General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales

The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales, probably the best-known work of medieval English literature, is dominated by descriptions of the 29 pilgrims who, along with the narrator, are traveling to Canterbury to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket. At the end of the prologue, they agree to participate in a tale-telling contest, thus establishing the framework for the rest of this literary masterpiece.

SUMMARY

The poem begins with some of the most famous lines in English literature:

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Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(Se pikeit hem nature in hir corages),
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
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And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engeland to Canteberye they wende,
The hooly blisful martr for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.

(lines 1–18)

The lines maintain their power even in translation: “When April with its sweet showers the drought of March has pierced to the root, and bathed every vein in such liquor, of which sweetness is engendered the flower; When Zephyr with his sweet breath has inspired in every grove and field the tender crops, and the young sun has run half his course in Aries, and small birds that sleep all the night with open eyes make melody (as nature urges them in their hearts), then people long to go on pilgrimages, and palmers long to seek foreign shores, distant shrines known in many lands; and especially, from even the farthest shires in England, they go to Canterbury to seek the holy blissful martyr who has helped them when they were sick.”

At this point, the narrator moves from the general to the specific, saying that one day, in a season such as he has just described, he was in Southwark, staying at an inn called the Tabard and getting himself ready to go on pilgrimage to Canterbury. That night a group of 29 other pilgrims also lodged at the inn. The group was made up of various and sundry sorts of people who had met by chance and decided to travel together, since they all had the same destination. After speaking with each one of them, the narrator decided to join their company. But before he tells any more of what happened following his decision, he is going to describe his fellow travelers in terms of each one’s circumstances, profession, social rank, and attire.

The Knight is described as a worthy man who practices chivalry and displays the qualities of fidelity, good reputation, generosity, and refined manners. He has spent much of his adult life fighting for his lord (a king or baron) in various wars, both in Christian lands and in pagan ones. He fought valiantly in Alisaudre (Alexandria),
later between various pilgrims, such as the Miller and the Knight; the Reeve and the Miller; the Friar and the Summner; and the Monk and the Knight. Some of these rivalries exhibit antagonism between various professions; others, such as that of the Knight and the Monk, suggest profound philosophical differences. Another important theme is the theme of pilgrimage, which, during our reading of the tales, tends to become submerged beneath our involvement with each individual narrative. It should, however, be kept in mind, because Chaucer intended the pilgrimage to Canterbury to serve as a metaphor for the journey of each individual through life. Strong hints of the poem’s cosmic dimension appear in the beginning of the General Prologue. Its very first lines refer to the coming of spring and its associations with rebirth, which along with the return of health after sickness, provides the spiritual and emotional impetus for embarking on a pilgrimage whose goal is to give thanks for renewed health. In this way, Chaucer forges a link between the temporal and the spiritual at the outset; while the tellers are telling their tales, it submerges and runs quietly like an underground stream, always present but never obtrusively so, and then resurfaces at the end, with the Parson’s sermon and CHAUCER’S RETRACTION, to remind us of the ultimate goal of life’s pilgrimage, which is heaven.

CHARACTERS
See character entries under The Canterbury Tales.

FOR FURTHER READING
Still one of the most accessible and informative discussions of the General Prologue, Muriel Bowden’s A Commentary on the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales (2nd ed., 1967) explains the many details of the prologue with reference to medieval sources, providing essential information on imagery and allusions that appear in the text. This book also provides a survey of modern scholarship in the first half of the 20th century. A suitable companion to Bowden’s book is Jodi-Anne George’s Geoffrey Chaucer: The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales (2000), which provides a summary-survey of critical responses to this text, focusing on particular time periods and the critical emphases that dominated them. Rob Pope’s How to Study Chaucer (2001) is aimed specifically at students and includes recommendations for writing an essay on Chaucer, a survey of current topics and debates, as well as suggestions for further reading. Those readers who would like to know more about estates satire, the genre that most heavily influenced the portraits in the prologue, should consult JILL MANN’S Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales (1973). JOHN M. MANLY’S Some New Light on Chaucer (1959) uses historical records to point out parallels between the pilgrims and actual persons. Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences by WALTER CLYDE CURRY (1960) analyzes Chaucer’s use of the medieval “science” of PHYSIOLOGY, or the interpretation of character based on physical appearance, in the pilgrims’ portraits. Laura Hodges investigates another dimension of the pilgrims’ appearance in Chaucer and Costume: The Secular Pilgrims in the General Prologue (2000). Anyone interested in astrology might want to consider William Spencer’s article “Are Chaucer’s Pilgrims Keyed to the Zodiac?” (Chaucer Review, 1970), which suggests that each pilgrim in the General Prologue is associated with one of the planets and signs of the zodiac, citing details of the sketches that, according to medieval astrological theory, support this idea. Caroline D. Eckhardt provides an excellent resource for further research in Chaucer’s “General Prologue” to The Canterbury Tales: An Annotated Bibliography, 1900–1984 (1990). More recent bibliographical information may be found in an online bibliography accessed through the University of Texas at Austin library homepage (URL: http://uchaucer.utsa.edu). Those who are interested in hearing portions of the General Prologue read in Middle English might want to consult one of the following: Chaucer, 1340–1400 (VHS, Films for the Humanities, 1988) or Chaucer: The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales (VHS, Films for the Humanities, 1993). The General Prologue on CD-ROM (2000) by Elizabeth Solopova, N. F. Blake, Daniel Mosser, and Peter Robinson pro-