
Belonging to a Class in the Canterbury Tales

During the Middle Ages in England, a tripartite society existed, consisting of three estates: the nobility, the clergy, and the workmen. This tripartite system is often referred to as “those who fight, those who pray, and those who work” because of the duties of each section that provide the kingdom’s protection and rule, the sanctity of the church to save souls, and the food and material for all. A very small percentage of people belonged to the aristocracy, a larger group made up the clergy, and an enormous population consisted of the workmen before the Black Plague. The inequality-based form of this society was accepted because of its attempt to reflect the Heavenly hierarchy of the Heavenly hosts. As a result of the Black Plague, the population of the kingdom would be reduced by a minimum of a third, setting off the turmoil of the social unrest. *The Canterbury Tales* allows readers to see that Chaucer is aware of the social unrest, and though he acknowledges the honest lives of some peasants and believes much of the church was corrupt, he professes faith in the hierarchy due to his loyalty to the aristocracy.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer reflects the general awareness of the tension between the social hierarchy through his use of a short story cycle piece composed of both fabliaux and romance. He highlights the fact that there is now more inherited money being passed down, because the entire population has been reduced so drastically from the Black Plague, which is creating more social ascension. This new social mobility is not only creating a middle class, for the first time, but also providing the lower class with a reason to ask for more pay due to their heavier workload. To combat this attempt at the peasants earning better wages, the Ordinance of Labourers, the Statute of Labourers, and high taxation have been implemented. Such measures show the fear the nobility has of social change to the hierarchy; one end result was the peasant revolt of 1381.

Within the prologue of the tales, Chaucer uses subtle word choices as well as implicit action in the plot to symbolize the lower class getting out of order when it comes to the hierarchy. Though the narrator is supposed to be different from the author himself, readers are able to see that many of the characters are observed and written in manners which indicated Chaucer’s actual opinions. In “The General Prologue,” the narrator tells the audience, “Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun/ To telle yow al the condicioun/ Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,/ And whiche they were and of what degree/ And eek in what array that they were inne,/ And at a knight than wol I first bigynne” (37-42). In his plan to describe all of the pilgrims, the narrator mentions that he will also note their degrees, showing not only that he relates the degree of a person by their social class but also that he knows that it should be ranked by the existing hierarchy.

In another scene in “The General Prologue,” the host in the tales decides that the pilgrims will

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all draw straws to choose the order of the people to tell their tales. When the knight is the pilgrim who chooses the straw that dictates that he go first, the narrator makes the comment, "Were it by aventure or sort or cas,/ The sothe is this:the cut fil to the Knyght" (845-846). This repetition of the idea that chance was responsible causes the remark to come off as sarcastic and shows his doubt that the knight pulled this straw due to chance. Therefore, this incident shows that even during what should be chance the aristocracy will come first because that is the natural order of the kingdom. The fact that it was the host who handed out the straws supports the idea that he symbolizes the king. Just as a king would do, the host made the rules of the bet, he is the one who arranges and tries to enforce the order, and also the one who gets to choose who wins the bet due to tale-telling skills. The host's rule over the order is challenged by the miller, who demands to be the one who tells the next tale, even though the host knows that the miller is not following the order of society in his lines: "Som better man shal telle us first another./ Abyde, and lat us werken thriftily" (3130-3131). Yet due to the miller's threats to "speke or ells go" (3133), the host grants him the next tale, although doing so goes against the rules of the game. This deliberate shift in the plot emphasizes the fear that the peasant revolt in 1381 caused for much of the nobility, including the king.

Chaucer is well aware of the implicit actions and symbols he applies to the text, and that make the hierarchy of the kingdom present in the prologs of *The Canterbury Tales*. The nobility during this time wasn't the only authority that was challenged by the laboring class. After the Black Plague reduced much of the population, despite the religious prayers of the Church, the common people began to question the clergy's righteousness. With the lavish lifestyles of the pope and higher clergy, the constant need for money from the commoners, and the corruption of so many clergy members and church officials, the Church began to lose some of its hold on the lower class. This is where the creation of the Lollard religion allowed people to read the Bible in English and to follow a church that remained rooted in simple lifestyles, without worldly luxuries. This English translation allowed the Bible to be interpreted by more than the clergy; a relevant reference occurs in "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," when she provides her own answer for the amount of husbands a woman may have in life. Anti-fraternal works in literature also become more popular, with *The Canterbury Tales* emerging as one of these works. Chaucer depicts both corrupt and honest religious figures in his work, suggesting that though he was aware of the corruption of many in the Church he still believed that there were those of honesty and true devotion. These religious characters of corruption can be seen in "The Friar's Tale" and "The Summoner's Tale," as both characters (ironically) deliver antifraternal tales even though they both are associated with the church. In "The Friar's Tale," the summoner of the tale is working alongside the devil and is fully aware of this reality after Satan's lines, "I am a feend. My dwellyng is in Helle" (1448). Not only does the summoner (the pilgrim) tell a story during his tale's prologue about 20,000 friars dwelling in Satan's ass in Hell, but he also follows that story with a tale about a friar who lies about seeing a soul lift to Heaven when he is asked about a woman's dead child. Through these tales, we can see that Chaucer believes in

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the possibility of this corruption, and perhaps has become aware of such corruption in specific examples during his life.

Besides the corruption of the Church and of the individuals associated with it, the breakdown in the social authority of the Church is made obvious in the curiosity entailed in the science behind miraculous events. In "The Miller's Tale," the carpenter believes that Nicholas has discovered the arrival of the next great flood through his use of astrology, even though the carpenter also believes that it is sinful to figure out God's "secrets." The squire also tells a story in which a King is told how something seemingly miraculous is at work in the lines, "For ther lith th'effect of al the gyn" (322). The science of miracles is depicted again in "The Franklin's Tale" when a character says, "For I am siker that ther be sciences/ By whiche men make diverse apparences" (1140). Thus, there is a shift in a society that is aware not simply that circles can be "bought" but that there is a science behind them, further decreasing the Church's authority over the kingdom. Finally, though scholars have interpreted "The Clerk's Tale" as Chaucer's metaphor for how the church should obey God, even this tale could be Chaucer's metaphor for how the kingdom should obey the king and thus prize worldly authority.

Throughout his life as a diplomat and poet, Chaucer always demonstrated unwavering loyalty to the aristocracy, indicating that his opinion on the matter of the hierarchy was a conservative one. In his famed tales, there might have been a challenge in the order of the tales, yet such social disruption was not met without irritation from the host, and many of the characters that interrupted were observed with negativity by the narrator. Chaucer may be a poet, but he was a squire first, and that status shows through in *The Canterbury Tales*.

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