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Lauren Day

Senior Thesis

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The Canterbury Tales: Chaucer's Respectful Critique of Church Officials and Their Abuse of Power

Leaders and politicians in positions of power have a duty to the people that they serve to examine and constructively criticize the institutions shaping their society. In fourteenth-century England, Geoffrey Chaucer played his public diplomatic role perfectly as well as, later in life, publishing, *The Canterbury Tales*, a harsh critique of certain aspects of the Catholic Church. Because of Chaucer's position at court, and his training as a diplomat, he was able to frame a work that revealed and implicitly condemned the corrupt practices of many church officials with impunity.

Chaucer was born in about 1341, and "[f]rom the age of fourteen until the very end of his life, he remained in royal service. He was a familiar and indispensable part of the court, and acted as a royal servant for three kings and two princes" (Ackroyd xvi). By the time he was twenty-four, Chaucer was being given important and "perhaps clandestine" diplomatic missions (29). He became known as "familia" of the king, which meant that his person was protected under order of the king (24). Because of his role at court, Chaucer, "was in the best possible position to observe and to understand the social changes... taking place all around him" (29).

Chaucer's work *The Canterbury Tales* is a prime example of his close observation and subtle understanding of the institution of the Church.

It is important to remember that Chaucer, "was not a poet who happened to be a diplomat and government official; he was a government official and diplomat who, in his spare time, happened to write poetry..." (67). This gives weight to his examination of the Church from the point of view of someone uniquely qualified to judge it. Chaucer displayed "evident skill in difficult negotiations" (50) time and time again, and what could be more difficult than critiquing the most powerful institution in his country? His ability to survive two separate regime changes demonstrates the power of his diplomatic skill. These shifts of power were accompanied by replacements of many court officials, both when Richard II came to the throne, and when the throne was later usurped by Henry IV. Chaucer maintained his position as royal diplomat regardless of the sovereign in power. (68). This fact gives testament to his indispensable worth to the court, an institution second only to one other in fourteenth-century England.

Religion, specifically the practices of the Catholic Church, would have had a major influence on Chaucer's life. "An apt symbol for the Catholic culture of fourteenth-century London might be found in the fact that there were ninety-nine churches, and ninety-five inns, within the walls" (8). Common greetings of the day consisted of, "God save you," "God give you grace," and "God's speed" (7). "The overseeing presence of the medieval Church could be compared to the air that was breathed" (Cullen 23). It should come as no surprise then that Chaucer's poetry should be "suffused with religious practice and religious personages"

(Ackroyd 9). Though Chaucer was steeped in the religion of his day, it is clear from his work that he felt an urgent need to critique certain church officials and their practices:

> More emotionally personified as Holy Mother and Bride of Christ, the Church was also called the Guardian of the Scriptures, the Teacher of Morality, the Refuge of the Poor, the Fulfillment of the Synagogue and the Light of the Gentiles. Small wonder that those who cared most deeply about such an ideal were dissatisfied with the medieval clergy! (Ames 25)

Throughout his *Canterbury Tales*, "On the one hand, Chaucer often shows the institutional practices of the surrounding culture compromising the values they were originally designed to uphold. On the other, he seems to respect those institutions however flawed their practices" (Condren 1). Chaucer was not criticizing the entire institution of the Catholic Church, but merely some of its officials.

Throughout *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole, Chaucer employs various narrative techniques in order to separate himself, as poet, from the commentary within his poems. His use of a many-layered narrative serves to provide stories within stories and characters invented by characters to such a degree as to render the source of the artistry blameless. Chaucer could defend his tales and their harsh and often crude critique of the Church by pointing to his characters as the source of the idea. "He shifts the blame, if that is the right word, upon his characters in *The Canterbury Tales*" (Ackroyd 39). His characters are not himself and by the same logic, his characters' stories are doubly separated from him, the writer. "Chaucer the poet,

then, is outside the poem" (Cullen 21). Despite the possibility of this claim, it is clear that Chaucer is merely using these layers as a device in anticipation of the event of a negative reaction to his work.

Chaucer also appears as a character in his own tales which adds another, and important layer to his narrative. "He adds a personal touch and complexity by having his alter ego perform as the actual teller of *all* the tales, and doubly significant (perhaps doubly challenging), he includes stories inspired from inside of himself" (21). Almost every character on the pilgrimage serves as a satire for some aspect of Chaucer's culture, even himself. In the Man of Law's Prologue, the Man of Law ridicules Chaucer, the character, and his inability to ryhme, "Chaucer, clumsy as he is at times / In metre and the cunning use of rhymes" (Coghill 138). Chaucer does not spare writers in his criticism and the fact that he even satirizes his own passion counteracts the harshness of his critique without lessening its impact.

The crude humor present in a number of the tales, such as "The Summoner's Tale" has led critics to classify them as fabliaux, which are bawdy tales that originated in France. "Obscenity has almost always been seen as intrinsic to the definition of the fabliuax" (Cobby 39-40). Chaucer uses this type of tale because of its extraordinary popularity. "The fabliaux have, from the start, also appealed to a popular audience" (33). Everyone loved this genre of writing and Chaucer, seeing this, used it as a device in his tales. "Chaucer was generally less polemical than Dante and less prophetic then Langland, and his attack on vice is usually more indirect and considerably funnier than theirs" (Ames 29). The idea was to keep people laughing so that they would take to the criticism more willingly.

The tales that manifest Chaucer's critique the most effectively are “The Friar's Tale,” “The Summoner's Tale,” and “The Pardoner's Tale.” In all three of these stories the characters are corrupt church officials revealing their true natures and their greed by taking advantage of the common folk they are bound to serve. These tales display, “religion made a business,” (Condren 1) the distortion of the institution of the Church that Chaucer was strongly condemning.

“The Friar's Tale,” told by the Friar, relates the story of a corrupt summoner, while conversely, “The Summoner's Tale,” told by the Summoner, tells the story of a corrupt friar:

> The Friar creates in his tale a somonour who acts with all the naked greed and hardhearted tenacity that often characterized summoners in Chaucer's day, only to be answered by the Summoner's creation of a frere who relies first on strained textual interpretations and later, in frustration, on tenacious greed, in the manner of many a late-fourteenth-century friar. (113)

Chaucer uses “The Friar's Tale” and “The Summoner's Tale,” as back-to-back satirical commentary on the Church and its officials. He lightens the accusation by having the two characters insult each other's positions in the Church. By creating a rivalry between the two, he adds comic relief to a harsh view of corrupt church authorities.

In “The Friar's Tale,” a summoner is going about his religious duties which he performs in such a way as to make them nothing short of black mail and extortion. He accuses certain people of sins they have not committed and they bribe him in order to keep him from

summoning them before the ecclesiastical courts. Out on business one day he meets a fiend from Hell who he believes is a yeoman. He describes his trade to the alleged yeoman but lies, "'Why then you are a bailiff?' 'Yes,' said he. / He did not dare, for very filth and shame, / Say that he was a summoner," (312). He then asks the stranger to tell him what he does for a living. The stranger informs him that he does exactly what the summoner does. Chaucer boldly makes a direct comparison between a church official and a fiend from Hell:

> I am a fiend, my dwelling is in Hell.
>
> I ride on business and have so far thriven
>
> By taking anything that I am given.
>
> That is the sum of all my revenue.
>
> You seem to have the same objective too,
>
> You're out for wealth, acquired no matter how,
>
> And so with me. (313)

The fiend tells the summoner that he has the ability to take whatever or whoever people curse. After he relates this strange power, a woman becomes angry with the summoner for wrongly accusing her of sin and exclaims, " 'The devil,' she said, 'can carry him away' " (318). The fiend then takes the summoner to Hell, "And on the word this foul fiend made a swoop / And dragged him, body and soul, to join the troupe / In Hell, where summoners have their special shelf" (318). Chaucer's description of this despicable character is humorous but also thoroughly negative. "He was a thief, a summoner, and a pimp" (311). The summoner is compared to the lowest members of society, and also to the lowest of the otherworldly creatures, a fiend from

Hell. Chaucer's point is quite clear: this was not how a summoner was intended by the Church to act.

The Summoner, not to be outdone by the Friar, in his narrative, “The Summoner's Tale,” tells an equally appalling story about a friar who abuses his authority over the common people. He begins in his prologue by describing the designated place for friars in Hell as Satan's “arse”:

> “Satan,” the angel said, “has got a tail
>
> As broad or broader than a carrack sail.
>
> Hold up thy tail, thou Satan!” then said he,
>
> “Show forth thine arse and let the friar see
>
> The nest ordained for friars in this place!”
>
> Ere the tail rose a furlong into space
>
> From underneath it there began to drive,
>
> Much as if bees were swarming from a hive,
>
> Some twenty thousand friars in a rout
>
> And swarmed all over Hell and round about,
>
> And then came back as fast as they could run
>
> And crept into his arse again, each one. (320)

This prologue, while crude in nature is a humorous attack on the character of friars as a group. It serves to succinctly make Chaucer's point clear while keeping his readers laughing simultaneously:

> As Thomas Speght, one of Chaucer's first editors and biographers, put it, the tales exemplify 'the state of the Church, the Court and the Country, with such arte and cunning, that although none could deny himself to be touched, yet none durst complaine that he was wronged'. (Ackroyd 157)

This off color humor is one technique of Chaucer for distancing himself from his critique. It allowed Chaucer to critique friars in general without necessarily offending them personally.

"In the story which follows, the Summoner, with the subtle cunning of Chaucer, gives friars high marks for zeal, business acumen, hypocrisy, vainglory, and manipulation of women" (Ames 45). After his brief tirade in the prologue, the Summoner launches into his longer tale in which he describes a friar in Yorkshire selling, for personal gain, trentals which were " an office of thirty masses for the souls of those in Purgatory" (Coghill 515). The friar would give a sermon, and after he had effectively fired up the congregation, he would exploit their emotions in order to make money. "When he had preached in church, and cast his spell / With one main object, far above the rest, / To fire his congregation with a zest / For buying trentals, and for Jesu's sake / To give the wherewithal for friars to make / Their holy houses" (320-321) he would ask them for donations to save their dearly departed friends from Purgatory, and then he would pocket their money. "What especially irked Chaucer was that the worldly success of the friars was ensured by their hypocritical protestations of imitating the unworldliness of their founder. He portrays them preying on the gullible piety of the laity and glorying in the status which they disclaim" (Ames 45).

Once the friar has exploited this group of people, he then goes through the town begging

for food. He writes down the names of the people who feed him promising to pray for them to thank them for their kindness, but "Once out of doors again and business done / He used to plane the names out, every one, / That he had written on his ivory tables. / He'd served them all with fairy-tales and fables...." (Coghill 322). Next, the friar attempts to take advantage of a sick man for his own monetary gain. During this part of the tale, the friar's hypocrisy is made particularly clear to the reader:

> Whoever prays must fast, he must keep clean,
>
> Fatten his soul and make his body lean.
>
> We follow the Apostle; clothes and food
>
> Suffice us though they may be rough and rude,
>
> Our purity and fasting have sufficed
>
> To make our prayers acceptable to Christ. (325)

He has just been begging for food from the townsfolk, not fasting, and he has not yet truly prayed for anyone.

The sick man, Thomas, sees through the friar's act and becomes angry. He tells the friar that he does have something he can have but he must promise to share his gains with the other friars, twelve in all. The friar agrees straightaway expecting a large sum of money. Thomas tells the friar that he has hidden the money with him in the bed, and when the friar reaches under him to get it the man farts in his hand. "When the sick man could feel him here and there / Groping about his fundament with care, / Into that friar's hand he blew a fart" (332). The friar has been characterized in such a way that the reader feels this action is warranted. Later on in

the tale, the friar attempts to get revenge and merely makes himself look the fool by publicizing the incident:

> In delightfully, and convincingly, extending the story beyond the private joke, Chaucer amplifies its satiric impact. The joke on the friar becomes progressively more social as each of his listeners hears and responds to the story of the 'odious meschief' perpetrated by 'this false blasphemour'. (Grudin 174)

Chaucer has masterfully created a corrupt friar and a corrupt summoner that in their rivalry convey point for point the corruption and misuse of their duties and roles as church officials.

"The Pardoner's Tale," while still a critique of a church official, takes on a different structure. The Pardoner himself is the character being satirized, not any of the characters within his narrative. In his prologue, he tells his fellow riders on the pilgrimage how and why he takes money from unsuspecting commoners:

> But let me briefly make my purpose plain;
> I preach for nothing but for greed of gain
> And use the same old text, as bold as brass,
> *Radix malorum est cupiditas*.
> And thus I preach against the very vice
> I make my living out of—avarice. (Coghill 259)

He has had too much to drink and so he reveals the secrets of his trade. His act is much the same as the friar's in "The Summoner's Tale" as he also uses the people's emotions against

them, works them into a fervor, and then takes their money in return for fake relics or the pardoning of all their sins.

The Pardoner, unlike the Friar and the Summoner, does not seem to feel defensive about his corruption. To some degree the Friar and Summoner attempt to deny that they are greedy and taking advantage of their congregations. They both become angry with each other for their insulting stories and do not want to admit that there is any truth to the tales. The Pardoner, however, comes off as egotistical and almost proud of the tricks that he manages to play on the unsuspecting commoners. Power has completely corrupted him and he revels in it. For this reason he is the worst of the three, and is satirized the most harshly. It is one thing to have a fellow pilgrim insult one's position in the church, but quite another to bring disgust upon oneself by getting caught up in avarice and power. What seems to be a lapse in consciousness by the Pardoner in revealing his methods, may in fact be a further critique of church authorities who boast about their greed. The Pardoner thinks that he is superior to the other pilgrims because of the power his church position gives him. He does not believe that he needs to fear punishment, and he is probably correct. To Chaucer it seems, the only thing possibly worse than a corrupt church official is a corrupt church official that does not even try to pretend that what he is doing is corrupt.

"The Pardoner's Tale," is about three rioters who make a drunken boast that they are not afraid of Death and vow to find and kill him. "'Here, chaps! The three of us together now, / Hold up your hands, like me, and we'll be brothers / In this affair, and each defend the others, / And we will kill this traitor Death, I say!'" (267). They go off to find Death and instead find a poor, elderly man. They accuse him of being Death's spy and he tells them that they will find

Death at the top of the next hill. When they arrive, they find a pile of gold, "No longer was it Death those fellows sought, / For they were all so thrilled to see the sight, / The florins were so beautiful and bright, / That down they sat beside the precious pile" (269). The boys then began to plot against each other. One agrees to run to town to get food and drink while the other two remain behind. The two with the gold decide to kill the third boy when he returns. Meanwhile, the boy in town has poisoned the wine he is bringing for the other two. When he returns, they kill him, drink from the poisoned wine, and die. In this way Death wins the battle against the three.

"The Pardoner's Tale," is a sermon about greed that serves to instill fear in his listeners that Death will come for them and they will not have repented of all of their sins. Once the Pardoner has given his sermon he asks his audience for money in return for forgiveness. "Dearly beloved, God forgive your sin / And keep you from the vice of avarice! / My holy pardon frees you all of this, / Provided that you make the right approaches, / That is with sterling, rings, or silver brooches" (272). This time, however, he forgets that his audience is the very group of pilgrims that he has already told his trade secret to, "'For though I am a wholly vicious man / Don't think I can't tell moral tales. I can! / Here's one I often preach when out for winning; / Now please be quiet. Here is the beginning'" (260). Chaucer uses one less level of the narrative in this instance for his critique. He is using the Pardoner on the pilgrimage and not a persona in his character's story to satirize the office of pardoner:

> No logic-chopping can save face for the two most shameful characters in *The Canterbury Tales*, the Summoner and the Pardoner, and Chaucer

> suggests no ideal type for them. Whatever Christian values were connected originally with their jobs apparently no longer seemed viable to Chaucer—or to anybody else we still read. (Ames 55)

"The Pardoner's Tale," along with "The Friar's Tale" and "The Summoner's Tale." are a clear outpouring of Chaucer's frustration at an institution that was no longer functioning in the best interest of the people.

Chaucer was able to create this strong satire and critique of certain aspects of the Church because he was himself religious and well-known at court. He was not merely an outsider looking in and passing judgment on others' beliefs, but a believer seeking to effect change in an institution that was as large a part of his life as the royalty and the court. "The liturgy is in his pages because it was part of the way of life" (Boyd 1). Chaucer was writing from his personal experience observing the despicable corruption of the one institution that should have been above even the possibility of such corruption. But Chaucer had not entirely despaired of the Church. He clearly shows how he believed church authorities and religious believers should act in some of his other tales, which abound in religious references. Chaucer's personal religious experience would have been specific to England during his lifetime, and therefore his references would reflect this.

The specific liturgies of certain regions under the Roman Church differed during Chaucer's lifetime, but "England had its own derived rites. The most important one in Chaucer's time was the Use of Salisbury, better known as the Use of Sarum" (3). This particular set of liturgical traditions is the most valuable in analyzing his religious references, as

they are the rituals he would have been most familiar with. "In a study of Chaucer's saints (1952)... Gordan Hall Gerould shows that most of those mentioned in the poet's works... appear on the calendar of the famous missal of Nicholas Lytlington, Abbot of Westminster 1362-86" (22). Westminster Abbey is the church of the kings of England so Chaucer as a frequent visitor to court would have been more than familiar with the customs of the abbey. The pervasive nature of religion in fourteenth-century England accounts for the numerous and various religious references in *The Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer uses the term Host to refer to Harry Bailey, the man who was leading the pilgrimage, because of the term's religious connotations. The Host in Catholicism is the Body of Christ, and therefore Christ is symbolically leading the pilgrimage to Canterbury:

> the character in the *Canterbury Tales*, that we know as *the Host*, is the covert personification of this Eucharistic Host, as he leads the pilgrims who—as in the procession described above—are dignitaries, religious, and guild members. (Cullen 24)

Chaucer is giving religious authority to his claims by using the symbol of the Eucharist as the basis and backbone of his entire narrative. The implication being that Christ would have been just as if not more disgusted by the corruption in the Church as Chaucer was. To readers in the modern world, this uniquely Christian reference might pass by without a second thought, but to the people of Chaucer's day, the term Host would have brought with it a myriad of images and meanings having to do with both Catholicism and the ritual of mass. "The multiple connotations of host, the ambiguity the word contains, enriches the poem's possibilities" (24).

Chaucer was creating a satire of a powerful institution and therefore none of his points are overtly outlined in the narrative, but rather, they are implicitly embedded in the tales of his characters.

"The Man of Law's Tale," is preceded by an introduction where the Host calls on the Man of Law to tell his story, the man agrees, and begins to speak. He first bemoans that he has nothing left to say because Chaucer has already written it all:

> I can't recall a pithy tale just now;
>
> But Chaucer, clumsy as he is at times
>
> In metre and the cunning use of rhymes,
>
> Has told them in such English, I suppose,
>
> As he commands; for everybody knows
>
> That if he has not told them, my dear brother,
>
> In one book, he has told them in another.
>
> He has told more of lovers up and down
>
> Then even Ovid honoured with renown
>
> In his Epistles, which are very old.
>
> Why tell them all again since they've been told? (Coghill 138)

This is yet another device employed by Chaucer in his tales. He creates a persona Chaucer who is on the pilgrimage to Canterbury, separate from himself the poet, Chaucer. With this device, he simultaneously brings himself closer to the subject matter by becoming a character in his own narrative while retaining the right to claim that the Chaucer in the work is a character and

not himself.

The narration of “The Man of Law's Tale,” is composed of three distinct parts. In the first part a group of Syrian merchants travels to Rome where they chance to meet the Emperor's daughter, Constance. When they returned to Syria and told the Sultan of Constance's beauty he became determined to marry her. “Her features filled his fancy and invention / Till all the passion of his heart was cast / On loving her as long as life should last” (142). He and all of his court are baptized as Christians so that differences in religion will not keep him from marrying his beloved. Constance, however, is not as pleased with the match. She is distressed at having to leave her home, her family, and her friends, but she bows to her father's wishes and the will of God, and goes with the Sultan. In the last stanzas of Part One, the reader learns of the Sultan's mother. Up until now she has refused to be baptized, but she decides at the end to pretend to convert in order to be allowed at the wedding, where she is plotting harm to Constance and her wedding party.

In Part Two of the tale, the mother and her group of soldiers kills all of the Christians at the wedding, and any Syrians who stand to protect them. She then sends Constance out to sea in a rudderless boat to float where she will. Throughout the tale, Constance suffers greatly, but never loses faith in her God. When she is set out on the ship to starve or drown, she prays:

> She crossed herself and with a piteous falter
>
> Of voice, addressed the cross of Christ and said:
>
> 'Holiest cross, O rich and shining altar
>
> Bright with the blood of pity the Lamb bled

To wash the world's iniquity, O shed

Protection from the Fiend upon me! Keep

My soul the day I drown upon the deep!

Victorious Tree, protection of the true,

Thou that wert only worthy to up-rear

The King of Heaven in His wounds all new,

That whitest Lamb, hurt with the cruel spear,

O blessed cross, that puts the fiend in fear

Of man or woman that is signed with thee,

Help me amend my life, and succour me!' (150)

In this prayer, the reason behind the name chosen by Chaucer for this character becomes clear. Constance is constant in her devotion to God and even now when she thinks that she will die, her faith does not falter. A believer according to Chaucer would not fear death, and would remain faithful even in the face of extreme hardship and suffering.

For three years Constance is said to have been tossed about on the sea in her boat. Chaucer makes it clear that she only survived by the grace of God, and as God saved Daniel from the lion's den, so he saved Constance from the murderous wrath of the Sultan's mother. She lands in Northumberland and is taken in by the Constable and his wife, Hermengild. Constance manages to convert the wife to Christianity, “And Constance made so long a sojourn there, / Giving herself to weeping and to prayer, / That Jesus brought conversion, of His grace, / To Hermengild the lady of the place” (152). Later on the husband with the influence of both

Constance and his wife converts as well. Chaucer clearly believes in the power of Catholicism to inspire faith in others.

The most significant aspect of the second part of the tale, is that Constance is married to the King and becomes Queen. Unfortunately, yet again an evil mother is plotting against Constance. On her wedding night, Constance became pregnant and months later, while her husband was away, she gave birth to a boy. The mother of the King intercepted the letter sent by Constance to inform the King of the birth of their son, and told him that his wife had given birth to a fiend from Hell. The King replies that the child should be kept alive until he can see it for himself, but the mother again intercepts the letter and tells Constance that the King desires her and her child to be set out to sea.

In Part Three of the narrative, the King returns and discovers what his mother has done. He puts his mother to death and grieves for Constance, who drifts at sea for five long years. Finally, she meets another ship, which just happens to have her father, the Emperor of Rome, at the helm. He does not recognize Constance at first but takes care of her. When they return to Rome, the King is there seeking penance from the Pope. He sees his son and immediately recognizes both him and Constance. After this, Constance reveals herself to the Emperor and everything is at last resolved. It is clear that the moral of the tale is if one trusts in God above all else He will rescue and protect you.

Chaucer makes many religious references throughout this story. When in the course of her wanderings Constance is almost raped by a thief, she is somehow able to force him out of her boat. She is compared to Judith, a biblical figure who against all odds but with the help of

God was able to defeat her mighty enemy, Holofernes:

> Judith was left alone in the tent with Holofernes, who lay prostrate on his bed, for he was sodden with wine. She had ordered her maid to stand outside...When all had departed, and no one, small or great, was left in the bedroom, Judith stood by Holofernes' bed and...Then with all her might she struck him twice in the neck and cut off his head. (Senior 565-566)

Constance is compared to this extraordinary Hebrew woman who is willing to risk her life to save her people from the murderous wrath of Holofernes. It is clear that the reader is meant to see Constance as a model Catholic; one that they could learn and gain inspiration from.

Constance is similarly compared to David, another biblical figure who also defeats a great enemy against overwhelming odds:

> A champion named Goliath of Gath came out from the Philistine camp; he was six and a half feet tall...The Philistine then moved to meet David at close quarters, while David ran quickly toward the battle line in the direction of the Philistine. David put his hand into the bag and took out a stone, hurled it with the sling, and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone embedded itself in his brow, and he fell prostrate on the ground. [Thus David overcame the Philistine with sling and stone; he struck the Philistine mortally, and did it without a sword.] Then

> David ran and stood over him; with the Philistine's own sword [which he drew from its sheath] he dispatched him and cut off his head. (323-325)

Constance is compared to two extraordinary heroes in the course of her story, and it is clear from this that Chaucer holds her character in high esteem. Judith and David are both strong and fearless figures who triumph over evil, hardship, and suffering to win victories. As Constance in Chaucer's narrative, Judith and David in the Bible win their battles with the help of God. Constance shows an extraordinary trust in God and it is made clear throughout the narrative that her many narrow escapes are the work of God miraculously intervening in her life. The religious nature of this tale is a testament to Chaucer's own faith. "The Man of Law's Tale" is only the beginning, and there are many other tales that contain similar religious tones and themes.

"The Parson's Tale," is a narrative in which Chaucer's personal religious views become even clearer to the reader. The only religious character in the work that is not satirized or critiqued in any way is the Parson. "In the person of the good Parson, Chaucer has given us a standard by which to judge all the rest" (Ames 32). It is important to note that he is the lowest in the church hierarchy of the pilgrims traveling to Canterbury. Chaucer is implying that the higher up in the hierarchy the church official, the more likely he is to be corrupt:

> Ten of the twenty-nine Canterbury pilgrims are either members of the clergy or minor functionaries in the Church, and another cleric briefly joins the party en route. Only four of these, the Parson, the Clerk, the

> Nun's Priest, and the Second Nun, pass without criticism, the last two not being described at all in the General Prologue. Further, the priests, monks, friars, and clerks who figure in the tales told by the pilgrims are a notoriously sinful group; indeed, in these stories there are more good pagans than good clerics. And yet, to judge from these charcters [sic], Chaucer was neither an atheist nor a heretic, but a Catholic who desired the reform of the Church in an orthodox way. (30)

Chaucer understood the effects of power on human nature from both his observations of the church and the people of the court and was able to use this understanding to create realistic personages for his pilgrimage narrative.

"The Parson's Tale" is a sermon in prose about penitence, its meaning, its actions, and its various types. The sermon in its discussion of sin also describes the cardinal sins and the correct means for confessing them:

> On the literal plane of meaning it seems to be offered as an appropriate ending to a pilgrimage before the Saint's shrine is reached. On the allegorical plane, referred to by the Parson when first called upon for a story, it may be deemed a preparation for a last confession to be made on 'that perfect, glorious pilgrimage' that is called the celestial, to the Heavenly Jerusalem. (Coghill 503)

Chaucer displays a vast knowledge of Catholic doctrine through this sermon and clearly demonstrates his respect for the church officials who do not abuse their positions. It seems that

he agreed with the Parson, that sin is much worse if it is committed by one of religion (Ames 30). "In his sermon-tale, the Parson calls simony, the selling of Church office, the greatest sin because it places in the Church thieves who steal souls from Jesus Christ; simony sells the souls of sheep, he says, to the wolf that strangles them" (30). It is clear from his satire that Chaucer believed the higher up in the hierarchy the church official, the worse it was if they gave in to greed and became corrupt, but also that the lower church officials could be extremely pious and kind people.

The final portion of *The Canterbury Tales* is "Chaucer's Prayer" or "Chaucer's Retraction". In this last word to the reader Chaucer seems to be asking forgiveness for the offensive nature of some of his works, while simultaneously thanking God for his ability to write whichever tales the reader finds worthy of praise. To some critics this retraction poses a major problem to their understanding of the work. However, this final say of Chaucer simply reiterates the point he has continuously made throughout the poem. Chaucer is again attempting to separate himself, as a poet, from the critique obvious in his work, while at the same time showing the reader his devout nature.

It is clear from the Retraction that Chaucer felt the need to seek forgiveness for the crude humor and harsh subject matter of his tales, if his many attempts to separate himself from his critique through literary devices failed. As a diplomat, Chaucer must have been in the habit of using discretion in his conversations and correspondences. "He chooses to hide behind words. Or, rather, he allows his personality to be dissolved within them" (Ackroyd 38-39). It is unlikely that he would have been able to separate this habit, acquired from years of important and covert diplomatic missions, from his writing. By the time he was writing *The Canterbury*

Tales, it was late in his career and it would have been even more difficult for him to set aside his discreet manner at this point in his life than earlier, especially since the subject matter in his tales was controversial in many ways.

The main frustration that some readers have is that the "Retraction" does not seem to provide the closure that they wish for at the end of the narrative. Chaucer is apparently not attempting to shirk his responsibilities as a writer in not providing a satisfying ending, but rather is trying to create a dialogue with his work that will transcend his work and perhaps effect change in his society:

> The [Retraction] is at once a bow to conventional expectation and an escape from it. In thus asking the audience to complete the text, Chaucer again evades structural closure in favor of a continuing process that involves listener as well as speaker, reader as well as writer. (Grudin 180)

Also it is important for the reader to remember that the idea of narrative closure as a necessity in literature is a relatively modern idea that is both "culturally and historically contingent" (166). It is "a response to 'a modern intellectual climate characterized by decenteredness, isolation and absence of meaning..."' (166). Chaucer and his contemporary audience would not have been disturbed by an open ended conclusion. He may have in fact been using this lack of closure to make a point about the human experience:

> Conventional closure implies that discourse can settle some vivid issues of human experience—the result dreamed of in philosophy and politics

> generally. By refusing to supply such a closure, Chaucer focuses our interest instead on the processes of communication, on the dynamics of discourse as social interaction itself. (164)

Chaucer is artfully imitating reality by refusing to provide artificial closure to his narrative (168). In real human experience, closure is not a guarantee and Chaucer is always true to human nature and reality in his works. Also, by leaving the ending ambiguous in this way he is leaving his work open to discussion and interpretation that would in all likelihood further his goal of effecting change in the institution of the church.

Geoffrey Chaucer died in 1400 leaving *The Canterbury Tales* unfinished. While incomplete in narrative, the work is in fact complete in theme and scope:

> He (Chaucer) must have been a man of a most wonderful comprehensive nature because, as it has been truly observed of him, he has taken into the compass of his *Canterbury Tales* the various manners and humours (as we now call them) of the whole English nation, in his age. (Ames vii)

Chaucer was in the midst of creating a masterpiece of literature and his untimely death does not change the impact of his work. While "it is clear from the whole body of his poetry that Chaucer's Catholicism was an integral part of his outlook, an operative force in his thinking about his fellowman, the world, and the universe" (xi), it is also clear that he was intentionally creating a scathing critique of the Catholic Church at a time when it was more than necessary to

do so. “Chaucer...wished to change the institution by changing the people in it” (61). Because of his position at court and his favor with the royal family, he was able to use his position in order to effect change in the institutions around him. In fourteenth-century England, a poet-diplomat was the perfect combination of insider and objective observer to form a narrative critique of an all powerful institution.

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