Study Guide

for

The Canterbury Tales

Selected Works

by Geoffrey Chaucer

☙

Meet Geoffrey Chaucer

Chaucer was one of the most original men who ever lived. There had never been anything like the lively realism of the ride to Canterbury done or dreamed of in our literature before. He is not only the father of all our poets, but the grandfather of all our hundred million novelists.

––G. K. Chesterton, from "The Greatness of Chaucer" in *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 1932

Geoffrey Chaucer's exact year of birth is not certain, since no document recorded it. He was probably born around 1343 in London. His father was a middle-class wine merchant, and the young Chaucer became a page in the royal household while still a teenager. Despite the mundane duties that he carried out, the position exposed the youth to the speech, manners, and shortcomings of high-born people of the day.

His education was broad. He was a voracious reader who read in four different languages—English, Latin, French, and Italian. As one of his later works, a treatise on an astrolabe, showed, he was knowledgeable about science as well as literature.

When he was in his twenties, Chaucer was made a court official, an appointment that began many years of public service. During his career, he traveled abroad on diplomatic missions and gained a knowledge of both French and Italian literature and culture.

Life As a Writer For the rest of his life, Chaucer held a variety of governmental posts. Despite his duties, he managed to produce a large body of work. Many scholars divide his work into three distinct periods. His early poetry, includes the *Book of the Duchess* and the *Romaunt of the Rose*. Later, he wrote the *Parliament of Fowls* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. His most mature works, written in his forties, include the *Legend of Good Women* and *The Canterbury Tales*.

The Canterbury Tales *The Canterbury Tales* is considered Chaucer's masterpiece for several reasons. First, it marks the beginnings of a new tradition: Chaucer was the first writer to use English in a major literary work. Secondly, it gives a picture of a cross-section of society during the 1300s. Finally, it is a detailed, lifelike, and engaging picture. Chaucer lets his characters speak as they might actually talk. This was risky because they did not always talk in a polite way, which could offend some readers. Chaucer acknowledges this fact himself:

> *. . . I rehearse*
> *Their tales as told, for better or for worse,*
> *For else I should be false to what occurred.*
> *So if this tale had better not be heard,*
> *Just turn the page and choose another sort;*
> *You'll find them here in plenty, long and short;*
> *Many historical, that will profess*
> *Morality, good breeding, saintliness.*
> *Do not blame me if you should choose amiss.*

Some critics were shocked by the earthy language and humor in certain stories, but even more were captivated by the characters, stories, and the language itself. *The Canterbury Tales* shows Chaucer's mastery of numerous poetic forms and his thorough grounding in history, mythology, psychology, science, theology, and business. He created approximately 17,000 lines of vivid poetry that has such universal appeal that it still attracts new readers today.

Introducing the Tales

The people we read about are as real as the people we brush clothes with in the street, — nay, much more real, for we not only see their faces, and the fashion and texture of their garments, we know also what they think, how they express themselves, and with what eyes they look out to the world.

——Alexander Smith, *Dreamthorp*

BACKGROUND

In *The Canterbury Tales,* Chaucer uses a form that had been used before—the frame tale, a larger story, inside of which are many smaller stories. Since Chaucer had spent time in Italy, he was familiar with the *Decameron,* an earlier frame tale written by the Italian poet Boccaccio. In fact, he even incorporated stories from that work and from others into his own stories. Retelling older tales was a common practice in Chaucer's day. After all, before stories were printed, as they are today, people were used to hearing and rehearing the same tales. Their pleasure came not just from the plot, but from the storyteller's skill. Each teller added special qualities to a story.

Although Chaucer was not the first to use the frame tale, or even most of the plots themselves, he used the material in a special way. Each of the smaller stories was told by a character whose language and style was distinctive.

Today, this may not sound so unusual, but before Chaucer, most literature featured epic heroes—larger-than-life characters—or highly stylized figures who demonstrated only a few particular qualities. Chaucer's characters, although they are types, are well-rounded flesh-and-blood people. Through them, Chaucer provided a lively look at three distinct groups of people in fourteenth-century England:

Members of the feudal system: Knight, Squire, Yeoman, Franklin, Plowman, Miller, Reeve

People in religious life: Nun, Monk, Friar, Cleric, Parson, Summoner, Pardoner

The rising middle class: Merchant, Sergeant at the Law, Five Tradesmen, Cook, Skipper, Doctor, Wife of Bath, Manciple, Host

Through these characters, readers are given an overview of many of the concerns and interests of fourteenth-century people. The concerns reflected major social changes that were occurring:

Social changes The old feudal system was beginning to come apart. Previously, the ruling classes had held all the power because they owned the land, which was a major source of wealth. Then the Black Death killed a huge percentage of the agrarian workers and tenant farmers. The ones who remained felt a new power, since landowners depended on these workers. Realizing this new status, the peasants began making demands. They were no longer content with life as it had been. Also, a new class of merchants, traders, and shopkeepers arose in response to widening trade opportunities, adding a new level to society.

Religious changes The church was losing some of its power and influence for several reasons. There was controversy after the French Pope Clement V moved the seat of the Church to France. This led to a series of arguments over who was really the head of the Church. Second, literacy was becoming more widespread. Once only the clergy could read and write, but now schools were springing up to teach the new merchants how to read, write, and do their accounting. As more people learned to read, literary tastes began to change. Instead of reading religious tracts or moralistic tales, people wanted more realistic works. *The Canterbury Tales* provided this.

Scholars think Chaucer originally planned an even more ambitious project than the one he created. A character in the Prologue, the Host, suggests that each of the thirty pilgrims tell four stories each, which suggests that Chaucer planned 120 different tales. However, he died after having written only twenty-two of them. Since he left behind a pile of incomplete tales and story parts, no one knows exactly when they were written or in what order Chaucer intended them.

THE TIME AND PLACE

The Canterbury Tales takes place during the fourteenth-century on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. People had been making that journey for 200 years to worship at a shrine of St. Thomas à Becket. He had been the archbishop of Canterbury during the reign of Henry II and was murdered by that king's knights over religious differences.

Becket's murder, inside the Cathedral, made him a martyr, and in 1220 an elaborate gold shrine was built to hold his remains. Every half a century, celebrations were held there on the anniversary of his death, and these celebrations attracted numerous pilgrims. The 200th anniversary of Becket's death fell within Chaucer's lifetime, and this event brought larger crowds than usual.

Did You Know?

The Canterbury Tales were written in English, but not in the English of today. Chaucer spoke a language that we now call Middle English. Middle English was the language of England after the Norman conquest of 1066 and before the modern English that we speak today. Besides the older Anglo-Saxon words, it also included many words from French and from Latin. Furthermore, it no longer contained all the complicated word endings used in Old English. Although many Middle English words look familiar today, their pronunciation was quite different in Chaucer's time. For example, what we now call the silent *e* at the ends of certain words was once a separate syllable.

The fact that Chaucer chose Middle English at all was unusual at the time. Most writers of his day wrote in French or in Latin, and Chaucer knew both of those languages. He could have chosen one of them. Middle English was considered ordinary, not literary, language, and the fact that Chaucer selected it suggests that these tales were written for the general population instead of the ruling classes.

CRITIC'S CORNER

Like vacation acquaintances in all time periods, the Canterbury pilgrims experience each other in a lighthearted way. The pilgrimage offers them time and space away from their everyday cares; they are on holiday, thus open to each other in a way they would not be in any other context. A spirit of play animates their interactions, a spirit of acceptance informs their attitudes. People who would otherwise be separated by social class or occupation or gender are brought together by chance. . . .

—Margaret Hallissy, *A Companion to Chaucer's* Canterbury Tales

Before You Read

The Canterbury Tales The Prologue

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What kinds of people interest you the most? What kinds would you enjoy sharing company with on a long trip?

Web It

If you wanted to capture an individual's personality, what sorts of details would you note? Choose someone you know well. With that person's name in a center circle, make a web, jotting down in the surrounding circles the kinds of details that best reflect his or her qualities.

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out about the colorful characters who embark on the journey to Canterbury.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

During Chaucer's lifetime, people went on pilgrimages for many reasons. Some went to show their devotion; others went to pray for miracles; still others went for more mundane reasons. They wanted adventure, perhaps, or a change of scenery. Pilgrims usually banded together for safety and convenience. The roads they traveled on often were unpaved, muddy, and difficult to ride on. Also, a lone traveler was more likely to be robbed than a member of a group would be. Today, the distance that Chaucer's band traveled seems short—perhaps a two-hour drive. In Chaucer's day, though, such a journey usually took several days. People stayed at inns along the way, often sharing rooms and sometimes beds with complete strangers.

Satire and Irony

Modern readers sometimes approach *The Canterbury Tales* solemnly, since they know it is a "classic." They are often happily surprised to discover how much humor is tucked inside. Two of the most common forms include satire and irony. **Satire** is a type of writing that pokes fun at people, their weaknesses, institutions, and social conventions. Satire takes different forms: it can be moralistic and indignant, or it can be gentle and elicit laughter to make a point. **Irony** means using words to express the opposite of what is literally said. A writer who uses verbal irony might state things that readers know to be false, such as calling a stingy person "generous." Writers also use situational irony, in which readers expect one thing but get surprised by its opposite. For instance, a writer might create a character who is a firefighter, yet who, for the thrill of extinguishing them, sets fires deliberately.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

buffoon [bə foon´] *n.* a gross and stupid person (p. 16)

conveyance [kən vā´əns] *n.* instrument by which title to property is delivered (p. 11)

prevarication [pri var´ə kā´ shən] *n.* deviation from the truth; lie (p. 20)

screeds [skrēdz] *n.* long pieces of writing (p. 11)

sundry [sun´drē] *adj.* miscellaneous, various (p. 3)

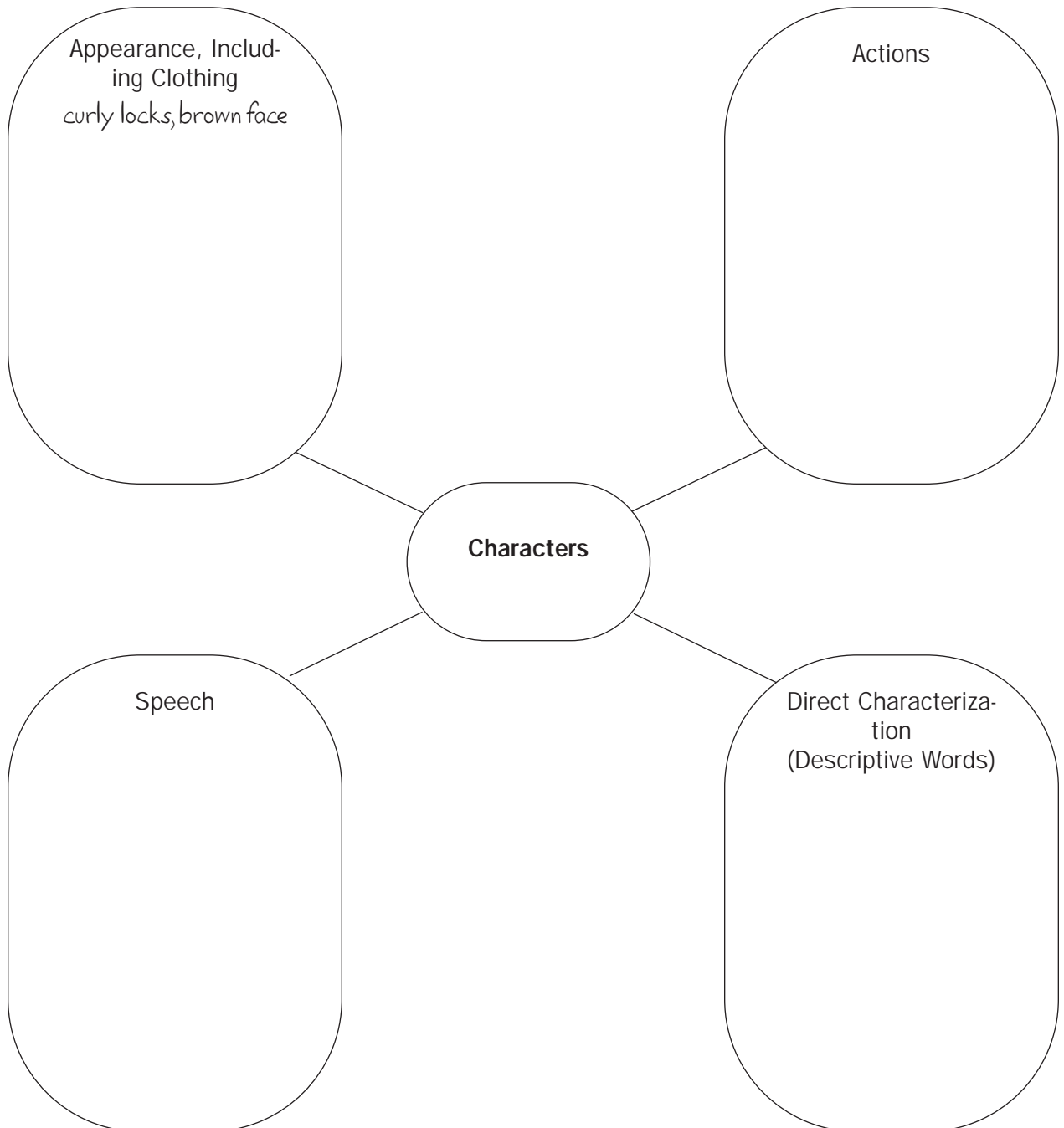**superfluities** [soo´ pər floo´ə tēz] *n.* unnecessary items (p. 13)

tithes [tīthz] *n.* a tenth of one's income given to the church (p. 16)

wimpled [wim´pəld] *adj.* wearing a wimple, a type of cloth covering worn over the head and neck (p. 14)

Active Reading

The Canterbury Tales The Prologue

For centuries, readers have delighted in the colorful characters Chaucer introduced in "The Prologue." Pay attention to how Chaucer made these characters so memorable. As you read "The Prologue," list some of the lively and descriptive details that he used to make his characters vivid. Try to write at least one detail for each main character.

Appearance, Including Clothing
curly locks, brown face

Actions

Characters

Speech

Direct Characterization
(Descriptive Words)

Responding

The Canterbury Tales **The Prologue**

Personal Response

Which character or characters made the greatest impression on you, and why?

_____

_____

_____

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. At what time of year does this pilgrimage take place? Why is this a good time of year for such a trip?

_____

_____

_____

2. Which pilgrim is described first? What might this suggest about the narrator's attitude toward the character? What words or phrases support your answer?

_____

_____

_____

3. What sort of life did the Prioress and the Monk lead? What does this suggest about their values and position in life?

_____

_____

_____

4. What details do you learn about the Parson? In what way is he different from the Monk, and what does this suggest about the narrator's attitude toward the clergy?

_____

_____

_____

5. What sort of man is the Host, and what reason does he give for suggesting the stories? What sorts of stories does he ask the pilgrims to tell? What does this suggest about people's knowledge?

_____

_____

_____

Responding

The Canterbury Tales The Prologue

Analyzing Literature *(continued)*
Evaluate and Connect

6. Which character or characters are most lifelike, do you think, and which are most idealized? Support your answers with details and examples from "The Prologue."

_____

_____

_____

7. Now that you have met the pilgrims, which one would you most enjoy traveling with? Is this the type of person you described in the **Focus Activity** question on page 16? If not, in what ways does the person differ?

_____

_____

_____

Literature and Writing
Who Says?

Although the narrator of "The Prologue" uses the word *I,* do you think the narrator is Chaucer, or do you think it is another character that Chaucer created? Support your answer with reasons and evidence from the text.

Extending Your Response
Literature Groups

Which characters does Chaucer seem to admire, and which does he poke fun at? Answer the question for yourself first and then compare your answers with other members of your group. Discuss the reasons for the answers, and try to see if you can reach agreement as a group.

Learning for Life

The Host acts a little like a tour guide, happily planning activities for his visitors. However, he is first of all a businessman, and happy guests mean recommendations and repeat visitors. As the Host, write a business plan for your inn. Explain what you offer, how you promote your business now, and how you plan to expand your business in the future. Provide facts and figures that document that your business is worthy of a loan.

Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

The Canterbury Tales Tales of Chivalry

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What images come to mind when you think of medieval knights and ladies? What qualities do you associate with them?

Freewrite
Spend three or four minutes freewriting on the topic of medieval knights and ladies. Begin by answering the questions above. Then keep writing until the full time has elapsed.

Setting a Purpose
Read to discover the varieties of chivalric behavior portrayed in Tales of Chivalry.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?
"The Knight's Tale," the longest piece in this section, demonstrates Chaucer's familiarity with Boccaccio's story "Teseida," on which it is based, and also Chaucer's facility with writing a romance. A **romance** is a long narrative about chivalric heroes.

Elements of Chivalry
Chivalry was the code of conduct and manners associated with knights in the Middle Ages. Although the system developed over time, certain elements and themes are typical of chivalric romances:
- a wise and just leader
- trustworthy knights who were loyal, courteous warriors
- people who behaved with honor and kept promises
- a struggle or contest, often to win the hand of a lady
- detailed descriptions of clothing, discussions, or other elements
- an unattainable woman who was often loved from afar
- an idealized rather than realistic or physical love
- the involvement of destiny, fate, chance, or the gods
- ceremonial events, such battles, tournaments, weddings
- a dragon, a monster, or some other supernatural element

Not every feature is found in every story. However, as you read these tales, you may be surprised by how many elements do appear, even though they might be cast in an unexpected setting, such as ancient Greece.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

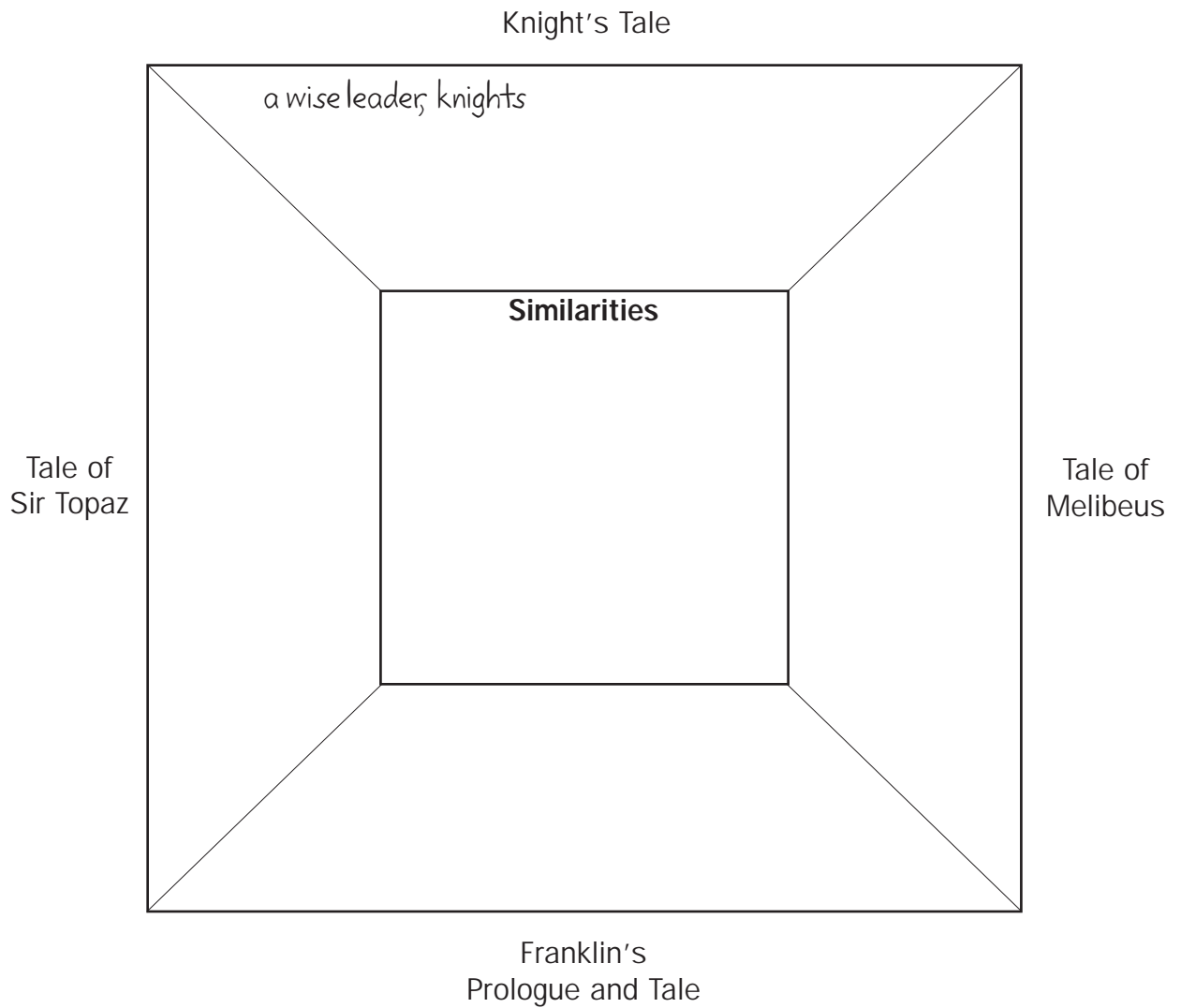**amity** [am′ə tē] *n.* friendship (p. 62)
boon [bo͞on] *n.* favor, especially one given in answer to a request (p. 60)
lamentation [lam′ən tā′shən] *n.* wailing to show grief (p. 29)

Active Reading

The Canterbury Tales Tales of Chivalry

These tales have many similar elements, as well as some striking differences. To focus on their common view of chivalry, fill in the diagram below. Note some of the distinguishing features that each story contains, as well as the similarities.

Knight's Tale

a wise leader, knights

Similarities

Tale of
Sir Topaz

Tale of
Melibeus

Franklin's
Prologue and Tale

Responding

The Canterbury Tales Tales of Chivalry

Personal Response

Were you surprised by anything in these tales? Describe why or why not.

_____

_____

_____

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. How do Arcite and Palamon wind up in prison, and how does Arcite get out? What part does chance play in these events?

_____

_____

_____

2. What do the men know of Emily? When Arcite voices his love for her, why does Palamon become so angry? How does this cast doubt on Arcite's honor as a knight?

_____

_____

_____

3. Theseus forgives Arcite and Palamon and then proposes a way to let Destiny determine who will win Emily's hand. What does he suggest? What rules must be followed?

_____

_____

_____

4. What finally happens to Arcite and Palamon? What ceremonies are associated with each event? What rewards does each man gain?

_____

_____

_____

5. Why does the Host stop the tale of "Sir Topaz"? In what ways is its tone different from "The Tale of Melibeus"? What does this difference suggest about what was acceptable in a chivalric romance?

_____

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_____

Responding

The Canterbury Tales Tales of Chivalry

Analyzing Literature *(continued)*
Evaluate and Connect

6. In "The Knight's Tale," did the best man win? Give reasons for your answer.

_____

_____

_____

7. Review the freewriting that you did in response to the **Focus Activity** on page 20. In what ways did these tales match your expectation and in what ways were they different? Are any of these elements meaningful today? Explain your answer.

_____

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_____

Literature and Writing
Analyzing Details

Certain situations in these stories are described in detail, while others are taken care of in a few lines. Select one scene that is vividly described and analyze the types of details that it contains. Draw conclusions about the author's purpose for including so much detail in that scene. Be sure to support your conclusions with specific examples and reasons.

Extending Your Response
Literature Groups

Although women are considered to be the audience for modern romance novels, they may not have been the audience for medieval romances. With your group, discuss whether these tales are more likely to appeal to men or to women and why. Compare your answer with that of other groups to see if there is any consensus.

Internet Connection

Modern tournaments and ceremonies similar to those of Chaucer's time still take place today. They are produced by groups who enjoy creating medieval reenactments. One of the best-known groups is the Society for Creative Anachronism, but it is not the only group. Using a search engine, find Web sites about medieval reenactments to discover some fascinating glimpses into modern chivalric ceremonies and to see why people enjoy them.

Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

The Canterbury Tales **Tales of Love and Marriage**

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Do you think that men and women would agree on what makes a good marriage? What ingredients would you choose?

List It

Work with classmates to make a list of elements that are likely to produce happy marriages.

Setting a Purpose

Read to discover the roles that husbands and wives often fulfilled in medieval marriages.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

Men and women were treated quite differently in the Middle Ages, and these differences were probably most apparent among the upper classes. Some, for example, considered men to be rational human beings, motivated by logic, honor, and virtue, while women were often seen as passionate creatures who were not as spiritual as men. At the same time, they were often idealized as delicate beings who needed protection. Laws and customs of the time showed the same dual vision. Men were allowed to abuse women physically and control their actions. Still, married women could own property, and they often ran households and businesses while their husbands were away.

Marriage in the Middle Ages

Marriages were often arranged between families, although the men and women involved did seem able to reject unappealing suitors. Wives were usually quite young, often not even in their teens, probably because women often died young in those days. Men were somewhat older—but might be as young as age seventeen. Marriage was more of a business transaction than a love match; each partner looked for a suitable mate who would fulfill her or his role. Women's families promised dowries—donations of cash or goods—to future husbands, and the size of the dowry often determined whether a marriage took place.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

betray [bi trā´] *v.* to reveal unintentionally or intentionally (p. 120)

clemency [klem´ən sē] *n.* an act or instance of leniency (p. 131)

prescience [prē´shē əns] *n.* foreknowledge of events (p. 146)

sovereign [sov´rən] *adj.* superlative in quality; supreme (p. 121)

temporal [tem´pər əl] *adj.* of or relating to time as opposed to eternity (p. 123)

Active Reading

The Canterbury Tales Tales of Love and Marriage

These stories present different ideas about what makes happy marriages. To understand each story's message, look at several elements. First, note the characteristics of the men and of the women. Who has the power in each story, and what does he or she do? Then consider who ends up happy—the man, the woman, or both? As you read, make notes in the chart below.

Wife of Bath's Tale

Main Characters	Character Traits	Details That Show This
Knight, old woman		

What makes a happy marriage? _____

Clerk's Prologue and Tale and Chaucer's Envoy

Main Characters	Character Traits	Details That Show This

What makes a happy marriage? _____

Responding

The Canterbury Tales Tales of Love and Marriage

Personal Response

What did you notice especially about the characters or situations in these stories or in one of the stories? Why?

_____

_____

_____

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. What is the Knight's answer to the question the Queen posed? How does the Knight discover that answer?

_____

_____

_____

2. What price must the Knight pay for his new knowledge, and why does this bother him? What does this suggest about his character?

_____

_____

_____

3. What cruel actions does the marquis order? How does Griselda respond to each? What advice is given in Chaucer's Envoy, and what does this suggest about the lesson that the tale tells?

_____

_____

_____

Responding

The Canterbury Tales Tales of Love and Marriage

Analyzing Literature *(continued)*
Evaluate and Connect

4. Which story best fits the character of the pilgrim who told it? Give reasons for your answer.

_____

_____

_____

5. Review your response to the **Focus Activity** on page 24. How do you think characters in each tale would answer the question? How do you think they would respond to your list? Why?

_____

_____

_____

Literature and Writing
Drawing Conclusions About Chaucer

From what you have read here, would you guess that Chaucer himself had a happy or unhappy marriage? Take a stand. Write a paragraph or two stating your position and using story details to support it.

Extending Your Response
Performing

Bring these tales into the modern day by creating a skit about an on-air radio personality who takes questions about love and marriage from callers. First, assign roles, asking each character to consider what he or she might say. Then discuss the dialogue as a group, working to make it lively, humorous, and in keeping with the spirit of the story from which the character is taken. Finally, practice your skit and then audiotape or videotape it for other classes to enjoy.

Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

The Canterbury Tales Cautionary Tales

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What is the best or most important lesson you ever learned, and how did you learn it?

Journal
Two of the most common ways to learn lessons are by experience and through advice that proves true. In your journal, describe an important lesson that you learned and tell how you learned it.

Setting a Purpose
Read to find out how Chaucer's tales taught those who read them enduring lessons about life.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?
Churches in Chaucer's time had many officials who engaged in questionable practices, a situation that ultimately led to the Reformation in the sixteenth century. One practice that became corrupt was the granting of indulgences—written forgiveness for past sins. Theoretically, a person had to show true repentance to be granted an indulgence by a pardoner, a clergyman authorized by the pope to pardon sinners. However, unethical pardoners quickly learned that they could sell pardons, as well as holy relics. As you read these tales, you will also find other examples of unethical church practices. However, Chaucer includes other descriptions of truly devout members of the clergy, so his view was not entirely negative.

Types of Cautionary Tales
From ancient times until today, people have used stories to teach lessons and to transmit social values. Stories designed to warn against certain behaviors or situations are called cautionary tales. These include **fables,** brief stories with morals at the end; **parables,** stories that parallel a more general lesson about morality; and **exemplums,** stories that provide specific examples that prove some moral rule.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

conundrum [kə nun′drəm] *n.* an intricate and difficult problem (p. 209)

iniquity [in ik′wə tē] *n.* wickedness (p. 174)

miscreant [mis′krē ənt] *n.* one who behaves criminally or viciously (p. 193)

prattle [prat′əl] *n.* unimportant or empty talk (p. 173)

recrimination [ri krim′ə nā′ shən] *n.* accusation in revenge for another accusation (p. 221)

sycophant [sik′ə fənt] *n.* servile, self-seeking flatterer (p. 177)

transmutation [trans′ mū tā′zshən] *n.* conversion of base metals into gold or silver (p. 216)

The Canterbury Tales Study Guide

Active Reading

The Canterbury Tales Cautionary Tales

The Cautionary Tales warn listeners of certain types of behavior. As you read each story, note the character defect or sin that each main character shows. Then consider what happens to the character. From this, you can draw some conclusions about the lesson that the tale is trying to teach. Use the spaces below to record your ideas.

Nun's Priest's Tale Character's defect or sin: *pride* What happens: Lesson or lessons:	**Pardoner's Tale** Character's defect or sin: What happens: Lesson or lessons:
Summoner's Tale Character's defect or sin: What happens: Lesson or lessons:	**Canon's Yeoman's Tale** Character's defect or sin: What happens: Lesson or lessons:

Responding
The Canterbury Tales Cautionary Tales

Personal Response
What scenes or images from these tales most stick in your mind, and why?

_____

_____

_____

Analyzing Literature
Recall and Interpret

1. What animals are the main characters, and why might fables use animal characters so often instead of human ones?

_____

_____

_____

2. Why is Chanticleer concerned about dreams? What advice does Pertelote give him when he voices his concerns? What lesson can be inferred from her reaction and what follows?

_____

_____

_____

3. What happens to Chanticleer at the end? In what ways was he responsible for what happened? What moral is suggested by this ending?

_____

_____

_____

4. What do you learn about the Pardoner in his Prologue? What kind of man is he? In what ways are his characters like him? What sin might each character stand for?

_____

_____

_____

5. How does the old man view Death? How do the young men view Death? What does their meeting suggest about the relationship between humans and death?

_____

_____

_____

Responding

The Canterbury Tales Cautionary Tales

Analyzing Literature *(continued)*

Evaluate and Connect

6. In what ways are the lessons taught in "The Summoner's Tale" and "The Canon's Yeoman's Tale" useful today? In what ways are they outdated?

_____

_____

_____

7. If Chaucer were writing cautionary tales today, what subject might he write about and what lesson might he try to teach? Before you respond, review your response to the **Focus Activity** on page 28 to see if you wish to include it here.

_____

_____

_____

Literature and Writing

Analyzing Effectiveness

Do you think that telling a cautionary tale is more or less effective at teaching a lesson than just offering advice and logical reasons is? Support your answer with quotations and other evidence from the stories in this part.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Compare and contrast the four stories. Which are more effective and entertaining? Are the ones that are more entertaining the most effective ones at teaching lessons? Discuss these questions with your group. Later, compare your answers with those of another group.

Music Connection

Select or create a piece of music that you think would provide a good background to one of the tales or to one of the scenes within a tale. Share the music with the class, telling what work or scene it reminds you of and why.

James Glanz

In Chaucer Tale, a Clue to an Astronomic Reality

Before You Read

Focus Question
Do you think that factual knowledge or imagination is more important in writing a story? Why?

Background
This newspaper article explores the possibility that Chaucer incorporated a rare actual astronomical occurrence into the "The Franklin's Tale."

Responding to the Reading

1. What unusual astronomical event happened in the fourteenth century? To what fictional event does James Glanz connect it?

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. What evidence or reasons make James Glanz and others believe that Chaucer knew about this event?

   _____

   _____

   _____

3. Do you think Glanz is right? Why or why not?

   _____

   _____

   _____

4. If Chaucer were writing today, do you think he would still use magic to explain the tide or would he be more likely to use a scientific explanation? Give reasons for your answer.

   _____

   _____

   _____

5. **Making Connections** What details in "The Franklin's Tale" could suggest that the "magical" occurrence was really an astronomical event?

   _____

   _____

   _____

Learning for Life
Write a brief scientific report explaining what causes regular tides and what causes the sorts of high tides that Glanz describes. Use details from his article as well as diagrams or illustrations that you find or create.

Giovanni Boccaccio

from the *Decameron*

The Marriage of the Marquis of Saluzzo and Griselda

Before You Read

Focus Question

What is the most important quality that a spouse can have? Why?

Background

Like *The Canterbury Tales,* the *Decameron* is a frame tale. This story was the basis for the "Clerk's Tale."

Responding to the Reading

1. How realistic are Griselda's changes after the wedding and people's feelings toward her?

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. Who behaves more nobly, do you think, the humble Griselda or her husband? Give your reasons.

   _____

   _____

   _____

3. The characters and situations in the story suggest certain attitudes toward women and marriage. How have such attitudes changed?

   _____

   _____

   _____

4. **Making Connections** Whose version of this story did you like more, Chaucer's or Boccaccio's? Why?

   _____

   _____

   _____

Creative Writing

Assume the personality and viewpoint of one of the minor characters in this story, such as Griselda's father, the retainer who took the children, or even one of the children. From that character's perspective, write a first-person account of what happened to Griselda in her marriage.

Marie de France

Chaitivel
(The Unfortunate One)

Before You Read

Focus Question
How would you go about winning the love of another person? What methods would you avoid?

Background
Although little is known about the twelfth-century writer Marie de France, she did leave behind a remarkable body of work, including the *Lais,* short verses dealing with romantic and chivalric subjects. Besides being exceptional literary works, they also provide a glimpse of knighthood from a female perspective.

Responding to the Reading

1. According to Marie de France, why does the lady not choose one of the men before the tournament? What are your thoughts on this?

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. The speaker describes what happened because the knights did not separate at the tournament. "They paid for it," she says. In your opinion, did they get what they deserved or not? Explain.

   _____

   _____

   _____

3. For what reason, do you think, do the lady and knight come up with different titles? Which title do you think is better and why?

   _____

   _____

   _____

4. What is the purpose of this *lai,* according to the lady? What other purpose might she have had?

   _____

   _____

   _____

5. **Making Connections** Suppose a character in *The Canterbury Tales* had told this story. Which character, do you think, would have told it? Give reasons for your answer.

   _____

   _____

   _____

Literature Groups
Discuss this question with your group: How does the writer's gender affect the tone, content, or style of the story? Use quotations and examples from the poems to support your responses.

Barbara Tuchman

from A Distant Mirror

Before You Read

Focus Question
What do you know about chivalry, and why do you think it began and continued?

Background
This article explores chivalry and courtly love and their relationship to each other. The author explains what each aspired to be and how they were actually practiced in the time of Chaucer.

Responding to the Reading

1. Tuchman writes that chivalry was "about four parts in five illusion." Despite this, in what ways was it still valuable?

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. What modern event do you think compares most favorably to a tournament? Tell the ways in which they are alike.

   _____

   _____

   _____

3. Describe the ideal knight. What physical and moral qualities does he have?

   _____

   _____

   _____

4. How would your life be different if people still subscribed to the ideals of chivalry and courtly love? Would your life be better or worse? Why?

   _____

   _____

   _____

5. **Making Connections** What evidence can you find in *The Canterbury Tales* that Chaucer was well acquainted with chivalry, both in its ideal form and as it was practiced? Give several examples.

   _____

   _____

   _____

Learning for Life
Suppose knights had to be interviewed in order to join the brotherhood. What questions might an interviewer ask to discover if an applicant were truly worthy? Write five questions that are designed to determine an applicant's suitability. Afterwards, compare your list with another student's.

Saida Miller Khalifa | *from* The Fifth Pillar

Before You Read

Focus Question
If you were undertaking a modern-day pilgrimage, what do you think the hardest part of it would be?

Background
The hajj is a pilgrimage to Mecca that Muslims take at least once in a lifetime if they are able. Pilgrims converge from all over the world. This narrative is a clear first-person account of a modern Muslim woman's experience.

Responding to the Reading

1. What types of preparations must be made before a modern hajj? How are they different from what pilgrims did long ago?

   _____

   _____

2. What is the function of the *mutawwif?* Why is this job important?

   _____

   _____

3. What were some of the problems that the narrator faced? Which of these would you find most difficult, and why?

   _____

   _____

4. What details surprised you the most in this account? What evidence suggests that this was not the last pilgrimage undertaken by Khalifa?

   _____

   _____

5. **Making Connections** Compare this modern pilgrimage and the account of it with the one you read about in *The Canterbury Tales.* How are they alike?

   _____

   _____

   _____

Art Connection
Find, draw, or paint an illustration for this account. Try to capture the atmosphere and setting or the characters in a particular scene.