrims associated with the Church, and he describes a Merchant who was among the group. The Merchant had a forked beard and wore a Flemish beaver heat. He bragged about his financial exploits and his huge profits. Chaucer renders the line as "Sownynge alway th'encrees of his wynnyng" – literally 'Sounding always or continually about the increases of his winnings.'

Then Chaucer introduces us to a Clerk from Oxford. He writes:

A Clerk from Oxford was there also,
That had studied logic long ago.
As lean was his horse as is a rake,
And he also was not very fat, I undertake,

A Clerk ther was of Oxenford also,
That unto logyk hadde longe ygo.
As leene was his hors as is a rake,
And he nas nat right fat, I undertake,

You may have noticed that Chaucer used the word *right* as an intensifier there, instead of the more modern word *very*. I talked about that earlier. He wrote that the Clerk was "nat right fat" – 'not right fat' meaning 'not very fat.' This was intended to emphasize the fact that he was poor, perhaps even malnourished. Chaucer goes on to tell us that the Clerk was a poor teacher and scholar at Oxford. His coat was "Ful thredbare" – 'full threadbare.' And he "looked holwe" – 'looked hollow' meaning that he looked very thin. Chaucer tells us that the Clerk wasn't really interested in money or formal positions in the Church or government. He preferred to spend his time reading and studying. He spent his money on books and learning.

Now even though Chaucer used the word *clerk* in a very specific way, the word has a wide variety of meanings today. It can mean a record-keeper or administrative person. In North America, it can also refer to front-desk clerk in a hotel. American English also refers to a sales person in a store as a clerk. But originally, it meant a churchman or clergyman. It's really just a shortened version of the Latin word *cleric*.

In the early Middle Ages, education and literacy was largely confined to the Church and church-schools. So most educated and literate people were clerics – or clerks. So the word *clerk* also acquired a secondary sense as a scholar or educated person, and that's the way Chaucer uses the word here. Since they were educated and literate, clerks were often employed both inside and outside of the Church as scribes and record-keepers. And that led to the more modern sense of the word as an administrator or bookkeeper. And from that association with low-level administrative positions, it was extended in American English to other types of employees like hotel clerks and store clerks.

Now if you're listening to this podcast in Britain, and some other places as well, you may be getting annoyed by my pronunciation of this word as /clurk/ because, in much of Britain, the word is pronounced as /clark/. And the word spelled D-E-R-B-Y is /durby/ in the US, but /darby/ in Britain. So what's the deal with that?

Well, as you might have guessed, the difference is the product of a sound change that took place within England. It's possible that this change was underway during the time of Chaucer, but most scholars think it occurred slightly later in the following century – the 1400s. Chaucer probably pronounced the word *clerk* with its original short 'E' sound – /clairk/. This is the same vowel that still have in the word *cleric*. So if you drop that 'I' in *cleric*, you get /clairk/.

But a short time later, that short 'E' sound started to change when it appeared before an 'R' – especially when the 'R' was followed by another consonant. But the change was not consistent throughout England. In much of southern England – especially around London – 'er' (/air/) became 'ar.' So *clerk* (/clairk/) became /clark/. And *derby* (/dairby/) became /darby/. But in other parts of England, the sound shifted from 'er' (/air/) to 'ur.' So in those places, *clerk* (/clairk/) became /clurk/, and *derby* (/dair-bee/) became /durby/. Then, in the 1600s and 1700s, as people migrated from England to North America, they took those pronunciations with them. But given the migration patterns, the /ur/ pronunciation was more dominant in North America. Meanwhile, the /ar/ pronunciation was the pronunciation of London, so it became more standard in British English. And today, we have American /clurk/ and /durby/ and British /clark/ and /darby/. And to be fair, British English today generally drops that 'R' sound as well, so it's more like /clahk/ and /dahby/.

So if that's the case, why do we have the word *cleric* with the original vowel sound? I mean it's not /cluric/ or /claric/. Well, that's because the word *cleric* was re-borrowed from Latin in the 1600s in its original form. Since the word *clerk* had lost much of its original meaning within English, the word *cleric* was re-borrowed in its original form to fill the gap. When it came in this second time, it came back in with its original vowels – both the E and the I. So it came back in as a two-syllable word. And it also came back in with much of its original meaning as a member of the clergy. So the word *cleric* is the more recent loanword, but it also reflects more of the original form of the word. And the word *clerk* – or /clark/ – is the form of the word that survived the changes of Middle English and still shows the effects of those changes.

Now before I move on, I should note that the regional distinction between /clurk/ and /Durby/ on the one hand, and /clark/ and /darby/ on the other, is not nearly as clean and neat as my discussion may have suggested. American English does actually have the pronunciation of *clerk* as /clark/, but it's only retained as a name like Dick Clark or Clark Kent. The name *Clark* began as an occupational surname from the word *clerk*. So *clerk* and *Clark* are ultimately the same word. American English just uses one version for the occupation (/clurk/) and the other for the occupational surname (/clark/). That's ultimately how American English resolved the difference in pronunciation.

By the way, this same sound change helps to explain the difference between *vermin* and *varmint* which are actually variations of the same word. The sound change also explains the connection between *varsity* and *university*. *University* was sometimes shortened to /versity/ or /varsity/ – depending on the pronunciation. And *varsity* won out over time on both sides of the Atlantic.

So now we know why some of you say /clurk/ and some of you say /clark/. As I noted, Chaucer probably said /clairk/, and after describing his /clairk/, he then turned his attention to another of the pilgrims – the lawyer. Chaucer actually identifies him as a 'Sergeant of Law,' which typically meant a senior barrister belonging to the order whose members often served as judges. In fact, Chaucer says that the lawyer sometimes served as a judge in the King's courts. 'Sergeant of Law' literally meant 'Servant of Law,' and it essentially meant a 'Servant of the King in Matters of Law.' In fact, the words *sergeant* and *servant* are two variations of the same Latin root word which also meant servant. The words became distinct within French when the consonant sound

in the middle shifted from /v/ to /j/. And English borrowed each of them as distinct words. *Servant* came in with a broad sense as any kind of servant, and *sergeant* came in with a more restricted sense. Of course, it could mean a military servant which is often how we use it today, and it could also be used in this sense as a 'Sergeant of the Law.'

But here's the other interesting thing. Between *servant* and *sergeant*, we can hear that same sound change that we just looked at between *clerk* and *clark*. This is another word pair affected by that change. *Servant* retains one pronunciation and *sergeant* retains the other. This also explains why that initial vowel sound in *sergeant* is spelled with an E and not an A. The word is spelled S-E-R-G-E-A-N-T, and that's because that letter E represented a short 'E' sound in early Middle English. But again, that 'E' sound before an R shifted in the century after the Canterbury Tales was written.

Now Chaucer says that his lawyer had a great reputation and took large fees. He handled many real estate deals, and he knew every legal decision that had been decided since the time of William the Conqueror.

Next up was the Franklin. A franklin was a free landholder who was usually quite wealthy. Franklins represented the class of landholders just under the gentry – somewhere between the yeomen and the lesser nobility. They often played a important role in the affairs of the countryside.

The term *franklin* is actually a French loanword, and it's based on the word *Frank* which we've seen many times in the podcast. Of course, it was ultimately derived from the name of the Franks – the Germanic tribe that settled in modern-day France and ultimately were the founders of the modern nation-state of France. The word *frank* is also the root of the words *France* and *French*. And you might remember from earlier episodes that the word *frank* meant 'free' within French because the Franks were given a degree of freedom and autonomy by the Roman Empire when they first settled in the region. And that's how the word *frank* came to be applied to these free landholders in England after the Norman Conquest. These landholders didn't owe personal labor services to a lord, so they were deemed to be free, and as such, they were sometimes called *franklins*. Of course, the word mostly survives today as an occupational surname, for example in the name the American founding father Benjamin Franklin.

After the Franklin, Chaucer tells us that there were five guildsmen representing various London professions. There was a carpenter, a weaver, a dyer, and a tapycer. A *tapycer* was a weaver of tapesteries and rugs and related items. There was also a haberdasher which was a seller of hats or other small wares. This is one of the first recorded uses of the word *haberdasher* in an English document. These guildsmen represented the new wealth of the craftsmen who made up the emerging middle class London. They all wore band new outfits and had knives adorned with silver.

The guildsmen also brought a cook with them. The cook had a taste for London ale and had a bad ulcer on his shin.

There was also a Shipman who ferried cargos of wine across the Channel. But Chaucer tells us that he was not above stealing some of the wine while the traders were sleeping.

Next up was a physician, or as Chaucer describes him, a Doctour of Physik. He is described in very general terms.

Then we have one of Chaucer's most intriguing characters – the Wife of Bath. As her name suggests, she was a wife from the town of Bath. She had a great deal of experience with pilgrimages having been to Jerusalem three times. But that wasn't the only thing she had experience with. Chaucer writes the following:

She was a worthy woman throughout her life,
Husbands at the church door, she had five,
Not counting other company in youth;
But there's no need to speak of that now, in truth.

She was a worthy womman al hir lyve:
Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve,
Withouthen oother compaignye in youthe,
But therof nedeth nat to speke as nowthe.

Now up until this point, Chaucer has given us characters from the Upper Classes and Middle Classes, and even some craftsmen and laborers. But the remaining pilgrims all come from a lower social background. The first of these are a couple of brothers who are true peasants. One of them is a Parson, more accurately described in the poem as a Poor Parson. And he is accompanied by his brother, the Plowman.

The Parson is depicted as an ideal character – poor in worldly goods, but rich in faith. Chaucer writes:

A good man was there of religion,
He was a poor Parson of a town in the countryside,
But rich he was in holy thought and work.
He was also a learned man, a clerk

A good man was ther of religioun,
And was a povre persoun of a toun,
But riche he was of hooly thoght and werk.
He was also a lerned man, a clerk

Chaucer goes on to describe him in glowing and pious terms. And his brother the Plowman is also depicted in similar terms. Chaucer says of the poor Plowman, '...a true worker and good was he, Living in peace and perfect charity.' In the original Middle English, "...a trewe swynkere and a good was he, Lyvynge in pees and parfit charitee."

In the extended descriptions, Chaucer doesn't really have a negative word to say about either of these poor brothers. And you can't help but see a possible influence from Piers Plowman in these characters. As we saw in an earlier episode, the first version of Piers Plowman – the A Text – was composed in the 1360s, a couple of decades before Chaucer began work on the Canterbury Tales. And Piers Plowman depicts an idealized plowman as a Christ-like figure surrounded by a world full of corruption and greed. Well, here we have two peasant brothers – one an idealized Parson and the other a plowman who is reminiscent of Piers Plowman.

There's also another obvious parallel with Piers Plowman. The Prologue of that poem also begins in Springtime, which was common for poetry of this period, and the narrator falls asleep and has a dream vision of a field full of people from all elements of society. He sees plowmen, and merchants, and priests, and various townspeople – including cooks and a sergeant-at-law. He even sees a group of pilgrims. So a lot of the people presented in the Prologue of Piers Plowman are also featured in the General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales. Maybe it's all a coincidence, but it seems that Chaucer may have been influenced by that earlier poem.

One other quick note about the poor Parson before we move on. Chaucer rendered the word *parson* as *persoun* – P-E-R-S-O-U-N. So it looks like the word *person*, and in fact, it IS the word *person*. Ultimately, *parson* and *person* are the same word. And once again, we see the same sound change that distinguished *clerk* and *clark* and *servant* and *sergeant*. And here, it distinguished *person* and *parson*. So how did the very generic word *person* evolve into a word for a type of priest?

Well, the first thing to understand is that the word was borrowed from French, and it is ultimately derived from the Latin word *persona*. The next thing to understand is that in the time of Chaucer, a parson was usually the priest of a small independent church. And as the priest, he represented the congregation. And as the religious and legal representative of the congregation, he was the face of that particular church or assembly. He embodied it and personified it. As such, that type of priest was sometimes called the *persona ecclesiae* in Latin. It literally meant the Church Person. And over time, via French, that title simply became *persoun*, and that's the title that Chaucer used in the Canterbury Tales. But again, that vowel change in the 1400s meant that *persoun* became either /person/ or /parson/, depending on what part of England you were in. Over time, *person* acquired the broader sense as a human being, and *parson* acquired the more restricted sense as a priest.

Now having described the Parson and his brother the Plowman, Chaucer turns his attention to the five remaining pilgrims, most of whom are cheats and crooks.

The first of these is the Miller. He is crude and unsophisticated. He is a stout and brawny guy. His has large shoulders and a head so hard he could use it to break down doors by ramming through them head first. He wears a white coat and a blue hood. And perhaps, most importantly, he's a crook. Chaucer writes: "Wel koude he stelen corn, and tollen thries" – 'Well could he steal corn, and toll three times his fee.'

Now this characteristic would have seemed obvious and redundant to any reader in the Middle Ages. Millers were notorious for cheating their customers, and it was pretty much a given that a Miller was a thief. There was even a well-known proverb at the time: "Every honest Miller has a golden thumb." Of course, since no miller actually had a golden thumb, the proverb meant that there were no honest millers. In fact, Chaucer alludes to this proverb in the next line. He says, "And yet he hadde a thombe of gold, pardee." – 'And yet he had a thumb of gold, by God.' The use of the word *pardee* at the end gives away the intended sentiment. *Pardee* was an Anglicized version of the French phrase 'par dieu' – literally 'by God.' It was essentially a curse word. So when Chaucer says that the Miller had a thumb of gold, you have to imagine someone reading that line sarcastically – basically rolling their eyes and saying, "Yeah, he was a real honest guy."

The reason why millers had this bad reputation is because they were paid by taking a share of the grain after it was ground into a fine meal. But there was no way to audit or regulate what the miller took. So millers routinely took more than their fair share. Chaucer writes that his Miller would steal corn and 'tollen thries' – basically take three times the amount he was supposed to take.

Now from a linguistic point of the view, the most fascinating thing about Chaucer's extended description of the Miller is the words he chose to use. He describes the Miller in very basic terms. The words he uses are mostly simple single-syllable words, and they are mostly words pulled from Old English or Old Norse. He uses very few fancy French words.

Remember how Chaucer bumped up the percentage of French words when he was describing the Prioress – an upper class lady with noble features? The percentage of French words jumped from an overall average of 15% up to 40% . She was heavily described with sophisticated French loanwords. But now, in his extended description of the Miller, Chaucer abandons those words. In the description, less than 7% of the words come from French. That's less half of the overall average of 15%. Of 188 words used in the description, only 13 come from French. And even when we look at those 13, most of them are not obvious French words. They are single syllable words that seem like Old English words and may have been considered native English words by this point. They include words like *stout*, *brawn*, *bar*, *tuft*, *coat*, *blue*. None of those words seem fancy or sophisticated. And another one of the 13 French loanwords was that expression *pardee* meaning 'by God!.' So it was actually a curse word.

And one of the other words was *harlotries* – a variation of the word *harlot*, but it meant obscenities. Chaucer said that the Miller could tell a story, but it mostly consisted of sin and harlotries – or obscenities   And we'll get confirmation of that in the next episode when we look at the Miller's Tale. So as we can see, Chaucer shifted into his lower register when he described the Miller. He used mostly simple native words, and when he incorporated a French loanword, it was usually a simple one that resembled a native word, or it was a curse word, or it was a word that had an association with that type of person. So again, Chaucer modified his language to fit the character.

After describing the Miller, Chaucer says that there was also a Manciple. A Manciple was basically a purchasing agent. He was an officer who purchased supplies for someone else – usually a monastery or college or other assembly. In this case, Chaucer refers to "A gentil maunciple was ther of a temple" – 'A gentle manciple was there of a temple.' This specifically refers to a site in London where law students lived and studied. It was located near the royal courts, and so the Manciple was responsible for buying food and other provisions for the lawyers and law students who lived there. Chaucer doesn't have much to say about the Manciple other than the fact that he was clever and always made good financial deals. There's an implication that the deals weren't always above board, but Chaucer never expressly says that.

Then Chaucer turns his attention to the Reeve. The Reeve was basically the manager of a country estate. Chaucer's Reeve was tall and lean with a closely cropped haircut and beard. We are told that his lord was a mere 20 years old, so the Reeve was able to take advantage of the situation. Chaucer writes:

By green trees shaded was his dwelling-place.
Much better than his lord could he purchase.
Full rich was he provided privately,
He knew well how to please his lord subtly

With grene trees shadwed was his place.
He koude bettre than his lord purchace.
Ful riche he was astored pryvely:
His lord wel koude he plesen subtilly

The implication seems clear. The Reeve was doing some shady dealing. He was provided for 'pryvely' – or 'privately' – but it meant secretly. And he knew how to please his lord 'subtly,' so without the lord fully understanding what was going on. Chaucer also gives us two other bits of information about the Reeve that will become important later on. First, he had been trained as a carpenter in his youth, and second, he was from Norfolk in the east of England. That information will become important when the Miller tells a bawdy tale about a carpenter. The Reeve takes offence since he was a carpenter by training, and in response, he tells a bawdy story about a Miller. So the Miller's Tale and the Reeve's Tale have similar tones, and they both go together. And again, I'm going to look at those tales in the next episode.

The Reeve's Tale is also important to language historians because it features two students from the north of England, and Chaucer writes their dialogue using a Northern dialect. But what often gets overlooked about the Reeve's Tale is that Chaucer gives the Reeve a Norfolk dialect as well. And that's why it is notable that Chaucer points out here that the Reeve is from Norfolk.

Now after the Reeve, Chaucer turned his attention to the Summoner. The Summoner was a person who served summonses or writs compelling people to attend the church courts. You might remember that the Church had its own separate court system to deal with religious offenses like witchcraft, adultery, usury, and so on. The Summoner delivered the papers that required a person to attend a session of the court, and he would act as an usher during the court session.

Chaucer's Summoner had an intimidating and scary appearance. Children were afraid of him. Chaucer writes, "Of his visage children were aferd." He was prone to getting drunk on wine and raving like a madman. And when that happened, he only spoke in Latin, even though he only knew a few random Latin phrases that he often heard in court. And Chaucer tells us that he could be easily bribed with a quart of wine.

The final pilgrim presented by Chaucer is the Pardoner. As his title implies, the Pardoner sold pardons, specifically religious pardons. As I've noted in prior episodes, the Christian Church of the Middle Ages raised money by selling pardons and indulgences. It was basically a way for the Church to raise money, but it was also a way for people with money to buy their way out of sin and to buy their way into heaven. It was a controversial practice even at the time. William Langland criticized it in Piers Plowman, and John Wyclif railed against it. And here, Chaucer takes his shots as well.

He tells us that the Pardoner had just arrived from Rome. He wrote:

His knapsack lay before him in his lap,
Stuffed full with pardons brought from Rome all hot.

His walet lay biforn hym in his lappe
Bretful of pardoun come from Rome al hoot.

But the Pardoner's fraud extended well beyond the sale of indulgences. He also carried with him various common items which he claimed were holy relics. He had a pillowcase which he claimed the Virgin Mary's veil, and he had some pig's bones in a glass. He made a killing selling these supposed relics. All he had to do was find was a local church and sell the items to the gullible congregation. Chaucer writes:

But with these relics, whenever he found
Some simple parson's dwelling in the country,
In just one day, he took in more money
Than the parson made in two months.

But with thise relikes, whan that he fond
A povre persoun dwellyng upon lond,
Upon a day he gat hym moore moneye
Than that the person gat in monthes tweye;

So Chaucer concludes his list of pilgrims with a series of dishonest pilgrims, with one of the most corrupt bringing up the rear.

Now if you were paying really close attention as I went through those various pilgrims, you may have noticed a discrepancy. Chaucer began by saying that there were 'nine and twenty' – or 29 – pilgrims. But if you count each of the pilgrims mentioned by Chaucer, there were actually 30 of them. Now this isn't really a big deal, but it shows that the Canterbury Tales was still a work in

progress when Chaucer died. We have to assume that he would have corrected that error if he had ever gotten around to putting all the fragments into a final manuscript.

Now after describing the various pilgrims gathered together at the Tabard Inn, Chaucer tells us that the host of the inn provided them with food and wine and entertainment. We later find out in the Cook's Tale that the name of the host is Harry Bailey. And believe it or not, there really was a Harry Bailey who was an innkeeper in Southwark during this period. This is proven by multiple surviving records. So it appears that the character was actually based on a real person. And it also implies that some of the other characters may have also been based on actual people who Chaucer knew.

At any rate, the host Harry Bailey addresses the gathered pilgrims, and he proposes a contest. He says:

What I say is true, for I shall not lie,
I have not seen, this year, so merry a company
Here in this inn as is gathered here now.
I'd make you happy with mirth, if I knew how.
And of a game, I have right now thought of something
To give you joy, and it shall cost you nothing.

For by my trouthe, if that I shal nat lye,
I saugh nat this yeer so myrie a compaignye
Atones in this herberwe, as is now.
Fayn wolde I doon yow myrthe, wiste I how.
And of a myrthe I am right now bythoght,
To doon yow ese, and it shal coste noght.

The game proposed by Harry Bailey is a story-telling contest. Each pilgrim will tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two stories on the way back. Harry says that he will join the pilgrims to act as a guide and judge. And whoever proves to be the best story-teller will receive a free meal at the inn when they all return from their pilgrimage.

They all agree to the terms, and this sets the stage for the pilgrimage and stories to come. They all retire to their beds for the evening to get a good night's rest before departing the next morning. This concludes the General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales.

Now I should note that the rules proposed by the host and agreed to by the pilgrims present another discrepancy. Supposedly, each pilgrim was to tell two tales each way. That's four tales each. And there were 30 pilgrims. So that meant that Chaucer had to come up with 120 different stories. Well, he never did that. He actually only wrote 24 tales, and two of those were left unfinished. So in the final version of the book, the pilgrims were limited to one tale, and some of them didn't even get to tell a tale. So Chaucer's grand plan was scaled back significantly, but the General Prologue was never changed to fit that revised plan.

Before I conclude, I should also make one other important observation about Chaucer's pilgrims. I've said a few times that they represent a cross-section of English society. And that is true. But a closer look reveals that most of them are actually from the middle strata of English society. At the upper end of the scale, we have a Knight and a Prioress who may have had a noble background, but otherwise, we don't really have any other members of the nobility. And at the other end of the scale, we have a Plowman and his poor Parson brother, but that's it when it comes to the traditional rural peasant class. By and large, what we have are professionals, and businessmen and craftsmen. We have a doctor, a lawyer, a merchant, a franklin, and shipman, a miller, a reeve and various guild members. These were the people of the emerging middle class of England that had been largely ignored in the literature prior to this point. But as we've seen before, by the late 1300s, they had become a powerful force within England largely due to the breakdown of the feudal system. And as I've noted before, these people came from the traditional English-speaking classes, and their rise occurred in conjunction with the rise of their language – English. And since this class of people had a high degree of literacy, they also came to demand books. And not just any books, but books composed in English. And of course, they would have been especially intrigued to read about themselves and the people they knew. So that may help to explain why the Canterbury Tales found such a receptive audience in the years after it was produced. It many respects, it was written 'about' the emerging middle class of England, and it written 'for' them as well. And that was really a unique approach to English literature in the late Middle Ages.

So with that, I'm going to conclude this episode. Next time, we'll conclude our look at the Canterbury Tales by explore a couple of the actual tales – the Miller's Tale and Reeve's Tale. As I noted earlier, these tales present the bawdy side of Chaucer. So the next episode will be a little different. It'll be a little risqué, a little naughty, a little crude, and lot of fun.

So until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.