

Written in the Stars

In the allegory of the *Canterbury Tales*, the introductions of zodiac constellations disguised as Chaucer's Pilgrims have identifiers all in clear view--if you look for them. They involve mythology and animal characteristics (where they apply) as well as stars that make up the figure. And one rule of allegory is--once you've recognized the guiding pattern, *all the parts must be there*. Once you know one of the signs, the challenge is to find all twelve.



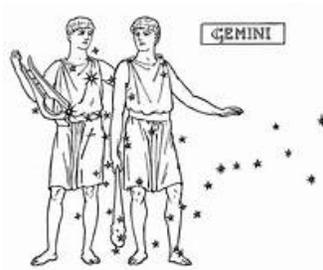
aries

Aries/ the Friar Hamal and Sheratan are a distinctive pair of stars in the head of Aries, who is the first of the zodiac ring. The sign appears in the chill of March, so Chaucer indicates these stars may say the Friar's eyes *twinkled in his head as do stars in the frosty night*. Being the first is noted with the allusion to the Friar's pleasant "*In principio*." The wooly ram image is found in the Friar's *short cloak of double worsted*.



TAURUS

Taurus/ the Miller As a constellation, Taurus has been recognized since ancient times. The dominant star, Aldebaran, has the distinction of being yellow and the brightest star in the zodiac. The Miller's *thumb of gold* corresponds to brilliant Aldebaran. The animal image plays a large part. We see the Miller as *stout, big of brawn and bones, short-shouldered, with a broad, thick, gnarled body. His nostrils are wide and black and he could heave a door off its hinges by running into it with his head*



Gemini/ the two brothers--the Parson and Plowman The poet gives no physical description of these brothers. Single stars--Castor and Pollux--indicate the head of each. Alhena, the bright yellow star in Pollux, was also seen as "red." Chaucer captures the idea with --*If gold rusts, what shall iron do?* As Gemini rises, Castor (the Plowman) is seen first; Pollux (the Parson) comes into view later. The poet notes this when the Parson (Pollux) says--*I am a Southern man*. His is the "Southern man" because he is south of his brother.



cancer **Cancer/ the Cook** Only one thing in the figure is noteworthy--a cluster of stars called the *Manger*. The Cook's appearance is not described. Chaucer tells only of his talent in "making" tasty dishes--until the last two lines. Attention, then, is drawn to *the running sore on his shin*--a sure indication of cancer. That unpleasant fact is immediately followed by telling of his reputation as an expert at making blank*manger*. The white (blanc) manger "made" by the Cook refers to the star cluster of the sign of the Crab.



Leo/ the Monk Three stars represent three oddities in the Monk. The first magnitude star, Regulus, is called "the Lion's Heart." Chaucer presents the brilliant Regulus as *a golden ornament under the Monk's chin*. A second prominent star, Denebola (Arabic, "the Lion's Tail"), is said to be the *"love-knot in the greater end."* A third star, Algieba (above Regulus) is named "Brow of the Lion." Chaucer indicated Algieba by describing the Monk's *glowing eyes*. The lion image is expressed with details of being *a hunter after game* and words like *pricking*, and *being of good point*.



Virgo/ the Wife Virgo has many ancient associations with the thousand-name goddess--who spilled grain to form the Milky Way. There is only one outstanding feature in the figure--Spica, a blue star of the first magnitude. That name refers to an ear of corn, so Virgo is sometimes called "the corn maiden." Only one line about the Wife is needed to confirm her as Virgo--*And on her feet a pair of spurs sharp*. Chaucer, here, points to Spica. The Latin word, *spica*, means a *spike*, and it also means *an ear of corn*: spike for the star, ear of corn for the myth. As the Mother of the gods in the ancient Roman world, her statue received a ritual cleansing annually. And as the goddess Hera, a cleansing bath renewed her virginity each year. Of great significance, then, is the name the poet gave her--The Wife of *Bath*. The bath is *essential* to her identity.



Libra/ the Manciple Chaucer doesn't attempt to describe weighing scales in terms of *a human being*, but tells of the Manciple's business capabilities instead. A manciple is the servant who buys provisions. He's "a purchasing agent." Rather than scales used in transactions, the word Libra, itself means a purchasing agent. It signifies "pound," the British pound symbolized by £, which stands for *libra*. With no effort at all, this Manciple, as Libra, is *money*, the efficient agent of business transactions.



Scorpio/ the Reeve Chaucer bypasses the many, bright stars of Scorpio. He concentrates on the scorpion image instead. Ancients described the living creature, with its claw-like pincers and a long, upturned tail, as a predator that haunts thicket and field. A scorpion's habit is to live most of its life alone in barns or deserted buildings. Death, from their venom, can come in less than an hour. Chaucer's Reeve--the overseer and accountant of a manor-- is *slender and bad-tempered*. He is *hairless and has legs like sticks*. He *keeps watch over storage areas*. And is *dreaded as if he were death itself*. He *prefers dwelling in the shadows on uncultivated land*. The detail of being *hindermost* of the group points to the scorpion's extensive physical structure at the rear.



Sagittarius/ the

Merchant Sagittarius has no outstandingly bright stars. The image *high on a horse he sat* fits only one sign in the zodiac. Picture the torso of a man joined to the shoulder area of a horse, and always illustrated with a beard and tousled hair. Chaucer covers both details with a *forked beard* and a *beaver hat*. The creature's hooves are noted as *boots neatly clasped*. Because we are dealing with a man-beast the poet says *men know not what to call him*.



Capricorn/ the Shipman

Capricorn is inconspicuous. Chaucer creates the connection to the Seagoat by choosing perfect seafaring references--an island off the coast of Sweden--Gotland--and a promontory along the coast of Spain--Cape of Finisterre. (*Sterre* is *star* in Chaucer's English.) That is, from *goat-land* to *fin-star*. Deneb Algedi (Arabic for *Tail's End*) is Capricorn's only important star and is properly located on the *fin* of the tail.



AQUARIUS

Aquarius/ the Summoner This singular portrait tells only of his duties and the condition of his face. The zodiac identifier is minimal--a one-word clue. *He knows how to call for "Watte" as well as does the pope. Watte* is explained as "Walter," but, with this spelling, "Watte" can function as both *Walter* and *water*. The task-name of "summoner" is awesome--the ultimate summoner being Death. Chaucer, no doubt, was well-acquainted with the dead and dying. This Pilgrim's appearance has all the possibilities of a victim of the plague. *His eyes are swollen almost shut. On his face, there are scabs, large and small pustules, and hair loss. Not surprising--Of his visage children were aferd. And yet, despite his hideous features, he had a way with The young girls of the diocese.* As the image of Death personified, the claim is acceptable; death would be irresistible.



Pisces/ the Pardoner A Christian legend commemorates Pisces as a fish caught by St. Peter; a coin was in its

mouth when it was hauled into the boat. Fomalhaut, a star of the first magnitude, has long been called the Fish's Mouth. The Pardoner's fine performance in church, singing and preaching, assured him of a great amount of silver in the collection. That projects a glimpse of Pisces as the fish with the coin in its mouth. A fish portrayed as a human can be seen in details of *his smooth hair, yellow as wax, as it spreads over his shoulders in very thin bits one upon another*--as an approximation of fish scales. He would *never have a beard* and *his eyes*--oddly enough--*look to the sides*, as the eyes of a fish would, rather than straight ahead.

Each of the Pilgrims has many more details for identification. This just gives a way to begin, an introduction to Chaucer's amazing allegorical method. (The entire analysis with all the scholarly references and sources is the substance of *Chaucer's Pilgrims: the Allegory*, my third book about the Canterbury Tales.) The search for identifiers has been an exciting adventure.