**Writing Your Own “Chaucerian” Portrait**

**Introduction**

This activity is a little different, and asks you to delve into your more creative responses to literature. It’s also something of a celebration for getting through the “General Prologue,” whose characters are probably already beginning to etch themselves in your memory. Now I’d like you to try to create a “Chaucerian” character of your own.

**Instructions**

Pick or invent a character to write a “Chaucerian” portrait about. There are many different ways of approaching this; those below are only suggestions.

1. Write the portrait about someone you know well, but be careful—only share it with them if you know them well indeed and they have a good sense of humour.
2. Write the portrait based on your impression of some public figure, like the current Prime Minister, a famous actor, a TV character, or someone in high places credited with humanitarian deeds or accused of heinous crimes.
3. Write the portrait from a picture—a photograph, a painting, a cartoon, etc. You may want to draw (or create in Photoshop) your own picture, and then write the portrait based on it.
4. Write the portrait about a completely fictional character of your own creation. Your fictional character can, of course, make use of any or all of the possibilities suggested above.

You can write the portrait in any form you please—in prose or verse, perhaps even Chaucer’s rhyming iambic pentameter; as a news report, a rant, a rap song or a ballad. You can also imitate Chaucer with reverence, parody or satire, but as you’re writing think about the perspective and attitude of Chaucer’s Narrator, and the way in which he can turn the tables on a character (and get his readers thinking in new ways) in the length of a couplet, as he does to the Wife of Bath in these carefully juxtaposed lines:

* She was a worthy womman al hir live:
* Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde five (lines 461-462).

Reflect also upon the many details Chaucer’s Narrator records about the activities, abilities, eating and drinking habits, wishes, pretensions, appearance, clothing, horses, arms, and words of his pilgrims as you choose the details you’ll include in your own portrait. And think, too, about the language and images used to report those details.

If you decide to draw (or otherwise create a visual) portrait as well as a written one and you have access to the Internet, you might want to take a look at the pilgrim portraits painted in the lavishly decorated Ellesmere Manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales* to see how a medieval artist chose to represent Chaucer’s characters (<http://dpg.lib.berkeley.edu/webdb/dsheh/heh_brf?Description=&CallNumber=EL+26+C+9>).

If you choose to use a real person (or even a photograph of a real person) take a moment to consider whether there were real people behind any of Chaucer’s portraits. Was there a real crusading Knight like the one Chaucer presents? A real Wife of Bath whose “cloth-making” surpassed “hem of Ypres and of Gaunt” (lines 449-450)? A real thieving Shipman who had drawn “Ful many a draughte of win” (line 398) from Chaucer’s father or a neighbouring vintner? A real philandering Friar “cleped Huberd” (line 271) whose exploits made him worthy of the longest portrait in the “General Prologue”? Does it change the meaning of the portrait if you know the character is based upon a historical individual?