1. What do you already know about Geoffrey Chaucer? Refer to your notebook.

2. You are going to read a description from the General Prologue of the pilgrim called The Prioress.
   a. What is a prioress? Where would she live and work? What kind of person do you expect her to be? Choose from these adjectives:
   - a. rich
   - b. fashionable
   - c. religious
   - d. modest
   - e. humble
   - f. passionate
   - g. self-indulgent

b. Listen to and read the text (lines 118-162), in a modern English translation. Take notes under the following headings:
   a. Name and social status
   b. Physical appearance
   c. Clothes / style of dressing
   d. Education and manners
   e. Experience of life
There was also a nun, a prioress,
Whose smile was unaffected and demure;
Her greatest oath was just, ‘By St Eloi’! 1
And she was known as Madame Eglantine.
She sang the divine service prettily,
And through the nose, becomingly intoned;
And she spoke French well and elegantly
As she’d been taught it at Stratford-at-Bow, 2
For French of Paris was to her unknown.
Good table manners she had learnt as well:
She never let a crumb from her mouth fall;
She never soiled her fingers, dipping deep
Into the sauce; when lifting to her lips
Some morsel, she was careful not to spill
So much as one small drop upon her breast.
Her greatest pleasure was in etiquette.
She used to wipe her upper lip so clean,
No print of grease inside her cup was seen,
Not the least speck, when she had drunk from it.
Most daintily she’d reach for what she ate.
No question, she possessed the greatest charm,
Her demeanour was so pleasant, and so warm;
Though at pains to ape the manners of the court,
And be dignified, in order to be thought
A person well deserving of esteem.
But, speaking of her sensibility,
She was so full of charity and pity
That if she saw a mouse caught in a trap,
And it was dead or bleeding, she would weep.
She kept some little dogs 3, and these she fed
On roast meat, or on milk and fine white bread.
But how she’d weep if one of them were dead,
Or if somebody took a stick to it!
She was all sensitivity and tender heart.
Her veil was pleated most becomingly;
Her nose well-shaped; eyes blue-grey, of great beauty;
And her mouth tender, very small, and red.
And there’s no doubt she had a fine forehead,
Almost a span in breadth, I’d swear it was,
For certainly she was not undersized.

1. ’By St Eloi!’: a mild form of exclamation (‘Per Sant’Eligio’).
2. Stratford-at-Bow: the English convent where the Prioress had studied French.
3. little dogs: she kept dogs against church law which forbade nuns to keep dogs.
3. What do the following facts suggest about the Prioress?
   a. she keeps two dogs against church rules
   b. she wears a golden brooch with a motto about love

4. Describe the Prioress's personality. Use words from the text and make inferences from what the poet says about them.

5. Look at the choice of words and details used in the description. Is the description realistic or idealised? Support your answer with quotations.

6. The poet's tone of voice in the two descriptions is gently ironic. Which of the following devices does Chaucer use to convey his irony? Give examples from the text.
   □ a. He says something about the object of irony while he means quite a different thing.
   □ d. He uses hyperbole, that is, he points out exaggerated attributes or details of the object of irony.
   □ c. He points out some aspects which are different from what one would expect in reality.

7. Which of these typical Chaucerian themes can you recognise in the description of the Prioress? Circle your choices and give evidence.
   □ a. magic: ____________________________
   □ b. sensual love: ______________________
   □ c. class pride: ________________________
   □ d. anti-feminism: _____________________
   □ e. platonic love: ______________________
   □ f. avarice: __________________________
   □ g. feminism: _________________________
   □ h. hypocrisy: ________________________

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Her cloak, I noticed, was most elegant.
A coral rosary with gauds of green
She carried on her arm; and from it hung
A brooch of shining gold; inscribed thereon
Was, first of all, a crowned ‘A,’
And under, Amor vincit omnia.

(modern English translation by Richard Wright)

Toraca elegante aveva indosso
e un bel rosario di corallo rosso
e pietre verdi, il polso le cingeva.
E una spilla pur da lì pendeva
con una A coronata e con il motto
Amor vincit omnia, inciso sotto.

(In Italian translation by Vincenzo La Gioia)
Geoffrey Chaucer’s pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* are human types well-known to popular as well as to literary tradition: for example, the honourable knight, the prioress, the libertine friar, the domineering. However, they are not depicted as; they are human beings with an irresistible vitality besides their qualities and defects. They come to life first in the poet’s descriptions in the *General Prologue*, especially through detail, and then in their tales. The ladylike Prioress has the elegant manners of the class and a charming appearance which is that of a heroine of romance. The poet shows great admiration for her accomplishments; still, he makes her the object of gentle irony when he makes the reader aware that her charity is mainly directed to her own and the motto engraved on her brooch does not seem to refer to spiritual only.

The tales are both a means to illustrate aspects of the tellers’ and to explore some recurrent themes. For example, the Prioress’s tale is on a conventional subject — a miracle connected to the murder of a child — appropriate to her role and status. A dominant theme of the tales is which is hinted at in the figure of the Prioress who looks and behaves much more like a fashionable lady than a. Chaucer draws inspiration for his themes from various sources: the English popular and literary tradition, classics (especially Ovid) and the contemporaries Petrarch and Boccaccio. His tone of voice varies in the tales: it may be ironical and mocking, or and thoughtful.

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**Geoffrey Chaucer**

**Section 1** From the Beginnings to the 1700s