Canterbury Tales: Introductory Notes

The Tales and The Prologue
The Canterbury Tales

- Chaucer presents the world as he sees it
- Began to write it in 1387
- Incomplete (Chaucer died in 1400). “The General Prologue” and only 22 tales completed; there were supposed to be 120 total
- Shows a cross section of Medieval society
Geoffrey Chaucer
1343? - 1400

• In his own lifetime he was considered the greatest poet, and he is currently considered second only to Shakespeare.
• He was the first person to be buried in the Poet’s Corner of Westminster Abbey.
It is a **frame story** – a story that includes another story or stories. The main story is the pilgrimage to Canterbury (80 miles from London) to visit the tomb of the martyr Thomas à Beckett (killed in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170).
The Tales (cont)

- 26 pilgrims actually described; 29 referenced. Chaucer is one of the pilgrims for total of 30.
- plan was to tell two tales each on the way to Canterbury and two more tales on the way back (30 pilgrims x 4 tales=120 total tales planned)
- a tale is often so well fitted to a pilgrim’s character and opinion that the tale and teller illuminate each other
General Information

- Tabard Inn (leave from here)
- The owner is Harry Bailey (he is the host who established the contest---winner gets a free dinner paid for by other pilgrims)
- Harry will be the judge of the best tale
- The telling of the tales will help to pass the time more quickly
The Writing of the Tales

- Narrative POV
- narrator is actually a character
- creates multiple levels of irony
- hints that the author does not agree with the narrator
- written in iambic pentameter
- lines rhyme in couplets
- Chaucer uses satire to ridicule the corruptness of the Church in England in the Medieval Period.
The Prologue

- Opening lines provide a setting and motivation for the Canterbury pilgrimage
- Prologue contains all levels of English life
- The order of the introduction of each pilgrim is important because it provides the social standing of the different occupations; it begins with the highest social rank and descends in order.
Highest rank is aristocracy or nobility

- Knight
- Squire (Knight’s son)
- Prioress
- Monk
- Friar
The Prologue: Characters

Commercial Wealthy class

• Merchant
• Sergeant of Law
• Clerk
• Franklin
The Prologue: Characters

Guildsmen:

Haberdasher
Dyer
Carpenter
Weaver
Tapestry-maker

*none of them tells a tale
The Prologue: Characters

Middle-class group

- Cook
- Shipman
- Physician
- Wife of Bath
The Prologue: Characters

Virtuous poor or lower class

- Parson
- Plowman
The Prologue: Characters

Immoral lower class

- Manciple
- Miller
- Reeve
- Summoner
- Pardoner