1. Introduction & Historical Context

Chaucer's Importance

- Often called "Father of English Poetry"
- Wrote in Middle English when Latin & French were dominant
- Elevated the status of English as a literary language

Key Historical Snapshot

- Mid-to-late 14th Century
  - Hundred Years' War with France
  - Black Death (plague) devastation
  - Social unrest (Peasants' Revolt of 1381)

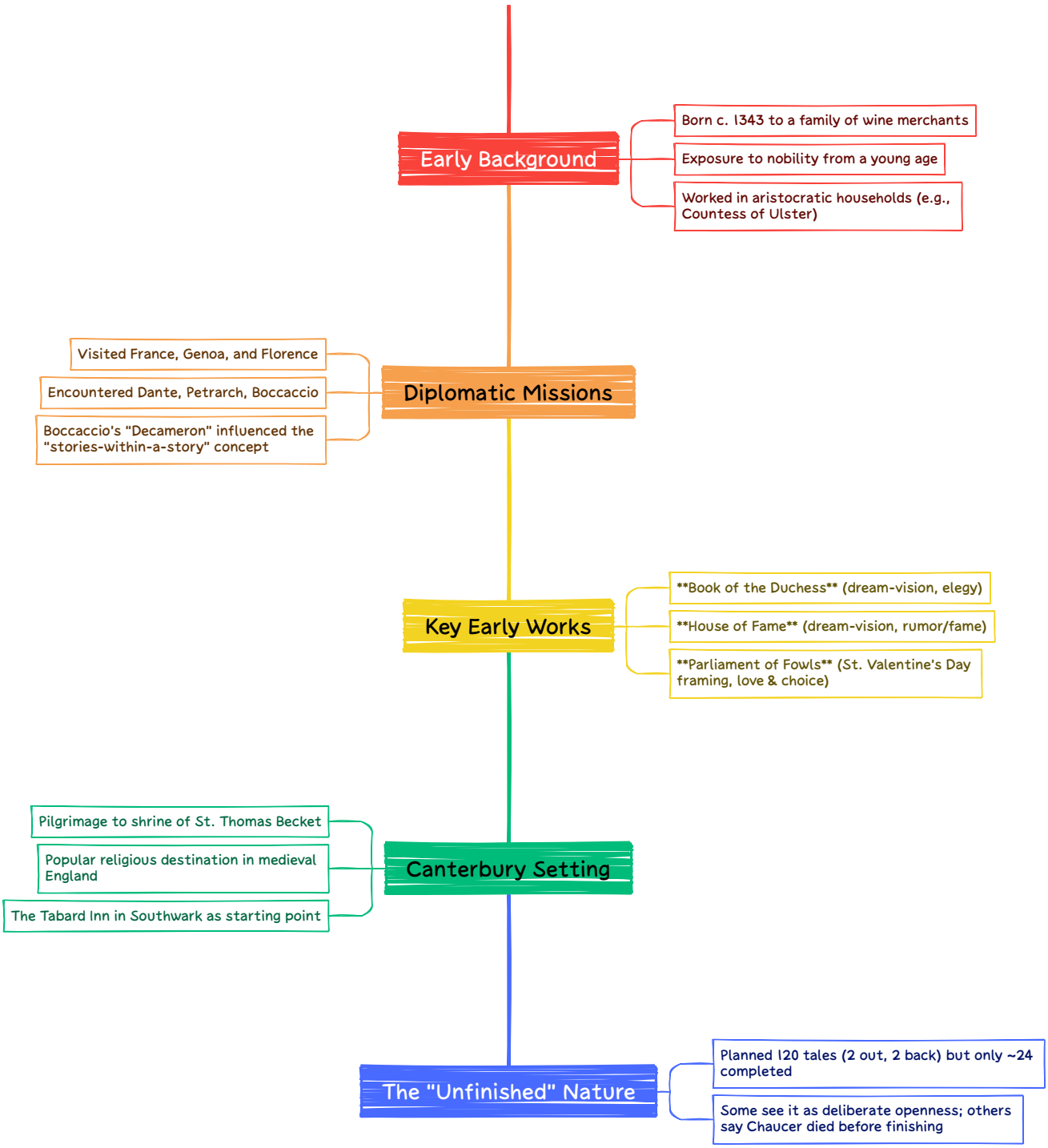
Chaucer's Unique Position

- Served as page, soldier, diplomat, customs official
- Experience in both courtly & common circles
- Captured during the war and ransomed by King Edward III

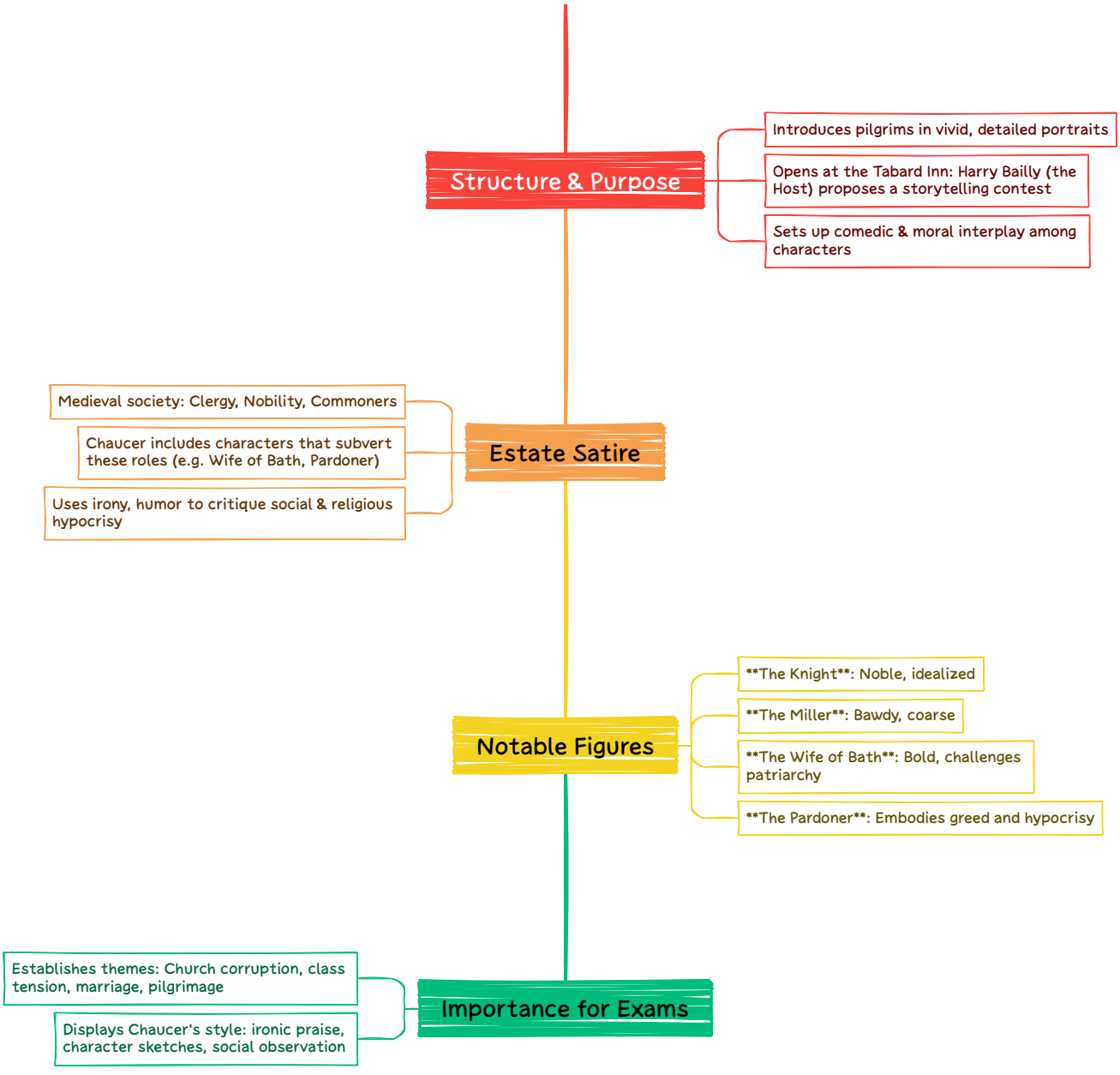
The Canterbury Tales Overview

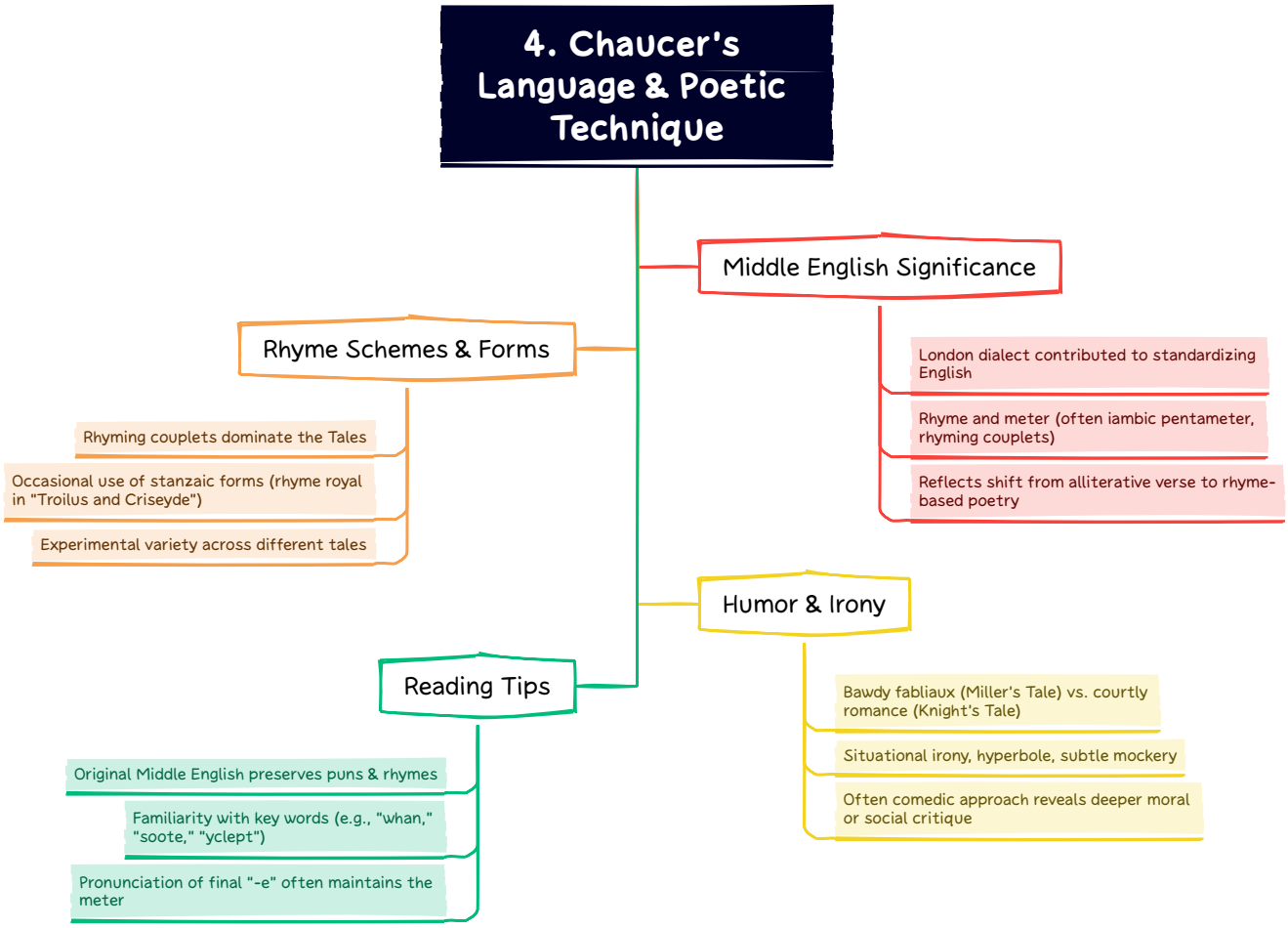
- Frame narrative of pilgrims traveling to Canterbury
- Each pilgrim tells tales for entertainment (and a chance to win a free supper)
- Showcases diverse medieval society and literary genres

2. Chaucer's Life & Influences

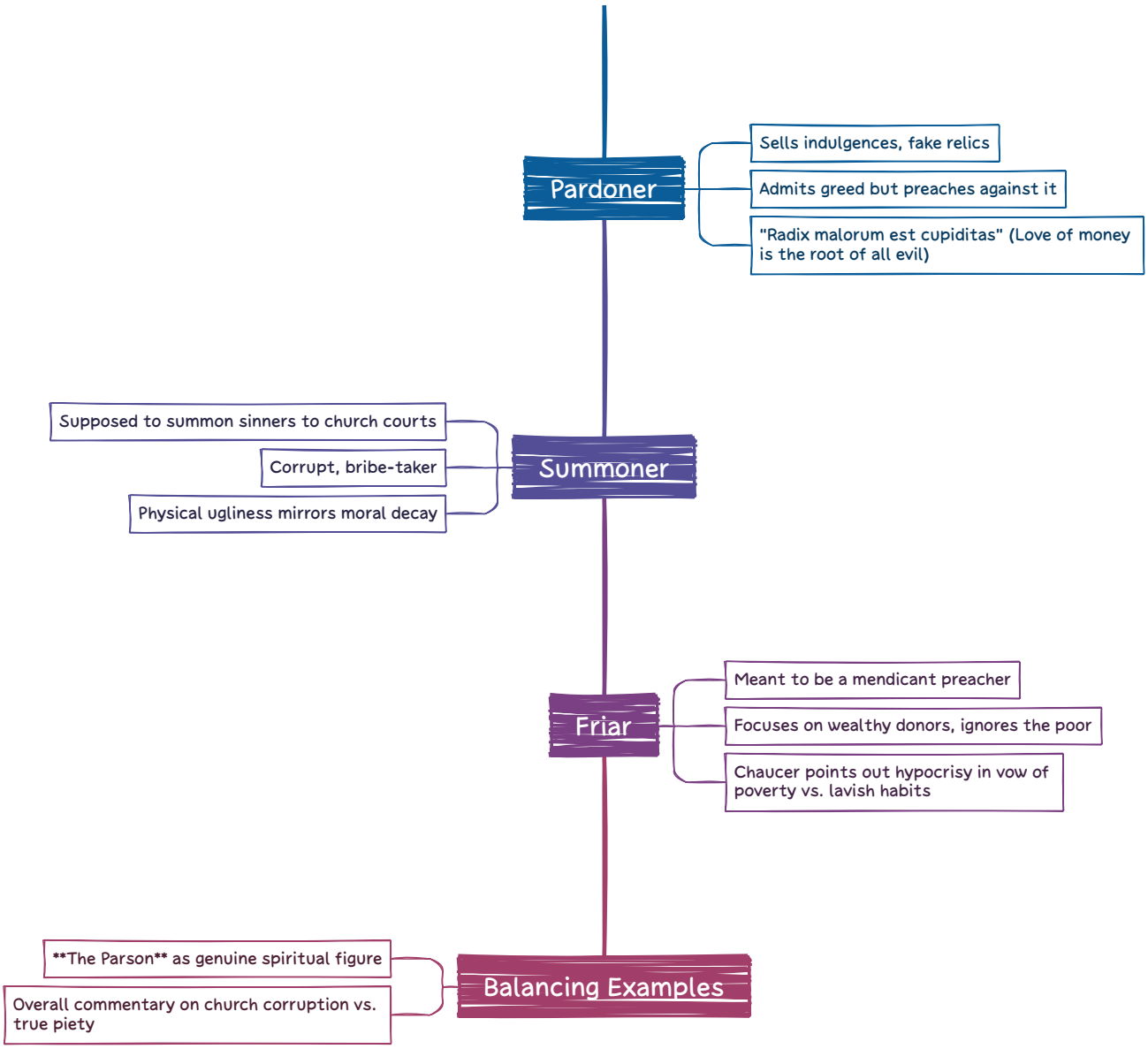


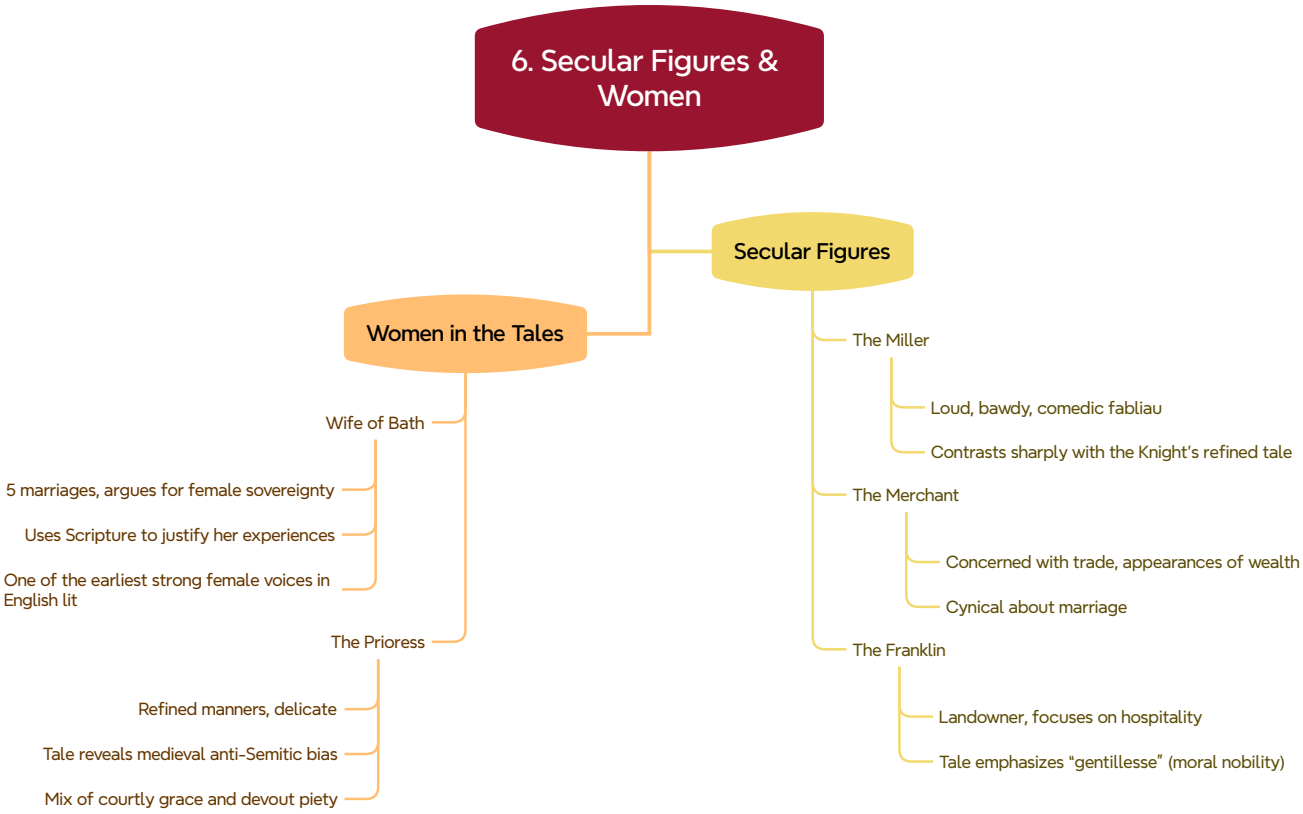
3. The General Prologue & Estate Satire




4. Chaucer's Language & Poetic Technique
Middle English Significance
London dialect contributed to standardizing English
Rhyme and meter (often iambic pentameter, rhyming couplets)
Reflects shift from alliterative verse to rhyme-based poetry
Rhyme Schemes & Forms
Rhyming couplets dominate the Tales
Occasional use of stanzaic forms (rhyme royal in "Troilus and Criseyde")
Experimental variety across different tales
Humor & Irony
Bawdy fabliaux (Miller's Tale) vs. courtly romance (Knight's Tale)
Situational irony, hyperbole, subtle mockery
Often comedic approach reveals deeper moral or social critique
Reading Tips
Original Middle English preserves puns & rhymes
Familiarity with key words (e.g., "whan," "soote," "yclept")
Pronunciation of final "-e" often maintains the meter

5. Religious Figures & Critiques




6. Secular Figures & Women
Secular Figures
The Miller
Loud, bawdy, comedic fabliau
Contrasts sharply with the Knight's refined tale
The Merchant
Concerned with trade, appearances of wealth
Cynical about marriage
The Franklin
Landowner, focuses on hospitality
Tale emphasizes "gentillesse" (moral nobility)
Women in the Tales
Wife of Bath
5 marriages, argues for female sovereignty
Uses Scripture to justify her experiences
One of the earliest strong female voices in English lit
The Prioress
Refined manners, delicate
Tale reveals medieval anti-Semitic bias
Mix of courtly grace and devout piety

7. Key Tales (Part 1): Knight, Miller, Reeve, & Cook

The Knight's Tale

- Classical chivalric romance: Palamon & Arcite competing for Emelye
- High seriousness, fate vs. free will
- Courtly ideals, cosmic justice

The Miller's Tale

- Fabliau: John the carpenter, Alison, Nicholas, Absolon
- Bawdy tricks, sexual farce
- Parodies the Knight's lofty tone

The Reeve & The Cook

- Reeve's Tale: Another fabliau targeting a dishonest miller (revenge on the pilgrim Miller)
- Cook's Tale: Unfinished fragment about a dissolute apprentice
- Showcases personal rivalries shaping tale-telling

8. Key Tales (Part 2): Man of Law, Shipman, Monk, Nun's Priest

Man of Law's Tale

- Constance's trials, patience, and divine reward
- Reflects devout moral exemplum

Shipman's Tale

- Merchant's wife & a cunning monk
- Secular focus on trickery and affairs
- Possibly reassigned from the Wife of Bath's materials

Monk's Tale

- Series of tragic exempla about the mighty fallen
- Host finds it depressing and interrupts
- Emphasizes Fortune's cruelty

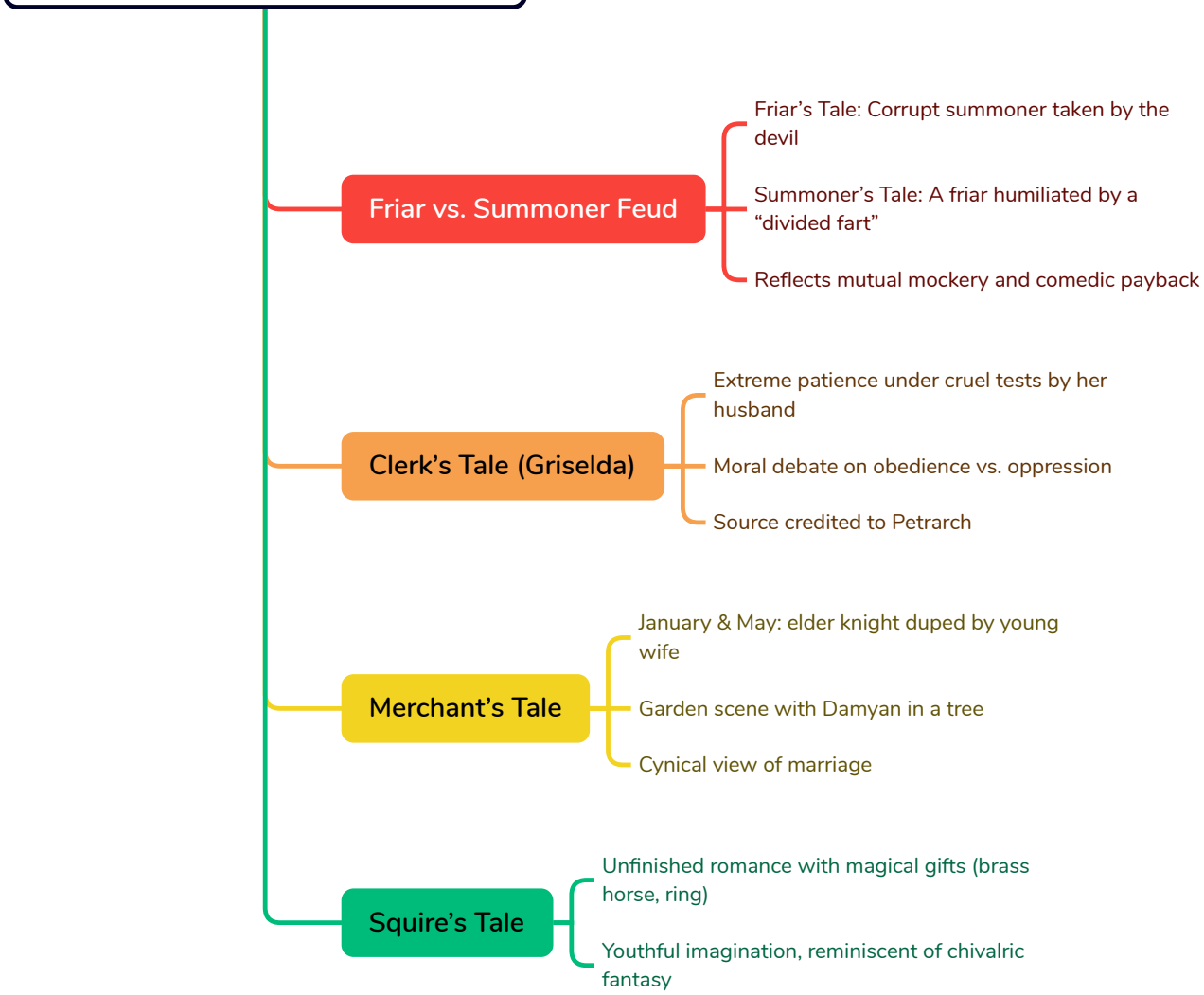
Nun's Priest's Tale

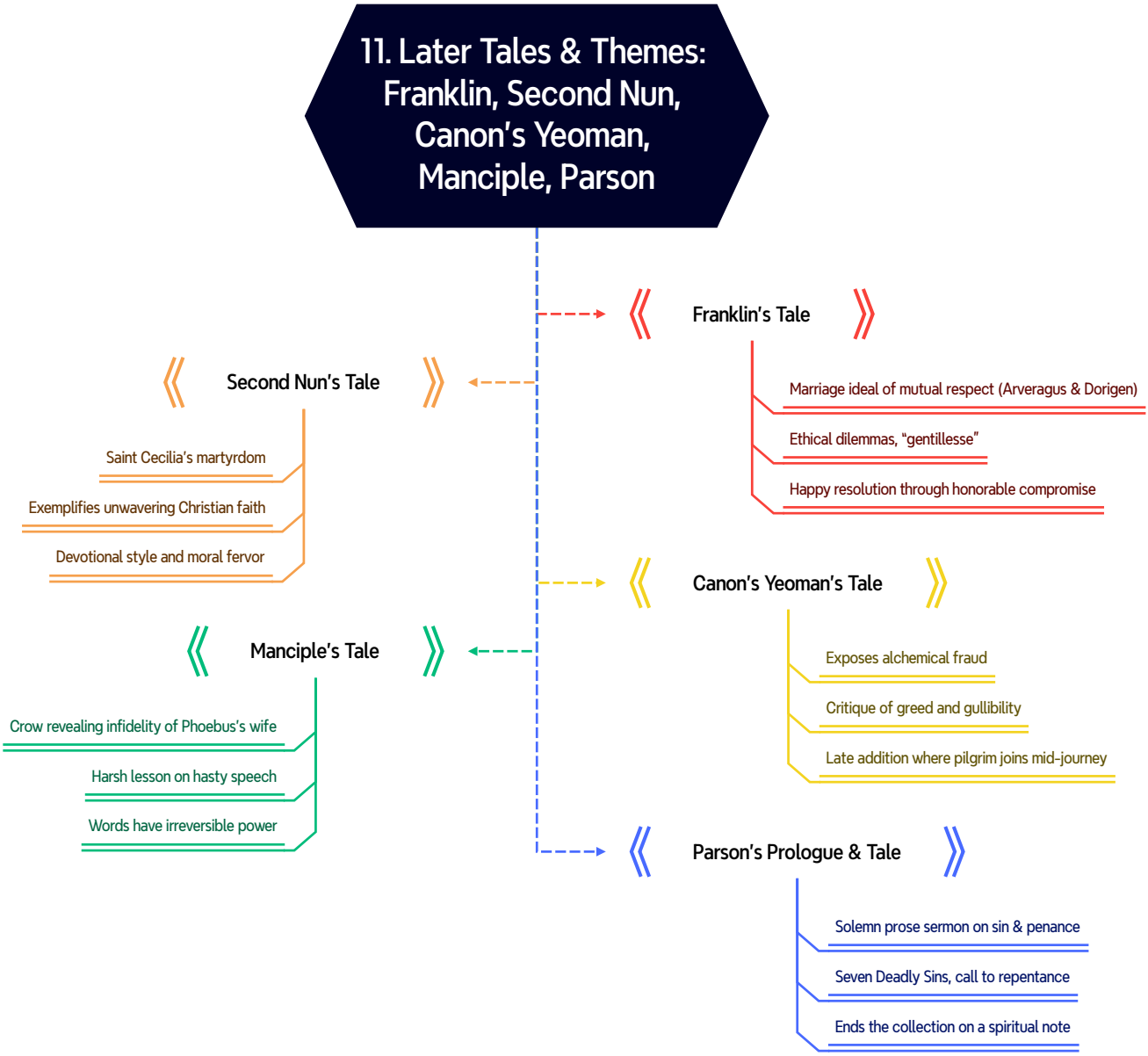
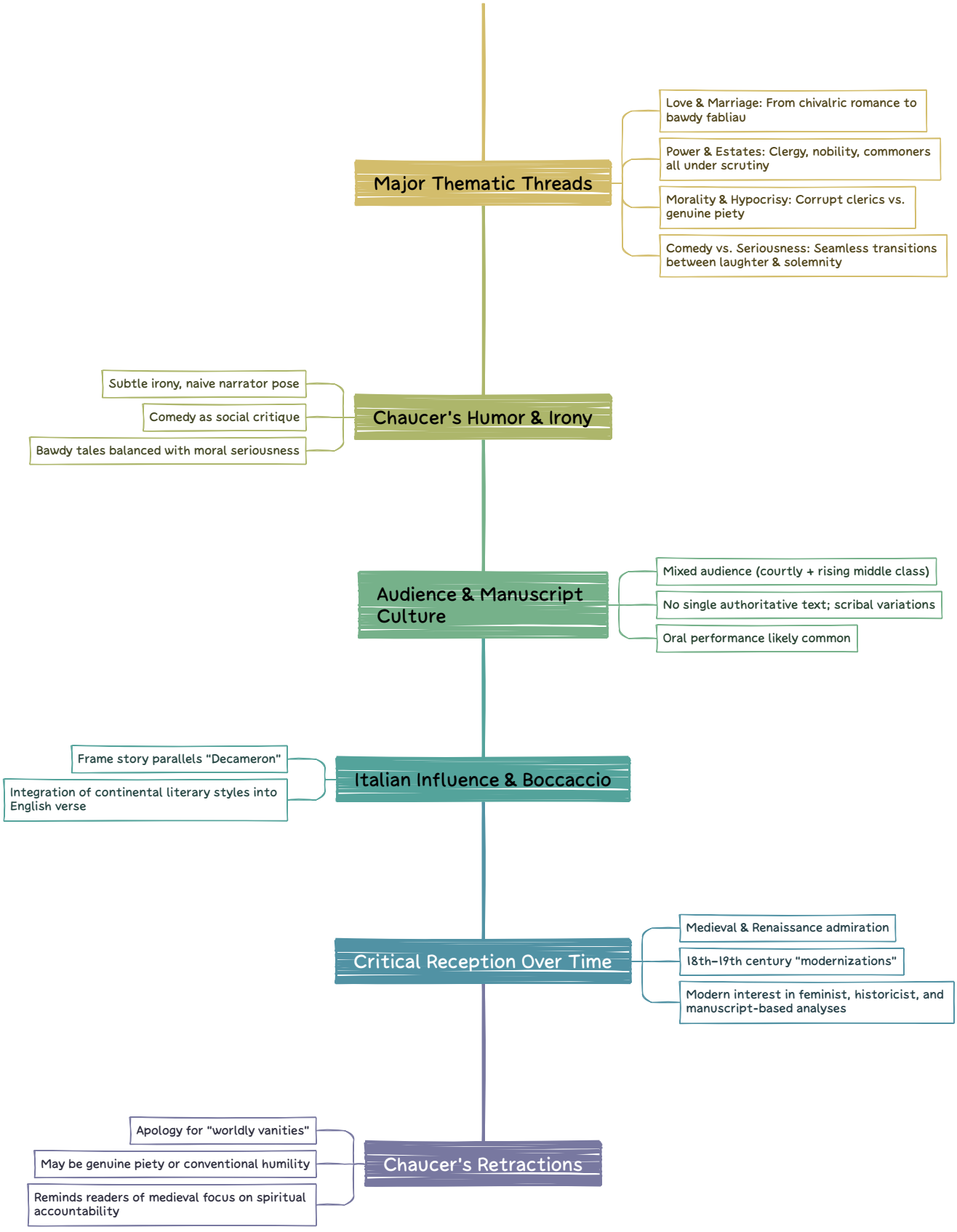
- Mock-heroic fable of Chanticleer (rooster) & a cunning fox
- High-flown language for a barnyard drama
- Satire of vanity and flattery

9. Key Tales (Part 3): Physician, Pardoner, & Wife of Bath

- **Physician's Tale**
  - Story of Virginia's tragic death to preserve her purity
  - Highlights corruption (Judge Appius) and extreme measures of "honor"
- **Pardoner's Tale**
  - Sermon against greed told by a proud hypocrite
  - 3 rioters find gold & kill each other
  - "The love of money is the root of all evil"
- **Wife of Bath's Prologue**
  - Long personal account: 5 marriages, biblical justification
  - Challenges male clerical authority
  - Advocates for women's sovereignty in marriage
- **Wife of Bath's Tale**
  - Arthurian setting: Knight must learn what women desire most
  - Old hag's transformation after gaining "maistrie"
  - Reinforces prologue's theme of female autonomy

10. Key Tales (Part 4): Friar, Summoner, Clerk, Merchant, Squire




11. Later Tales & Themes: Franklin, Second Nun, Canon's Yeoman, Manciple, Parson
Franklin's Tale
Marriage ideal of mutual respect (Arveragus & Dorigen)
Ethical dilemmas, "gentillesse"
Happy resolution through honorable compromise
Second Nun's Tale
Saint Cecilia's martyrdom
Exemplifies unwavering Christian faith
Devotional style and moral fervor
Canon's Yeoman's Tale
Exposes alchemical fraud
Critique of greed and gullibility
Late addition where pilgrim joins mid-journey
Manciple's Tale
Crow revealing infidelity of Phoebus's wife
Harsh lesson on hasty speech
Words have irreversible power
Parson's Prologue & Tale
Solemn prose sermon on sin & penance
Seven Deadly Sins, call to repentance
Ends the collection on a spiritual note

12. Broader Themes, Critiques & Conclusion