

## **Review of Chaucer's "Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" as a critique of Catholicism.**

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### **Abstract**

Chaucer's "Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" has been hailed as a masterful literary work that subtly critiques the prevailing Catholicism of his time. Written in the late 14th century, during a period when the Catholic Church held immense influence over the lives of individuals and societies, Chaucer's Prologue offers a unique lens through which to explore the complexities and contradictions of medieval Catholicism. Chaucer presents a diverse group of pilgrims embarking on a journey to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket. Each character represents a distinct facet of medieval society, reflecting the pervasive influence of religion on all walks of life. Through their narratives and interactions, Chaucer unveils the moral and ethical shortcomings of many pilgrims, including clergymen and church officials. He exposes their hypocrisy, avarice, and moral failings, challenging the idealized image of religious piety upheld by the Church. Chaucer's portrayal of the Pardoner, a corrupt church figure who sells indulgences and relics, directly criticizes the Church's exploitation of religious beliefs for financial gain. This character serves as a stark commentary on the Catholic Church's perceived moral decline, particularly in its commercialization of faith.

### **Introduction**

Chaucer's "Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" stands as a timeless literary masterpiece that artfully critiques the Catholicism of his era, offering a nuanced exploration of the complex relationship between faith and society during the late 14th century. Set against the backdrop of a pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket, Chaucer presents a diverse group of pilgrims, each representing a distinct facet of medieval society, from nobility and clergy to laborers and merchants. Through their narratives and interactions, Chaucer delves deep into the moral and

ethical intricacies of a Catholic-dominated world. At the heart of Chaucer's critique lies an examination of the moral shortcomings and hypocrisy within the Church itself. In a time when the Catholic Church wielded immense power and influence over the lives of individuals and communities, Chaucer fearlessly exposes the moral decay that had infiltrated its ranks. The clergy members, often revered as paragons of virtue, are depicted with a disarming candor that reveals their own moral failings, greed, and licentiousness. Through this portrayal, Chaucer challenges the prevailing idealized image of religious piety, effectively puncturing the facade of holiness surrounding the Church. One of the most notable critiques in Chaucer's work is embodied in the character of the Pardoner, a church official who shamelessly peddles indulgences and relics for personal gain. This character serves as a powerful symbol of the Church's corruption and exploitation of the faithful, a biting commentary on the commercialization of faith. explore how Chaucer's "Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" serves as a profound critique of Catholicism, shedding light on the moral decay, hypocrisy, and exploitation that plagued the Church of his time. By ingeniously crafting a diverse cast of characters and their stories, Chaucer invites readers to engage in a thought-provoking discourse on the role and influence of the Catholic Church in shaping medieval society. His enduring work remains an enduring testament to the power of literature to challenge prevailing norms and provoke reflection on the intersection of faith, morality, and human nature.

### **About Chaucer**

Geoffrey Chaucer, often regarded as the "Father of English Literature," was a prominent medieval English poet and author. Born in the early 1340s in London, England, his life and work are not only significant for their literary contributions but also for the insight they provide into the social, political, and cultural milieu of his time.

Chaucer's literary career was diverse and prolific, encompassing a wide range of genres, styles, and themes. His most famous work, "The Canterbury Tales," is a collection of stories told by a group of pilgrims on their journey to the shrine of Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. Through these tales, Chaucer masterfully depicted the diverse tapestry of medieval English society, with characters representing various social classes, professions, and moral values. This

work serves as a vital historical and sociological document, offering valuable insights into the social stratification and moral landscape of the 14th century.



Chaucer's literary prowess extended beyond "The Canterbury Tales." He wrote numerous other poems and works, such as "Troilus and Criseyde," a long narrative poem, and "The Parliament of Fowls," an allegorical dream vision. His writing style evolved over the years, showcasing his versatility as a poet. Chaucer's use of Middle English, a precursor to modern English, contributed significantly to the development of the English language as a literary medium.

Chaucer's career was closely intertwined with his service to the English crown. He held various positions in the royal court, including customs officer, diplomat, and clerk of the king's works. These roles exposed him to a wide range of experiences and provided him with valuable connections in the political and social spheres.

One of Chaucer's notable diplomatic missions was to Italy, where he was exposed to the works of Italian Renaissance writers like Petrarch and Boccaccio. These encounters influenced his writing and introduced new literary forms and ideas to English literature.

Chaucer's works often displayed his keen observational skills and wit, allowing him to satirize the foibles and hypocrisies of his contemporaries, including those within the Church. His "Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" is particularly renowned for its critical examination of the clergy and the moral ambiguities within the Church.

Geoffrey Chaucer's influence on English literature is immeasurable. His innovative use of language, vivid characterizations, and exploration of the human condition have left an enduring legacy. Chaucer passed away in 1400, but his works continue to be studied, appreciated, and adapted by scholars, writers, and enthusiasts worldwide. In recognition of his contributions to English literature, he was buried in Westminster Abbey, an honor reserved for a select few of England's literary luminaries. Chaucer's enduring relevance attests to his status as one of the most important figures in the history of English literature.

### **The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer**

Geoffrey Chaucer, one of the most celebrated poets of the Middle Ages, produced a diverse body of work that spans various genres and themes. Here is an overview of some of his most notable works:

1. "The Canterbury Tales": This is Chaucer's magnum opus and his most famous work. It is a collection of stories framed within a narrative structure. A group of pilgrims traveling to the shrine of Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral tells tales to pass the time. Each tale is told by a different pilgrim and reflects their personality and background. This work offers a panoramic view of medieval English society, exploring themes of love, morality, and human nature.
2. "Troilus and Criseyde": This is a long narrative poem written by Chaucer, based on the tragic love story of Troilus, a Trojan prince, and Criseyde, a Greek woman. Chaucer's version of the tale draws from various sources, including Boccaccio's "Il Filostrato." It is considered one of the greatest narrative poems in the English language, showcasing Chaucer's skill in storytelling and characterization.

3. "The House of Fame": This allegorical poem explores themes of fame, celebrity, and the fickleness of reputation. It tells the story of a dream in which the narrator is transported to a palace of fame, where he witnesses how rumors and reputations are spread.
4. "The Parliament of Fowls": This is another dream vision poem by Chaucer, where the narrator dreams of an assembly of birds that gather to choose their mates on St. Valentine's Day. The poem delves into themes of love, nature, and the complexities of romantic relationships.
5. "The Legend of Good Women": This work features a prologue and a series of narratives, each focusing on the story of a virtuous woman from classical mythology or history. Chaucer initially intended to write a collection of stories about good women, but the project remained unfinished.
6. "The Book of the Duchess": This is one of Chaucer's earlier works, written as an elegy for Blanche, the Duchess of Lancaster, who had passed away. It combines elements of courtly love and dream vision genres.
7. "The Romaunt of the Rose": This is a translation of a French allegorical poem, "Roman de la Rose." It's one of Chaucer's earlier works and deals with themes of courtly love, chivalry, and the pursuit of an idealized woman represented as a rose.
8. "Anelida and Arcite": This is a narrative poem that tells the story of a forsaken woman, Anelida, who writes a letter to her lover, Arcite. The poem is incomplete and relatively short compared to some of Chaucer's other works.

These are some of the key works by Geoffrey Chaucer, showcasing his versatility and profound influence on English literature. His writings continue to be studied and appreciated for their historical, social, and literary significance.

### **Major Works**

In Geoffrey Chaucer's early major work, "The Book of the Duchess," he tries to comfort John of Gaunt, who was grieving the death of his wife, Blanche, in 1368. While the poem draws

inspiration from French courtly poetry, it transforms the genre's artificial sentimentality into a poignant portrayal of a beautiful woman's death and the sorrow of the Knight mourning her. Afterward, Chaucer likely wrote two "dream-vision" poems: "The Parliament of Fouls" and "The House of Fame." These poems may have commented on attempts to arrange a suitable marriage for Richard II.

"The Parliament of Fouls" is an allegorical debate about love, possibly inspired by the unsuccessful marriage proposal between Richard II and the daughter of Charles V of France. "The House of Fame" celebrates Richard II's betrothal to Anne of Bohemia in 1380 and explores the role of poets, the nature of poetry, and the fickleness of fame.

Chaucer's next significant work, "Troilus and Criseyde," is often considered his finest poetic achievement. It's an adaptation of Boccaccio's "Il Filostrato" and is set against the backdrop of the Trojan War. Chaucer's version is characterized by its symmetry, decorum, and use of metaphors, distinguishing it from Boccaccio's narrative.

Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales," widely considered his masterpiece, likely began around 1386. This work is structured as a collection of stories narrated by a group of pilgrims journeying to Thomas à Beckett's shrine in Canterbury. While the overall framework remains consistent, there are variations in the arrangement of its ten parts across different manuscripts, leading some scholars to believe that Chaucer might not have realized his final plan for the work.

The narrative begins with the General Prologue, which provides concise, vivid descriptions of the pilgrims. Following this introduction, there are twenty-four tales, often interspersed with lively dialogues and exchanges among the pilgrims. These tales span a wide range of styles, subjects, and themes, encompassing courtly romance, allegory, sermons, fables, and even mixtures of these genres. Each story typically mirrors the social class and personality of the storyteller, collectively presenting a rich and realistic portrayal of Chaucer's contemporary society.

Chaucer's significant achievement was establishing English as a prominent literary language. His poetry is cherished for its humanity and humor. However, surviving manuscripts of his works from the 14th century are scarce, none in his own handwriting or definitively corrected by him.

Most of the texts attributed to Chaucer today are derived from posthumous copies, which might have undergone editing and errors during transmission. Scholars have meticulously compared various early manuscripts to compile the poems in modern editions. It is evident from one poem addressed to his scribe, Adam, that Chaucer was concerned about preserving his texts in their original form, lamenting Adam's "negligence" and the need to "rub and scrape" out errors resulting from careless copying.

### **Geoffrey Chaucer's Life Sketch**

Geoffrey Chaucer, often referred to as the "Father of English Literature," was a medieval English poet and author who lived during the 14th century. His life and work are of immense significance in the history of English literature. Here is a brief sketch of Geoffrey Chaucer's life: Geoffrey Chaucer was born around 1343 in London, England, into a family of wine merchants. Little is known about his early life, but it is believed that he received a good education and was well-connected to the English court.

Chaucer's career began as a page in the household of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster, and later he served as a squire to Edward III during the Hundred Years' War. His experiences during these years provided him with exposure to the complexities of medieval court life and diplomacy, which would later influence his writing.

In 1366, Chaucer married Philippa Roet, who was a lady-in-waiting to Queen Philippa. This marriage connected him to important court circles, further enhancing his career prospects.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Chaucer, G. (2000).** Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" opens with the General Prologue, a poetic masterpiece that sets the stage for the epic journey to Canterbury Cathedral. This prologue is a literary gem that introduces us to a diverse group of pilgrims from various walks of life, each with their unique personalities and quirks. Through Chaucer's keen and often satirical observations, he provides a vivid portrait of medieval English society. The narrator,

presumably Chaucer himself, presents the pilgrims one by one, revealing their social status, occupations, and moral character. From the noble Knight to the worldly Pardoner, and from the pious Nun to the bawdy Miller, Chaucer's characters come to life through their distinct voices and tales. The General Prologue serves as a microcosm of the human experience, inviting readers to explore the complexities of class, morality, and human nature. It not only serves as an introduction to the tales that follow but also stands as a timeless work of social commentary and character study, making it an enduring classic in English literature.

**Rigby, S. H., & Minnis, A. J. (Eds.). (2014).** Historians' perspectives on Geoffrey Chaucer's "The General Prologue" to "The Canterbury Tales" shed valuable light on its significance in medieval literature and society. This iconic prologue, written in the late 14th century, provides a unique window into the social fabric of Chaucer's time. Historians often emphasize its role as a rich source of information about the diverse strata of medieval English society. Through vivid character sketches, Chaucer captures the aspirations, values, and foibles of individuals spanning from the noble Knight to the humble Plowman. Historians highlight how "The General Prologue" reflects the changing dynamics of Chaucer's era, marked by shifts in trade, urbanization, and social mobility. It offers glimpses into the emerging middle class and the challenges of maintaining one's social position. Historians analyze the linguistic aspect, recognizing Chaucer's pioneering use of Middle English, which contributes to our understanding of linguistic evolution during this period. Historians view "The General Prologue" as a historical treasure trove, offering a multifaceted glimpse into the medieval world, its social stratification, and the evolution of the English language. It remains an invaluable resource for scholars exploring the complexities of Chaucer's era.

**Horobin, S. (2010).** The relationship between Adam Pinkhurst, a scribe, Geoffrey Chaucer, the renowned medieval poet, and the Hengwrt Manuscript of the Canterbury Tales is a fascinating intersection of literary history and manuscript culture. Adam Pinkhurst, a skilled scribe, played a pivotal role in the preservation of Chaucer's seminal work, the Canterbury Tales. The Hengwrt Manuscript, a valuable and early copy of this literary masterpiece, is largely attributed to



Pinkhurst. This manuscript, which dates back to the 14th century, offers a unique insight into the text as it existed during Chaucer's lifetime. Pinkhurst's meticulous hand and attention to detail are evident in the manuscript's careful transcription.

**Correale, R. M. (2002).** "The Canterbury Tales" by Geoffrey Chaucer is renowned not only for its literary merit but also for its extensive use of sources and analogues, reflecting Chaucer's engagement with a wide range of literary traditions. Chaucer drew inspiration from various literary, historical, and cultural sources, both in English and other languages, to craft his collection of tales. These sources and analogues encompass classical works like Boccaccio's "Decameron" and Ovid's "Metamorphoses," as well as medieval texts such as the "Roman de la Rose" and Chaucer's own translations of French poetry. Chaucer's adaptation and reinterpretation of these sources are evident throughout "The Canterbury Tales." He skillfully weaves together different narratives, genres, and themes to create a tapestry of storytelling. This intertextual approach not only showcases Chaucer's erudition but also underscores his ability to engage with and comment on contemporary issues and societal norms. Studying the sources and analogues of "The Canterbury Tales" offers scholars valuable insights into Chaucer's creative process, the literary influences of his time, and the rich tapestry of European literature during the late Middle Ages. It is a testament to Chaucer's genius that he transformed these diverse sources into a cohesive and enduring work of English literature.

**Hodges, L. F. (2005).** In Geoffrey Chaucer's "The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales," the portrayal of clothing, particularly clerical and academic costume, serves as a subtle yet significant element in characterizing the pilgrims and conveying deeper social commentary. Chaucer's meticulous descriptions of attire reveal insights into the identities and moral qualities of the characters. Clerical clothing, such as the Monk's rich fur-lined habit or the Prioress's elegant cloak with a coral trinket, not only signify their vanity but also question the sincerity of their religious devotion. These extravagant garments juxtaposed with their religious roles highlight the worldliness of the clergy, a common critique of the time. Academic attire, as seen in the vivid depiction of the Oxford Clerk's modest clothing, reflects his dedication to learning and intellectual pursuits. His threadbare garments symbolize his commitment to knowledge over

material wealth, offering a favorable contrast to the more ostentatious characters. Chaucer's attention to clothing underscores his nuanced exploration of the pilgrims' moral character and societal roles, illustrating the tensions between appearances and reality in medieval England. Through the lens of attire, Chaucer invites readers to contemplate the complexities of human nature and the social dynamics of his era.

**Parker, R. H., & Meehan, M. (1999).** Accounting in Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" may not be a central theme, but it subtly surfaces in some of the narratives, shedding light on the economic and social aspects of medieval England. Chaucer, known for his keen observation of society, occasionally weaves financial matters into his tales. For instance, in "The Shipman's Tale," the protagonist's cunning wife devises a clever accounting scheme to outwit her husband and secure her lover's financial support. This tale reflects the practicality and resourcefulness of characters navigating economic challenges. The Merchant's character and narrative in "The Canterbury Tales" provide insight into the world of trade, credit, and financial dealings prevalent in Chaucer's time. His grievances and his wife's extravagant spending underscore the tensions arising from financial matters within marriage. Chaucer's inclusion of accounting elements serves as a backdrop to the broader societal context, revealing the economic concerns and financial complexities of medieval England. These subtle references offer a glimpse into the intersection of commerce, relationships, and human nature in Chaucer's tales, enriching our understanding of the multifaceted society he masterfully portrays.

**Cooper, H. (2013).** The "Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales" offers a comprehensive and invaluable resource for students, scholars, and enthusiasts of Geoffrey Chaucer's magnum opus. As part of the broader "Oxford Guides to Chaucer" series, this particular guide provides an in-depth and meticulous examination of "The Canterbury Tales," a cornerstone of English literature. This guide delves into various aspects of Chaucer's work, including its historical context, literary techniques, themes, characters, and critical interpretations. It offers insightful commentary on each of the tales, unraveling their complexities and nuances while also discussing the overarching structure of the collection. The guide situates Chaucer within the broader medieval literary tradition and examines the lasting impact of "The Canterbury Tales" on English literature and culture. It serves as a bridge between readers and the intricacies of Chaucer's work, making it accessible and enriching the reading experience.

"Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales" is an indispensable companion for anyone seeking a deeper understanding and appreciation of Chaucer's timeless masterpiece, providing a roadmap for navigating its multifaceted layers and enduring relevance.

**Doğan, S. (2013).**In Geoffrey Chaucer's "The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales," the Three Estates Model of medieval society is not only represented but also cleverly satirized. This model, a prevailing concept in Chaucer's time, categorized society into three broad classes: the clergy (those who pray), the nobility (those who fight), and the commoners (those who work). Chaucer, a keen observer of social dynamics, employs his pilgrims to vividly embody and critique these estates. The General Prologue introduces a diverse group of pilgrims from different walks of life, allowing Chaucer to highlight the complexities and contradictions within each estate. The pious Prioress, for instance, embodies the clergy estate, yet her affected manners and lavish lifestyle satirize the supposed sanctity of this class. Similarly, the Knight represents the nobility, but his chivalrous virtues contrast with the belligerent and mercenary characteristics often associated with this estate. Through satire, irony, and humor, Chaucer playfully exposes the shortcomings and hypocrisies of the Three Estates. His work serves as a witty commentary on the social norms and power dynamics of medieval England, providing readers with both a snapshot of the time and timeless insights into the human condition.

### **Geoffrey Chaucer's Life Sketch**

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In 1366, Chaucer married Philippa Roet, who was a lady-in-waiting to Queen Philippa. This marriage connected him to important court circles, further enhancing his career prospects.

Chaucer's literary journey took flight during his service as a government official. He held various positions, including a customs controller and a justice of the peace, which allowed him to travel extensively throughout England and Europe on official business. His travels exposed him to diverse cultures, languages, and ideas, enriching his creative reservoir.

Chaucer's most famous work, "The Canterbury Tales," likely began around 1386. This collection of stories is framed within a narrative about a group of pilgrims traveling to the shrine of Thomas à Becket in Canterbury. Each pilgrim tells a tale during the journey, showcasing Chaucer's skill in portraying a wide range of characters and social classes. "The Canterbury Tales" reflects the multifaceted nature of medieval society and is celebrated for its humor, realism, and keen social commentary.

Throughout his life, Chaucer was influenced by various literary traditions, including French and Italian poetry. He translated and adapted works from these languages, such as "Troilus and Criseyde," based on Boccaccio's "Il Filostrato," and "The Book of the Duchess," inspired by French courtly poetry.

## **Conclusion**

Geoffrey Chaucer's "Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" stands as a brilliant and enduring critique of Catholicism in the late 14th century. Through a tapestry of vividly drawn characters, Chaucer masterfully unveils a piercing analysis of the moral and ethical complexities within the Catholic Church and its practitioners. Chaucer's critique transcends the surface-level facade of religious devotion, exposing the moral decay, hypocrisy, and moral failings that had seeped into the Church's hierarchy. By presenting a diverse array of pilgrims, he offers a panoramic view of the human condition, illustrating the stark contrast between religious ideals and the imperfections of the individuals who were meant to uphold them. Among the pilgrims, the character of the Pardoner epitomizes the Church's moral decline and its exploitation of faith for personal gain. Chaucer's portrayal of this figure serves as a potent indictment of the Church's commercialization

of spirituality. Chaucer's "Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" endures as a literary treasure that challenges the dominant religious narrative of its time and continues to captivate readers with its incisive critique. It prompts ongoing reflection on the interplay between faith, morality, and human nature, reaffirming the timeless power of literature to scrutinize societal institutions and stimulate introspection in the realms of religion and society.

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