

***The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer**

Discussion Questions

May 27, 2021

The General Prologue

1. Chaucer introduces his cast of characters with short sketches. Did any of the pilgrims presented strike you as especially interesting? Which one(s), and why?

The Wife of Bath

1. The Wife of Bath is described as skillful, finely dressed, well-traveled, and experienced in “the arts of romance.” Although wrathful and red-faced she could laugh and joke in fellowship. What is your impression of her? Do you see her as a blowsy old broad or an experienced older woman who has survived a bumpy road and still has vigor and hope for the future?
2. She is fascinated with the “battle of the sexes” – power, control, dominance and submission. Her fifth husband is the only one we hear about who rises up to defy her ... then they fall into perfect harmony. What is your interpretation of this surprise twist?
3. In her prologue, she muses, “Age, alas, that will all evenom, has taken away my beauty and my vigor. Let it go. Farewell.” The Tale Chaucer has presented as hers seems to conclude that youth and beauty are most highly prized (over the ugly old crone). Does this imply that the Wife is mourning the loss of her own youth and beauty? Do we therefore feel some sympathy for her?

The Pardoner

1. Here Chaucer expresses his disdain for the Church’s greedy and dishonest practitioners like the Pardoner, who openly brags “mine intent is nothing but to profit, and I care nothing for the correction of Sin.” St. Thomas Aquinas believed that “God was able to work through evil people and deeds to accomplish good ends.” Do you agree?
2. Death takes center stage in the Pardoner’s Tale, as it did in Chaucer’s day. Three drunks decide to search for death and slay him but die as a result of their own greed. Have you ever tried to “control” death or disease by bargaining? (i.e. “If you let me live despite my lung cancer I will never smoke again.”)
3. An old man who longs for death but (ironically) cannot die, reveals Death’s location. The old man says, “Not even Death will have my life ... I must wander thither.” Who is this old man? The Wandering Jew of medieval folklore? Any ideas?

The Miller’s Tale

1. Were you shocked by the shenanigans depicted in this Tale? Do you find the story amusing? Or silly and ridiculous? By the way, some of the events described were painted by Peter Bruegel the Elder in his work, “Netherlandish Proverbs” - a shot-window in use, a man with his backside on fire, a man falling through a roof in a basket, and more.
2. Have our ideas of humor changed? Or have you seen Saturday Night Live lately ... quite a bit of “toilet humor”!