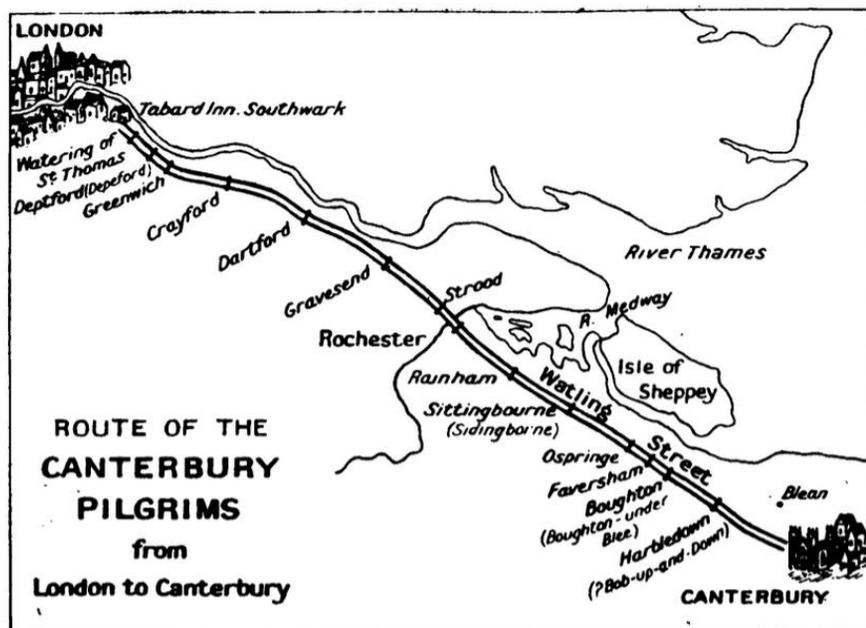# *The Canterbury Tales: The General Prologue*

In this opening tale, the narrator describes the purpose of this pilgrimage and goes into a lengthy description of each pilgrim's position, physical appearance, social rank, and financial circumstances— these descriptions of the pilgrims are commonly thought to be satirical. *The General Prologue* also establishes the bet between the pilgrims and the Innkeeper that sets the stage for the rest of the tales.

Setting

The narrator tells us that the pilgrims meet at the Tabard Inn (which still exists in some form today) in Southwark, London to begin their journey to Canterbury. They will travel directly southeast for several weeks by horse (see map below).

This shows only one of the pilgrims' routes to Canterbury, probably the one mentioned by Chaucer in his " Canterbury Tales." See also Stanley's " Memorials of Canterbury," etc., etc.

For more information about the Tabard Inn, [please visit this website.](#)

Terms

Even the modern English translation of *The Canterbury Tales* contains several words that today's readers aren't familiar with. Utilize the glossary below as you go through *The General Prologue.*

- **Zephyr**- the personification of the West Wind.
- **Yeoman**- a servant in a royal or noble household.
- **Abbot**- a man who was the head of an abbey of monks.
- **Limiter**- a man in the clergy who is permitted to listen to the confessions of parishioners.
- **Franklin**- a wealthy landowner.

Characters

List the major characteristics of each pilgrim in 1-2 sentences (pilgrims without a lengthy description in the text aren't included).

- The Knight-
- The Squire-
- The Yeoman-
- The Prioress (Nun)-
- The Monk-
- The Friar-
- The Merchant-
- The Clerk-
- The Sergeant-of-Law-
- The Franklin-
- The Weaver, The Dyer, and The Upholsterer-
- The Cook-
- The Sailor-
- The Physician-

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- The Wife of Bath-

- The Parson-

- The Plowman-

- The Miller-

- The Maunciple-

- The Reeve-

- The Summoner-

- The Pardoner-

Reading and Discussion Questions

Answer these questions in complete sentences using direct evidence from the text.

1. Why might the narrator spend the first sixteen lines of *The General Prologue* describing the weather during spring? What could spring represent here?

2. How does the Squire differ from the Knight in demeanor and appearance?
    a. What might that say about the Squire's personality?

3. The narrator says that the Prioress' "greatest oath is by Saint Loy" (l. 120). Refer to the footnotes of your text and do some additional research on this line. Why is this an appropriate description for a nun?

4. Look back at the description of the Monk. Why does this man of the Church wear such fancy clothes? What is his reasoning?

5. Compare the description of the Monk with that of the Friar. What image are we receiving of clergymen?
    a. Based on these comparisons, how do you think the narrator felt about the Church as an institution?

6. What is ironic about the description of the Merchant?

7. The Wife of Bath is the only woman in this company of pilgrims. Based on her description, how do you think women were viewed during this time?

8. Reread the Parson's description, particularly ll. 500-506 and 11.525-528. How is he different from the other clergymen in the party?

9. Based on the description of the Miller (particularly ll. 560-63), what do you think his tale will be like?

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10. What do you think the narrator means when he says that he thinks the Summoner "was a gelding or a mare"? (l. 691).
11. Describe the bet that the Innkeeper makes with the pilgrims in your own words.

Conclusion

The General Prologue is often considered the most difficult tale to understand because there are many characters to analyze and ironic/satiric comments to unpack. The other tales we will read in class, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *The Miller's Tale*, have a much smaller character list, which makes your job as a close-reader and analyzer much less strenuous.

Happy reading!