Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*: The General Prologue

THE POEM AS MICROCOSM

Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes,

What/Who is Zephirus?
What does inspired mean?

and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open eye—
(So priketh hem Nature in hir corages);
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,
The holy blisful martir for to seke
That hem hath holpen, whan that they were seeke.
Why do people go on pilgrimages?

Bifil that in that seson, on a day,
In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay
Redy to wenden on my pilgrymage
To Caunterbury with ful devout corage,
At nyght was come into that hostelrye
Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye
Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle
In felaweshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle,
That toward Caunterbury wolden ryde.
The chambres and the stables weren wyde,
And wel we weren esed atte beste;
And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste,
So hadde I spoken with hem everichon
That I was of hir felaweshipe anon,
And made forward erly for to ryse
To take our wey, ther as I yow devyse.

What impression do you get of the narrator?
Unreliable Narrator: Pilgrim vs. Poet
Naivete vs. Craft

A SERIES OF PORTRAITS —

Sometimes Satire: A Monk . . . An outridere

. . . This ilke Monk leet olde thynges pace,
And heeld after the newe world the space.
He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen,
That seith that hunters beth nat hooly men,
Ne that a monk, whan he is recchelees,
Is likned til a fissh that is waterlees,—
This is to seyn, a monk out of his cloystre;
But thilke text heeld he nat worth an oystre;
And I seyde his opinioun was good.
What sholde he studie, and make hymselfen wood,
Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure,
Or swynken with his handes and laboure,
As Austyn bit? How shal the world be served?
Lat Austyn have his swynk to him reserved!

Chaucer calls the monk a “manly man.”
Sometimes More Subtle—Ambiguous:

Ther was also a Nonne, a Prioresse,  
That of hir smylyng was ful symple and coy;  
Hir gretteste ooth was but by Seinte Loy;  
And she was cleped Madame Eglentyne.  
Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne,  
Entuned in hir nose ful semely,  
And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly,  
After the scole of Stratford-atte-Bowe,  
For Frenssh of Parys was to hir unknowe.  
At mete wel ytaught was she with alle:  
She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,  
Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe;  
Wel koude she carie a morsel, and wel kepe  
That no drope ne fille upon hir brist.  
In curteisie was set ful mucho hir list.  
Hire over-lippe wyped she so clene  
That in hir coppe ther was no ferthyng sene  
Of grece, whan she dronken hadde hir draughte.
Ful semely after hir mete she raughte.
And sikerly, she was of greet desport,
And ful plesaunt, and amyable of port,
And peyned hir to countrefete cheere
Of court, and been estatlich of manere,
And to ben holden dign of reverence.
But, for to speken of hir conscience,
She was so charitable and so pitous
She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous
Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.
Of smale houndes hadde she, that she fedde
With rosted flessh, or milk and wastel-breed.
But sore wepte she if oon of hem were deed,
Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte;
And al was conscience, and tendre herte.
Ful semyly hir wympul pynched was,
Hire nose tretys, hir eyen greye as glas,
Hir mouth ful smal, and therto softe and reed;
But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed;
It was almoost a spanne brood, I trowe;
For, hardly, she was nat undergrowe.
Ful fetys was hir cloke, as I was war;
Of smal coral aboute hir arm she bar
A paire of bedes, gauded al with grene, i.e., a Rosary
An theron heng a brooch of gold ful sheene,
On which ther was first write a crowned A,
And after Amor vincit omnia.

How would you characterize the Prioress? Devout?
Worldly? Vain?

How do you think Chaucer (the Pilgrim/Narrator) feels about her? What is Chaucer the Poet/Maker trying to accomplish? On what details in the portrait do you base your evaluation?

Characters thus variously presented are developed and complicated by the relation between them and the tale they tell.

For next time: Re-read carefully what Chaucer says in the General Prologue about the Pardoner.