

## Historical Context: Pilgrimages

In general, a *pilgrimage* is a religious voyage that a person or group of people make to a holy place or shrine. In the early seventeenth century a group of people called pilgrims made a voyage to the new world on a ship known as the Mayflower. While this and similar groups were not searching for a religious shrine or cathedral per se, they were looking for a place where they would be free to practice their religion.

In Chaucer's time, approximately 300 years before the Mayflower, people often traveled to holy places. It was believed by many that the shrines could offer healing or grace to those who paid homage to God through that particular saint or cathedral. In addition to shrines and cathedrals, *relics*, pieces of holy objects, or saints, were also objects of adulation and the places where these items were stored were destinations of pilgrimages. This trend was good for builders as they were called upon to erect more shrines and cathedrals. To the dismay of the Church, however, this trend caused people to worship the objects and shrines rather than God, in a practice known as *idolatry*. Many religions denounce *idolatry* as it causes the worshipper to lose sight of the god that is at the core of the religion. In today's society, we use the term idol to refer to a person others want to emulate. *American Idol* is a good example of a public search for the next music star that people will want to emulate and listen to.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, the Monk's Tale illustrates the Church's position on idolatry as he retells stories of great men who were cast down by God for worshipping idols. In Chaucer's time, the Church was undergoing upheavals stemming mainly from perceived abuses by the Church. The poor, who were asked to pay extensive taxes, saw the Church's luxuries go untaxed. For example, the elegant rosary beads worn by the Prioress would have been an untaxed item even though the beads and gold trinket on the strand were expensive items. The untaxed status also applied to golden chalices and extravagant cathedrals. Thus, the Church owned lavish, tax-free property while the poor, who paid taxes, were renting meager accommodations from landlords and being told to sacrifice what little they had to the Church.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, the pilgrims of the late 1300s are on a voyage to the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket in Canterbury. Thomas à Becket lived from 1118 to 1170, approximately 175 years before Chaucer was born. It is thought that Becket was assassinated by King Henry II's men. Then Archbishop Becket was in disagreement with King Henry II over the amount of influence the King of England should have over the church. Before he became a priest, Becket was among King Henry II's trusted advisors and close friends. They were often in agreement, and Becket often surrounded himself with pomp. Once ordained, however, Becket donned hair shirts and lived a life of sacrifice and devotion to God. Thus, it is believed that, as Becket's relationship with the Church evolved, his loyalties grew closer to the Church and farther away from the king. After years of an argument that never moved beyond a stalemate, King Henry II is rumored to have made a comment about getting rid of Becket, and a few of his men, overhearing the comment, set out to do just that. They found Becket in his church and gave him a warning. When Becket ignored their warning, the men brutally murdered him right there in the church. Three years after his brutal murder, Becket was canonized and became a saint. In the *General Prologue*, there is a passage that refers to Becket, "down to Canterbury they [pilgrims] wend / To see the holy blissful martyr, quick / To give his help to them when they were sick" (3). These lines imply the pilgrims in Chaucer's tales believe a visit to the shrine of Becket will heal them. It is the potential healing grace that makes the pilgrims willing to embark on the long and dangerous trip to

Canterbury.

A pilgrimage was not an easy journey. Among the problems with taking a pilgrimage were the discomfort of the long journey on horseback and the risk of peril due to highwaymen or others who would do harm to or rob anyone who passed by them. Some highwaymen required travelers to pay a fee before being allowed to continue on their journey but others chose to kill. The danger of highwaymen applied to more than just pilgrims as anyone who was riding across the country could be subject to robbery or murder. Chaucer, himself, discovered this truth when he was robbed twice while traveling in the service of the king. The belief that there was a certain safety in numbers led many pilgrims to travel in large groups. They discovered that traveling with companions served not only as protection but also as a diversion.

Even if they were not accosted by robbers the journeys were often long and tedious and a large group of pilgrims could pass the time by telling tales or otherwise amusing one another. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the pilgrims travel together in a group of approximately 31 people and agree to pass the time by telling tales. The host of the inn, Harry Bailey, offers to serve as the group's guide, thus providing another assurance that they will reach their destination. As the instigator of the tale telling contest, he also facilitates the telling of the tales and attempts to moderate when disagreements arise.

Chaucer uses the idea of a pilgrimage to bring together people from various social classes. Avoiding only the monarchy, Chaucer creates a group of pilgrims ranging from the Knight, who holds the highest position, to the lowly Plowman. Among the travelers are religious people who represent some of the abuses within the Church, bawdy characters who demonstrate the seamier side of society, and others who bear idiosyncrasies that Chaucer exploits for the amusement of his readers and the furtherance of his satire. The simple fact that all of the pilgrims are on a religious voyage sets the basis for the satire as even those pilgrims who appear to be pious are actually quite ridiculous when Chaucer the narrator describes them. For example, it would make perfect sense for the Prioress to be taking a trip to see a shrine. After Chaucer the narrator reveals that her actual intention is to emulate the aristocracy, the reader can see that her trip is not due to religious conviction but to an effort to appear above her own station. Through this revelation, Chaucer the narrator invites the reader to ridicule the Prioress as part of his satire. In a similar way, Chaucer uses the pilgrimage to further the satire of all of his travelers.