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Chaucerian Self-Portrait

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ABSTRACT: There is no better way to understand how an author uses language than to attempt to use language in the same way. This activity challenges students to observe in Chaucer's descriptions of his Pilgrims the wealth and significance of detail and to create a portrait of themselves that is similarly rich in evoking personality.

STANDARDS:

RI.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging or beautiful.

W.11-12.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

PROCEDURE: To the students: For your next writing challenge, you will create a word portrait of yourself, in the style of Geoffrey Chaucer. This means several things:

- You will consider the categories of sensory details that Chaucer focuses on to create a memorable visual representation, and you will use the same kinds of details to describe yourself (voice, clothing, way of moving, height/body type, hair, facial expression). You need not include every category; choose those that best create the overall impression you wish to make on your readers.
- You will provide some brief background or context for your "self in words," the way Chaucer does—not lengthy, but pointed.
- You will write your lines in iambic pentameter. You need not create rhymed couplets as Chaucer did, though you may if you wish.
- You will write a minimum of 25 lines.

Your word portrait will be assessed according to how well you address the above elements. In addition, you will demonstrate your understanding that punctuation applies to poetry as well as prose. Your portrait will be vivid and specific, not bland and vague. Yes, of course you may lie about yourself. This is primarily a fiction class, after all.

MATERIALS: Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, or at least, a copy of The Prologue thereof.