

# 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 5  
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— 10  
(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 15  
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 20  
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 25  
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, 30  
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, 175  
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,— 180  
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, 185  
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.”

What adjectives would *you* use to describe this abbot?

### Sometimes More Subtle—Ambiguous:

Ther was also a Nonne, a Prioressse,  
That of hir smylyng was ful symple and coy;  
Hir gretteste ooth was but by Seinte Loy; 120  
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, 125  
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 130  
That no drope ne fille upon hir brist.  
In curteisie was set ful muche 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. 135

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, 140  
And to ben holden digne 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. 145  
Of smale houndes hadde she, that she fedde  
With rosted flessch, 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. 150  
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; 155  
For, hardily, 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, 160  
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.