

Interpretive Issues in *The Canterbury Tales*

- 1) Chaucer's narrator sets up a cross-section of English culture, but he leaves out the high nobility who are so often the subjects of romances, one of the medieval period's most common genres. The tales, themselves, contain characters who are kings, queens, etc., but why would there be no kings, queens, dukes or earls (or their ladies) on this pilgrimage?
- 2) What does the creation of the game do to the social hierarchy which Chaucer the Pilgrim and Oure Hooste (the game's designer) are so concerned with protecting? What kind of social structure is the tale-telling game?
- 3) Who rides with whom, and what does that suggest? Especially, who leads the pilgrims and who rides last? This will be important to understanding the "Miller's Tale Prologue." With what modern social behaviors can we equate "riding with" someone? How does it relate to "The Battle of Maldon"?
- 4) The "pilgrim portraits" create a rich, concise vision of the pilgrims who crowd into the Tabard Inn on the night before the pilgrimage. Chaucer-the-Narrator tells us, for each one, their "condicioun" or socio-economic circumstance (status and wealth within their social group), what social group they belonged to (usually employment), and their "degree" (whether they were nobles [Knight, Squire, and by birth, probably the Monk and Prioress], gentlemen and -women [Man of Law, Franklin, Doctor?], or other free people distinguished only by their crafts or offices). The most subtle and important indicators of status and wealth are their "array" or clothing and other implements or jewelry they carry. To get some idea of the socio-economic differences among them, and how they might affect their relations with one another, look for the fourteenth-century prices of items of clothing etc. named in the portraits by clicking [here](#).
- 5) Because they were invented as ensembles for oral performance, the whole "tales of Canterbury" operates more like a musician's play-list than a published work of literature in the modern sense. Chaucer may have had an evolving sense of their emerging overall form as he composed them (probably 1385-1400), but scholars don't believe he left comprehensive instructions about the ordering of the tales. Some groups of tales, however, always occur together, whereas others appear to be "moveable" and others appear to have been switched ("Melibee," told by Chaucer in many versions, may have been the Man of Law's original tale, and the Shipman's fabliau originally may have been the Wife of Bath's tale).