**Reading Questions for *The General Prologue* to Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales***

The best beginning procedure is always to read the assignment all the way through, keeping track of characters, so that you know what's happening. If possible, read the whole work first. Try to get the big picture of the book (or section, or chapter) before getting bogged down in details. Read through, then go back and clear up details. Then you're ready to read the work closely with these questions in mind.

**Important Characters**

29 pilgrims  
The host  
The narrator

***LINES 1-286***

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| 1. | Why do people long to go on pilgrimages in April (lines 1-18)? Where do they go in England? What happens when the narrator goes to the Tabard Inn in Southwark (across the Thames from London) ready to set out on his pilgrimage (lines 19-34)? What will he tell us now (lines 35-42)? Is this going to be an impartial description from an omniscient point of view? (See line 39.) |
| 2. | How good a soldier is **the Knight** (lines 43-78)? Where has he fought, and in what kinds of wars? What is his appearance? |
| 3. | Who is **the Squire** (lines 79-100)? How old is he? Where has he been fighting? What does he look like? |
| 4. | Who is **the Yeoman** (lines 101-118)? Who is he traveling with? What does he look like? Does he remind you of anyone? |
| 5. | Who is **the Prioress** (lines 118-162)? She is a nun, but what seems to be the social class she came from? Is she a good nun? What is written on her brooch (line 162)? Is it appropriate for her as a nun? Is it still appropriate if we recognize the phrase as a quotation from Ovid? Who does she have with her (lines 163-164). |
| 6. | Who is **the Monk** (lines 165-207)? What social class does he seem to have come from? Is his description an appropriate one for a monk? Who says he should do the things described in lines 184-188? ("Austin" is St. Augustine. See the footnote.) |
| 7. | Who is **the Friar** (lines 208-271)? Does he seem to be a good representative of the church? (See the footnotes. What do you know about St. Francis and lepers?) With people like the Prioress, the Monk, and the Friar in charge, is the church in good hands? |
| 8. | Who is **the Merchant** (lines 272-286)? Using the footnotes, what does he do for a living? Is he doing well? |

***LINES 287-624***

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| 1. | Who is **the Clerk** (lines 287-310)? (He's *not* a "clerk" in the merchant's store!) What are his interests? Is the last line positive or negative? |
| 2. | Who is **the Sergeant of the Law** (lines 311-332)? Note from the footnote that this is one of the high legal officials of the land; you might equate him with a modern Supreme Court justice. (The fact that each U.S. Supreme Court justice is in charge of a circuit comes directly from the medieval English justices riding circuit through England and holding assizes as in line 316.) |
| 3. | Who is **the Franklin** (lines 333-362)? Why is he in the Sergeant of the Law's company? What sort of person is he? (Hint: think of the Ghost of Christmas Present in *A Christmas Carol*.) "Franklin" comes from the word "frank," meaning "free" (we still use it this way: "Let me speak frankly with you."). Specifically, in Chaucer's time a franklin is a freeholder, a landowner of free but not noble birth, ranking just below the gentry. In this context, notice his use of words like "free" and "gentle." What political and legal roles has he held (lines 357-361 and footnotes)? |
| 4. | Who are **the five guildsmen** (lines 363-380)? These are rich commoners from a city (probably London), the urban equivalents of the Franklin. |
| 5. | Who is **the Cook** (lines 381-390)? Why would the guildsmen bring their own cook along? Why might Mayor Daley be unhappy about this cook working in a Chicago restaurant? |
| 6. | Who is **the Shipman** (lines 390-412)? Where is he from? (The west country, including Dartmouth, was the origin of many of the sailors who explored the world in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries.) How honest is he? |
| 7. | Who is **the Physician** (lines 413-446)? How knowledgeable is he? (See the footnotes.) Is there anything ironic about lines 445-446? |
| 8. | Who is **the Wife of Bath** (lines 447-478)? Where is Bath and why does it have that name? What physical disability does she have (line 448)? What is her profession (lines 449-450; she is part of the most important English industry and seems to be very good)? What are her behavior and dress like? What color are her hose? How many husbands and pilgrimages has she had? Is there anything ironic about line 469? |
| 9. | Who is **the Parson** (lines 479-530)? How good a representative of the church is he? How much say in the running of the church does he have compared to the Prioress, the Monk, and the Friar? |
| 10. | What is the relation of **the Plowman** (lines 531-543) to the Parson? What sort of person is the Plowman? There are echoes here of the "ideal" person that also appear in William Langland's character Piers Plowman, at times a symbol of Christ. |
| 11. | What is **the Miller** like (lines 547-568)? What sports does he engage in (line 550 and especially 552-553)? How honest is he? What instrument does he play? |
| 12. | What does **the Manciple** do (lines 569-588 and footnotes)? Who does he work for? How honest is he? |
| 13. | What is **the Reeve** like (lines 589-624)? His position is as a manager of an estate. How good is he? How honest is he? What was his original craft? |

***LINES 625-860***

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| 1. | What is **the Summoner's** job (lines 625-670 and footnotes)? All issues of morals, including all matrimonial and sex-related issues, were handled in Church courts (which by the sixteenth century were called the "bawdy courts"), not in the secular government courts. How popular do you imagine he is? How honest is he? Is something going on in lines 665-667? |
| 2. | What is **the Pardoner's** job (lines 671-716 and footnotes)? What does the Pardoner look like (lines 677-693)? What is line 693 saying? How honest is he? How good are his relics? What does line 712 suggest? |
| 3. | What is the narrator saying in lines 727-748? Why is he apologizing? Does Chaucer have no choice but to report exactly what each of these people said and did? Are these people real? What is Chaucer the writer (as opposed to the narrator who is part of the pilgrimage) doing here? |
| 4. | What is **the Host** like (lines 749-759)? What does he propose to the pilgrims? Read his plan carefully (lines 792-811). What does he get out of this plan? |
| 5. | What happens at the beginning of the journey (lines 824-860)? Who wins the draw to tell the first story? Is this a fitting choice? What sort of tale do you think he will tell? His tale is followed by the Miller's tale, which we are not reading but which is recommended. |
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