

# Chaucer's Marketplace Poetics: Suggested Discussion Questions

These questions are based on [‘Chaucer’s Marketplace Poetics’, a lecture given at the Bodleian Libraries by Professor Marion Turner](#). The questions could be used for classroom discussion, revision, or to help you structure your notes on the lecture.

1. What does the opening of *The Canterbury Tales* reveal about time and the links between patterns of seasonal change in the natural world and the Christian calendar?
2. How does Chaucer’s *General Prologue* shift from the timeless, universal, and unchanging to the specific, local, and unpredictable?
3. What was the significance of the geographical settings which Professor Turner discusses in this lecture for Chaucer’s readers?
  - a. Southwark – and mercantile London in general compared to the feudal countryside
  - b. Lombardy (in *The Merchant’s Tale* and *The Clerk’s Tale*)
4. How did the Black Death in England lead to increased social mobility and challenges to authority? How does Chaucer’s tale collection reflect these shifts in 14<sup>th</sup>-century society?

You could consider:

  - a. Comparison with the tale tellers of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*
  - b. The Knight of King Arthur’s court in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*
  - c. Januarie, a Knight of Lombardy in *The Merchant’s Tale*
5. How does Chaucer’s expectation that the reader must make their own judgements and discern meaning beneath the surface level of the text invite us to challenge the authority of his characters, the narrator, and conventional medieval authority and morality?

You could consider:

  - a. Tone and voice in *The Merchant’s Tale*
  - b. The contradictory endings of *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*
  - c. The invitation to “taketh the moralite” in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*
  - d. The connection between the critical idea of ‘The Death of the Author’ (Roland Barthes) and Chaucer’s challenge to the reader throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, exemplified in *The Miller’s Prologue*: “Turne over the leef and chese another tale...Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys.”

Whichever tales you are reading, look for passages which explore parody, contestation, and ambiguous morality as part of this concept of Chaucer’s “marketplace of ideas”.

Further Reading:

[This excellent article summarises some of the key arguments in Professor Turner’s recent biography of Chaucer](#), and contains five recommended books for enriching your understanding of Chaucer.

This [chapter by Corinne Saunders is a thorough summary of the development of critical approaches to Chaucer](#).

