

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

Prologue to the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer: a Critique of Religious Officials

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.3.216](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.3.216)



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Article info

Article Received: 02/07/2025
Article Accepted: 03/08/2025
Published online: 08/08/2025

Abstract

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Prologue to The Canterbury Tales* stands as a monumental work of English literature, not only for its groundbreaking use of the vernacular and its vivid characterizations but also for its sharp and often biting critique of religious officials during the 14th century. The study on Chaucer's Prologue to the Canterbury Tales as a critique of Catholicism delves into Geoffrey Chaucer's renowned literary work, exploring its subtle and multifaceted commentary on the religious and moral landscape of medieval England. While not a wholesale condemnation of faith itself, Chaucer meticulously exposes the hypocrisy, corruption, and worldliness that had permeated various levels of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This article will delve into how Chaucer, through the pilgrims' tales and his masterful use of satire, irony, and realistic portrayal, effectively critiques the religious officials of his time, the Church Officials in particular. Chaucer's depiction of these characters serves as a reminder that faith and piety can be tested when religious leaders and institutions fall short of the moral standards they preach.

Keywords: monumental, meticulously, critique, condemnation, ecclesiastical, hierarchy.

Introduction

The late medieval period witnessed significant social and political upheaval, and the Church, a powerful and ubiquitous institution, was not immune to the pervasive issues of the day. Simony (the buying or selling of ecclesiastical privileges), pluralism (holding

multiple church offices), absenteeism, and a general decline in moral standards among the clergy were widespread problems. Chaucer, as a keen observer of society, captures these systemic flaws with remarkable precision. Chaucer's "Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" provides a critical lens through which he

examines the flaws, hypocrisies, and moral ambiguities within the Catholic Church of his time. While it's essential to recognize that Chaucer does not critique the entire Church but rather specific individuals within it.

Character Studies: Embodying Ecclesiastical Vice:

Chaucer's genius lies in his ability to embody abstract vices within concrete, memorable characters. Several religious figures among the Canterbury pilgrims serve as prime examples of the Church's shortcomings:

- **The Prioress (Madame Eglantyne):** While seemingly devout and refined, the Prioress's piety is superficial and driven by worldly concerns. Her emphasis on courtly manners, her "fetisly" (elegantly) sung divine service and her excessive sentimentality over mice rather than human suffering highlight a misplaced focus. Her brooch, inscribed "*Amor vincit omnia*" (Love conquers all), ironically points to courtly love rather than divine love, suggesting a prioritization of earthly affections over spiritual devotion. She represents the monastic orders that had become more concerned with social status and material comforts than with their vows of poverty and asceticism.
- **The Monk:** Far from a secluded scholar or ascetic, the Monk is a robust, pleasure-loving individual who delights in hunting and fine food. His disregard for monastic rules – "*He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen / That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men*" (He cared not a bit for that text that says hunters are not holy men) – is openly acknowledged. His rich attire, jingling bridle, and well-fed appearance are a direct contradiction to the austerity expected of his profession. Chaucer uses the Monk to critique the luxury and worldliness that had infiltrated

monastic life, often at the expense of spiritual duties.

- **The Friar (Hubert):** Perhaps the most scathing critique is reserved for the Friar. A "*lymytour*" (a friar licensed to beg within a specific district), Hubert is a master of manipulation and greed. He shuns the poor and sick, preferring the company of wealthy merchants and attractive women. His "*curteisye*" is a veneer for his avarice, as he readily grants absolution for a fee, exploiting people's desire for spiritual solace. His knowledge of taverns and barmaids, his musical talents, and his seemingly humble garb that conceals a knife for "cutting off the purse" all underscore his profound hypocrisy. The Friar embodies the rampant venality within the mendicant orders, who were originally established to live in poverty and serve the poor but often became instruments of corruption.
- **The Summoner:** As an officer who calls people to ecclesiastical court for spiritual offenses, the Summoner should be a figure of moral authority. Instead, he is physically repulsive with his carbuncles and scabby brows, a reflection of his inner corruption. He is easily bribed with wine and speaks Latin only when drunk, making a mockery of the Church's language. His willingness to allow men to keep concubines for a bribe and his threats of excommunication further expose his abuse of power and his debasement of religious justice.
- **The Pardoner:** The Pardoner is arguably the most morally bankrupt of the religious figures. He openly admits to his deceptive practices, selling fake relics (pig bones for saint's bones) and papal indulgences for personal gain. His effeminate appearance and his

chilling performance of sermons designed to extract money from the devout underscore his utter lack of spiritual conviction. He preaches against avarice while being the embodiment of it, highlighting the ultimate hypocrisy of those who exploited faith for material profit. His tale, ironically, is a powerful moral lesson against greed, making his own actions even more reprehensible.

The Pervasive Critique through Narrative and Irony:

Chaucer's critique is not limited to individual character portrayals. He employs various narrative techniques to underscore his message:

- **Satire and Irony:** The descriptions of the religious characters are replete with verbal irony and gentle, yet pointed, satire. For instance, the Prioress's impeccable table manners are juxtaposed with her exaggerated compassion, making her piety seem performative. The Monk's self-justification for his un-monastic life is presented with a subtle chuckle, allowing the reader to recognize the absurdity. The Pardoner's frank confession of his deceit is presented with a chilling matter-of-factness, leaving the reader to contemplate the depths of his depravity.
- **Juxtaposition with the Virtuous:** To highlight the corruption of some, Chaucer skillfully introduces figures who represent genuine religious devotion. The **Parson** stands in stark contrast to the other ecclesiastical characters. He is a truly devout and humble man who practices what he preaches, lives in poverty, and genuinely cares for his parishioners. He criticizes the corrupt clergy directly, stating, "If gold ruste, what shal iren

do?" (If gold rusts, what shall iron do?), implying that if the clergy, who are meant to be the purest, are corrupt, what hope is there for the common people? The **Plowman**, the Parson's brother, also embodies Christian virtues of hard work, charity, and genuine faith. By placing these virtuous figures alongside the corrupt ones, Chaucer provides a moral compass and emphasizes the deviation from true Christian ideals.

- **The Tales Themselves:** While the General Prologue sets the stage, some of the tales further contribute to the critique. The **Summoner's Tale** directly attacks the mendicant friars, portraying them as greedy and intrusive. The **Pardoner's Tale**, despite being told by a morally bankrupt individual, offers a powerful condemnation of avarice, ironically highlighting the very vice the Pardoner embodies. In this way the Tales themselves critique the religious officials and are set as an eye opener for the common folk of the fourteenth century English society.

Contextualizing Chaucer's Critique:

It is crucial to understand that Chaucer's critique was not an attack on Christianity itself or on the concept of spiritual authority. Instead, it was a critique of the *abuses* of power and privilege within the institutional Church. Many contemporaries, including reformers like John Wycliffe (whose ideas predated Chaucer's work and influenced the Lollard movement), also voiced concerns about the Church's worldliness. Chaucer's observations resonate with a broader sentiment of dissatisfaction with ecclesiastical corruption during his time. His aim was not to dismantle the Church but to expose its failings and implicitly call for a return to more genuine spiritual values.

Conclusion

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* offers a profound and enduring critique of religious officials in 14th-century England. Through his unforgettable characters like the Prioress, the Monk, the Friar, the Summoner, and the Pardoner, Chaucer masterfully exposes the pervasive hypocrisy, greed, and moral decay that had infiltrated various levels of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. By contrasting these figures with the genuinely devout Parson, Chaucer not only highlights the extent of the corruption but also implicitly champions true Christian virtue. His use of satire, irony, and realistic portrayal makes his critique both humorous and incisive; solidifying *The Canterbury Tales* as a timeless work that continues to offer valuable insights into human nature and institutional failings, particularly within the realm of religion.

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