



## THE AUTHOR'S STYLE

### Chaucer's Realism as Entertainment

Chaucer's enduring appeal as a poet stems in part from the humor and realism of his characterizations. Chaucer had no illusions about humanity, yet he showed a genuine fondness for human beings—warts and all. His combination of detachment and sympathy distinguishes his writing style.

#### Key Aspects of Chaucer's Style

- a gentle irony that exposes characters' faults while emphasizing their essential humanity
- a use of vivid but spare imagery and figurative language in describing characters' physical appearance
- a clear differentiation between characters
- a stylistic appropriateness of the tales to their narrators (Each character has a particular "voice.")

## Analysis of Style

On the right are five excerpts from *The Canterbury Tales*. Study the chart above and read the excerpts carefully. Then,

- find examples of the listed aspects of Chaucer's style
- explain what, if anything, is amusing about each excerpt and identify which aspects of style contribute to this effect
- go back through the selections from *The Canterbury Tales* and find other examples of these key aspects of Chaucer's style

## Applications

- 1. Speaking and Listening** With a partner, study the description of either the Pardoner or the Wife of Bath in the "Prologue." Then read aloud selected passages from the character's tale in the way that the character might have told it. Have your partner critique your oral interpretation and suggest improvements.
- 2. Illustrating Style** Choose one of Chaucer's pilgrims whose physical appearance is vividly described. Then draw a picture of the character, based on Chaucer's description.
- 3. Imitating Style** In poetry or prose, create a character (preferably from a modern profession) and describe him or her with the mixture of detachment and sympathy that Chaucer used to such advantage.

#### from the Prologue

##### About the Prioress:

For courtliness she had a special zest,  
And she would wipe her upper lip so clean  
That not a trace of grease was to be seen  
Upon the cup when she had drunk; to eat,  
She reached a hand sedately for the meat.

##### About the Doctor:

Yet he was rather close as to expenses  
And kept the gold he won in pestilences.  
Gold stimulates the heart, or so we're told.  
He therefore had a special love of gold.

##### About the Summoner:

There was a Summoner with us at that Inn,  
His face on fire, like a cherubin,  
For he had carbuncles. His eyes were narrow,  
He was as hot and lecherous as a sparrow.  
Black scabby brows he had, and a thin beard.  
Children were afraid when he appeared.

#### from The Pardoner's Tale

There is, in Avicenna's long relation  
Concerning poison and its operation,  
Trust me, no ghastlier section to transcend  
What these two wretches suffered at their end.  
Thus these two murderers received their due,  
So did the treacherous young poisoner too.

#### from The Wife of Bath's Tale

Others assert we women find it sweet  
When we are thought dependable, discreet  
And secret, firm of purpose and controlled,  
Never betraying things that we are told.  
But that's not worth the handle of a rake;  
Women conceal a thing? For Heaven's sake!