Discussion Questions for *The Canterbury Tales*

(1) Similar to *Beowulf*, the narrative structure of *The Canterbury Tales* is complex. Chaucer has created a character—the Narrator of *The General Prologue*—who claims to reproduce truthfully the tales told by the 29 pilgrims with whom he is travelling from London to Canterbury. *The Canterbury Tales* is thus a frame narrative, meaning each of the individual tales told by the pilgrims "takes place" in the frame of the Narrator recounting their pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas Beckett. In addition, the Host of the tavern poses a competition whereby the pilgrim who tells the best tale gets a free dinner on their return to London. As a result, the Host often attempts to take control of the narrative from the Narrator (who has been given control of the narrative by Chaucer). Why do you think Chaucer chose such a complex narrative structure?

(2) How does the Narrator describe the Miller in the *General Prologue*? How do you see the Miller in *The Miller's Prologue*?

(3) Why are the other pilgrims (and the Narrator) upset with the Miller in his *Prologue*?

(4) *The Miller's Tale* is a *fabliau*—a bawdy, comedic story, slap-stick even. What do you find funny in this tale (that is, can you understand the jokes in Middle English)?

(5) What does the Miller's tale say about marriage? Is there a "moral" or "lesson" to be learned?

(6) How does the Narrator describe the Wife of Bath in *The General Prologue*? What aspects of her life and appearance does the Narrator emphasize? Does this description give us any new insights into the character of the Narrator?

(7) How does Alice present herself? Readers often see tension in her character: Is Alice a medieval proto-feminist who argues for the rights of women in a patriarchal society? or Does the Narrator paint a misogynist portrait of a powerful medieval woman who is sex-crazy and concerned only with material gain?

(8) The Wife's *Prologue* here is much longer than that of the Miller. Alice first introduces her philosophy of marriage (1-193), then she discusses her three old husbands (194-452), then her fourth husband (453-502), and finally her fifth husband (503-828) before the interjections of the Friar and Summoner (829-856). What is the effect of such a lengthy *Prologue*? Is this a significant point? Why or why not?

(9) Why does Alice cite so many Biblical passages to justify her five marriages? Are these citations meant to be ironic? satiric? serious? critical?

(10) What is the relationship between Alice's *Tale* and her *Prologue*? That is, does the *Tale* reflect the sentiments of the *Prologue*? or does the *Tale* change your perception of Alice?

(11) Having finished both the *Prologue* and *Tale*, what do you think Alice's ultimate point regarding the "maistrie" of wives over their husbands? In other words, is it better for husbands or wives to have "maistrie"?