STUDY QUESTIONS FOR THE CANTERBURY TALES AND PILGRIMS

THE GENERAL PROLOGUE OF THE CANTERBURY TALES, TO P. 8

1. Did Chaucer actually go on a pilgrimage and draw these characters from real life, or did he read about them in books?

2. Who is Thomas a Becket? When did he die?

3. In what time of year does the Canterbury pilgrimage take place? What month?

4. Look closely at the first 18 lines. Where are the four elements of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water mentioned? Are they in any particular order?

5. How many Pilgrims does the narrator meet at the Tabard in Southwerk?

6. The narrator says (ll35–41) that he will describe all of his traveling companions according to their "degree" (social rank). Does he follow any particular order in his listing and describing the Pilgrims? Where does he start?

7. As you read through the descriptions of the Pilgrims, note how the narrator describes them, how their physical appearance might reflect personality, moral character, etc. Also watch for the narrator's comments about each one -- does he like them, is he impressed by them.

8. Chaucer is noted for his IRONY, that is, for creating a discrepancy between what one anticipates and what actually happens. Which of the Pilgrims are treated ironically, that is, which of them could be less moral or virtuous that the narrator perceives them to be?

9. Chaucer's narrator describes each of the Pilgrims with specific details that often have implications that he doesn't comment on (like the Prioress's keeping pets or being fastidious with her manners at table). Watch out for all these details and try to make them add up to an interpretation of the Pilgrim. Do this for each Pilgrim.

10. How do the Knight, the Squire, and The Yeoman form a unit of Pilgrims?

11. What are some of the accomplishments of the Knight? What does the narrator think of him? Is he a courtly lover or a more serious Crusading Knight?

12. What are the particular skills and abilities of the Squire? How is he related to the Knight? Is he a courtly lover? What details indicate that he is?

13. How do the Prioress, the Monk, and the Friar form a unit of Pilgrims? Are they described in any particular order? Are they doing anyone harm but themselves?

14. What are the distinctive habits and accomplishments of the Prioress, Madame Eglantine? Is she as "spiritual" as a nun should be? What details indicate she is a bit "worldly" in her concerns and behavior? Does the narrator criticize her at all? Her brooch is inscribed with the motto "Love Conquers All." What kind of love is this? Is it an ambiguous inscription?

15. What is the Monk's favorite past time? Is this appropriate for a cloistered man of the church? How well does the Monk live up to his calling? What is the Monk's physical appearance?

16. What does the Friar do with his time? Does he minister to the poor and the sick? With whom does he hang out? What are his motives? How does he use his office for personal gain?
17. Do the Merchant and the Clerk form any kind of unit? Do they create some obvious contrasts regarding wealth?
18. What is the Merchant particularly good at?
19. Describe the Clerk's horse. What does the Clerk spend all his money on? How does he afford his education? What motivates the Clerk (look at lines 309-310)?

STUDY QUESTIONS FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE PROLOGUE

1. Beginning at line 363, the narrator describes the guildsmen, like those who might have been in charge of a mystery play in their town. Which guilds are represented?
2. Who is traveling with the guildsmen? What malady does this person have? Is he going to Canterbury to get healed?
3. What is the Shipman particularly good at? Is he a nice man, or more of a pirate?
4. How good a doctor is the Doctor of Physik? What kinds of knowledge does he have and where did he get it? What is the Doctor most interested in?
5. What is the Wife of Bath's physical appearance? How many times has she been married? Where has she traveled on pilgrimages?
6. The Parson and the Plowman are brothers. How are they similar? The Parson and the Plowman are the last of the first group of Pilgrims to be described (the break comes at line 545 when the narrator introduces the last five Pilgrims). Where are the Parson and Plowman on the social scale? Top? Middle? Bottom? Of all the Pilgrims on the pilgrimage how would you rank the Parson and Plowman in moral character? Top? Middle? Bottom?
7. What do the last five Pilgrims have in common (ll. 544ff)? Are they all thieves or cheats of some kind? What do the Miller and the Manciple, and the Reeve steal? What do the Pardoner and the Summoner steal?
8. Describe the Miller's physical appearance? Why is it said he has "a thumb of gold"? What kinds of sports does he like? What kinds of stories does he like to tell?
9. Describe the physical appearance of the Reeve. What is a Reeve? For whom does this Reeve work and how does he cheat his employer? He is said to be choleric. What does that mean?
10. What is a Summoner? What is the physical appearance of this Summoner? What is wrong with his skin, his face and beard? What does he eat to remedy his condition?
11. Describe the Pardoner. What kind of voice does he have, what kind of hair? Is he particularly masculine? How do you know? (look at line 690-693). What does a Pardoner do? How does this one make his living?
12. The Pardoner is the last of the Pilgrims to be described. Is there any significance in this, any reason he is at the bottom of the list?
13. Why does Chaucer the Pilgrim (the narrator) put himself with this last group of Pilgrims (see ll. 546)?
14. The Host (ll. 749ff), the landlord of the Tabard Inn, a man named Harry Bailey, comes up with an idea to help the Pilgrims have fun along the route to Canterbury. What is this plan?
15. Who is going to benefit from the prize for the best story told, since the prize is a dinner at the Tabard Inn when the Pilgrims return to London?
16. How do they decide who will tell the first tale? Who will tell the first tale? Why is this appropriate?

THE KNIGHT'S TALE

1. In what country is the Knight's Tale set? How does Chaucer "medievalize" this classical setting? Think back to the romances of Arthur we have read.
2. Compare the two cousins, Palamon and Arcyte. Are they identical (and therefore there is no rational reason for one to win the girl and not the other), or is there a difference between them that might make one more deserving of the getting the girl? Who sees Emily first? Which says he loves her best? How is the opposition of love v. friendship explored in the poem? Who is better off -- the one in prison who can see Emily, or the one who is free but can't see her? Are these the kinds of issues that are explored by the Code of Courtly Love?
3. What features of the Courtly Love Code are present in the story of Palamon, Arcite, and Emily?
4. How does Arcite, who is exiled, manage to return to be in Emily's presence?
5. What happens when Palamon and Arcite meet in the woods? What does Theseus determine about their fates?
6. The poem is noble and stately with many references to chivalry and ideal love. Is it a proper tale for the Knight to tell?
7. Which of Chaucer's "jobs" is reflected in the tournaments and pageantry of the Knight's story?
8. Theseus is in charge, setting the rules for the tournament, controlling the fates of Palamon and Arcite. Does he represent some form of divine order or justice? Note what he says toward the end about the "chain of love." What does Egeus say about the human predicament?
9. To which deity does each of the lovers (Palamon, Arcite, Emily) pray? Describe the altars at which each prays; what pictures are on the walls? Recall the Dream Visions! Over the deities is Saturn who controls fate. Which character in the Knight's Tale performs the role of Saturn relative to the three lovers?
10. Given that Arcite wins the battle but Palamon wins the girl, IS there justice in the world? Does each lover get what he/she prayed for? Is chivalry a human attempt to impose order on an otherwise unpredictable world of accident, chance, and injustice?
11. Describe all of the "ordering" aspects of the poem, i.e., the parallel structures, characters, and events that create an "artistic" order in the poem. The pageantry is an aristocratic imposition of order on chaos by an aristocratic society -- the "rules" of war, the "rules" of love, the "rules" of civil behavior, for instance.

THE MILLER'S TALE & THE REEVE'S TALE

THE MILLER'S TALE
1. Review the description of the Miller in the General Prologue. What does he look like? What are his favorite activities? How does he cheat his customers? What kind of stories does he like to tell?

2. A fabliaux is a bawdy tale (French in origin) that deals with lower class people (sometimes with pretensions to nobility), filled with raucous burlesque action, tricks, con jobs, money and sex and peppered with "dirty" language, potty mouth people, bodily functions, etc.). What specific elements of the Miller's Tale fit the definition of the fabliaux?

3. Describe each of the young characters: Alison, Nicholas, and Absolon. What pretensions does Alison have (note the way she dresses); how is she identified as a "farm girl"; with what animals is she compared. What are Nicholas' particular skills; how is it that he will be able to convince John that Noah's flood is on the way? Could Absolon pass for Richard Simmons? Is he a "dandy"; of what is he particularly "squeamish"?

4. Describe John the carpenter. Note the lead-in to the tale, the conversation between the Miller and the Reeve. Why is the Miller mad at the Reeve? What is the occupation of the Reeve?

5. Describe the setting of the carpenter's house -- the bedroom, the window, etc.

6. Summarize the plot -- John's trip, Nicholas' plan, John discovering Nicholas in a trance, the building of the tubs, Absolon's appearance, "the kiss," the poker, the fart, the cry for water, etc. How is it all made believable? Given the characters and the situation, is the plot fitted together like a plan of inevitable cause and effect, like destiny, fate?

7. Is there Justice in the Miller's Tale (poetic justice, cosmic justice). What "punishment" does each character suffer? Do the characters get what they deserve better than the characters in The Knight's tale? Note that Alison gets away with no punishment. Is the Miller commenting on the nature of Justice?

8. Is the Miller's Tale a parody of the Knight's Tale: 2 men after one woman; a father with a comely daughter, a husband with a young wife; issues of fate, destiny, accident and chance. Note the difference between the people involved and the love/lust they profess, between the philosophical musing of the Knight's Tale with all its chivalry and Courtly Love and the bawdy humor, farcical actions, and jealousies of four horny middle class bumblers.

9. How, in the final analysis, does the tale "fit" the teller?

THE REEVE'S TALE

1. Why does the Reeve tell a story about a miller? What details in the story connect Simpkin with the Miller on the pilgrimage?

2. What is Simpkin particularly proud of? What is ironic about his "well-descended" wife and his daughter?

3. Where are Alan and John in school? Nicholas from "The Miller's Tale" was also a student. Where was he in school?) Why do they take the grain to be ground by a miller?
4. Simpkin dislikes Alan and John. Why?
5. Describe the way Alan and John speak, their dialect? What does this reveal about them? What part of the country are they from? Note: this is the first record of dialect being used in a work of English literature?
6. Like the Miller on the pilgrimage, Simpkin is a cheat. How does he distract the boys so he can cheat them? How, specifically, does he cheat them?
7. How do they discover that they have been cheated? Who tells on Simpkin?
8. How does Alan decide to get revenge on the Miller? Describe the Miller's house; how are the beds set up, the baby's crib, etc., so the action that follows will be credible?
9. What does John do when he realizes that Alan is having a good time with the Miller's daughter? How does he get the Miller's wife in bed with him?
10. What happens with the baby's crib that leads to the comic confusion? How is Alan "found out"? How does he end up in bed with the Miller?
11. Describe the comic fight that ensues? Note the detail about how the Miller's wife hits him on his bald head.
12. How do the boys get back the grain the Miller stole from them?
13. The "Reeve's Tale" is an example of a kind of story referred to as the "trickster tricked" or "table turned" Explain how this term fits the Reeve's tale.
14. Is there "poetic justice" in the "Reeve's Tale"?
15. How does the "Reeve's Tale" fit the teller; how does it reflect the personality of the Reeve as we know about him from the "General prologue," from his argument with the Miller, and from his introduction to his own tale?

THE FRIAR'S TALE

1. Re-read the description of the Friar in the "General Prologue." What are his character traits, his motives, his methods, etc.?
2. Where do the Summoner and the Friar begin their argument? Look back at p. 239 in the Wife of Bath's Tale for their opening dispute.
3. Describe the argument between the Friar and the Summoner. Why are they mad at each other?
4. Describe the Summoner in the Friar's Tale. What is a Summoner's job, how does this Summoner go about his business, what are his motives and methods?
5. The Friar calls his Summoner a "pimp." Why?
6. What does the Summoner in the Friar's Tale claim is his profession when he meets the "yeoman"?
7. Who is this "yeoman"? What has he in common with the Summoner? Is the Friar suggesting that a Summoner's proper companion is the devil. [Note that the yeoman is from the North, and in medieval thought Hell was geographically in the North].
8. Why is the expression "I'll be damned" uttered by the yeoman ironic?
9. What does the man with his cart stuck in the mud say and why doesn't the devil comply with his request? What bargain do the devil and the Summoner make; what are its terms? Is the Friar suggesting that a Summoner is better than (or at least competitive) the devil at cheating people?
10. Who is the Summoner trying to cheat out of money? What does she say to the Summoner when he tries to get her to pay up?
11. Why does the devil take the Summoner when the old widow curses him?

THE SUMMONER'S TALE

1. According to the Summoner Hell is full of Friar's. Where do they reside in Hell?
2. What are Trentals?
3. For what project is the Friar seeking donations? Who accompanies him on his rounds to collect gifts?
4. How does the Friar try to get money out of Thomas and his wife? What "vision" does he say he has had that might loosen their purse strings? What power of prayer does he claim will be of service to Thomas and his wife?
5. How does the Friar act in Thomas' house? Does he seem familiar, comfortable, at home? Note the way he sits down and brushes the cat aside. Does he have an "eye" for Thomas' wife?
6. Why is Thomas angry with the Friar? Is Thomas a "doubting Thomas"?
7. On what subject does the Friar lecture Thomas at length? How does Thomas respond to this "sermon"? What emotion does it evoke in Thomas? Is anger an appropriate/ironic/hypocritical topic for the Friar to be lecturing others about?
8. What "gift" does Thomas give to the Friar and what does he request that the Friar do with it?
9. Does this "gift" make the Friar angry?
10. To whom does the Friar complain about Thomas' behavior, the gift, etc.?
11. Who comes up with the idea about how the Friar can accomplish Thomas' request?
12. What is this idea, i.e., how does the Friar share the fart equally?
13. Who should make a movie of this story? The Farelly brothers? Terence and Philip?

Study Questions for THE SHIPMAN, THE DOCTOR OF MEDICINE, AND THE PRIORESS

THE SHIPMAN'S TALE

1. In the opening lines of the story, does it appear the narrator is a man or a woman? Note the line reference to the "wretched husband" who "keeps us in dresses and finery."
2. This tale was originally assigned to the Wife of Bath, most scholars agree. Why would it be a good tale for her to tell?
3. This story is of a type called "the lover's gift regained." Explain why this is an apt description of the events of the story.
4. Brother John in the story is a critical portrait of the medieval clergy. To what extent is Brother John similar to the Monk in the "General prologue"? What are his particular vices?
5. Brother John is fun loving and free-spending. How is his "cousin," the merchant, different from him? Where does the merchant spend most of his time? Is there a
correlation between money and sex here -- stingy and impotent, generous and virile? Does this remind us of the Wife of Bath's Tale in which sex and money are entwined?

6. Compare the situation here (husband, willing young wife, randy guest in the house) with that in the Miller's Tale. Note how being "on hand" when a husband leaves the house is a great advantage to the would-be lover.

7. Where do Brother John and the merchant's wife meet and discuss the possibilities of their tryst?

8. What complaints does the wife have against her husband (see p. 152 particularly)?

9. The wife asks Brother John for a loan of 100 francs. What does she want the money for? What does she offer in return for the loan?

10. Where does Brother John get the money to give to the wife?

11. What does Brother John tell the Merchant when the Merchant asks for the loan to be repaid?

12. What effect does making money have on the Merchant (see p. 157)? Is it a medieval Viagra?

13. What does the wife tell the Merchant when he asks for the money Brother John told him he paid back to the wife?

14. Does this amount to the form of prostitution that appears in the Wife of bath's Tale, i.e., the wife being paid for the sex she gives her husband?

15. What does the Host say to the Shipman after his tale concludes? Is the Host worried about his own wife (compare what he says to the Merchant, p. 343)

THE DOCTOR OF MEDICINE'S TALE

1. Re-read the description of the Doctor in the "general Prologue." Does he seem to be the kind of person who would tell a like that of Apius and Virginius?

2. What does Nature think of her creation, Virginia?

3. Describe the physical and moral excellence of Virginia.

4. What advice does the Doctor give to parents about raising children (p. 388)?

5. Is there anything ironic about Virginia's great beauty and moral excellence? What is it that makes Apius want to possess her? Would Virginia have been better off if she had been less attractive and less virtuous?

6. What office does Apius hold? What devious method does he use to get Virginia away from her father Virginius? Who helps him?

7. What does Virginius do to thwart Apius' plan and preserve his daughter's virtue?

8. How does Virginia feel about this?

9. What does Apius do to Virginius when he learns of Virginia's death?

10. How do the people react to Apius' sentence on Virginius?

11. How does Apius die? What happens to Claudius?

12. What is the Doctor's moral at the end of the Tale?

13. How does the Host respond to the Doctor's Tale?

THE PRIORESS' TALE

1. Re-read the description of the Prioress in the "General Prologue." Does Madam Eglantine seem the type of person who would tell a story about a miracle of the
Virgin? She's a nun after all. But she was rather ambiguous. Is her tale also morally ambiguous?

2. What is the verse form of the tale, the rhyme scheme? Is this different from the other tales we have read?

3. The Prologue to her tale is a hymn to the Virgin Mary. How do the following references in her "prologue" connect with the tale proper -- Moses, word and flesh, tongue and skill of expression, "feeble is my skill," "I'm like a child," the "song I shall sing of thee."

4. How are Jews portrayed in the story? Is the Prioress a bigot, an anti Semite?

5. What was the medieval attitude toward Jews? Even if they were generally hated and reviled, should a Nun express bigotry? Is it ironic that she quotes Hebrew scripture in her "prologue" and then condemns Jews as usurers, murderers, a "fiendish nation," and followers of Satan?

6. What song is taught to the little Christian schoolboy? Does he understand the words? Does the Prioress really understand the words of her own story?

7. Where is the boy walking when he is murdered? Who kills him? Who arouses the Jews' hatred of the little boy and sets them against him?

8. How is the murdered boy discovered in the cesspit where he was thrown with his throat cut?

9. The boy even I death continues to sing the song. What causes this miracle? How is the boy finally put to rest and the singing stopped?

10. Check the note on Hugh of Lincoln, a little boy who, like the boy in the story, was allegedly killed by Jews and thrown in a pit in the 13th century. Chaucer would have known about this story since he had probably traveled to Lincoln when his wife was inducted in the Cathedral's Order of the Virgin. Lincoln Cathedral is dedicated to Mary and in the south transept opposite the choir is a monument to St. Hugh of Lincoln.

THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

1. Re-read the description of the Wife of Bath in the "General Prologue." Summarize her physical appearance, her personality, her "biography."

2. The Wife begins with a statement about the merit of books versus experience in the matter of love and marriage. Which does she say is the best resource for knowledge on this subject?

3. How many times has she been married?

4. What arguments does she give to defend her multiple marriages (recall that in the medieval church re-marriage was like adultery)? Note that she quotes from the "text" (i.e., the Bible) for her own purposes. Explain the example of the Samaritan woman with five husbands.

5. What does she say about having children (does she have any?), about virginity versus marriage? Is virginity a commandment? What would happen if everyone was a virgin? What does she say about having more than one spouse (where do the examples come from; is it multiple husbands or wives?).

6. What questions does she rhetorically ask about sex organs?
7. What does the wife's husband have to do to have sex with the wife? She explains that she gets pleasure from sex; what else does she get? What is another word for what the wife is, considering that she is "selling" herself to her husbands?

8. How does the Pardoner react to what the Wife is saying about marriage?

9. On p. 224 the Wife says she will "begin my tale," but what follows is not her tale but more self-revealing biography -- the story of her married life with her three "good" husbands and her two "bad" husbands. What are the differences between these two groups of men?

10. How does the Wife treat her three old husbands? What are her techniques for getting what she wants -- money, freedom, property, adulterous affairs, sovereignty, etc.? At the beginning of her Prologue, the Wife is defensive of marriage. Does her description of her experience in marriage make marriage seem attractive or unattractive?

11. There are many things in the Wife's harangue that are anti-feminist, things that speak ill of women, like they nag, they are only after money, they will be unfaithful if unattractive and if attractive then everyone is after them, so no sane man should get married. What are some more of these (pp. 225-230)? Is the wife herself an example of many of these anti-feminist observations about women? Given that she is an arch feminist and pro-marriage, are these comments ironic, undercutting the wife's own position? Is she, in fact, her own worst advocate?

12. The Wife shifts to the two "bad" husbands in the middle of p. 230, when she begins to talk of her "fourth" husband. She gets a bit nostalgic on the top of p. 231; what does she say about her youth and about her current self? Is she sentimental, deserving of our sympathy?

13. What is it about the 4th and 5th husbands that the Wife likes and what does she dislike? Are they harder to control than the old codgers?

14. The fifth husband is Jankin the scholar. What do Clerks and Scholars think about women generally in the middle ages? How did the Wife meet Jankin? Was husband #4 still alive at the time?

15. How old is Jankin when she marries him? How old is she? Under what astrological signs was she born? Is this revealing of her personality?

16. What does Jankin do that makes the Wife angry? What is the book he reads every night? Does she have control over him or is it the other way round? Is the book symbolic here of masculine authority? What stories are in the book?

17. How does she get control (sovereignty) over him? When she rips the page out of the book (bottom, p. 238) what does Jankin do and what does the Wife do in response to get back in control?

18. Describe the Wife's technique in her monologue: does she ramble, interrupt herself, etc. Is it all rather natural and chatty? What does the Friar say when he interrupts (p. 239)? Recall the animosity between the Friar and the Summoner; it begins here.

19. In her Tale proper, who is the King of the land where the story takes place? Who is his Queen?

20. What crime has the Knight committed? Who hears his case at court? Is this something the Wife of Bath would approve of? What would the Wife think about the crime (in the original by John Gower, the crime was kidnapping).
21. What sentence does the Queen pass on the Knight? He is given one year to find the answer to a question. What is the question? What is the answer? Is this an answer consistent with what we know about the Wife of Bath and her marriages?
22. Who gives the knight the answer and where does the knight meet her?
23. What has the story of Midas (p. 243) imbedded in the Wife's Tale have to do with the story?
24. What has the knight promised the Old Hag in return for the answer to the question?
25. When the Old Hag gives the answer in court, how do the Queen and ladies react? What does the knight do when the Old Hag asks for his promise to be fulfilled?
26. The knight is forced to marry the Old Hag and on their wedding night she lectures him on "gentility" (gentilesse in the middle English) and defends her appearance, age, and poverty. What exactly does she say about in this sermon on gentility? After the lecture, the Old Hag gives the knight a choice (in the original it was "Fair by day and foul by night, or foul by day and fair by night) referring back to the issue of appearance and woman's fidelity. Chaucer changes the choice. What choice does Chaucer's Old Hag offer? Which does the Knight choose?
27. How does the Old Hag gain sovereignty over the Knight; why doesn’t he choose? How does the Old Hag reward the Knight for allowing her to choose?
28. How does this ending fit the Wife of Bath's goals (consider her desire to be young and have young men in bed and have control over them).
29. How does the Old Hag's method of gaining sovereignty differ from the Wife's? Is one person truly in control of the other in the marriage of the Knight and the Loathly Lady or do they enjoy mutual sovereignty? Does the Tale really support the Wife's agenda?
30. The Wife's Tale inaugurates a series of Tales on marriage and sovereignty -- by The Clerk, the Merchant, the Franklin. Together these are known by scholars as the Marriage Question tales.

THE SCHOLAR'S TALE

1. Review the description of the Clerk in the "General Prologue." What are his distinctive traits and outstanding virtues?
2. What is the source of the Clerk's Tale? Who is the "excellent scholar" from Padua from whom he learned this story?
3. The Clerk says he will be obedient to the Host's wishes. Is this consistent with the central theme of his tale?
4. The Clerk refers specifically to the Wife of bath at the end of his tale (p. 311), and most scholars believe he is responding directly to the Wife's portrait of marriage and of women as being domineering and shrewish. How is Griselda a counter-portrait of women and marriage.
5. Describe "patient" Griselda and all the things she is patient about?
6. Describe Walter. What is his attitude toward marriage? What are the trials he puts Griselda through? What are his motives?
7. Which of these two characters do you like least? Should a mother let her children be killed to remain obedient to her husband? Should a father put his wife and children
through such misery to test the wife's obedience to him? Is Walter sadistic and cruel beyond belief? Is Griselda grotesque and immoral for not putting up a fight?

8. Is any of this really believable, or could it be some kind of allegory with characters representing something other than real human beings? Could Walter stand for God testing humanity's obedience? See p. 304 and the reference to Job; also p. 311.

9. What is the Clerk's attitude toward Walter and his tests of Griselda (see p. 291)?

10. What is the final indignity the Griselda must suffer after Walter divorces her and kicks her out of the palace? See p. 305ff.

11. What do you think of Walter's explanation to Griselda of why he has done everything he has to her (p. 308)? Compare this with the Clerk's explanation at the bottom of page 310. Is the story about obedience in marriage or about suffering adversity with faith and courage?

12. At the very end the Clerk adds to his moral about adversity his own comments about the likelihood of finding any contemporary woman as patient as Griselda, and he directs these remarks to the Wife of Bath. What is his point here?

13. The Clerk then sings a song (called Chaucer's Epilogue). What does he advise women to do? What does he say about "superwives" like the Wife of Bath and what advice does he give to husbands?

14. Does this Epilogue "fit" with the theme of the tale the Clerk has just told, or does it undermine that theme; should we take it seriously, or does the Clerk speak it in jest?

15. Note the last lines of the Clerk's Tale, "weep, and worry, whine and wail," and how it is echoed in the opening of the Merchant's Tale: "Of weeping, wailing, worrying, and mourning/ I've had more than my share."

THE MERCHANT'S TALE

1. Re-read the description of the Merchant in the "General Prologue." What are his defining character traits?

2. What does the Merchant say about himself in the introduction to his Tale? How long has he been married? Does he seem happily married? Does he seem to respond to the Clerk's Tale in any way? What does Harry Bailey say about marriage and his wife at the end of The Merchant's Tale?

3. Which of the Canterbury Tales does the Merchant refer to in his "Prologue"?

4. Where, in what country, does the Merchant's Tale take place?

5. In the Tale, January, the King, decides to get married. What reasons does he give other than having an heir?

6. How do his counselors, Placebo and Justinian, react to his decision? What position does each take, what examples and arguments does each offer for and against marriage?

7. January seems set on marriage, and yet the Merchant has told us he is unhappy in marriage. Which of January's counselors do you think the Merchant most agrees with? What are the Merchant's conditions for a happy marriage from the husband's point of view?

8. Who was Theophrastus? What did he say about marriage, is he for it or against it?
9. Why does January refuse to marry an "older" woman? What do you think January really wants out of marriage -- children? sexual gratification? a ticket to heaven after sexual pleasures while alive?

10. Why does January worry about being blissfully happy in a marriage, having a "heaven on earth"?

11. Is it surprising to hear mention of the Wife of Bath (a pilgrim on the journey to Canterbury) within the fictional context of the Merchant's Tale, i.e., the mention is made by one of the characters in a fiction.

12. Who is Damian? What does he do right after he sees and falls in love with May? Are there echoes of the Courtly Love tradition here? How does Damian manage to see May on the sly?

13. Describe the sexual activities of January and May in their bedroom. Is January a poster boy for Viagra?

14. Where besides their bedroom do May and January have sex?

15. What infirmity does January suffer?

16. How do May and Damian accomplish their plan to meet in the garden? Where does Damian hide?

17. What excuse does May give January to climb the tree to be with Damian?

18. What are May and Damian doing when January's sight is restored?


20. How does May cleverly respond to January's discovery of her in Damian's arms?
   Who gave May the wit to respond this way?

21. Pluto and Persephone are husband and wife. How does their relationship comment on the story's depiction of marriage and the relationship of men and women in marriage? Is it consistent with the attitudes expressed within the story, by the Merchant, by Harry Bailey? Are wives inconstant, unfaithful, cheats like the Wife of Bath and the Alison of the Miller's Tale and the merchant's wife in the Shipman's Tale?

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THE FRANKLIN

1. Re-read the description of the Franklin in the "General Prologue." What are his distinctive characteristics?

2. What social class is the Franklin from? What is a Breton lay, the kind of story the Franklin tells? Is this genre of story suitable for a Franklin to tell?

3. Look back at page 361 to the end of the Squire's Tale. What does the Franklin say to the Squire? Does the Franklin appear to be interested in "good breeding," the upper social class? Is he trying to "kiss up" to the Knight, the Squire's father? Would the Franklin like to be considered as "noble" and "genteel" as the Knight and the Squire from the higher social class?

4. What aspects of the courtly love code appear in the romance of Arveragus and Dorigen? Who has sovereignty in their relationship?

5. Averagus goes off to wars to win honor; Dorigen remains at home. Why does she want the rocks removed from the coast?
6. What is ironic about removing the rocks, considering that she does it for her husband's sake?
7. What time of year is it when Dorigen meets Aurelius? Where do they meet? Note that Aurelius is a Squire (like the Squire on the pilgrimage the Franklin has just complimented) and that the Franklin praises his character.
8. What deal does Dorigen make with Aurelius to remove the rocks? Do you think she really means this, or is it an impossible task she presents him just to fend him off.
9. What role does one's word or "troth" or bond play in the story? Note that Arveragus and Dorigen have plighted their troth in marriage, given their word to be loyal and faithful to each other; now Dorigen gives her word she will love Aurelius if he removes the rocks to aid her husband's safe return.
10. Is Aurelius a courtly lover? What aspects of the courtly lover does he display in his love for Dorigen? What happens to him for two years after being smitten with Dorigen?
11. Who comes up with the idea about Aurelius can make the rocks appear? To whom does Aurelius go to accomplish this feat? Do the rocks actually disappear? What does the Franklin think about magic?
12. What word or bond does Aurelius give to the magician in Orleans in return for the disappearance of the rocks?
13. What does Dorigen say when the rocks disappear (see pp. 378-381 -- Dorigen's lament)?
14. When Dorigen tells Arveragus what has happened, that she has given her word to love the Squire if the rocks disappear, how does he respond? How important are one's word and honor to Arveragus?
15. When Aurelius learns of Arveragus' decision, what does he do?
16. Why does the magician forgive Aurelius' debt when he learns of Arveragus' and Aurelius' actions?
17. What is the answer to the question posed by the Franklin: "Who is most generous"? How does the subject of honor and social class "fit" the Franklin who is telling the story? Is he suggesting that being true to one's word, being honorable, is not a condition reserved for the upper classes? Is this similar to what the Old Hag says in her sermon on gentlesse in the Wife's Tale?

THE CANON'S ASSISTANT'S TALE

1. How do the Pilgrims encounter the Canon and his Assistant?
2. What does the Assistant say about his Canon? Is he impressed with him?
3. What does the Assistant say about his master's "practices"? What is his attitude toward alchemy?
4. Why does the Canon leave the group? What has his assistant revealed about him?
5. How knowledgeable is the Assistant of the details of the "science" of alchemy? What's the evidence? Is the Assistant showing off?
6. The Canon the Assistant tells his story about is very deceptive. How does he trick the Priest into believing that alchemy works? What tricks does he employ?
   Note that the assistant is telling a story about a Canon, not his Canon, but one who certainly mirrors the criminal activity of his employer.
7. How does the Canon of the story make money off of his deception? What does he sell to the priest? For how much?
8. What warning does the Assistant provide the Pilgrims at the end of his Tale? What does alchemy transform if not mercury to silver?

THE TALE OF SIR TOPAZ

1. What picture of Chaucer do we get from the Host's words to the narrator in the "Prologue" to the Tale of Sir Topaz?
2. What does Chaucer the Pilgrim say when asked to tell a tale? Is this highly ironic?
3. Describe the stanza and rhyme scheme of "Sir Topaz." Note how the meter falters, the rhymes don’t work, and "filler" phrases are inserted when imagination lapses and a line or stanza needs to be finished off. Compare it with the intricate rhyme royal scheme of the Prioress’ Tale which preceded it (and the three stanzas of the Host's words to Chaucer as well). How could the person who wrote the Prioress' Tale be so incompetent in "Sir Topaz"? Of course, to be this bad, you have to be really good! What does this tell us about how Chaucer worked hard to "fit" tales to tellers and make the tales an expression of the personality of the teller?
4. Describe Sir Topaz. What does he look like? Where is he from? Bruges was, and Brussels is still, a nation of cooks. Most importantly, what images are used to describe him? From what realm of experience are the images drawn?
5. He is a "valiant" knight, right? What does he hunt? What "savage beasts" does he meet in the forest?
6. List some of the incompetences the story teller reveals in telling his story. For instance, he talks about telling his story instead of telling it. He forgets to include things and has to loop back to include them. He provides no motivation and doesn’t explain the presence of certain details (like his horse's sides being drenched with blood). Sir Topaz goes on a quest. Who is he looking for? Whom does he meet in Fairyland? Why does he beat a hasty retreat?
7. Sir Topaz goes back to town to put his armor on. Describe the arming of the Knight; are there more kitchen references here? When he swear an oath that he'll kill the giant, what does he swear by?
8. Where is this story going? Does Topaz ever fight the giant? What appears to be happening at the beginning of the second "Fit" when the narrator says "Now hush your mouth, for charity…"? Does he seem to be continuing the same story he started with? Questing for the love of the Fairy Queen, battling giants, ritual arming of a knight -- all these are events from medieval romance, stories of Lancelot, Percival, Sir Gawain, King Arthur, etc. References and allusions in these stories are drawn from mythology, history, warfare, literary heroes and great lovers. Is "Sir Topaz" a parody of these more elegant tales of love and adventure? Is it a burlesque?
9. Count the stanzas down to the break on p. 170 where the narrator seems to start up again with "Yet listen, masters, to my tale…" Some believe the first "Fit" ends here. Then count the stanzas down to what out text calls the "Second Fit." Then count the stanzas in this second (actually third) Fit. Do you notice any arithmetical progression?
1. The Pardoner tells the Pilgrims how he "operates," how he cheats poor village folks out of their money. What, specifically, are the methods he uses? What does he tell them to get them to give him money?
2. What does the Pardoner carry with him in his "wallet"? What does he sell to the village folk? What does he promise them his relics will do for them?
3. Who among the villagers does he say will NOT be able to use his products? How does this get more villagers to offer to buy them?
4. What is the Pardoner's attitude toward his own villainy? Is he trying to impress the Pilgrims with what a successful con man he is? Is he proud of his accomplishments?
5. Of what sin is the Pardoner by his own admission guilty? What sin is the subject of all his sermons? What is the Latin phrase that describes his constant thesis?
6. How does preaching on this topic help the Pardoner achieve his goal of separating his audience from their money?
7. Is the Pardoner treating the Pilgrim audience different from the way he treats his village audience? Is he trying to impress them? Is he setting them up? Pardoners in Chaucer's time were despised for doing pretty much what this Pardoner boasts about; is he giving the Pilgrims what they expect -- an avaricious, cunning, cheating Pardoner?
8. Where, in the "pilgrimage" frame of the narrative, is the Pardoner when he tells his story about the three rioters? Where is the story set? What are the three men doing when we first meet them in the story?
9. The Pardoner begins by sermonizing on what are generally called "tavern sins." Which sins are these?
10. What examples does the Pardoner provide of each of these sins the three rioters are guilty of?
11. What has happened to one of the three rioters' friends? What oath do they swear? Whom do they go after to kill?
12. On the road in search of Death, the three rioters meet an Old Man all wrapped up in cloth like a mummy who is looking for someone to exchange his youth with the Old Man's age. He also, it seems, is looking for Death. Critics have disagreed over the years about who this old man is, what he represents in the story. Any ideas?
13. The Old Man tells the rioters where they can find Death. Where does he point them?
14. What do the three rioters find at the base of the tree? Is this death for them?
15. Describe how the rioters kill each other, who gets stabbed, who gets poisoned, etc.
16. Do the rioters commit the sins examined earlier in the story (swearing an oath, gambling, and drinking)?
17. What deadly sin are the three rioters guilty of? Does it kill them? Is it ironic that the Pardoner is also guilty of this same sin? Is the Pardoner flirting with spiritual death?
18. How does the moral of the story -- greed leads to death -- help the Pardoner sells his relics and pardons to the village folk to whom he tells this story? Does it tend to open their pockets? What about the Pilgrims? Is the Pardoner trying to open their pockets too?
19. Note where the Pardoner says "There you are gentlemen, That's how I preach..." Here he's shifting from his village audience to the Pilgrims ("gentlemen"). He then says Jesus' pardon is the one they should seek, not his. Then he tries to sell his pardons to the Pilgrims ("But, sirs, there's one thing..."). What's going on here? Has he forgotten how he has revealed his whole con game to them? Is he drunk? Carried away? To whom does the Pardoner try to sell his pardons after he finishes his tale? What "pitch" does he make to sell his pardons? What does he say might happen to a pilgrim along the way to Canterbury? Is he serious, trying to pull off the ultimate con, or just having a joke at the host's expense?

20. How does the Host respond to the Pardoner's suggestion that he is most in need of a pardon? What does he say to the Pardoner? The Pardoner, remember, is a bit effeminate. How does the Pardoner respond?

21. Which pilgrim intercedes and brings order to the proceedings? Would we expect this pilgrim to represent civility and order?

THE NUN’S PRIEST’S TALE

1. Which of the Pilgrims on the pilgrimage does the Nun’s Priest work for? What genre of literature is "The Nun’s Priest’s Tale"? Where does the action of the story take place and who are the principle characters? See questions below on the "heroic" style of the poem. Recall that "Sir Topaz" was a burlesque, in which "high" characters (a Knight on a quest in this case) are treated with ridicule. When "low" characters like barnyard animals are treated heroically, compared with heroic characters from history and myth and legend, the result is a mock epic (like Swift's "Rape of the Lock").

2. Describe the old woman who owns the farm and the barnyard. How does she compare/contrast with the Prioress, Madame Eglantine, for whom the priest works?

3. Chanticleer is a handsome and talented fellow. What are his particular attributes? What are his skills? Does he appear proud of his abilities? his looks? Is he the "cock of the walk"? Is he "cocky"?

4. Describe the relationship between Pertelote and Chanticleer. Are they a portrait of a battling husband and wife? Who seems to be in charge? What would the Wife of Bath think about Pertelote? about Chanticleer? How does Pertelote compare with other women in the tales that have been told? How do they, as a couple, compare with other couples: John and Alison, January and May, Averugus and Dorigen, Walter and Griselda in the Clerk's Tale?

5. What is the dream that Chanticleer has had? Why does it frighten him?

6. What does Pertelote think of Chanticleer’s dream and the effect it has had on him? Where is Pertelote on the issue of the truthfulness and prophetic power of dream "visions"? What is Pertelote's explanation for Chanticleer’s dream? How, specifically, does she account for the "red" and "black" colors in her husband's dream? What is her solution for his "problem"? How does Chanticleer react to Pertelote’s response? What does he say about the validity of dreams as prophecies
of the future? How does he support his position on this topic? What two examples does he give? Who turns out to be correct about dreams? Recall that the colors of the fox are red and black.

7. Why does Chanticleer fly down into the barnyard from the safety of the roost even though he believes his dream to be true? What is motivating him here?

8. What does Chanticleer do when he gets on the firm ground of the barnyard?

9. The Nun's Priest compares Chanticleer's action here to the Biblical fall from Paradise and quotes Chanticleer as saying that women are man's ruination (although Chanticleer mistranslates the Latin phrase). Why would the Nun's Priest say such a thing about women (in this case Eve)? Was this the normal clerical attitude toward women? Why does he retract it: "These were the cock's words, not mine"? Is the Nun's Priest indicating that it is difficult for a man to take orders from a woman?

10. What is the Nun's Priest accomplishing comically by comparing a rooster and a hen with Adam and Eve? By elevating animals to "heroic" stature is he also lowering humans to the status of beasts?

11. What other comparisons does the Nun's Priest make between the barnyard animals and great personalities and events from history, legend, and literature (Note particularly the references to the Trojan War and other classical myths)?

12. How does the fox trick Chanticleer? What "weakness" in Chanticleer makes him vulnerable to the fox's flattery? Is Chanticleer done in by his own cockiness? Is it vanity that almost causes him to lose his life?

13. What "weakness" or vice does the Nun's Priest exhibit that might connect him with Chanticleer? Consider all the learned discourse in the Tale, the Biblical references, the use of rhetoric, the classical allusions. Is the Nun's Priest well read and learned and proud of it? Recall how the Canon's Assistant tries to show off his knowledge about alchemy and how the Pardoner is rather proud of his wit and ability to con simple villagers.

14. What weakness in the fox makes it possible for Chanticleer to escape his jaws. Is the fox also proud of his accomplishment and willing to taunt his pursuers to the extent he lets his prey escape? Did the fox open his mouth when he should have kept it shut?

15. What aspect of the Nun's Priest might connect him with the fox in his story? Do his vanity and learning cause him to open his mouth (about women) when he should have kept it shut?

16. Is there a double moral to the tale, something about vanity/pleasure coming before a fall (the fox flatters Chanticleer to sing, with eyes shut) and knowing when to keep your mouth shut (the fox opening his mouth to taunt his pursuers)?

17. Does the Tale ironically "backfire" on the Nun's Priest?

18. Consider how many layers of storytelling are present in the story: at the center is (1) the story of a murder told by a man recounting a dream in (2) Chanticleer's explanation of the truth of dreams, which is told (3) by the Nun's Priest as written (4) by Chaucer.