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COMMENTARY

Introducing the Characters

In the *Prologue* only three pilgrims seem to gain Chaucer's unqualified admiration—the Knight, the Parson, and the Plowman. These three, significantly, represent three of the most important classes of medieval society. Significantly too, they are abstractions, while the other pilgrims tend to be more sharply delineated.

The tone of the poem is not serious enough to support the theory that Chaucer intended it as a moral tract. He knew what people were and what they were supposed to be. But he also recognized that life was not a simple matter of black or white, of right or wrong. He recognized the pilgrims as they were, a panorama of human types, as vivid today as they were then.

The Knight. Students might need an explanation of such terms as *chivalry* and *courtesy* in order to understand Chaucer's description of the knight, for these terms have somewhat different meanings today. Discuss the following points: What details in the description of the Knight seem most concrete? What words and phrases reveal Chaucer's opinion of the character of the Knight? With what abstract qualities is the Knight associated?

The Squire. The Knight and the Squire, a father and son, represent a rather classic study in contrasts. Although the latter is training to become a knight, he clearly does not hold the same interests as his father and will use his knighthood to different ends. His accomplishments, such as learning to write and to dance,

his affectations, such as training his hair and attending to the details of dress, and, perhaps above all, his desire to impress the ladies, all proclaim an interest in the temporal world and the pleasures of this life. His father, on the other hand, is depicted as a representative of the older order, whose interests are more spiritual than temporal. It is significant that the Knight goes to war only in support of the Church or those to whom he owes feudal allegiance, thus indicating his concern for religion and chivalry. The Squire represents the changing attitudes in these areas during the period of the later Middle Ages and the approach of the Renaissance.

Discuss these points with the class: What does the Squire have in common with most young men? Which details illustrate his vanity? What are his chief accomplishments? What do lines 95 and 96 tell about the Squire and about Chaucer's opinion of him?

The Yeoman. The Yeoman is the Knight's only retainer and, as such, reminds the reader of his master in several ways. There seems to be the same seriousness about him that distinguishes the Knight from the Squire. He is obviously unwilling to talk about himself or what he has done, a trait found often in the soldier who has done more than the average, forcing Chaucer merely to guess what he can about the Yeoman from an external examination. As a result, Chaucer must convey the character of the Yeoman by describing his appearance, his clothes, and his equipment. His equipment, the best possible for the job, he keeps in perfect

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condition. The mention of the close-cropped hair and the weathered face gives the reader the feeling that the Yeoman's personal condition is probably as perfect as that of his weapons. From these points we are able to recognize the craftsman and the professional in the Yeoman.

The Prioress. The Prioress, as almost a counterpart of the Knight, seems to be a leftover from the age of chivalry. Chaucer is aware of several things about her which seem ludicrous to him; nevertheless, he seems to have great respect for the Prioress and, although he does satirize her, he does it in a most gentle way. However, he has made us more aware of the woman than of the nun, whose obsession with the customs and niceties of court life—such as keeping dogs as pets (usually forbidden to members of religious institutions), feeding delicacies to them instead of ministering to the poor, and affecting severely fastidious manners—is overwhelming. Chaucer's description draws a comparison between what the Prioress is and what she should be by almost totally ignoring the religious side of her life and thereby forcing a judgment on the reader. This is a device Chaucer uses often in *The Canterbury Tales*, and, as they read further, students should come to recognize it.

Ask students to discuss these points: How does Chaucer use the name Madame Eglantyne to further his description of the Prioress? What details concerning the Prioress seem to impress the reader most of all? What things seem to be of greatest interest to the Prioress? Is there anything contradictory in the description of the Prioress?

The Monk. The class should be given some information on monasticism and monastic orders in England. Monasteries, which had been the great centers of learning for hundreds of years, had at the time of *The Canterbury Tales* perhaps passed the flood tide of their existence. Less than a century and a half after the death of Chaucer, they would disappear entirely from the English scene at the not-too-gentle insistence of Henry VIII. The more powerful orders, such as the Benedictine, of which Chaucer's Monk was

probably a member, insisted on vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The Benedictines took an additional vow never to leave the lands of the monastery without the express permission of their superior. The very facts of the Monk's dress and the way in which he spends his time are completely in opposition to the monastic rule.

Have the students discuss these points: Chaucer seems to agree with the Monk's attitudes toward the rules of monastic life when he says that the Monk's "views were sound." What evidence is there to indicate that Chaucer does not, in fact, agree with the Monk? What reactions are there to the questions in lines 182–185?

The Friar. The differences between monks and friars should be pointed out here. A monk led a cloistered life of work, study, and prayer. A friar, on the other hand, spent his life out in the world preaching and ministering to the poor. Friar Hubert is a mendicant—that is, he is licensed to beg—and very probably he is a member of the Franciscan order.

By now your students should be aware of a number of Chaucer's favorite devices for revealing character—his attention to clothing and physical appearance, his selection of seemingly unimportant details, such as the form by which a pilgrim is addressed or a description of a pilgrim's horse, to illustrate the difference between what the character is and what he should be. The class should realize that Chaucer is doing far more than merely describing the characters.

Have the students discuss these points: What are the salient features in Chaucer's description of the Friar? In what ways is the conduct of his life in conflict with the principles of his order? What evidence is there to show that Chaucer is doing more than simply describing the Monk and the Friar?

The Merchant. In contrast to some of the descriptions of the other pilgrims, Chaucer's description of the Merchant is rather brief but very personal, as though he had a specific person in mind. This pilgrim might well be the easiest to understand, or at least the easiest for us to recognize, for, on the whole, nothing seems

to have changed during the intervening six centuries.

Discuss these points with the class: What attitude does Chaucer express toward the Merchant? What does Chaucer mean in lines 280–282? Why does Chaucer think it necessary to comment on the fact that he doesn't know the Merchant's name?

The Oxford Cleric. The term *cleric* as Chaucer uses it was the designation given to any person in holy orders or to an ecclesiastical student. It should be remembered that the medieval university was originally founded to train young men for the Church.

Ask the class to discuss these points: What is so extraordinary about the Cleric having twenty books? What is suggested by the details of his dress and by the description of his horse? What subjects does he study? What does the last line reveal about him? Can the Cleric be compared to any other member of the pilgrimage?

The Serjeant at the Law. Serjeants-at-Law were the most eminent members of the legal profession in medieval England; at the time Chaucer wrote, there were only about twenty in the entire country. They were special legal servants of the king, selected from lawyers with at least sixteen years of experience. From among the Serjeants-at-Law, the king chose the judges for his courts, as well as traveling "circuit judges" known as "Justices of Assize" (line 318). Chaucer may have based his portrait on Thomas Pynchbek, a prominent Serjeant-at-Law who took the opposite side politically from Chaucer himself. Chaucer's satirical emphasis on the Serjeant-at-Law's apparent wisdom ("Or so he seemed," line 326) and greedy materialism ("Had won him many a robe and many a fee," line 321) supports this possibility. This portrait is also of special interest because of the likelihood that Chaucer himself had a legal education.

The Franklin. The Franklin is a country landowner. In Chaucer's day, a franklin was a man of some substance, ranking just below the gentry in the social order. He is also called "Member for the Shire" at one point, but this title is purely nominal. The reference to

Epicurus may have to be explained to the class as an allusion to the luxurious living to which the Franklin is partial. Many of the Canterbury pilgrims are guilty of one or more of the deadly sins of the older morality plays, and with Chaucer's special emphasis on his eating habits, the Franklin appears guilty of the sin of gluttony.

Discuss these points with the class: What sort of humor does Chaucer employ in describing the Franklin? Why is the Franklin so preoccupied with lavish living? Can the class accept his philosophy?

The Five Guildsmen, the Cook, the Skipper, the Doctor. In lines 365–382 Chaucer presents five representatives of one of the guild-fraternities under the protection of his patron, John of Gaunt. Make sure the class understands the function of guilds in medieval society. Ask them to notice the emphasis on these guildsmen's prosperity and on their proud identification with their company. Chaucer's Cook is obviously skilled in preparing favorite medieval dishes, but unfortunately he is suffering from an ulcer on his knee that rather undermines his culinary ability. The visceral humor here is a characteristic Chaucerian touch. The portrait of the hardy, sun-tanned Skipper is mainly sympathetic, although Chaucer does suggest that this seaman's horsemanship leaves something to be desired (line 394), and that he deals rather unscrupulously with prisoners taken in battle and with the Bordeaux wine merchants. The Doctor is typical of the age in that he treats his patients according to the laws of astrology and the medieval theory of humors. (The health of the body was thought to be determined by the condition and balance of four humors: blood, which was hot and moist; cholera or yellow bile, which was hot and dry; phlegm, which was cold and moist; and melancholy or black bile, which was cold and dry.) Also typical is the Doctor's exploitative love of money (lines 439–442). In discussing this last passage, the students might find it interesting that Chaucer lived through the terrible fourteenth-century onslaught of the plague, which had been brought back to Europe by Crusaders returning from the Holy Lands.

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The Wife of Bath. The Wife of Bath is one of those pilgrims whose characteristics are more individual than general. The physical details Chaucer uses are not the details that we today would use to characterize a type (such as dyed blond hair). Instead, Chaucer refers to her deafness and the gap between her teeth. Medieval physiognomists, however, believed that certain physical abnormalities or defects revealed imperfections of character. Other rather personal characteristic traits are the Wife's somewhat outlandish trappings, the number of husbands she has had (a distinguishing characteristic in any age), and her great love of travel, for which most women of that age had little opportunity.

Discuss these points with the class: For what reason, ostensibly, does the Wife of Bath travel? Who else among the pilgrims has traveled as widely? Is there any evidence to show that the Wife of Bath's earlier pilgrimages were not entirely of a religious nature?

Since the Church discourages remarriage (I Corinthians 7:39), of what significance is the fact that the Wife of Bath has been married five times? How else does Chaucer reveal his attitude toward the Wife of Bath?

The Parson. The Parson, to distinguish him from the two other churchmen we have encountered so far, is what we would call a village clergyman or a parish priest. The difference between the description of the Parson and that of the Wife can quickly be seen, for the former is a paragon, an ideal, with absolutely no personal oddities.

Discuss these questions: What qualities does the Parson possess? In what way can the Parson be compared with the Monk and the Friar? What is the significance of the question "... if gold rust, what then will iron do?"

The Plowman. As the Parson represents the ideal priest, the Plowman represents the true Christian layman. The Plowman is one of the several people, such as the Knight, who represent a stratum of medieval society rather than an occupation. His inclusion in the pilgrimage represents the increasing importance of the laborer after a third or more of the population of England had been killed by the

Black Death. The fact that Chaucer represents him favorably instead of with contempt, as was usual with most contemporary portraits of the common man, is significant.

Discuss this point with the class: The Plowman is represented as the brother of the Parson. Should this be taken figuratively or literally?

The Miller. Of all the descriptions of the pilgrims, perhaps that of the Miller is the most completely physical. It is interesting to note that while we can see him clearly, we know very little about the Miller. It is unusual for Chaucer to give such a one-sided picture. Ask the class how the Miller's physical characteristics reveal his moral fiber.

The Manciple. A manciple was a steward or servant who purchased provisions for a college or, in this case, for one of the Inns of Court, the four ancient law schools in London. Chaucer wittily contrasts the practical cleverness of the Manciple here with the "abstrusest legal knowledge" of the men he serves. It has been argued that the inclusion of such an inconsequential character among the Canterbury pilgrims lends support to the idea that Chaucer himself lived and studied for a time at one of the Inns of Court.

The Reeve. A reeve served as the superintendent of an estate. His position was not unlike that of a steward and, indeed, in some ways, very like the good steward of the Biblical parable. Chaucer, once again, might well have had a certain individual in mind.

Discuss these questions with the class: What specific details indicate that the description of the Reeve is based on an actual individual? What ironic touch is to be found in lines 605-609? How would this help to explain the traditional rivalry between millers and reeves?

The Summoner. Summoners were employees of the ecclesiastical courts, sent by the justices to summon those suspected of offenses against Church law. By Chaucer's day, summoners had become notorious for blackmailing people by threatening to have them called into court. (Chaucer's Friar, in his tale, will accuse the Summoner of just such despicable

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offenses.) But with his usual generous irony, Chaucer suggests that this Summoner is far from being the worst member of his profession, although he is grotesquely fond of strong food and drink and of abusing the Latin language. The Summoner's appalling physical appearance may be due to venereal disease, for which the ointments mentioned in lines 633–635 were often prescribed. This portrait provides a good occasion for discussing the medieval tradition of criticizing the less admirable practices of the Church—the opposite side, in a sense, of the proverbial medieval emphasis on piety and spirituality.

The Pardoner. The tricks and abuses of privilege by pardoners were widely known in Chaucer's day. Many unauthorized pardoners went about the countryside selling pardons to unsuspecting rural folk. However, that a pardoner was licensed to sell indulgences is a common misconception. Pardons were not for sale. In order for an individual to be absolved from sin, three conditions had to be met: (1) contrition in one's own heart; (2) confession to a priest who then gave absolution; (3) penance to remove temporal guilt.

In addition to this, almost none of the pardoners dealt with relics, so Chaucer's

Pardoner, who does, is satirized as being especially offensive. He also comes from the Hospital of Blessed Mary of Roncivalles near Charing Cross. It was quite common to satirize pardoners from this hospital because they were such frequent offenders.

Discuss these points with the class: Why is the Pardoner so successful in selling his "relics"? How is the Pardoner's disheveled appearance a reflection of his inner depravity? Why, then, does Chaucer call him "noble"? Why is it ironic that the Pardoner does, indeed, sing the offertory best?

The Host. Of all the characters on the pilgrimage, the Host is the most surely identifiable as a real person. Elsewhere in *The Canterbury Tales* (The "Cook's Prologue") he is even called by name, Harry Bailly. There is substantial evidence that such a person did operate a tavern in Southwark during Chaucer's time.

Discuss these questions with the class: What is Chaucer's attitude toward the Host? How is the Host described? What suggestions does he make to the assembled pilgrims? What specific value do these suggestions have as far as the general plan of *The Canterbury Tales* is concerned?

ANSWER KEYS

READING CHECK

- A. 1. T 3. F 5. F 7. F 9. T
 2. F 4. T 6. T 8. T 10. F

- B. 1. twenty-nine
 2. It is a religious pilgrimage; they plan to worship at the shrine of Thomas à Becket.
 3. April
 4. Students should list any three of the following pilgrims: the Monk, the Friar, the Miller, the Summoner, and the Pardoner.
 5. He suggests that each pilgrim tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back.

STUDY GUIDE

1. He was the son of middle-class parents, his father being a wine merchant. He became a page in a house with close royal ties and learned Latin, French, and Italian. His exposure to society also provided an important education in the observation of people and a growing understanding of human nature.
2. He served as a soldier in France and as a courtier, diplomat, civil administrator, and translator. He was also a member of Parliament, justice of the peace, comptroller, and clerk.
3. John of Gaunt, King Richard II's uncle, was Chaucer's patron. The influence of an