

BIOLA UNIVERSITY

CHAUCER'S SOCIAL CRITICISM:
SOCIAL ORDER WITHIN THE CANTERBURY TALES

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OUTLINE

Thesis Statement: Chaucer organizes the community of pilgrims in a way that intentionally protests the gentrification of medieval society, presenting instead a vision of a meritocracy that allows for social mobility. Thus, the entirety of the *Canterbury Tales*—its structure, language, and content—is a critique of prevailing social hierarchy.

I. Chaucer must have been aware of the incongruity of his actions with prevailing social order.

A. Dissatisfaction with gentrified society was on the rise throughout the late 1300s.

1. Changes in the economic equation of feudalism increased pressure for social mobility.

2. Classist tensions culminated in the Peasant's Revolt of 1381.

B. Chaucer was socially positioned to observe but not be directly influenced by the tensions between classes.

1. Chaucer received patronage and was therefore financially secure.

2. Chaucer had a diverse background in dealings with factions and gentry.

II. Chaucer made a critical move in choosing the vernacular English as the language for *The Canterbury Tales*.

A. By employing English in a literary way, Chaucer elevated the vernacular and performatively argued for the acceptance of the vulgar as a valid form of expression.

B. *The Canterbury Tales* acted as a stabilizing force, conferring permanence on English as a language.

1. Chaucer acted as an English Dante, glorifying the language in which he wrote.

2. By writing great literature in the vernacular, Chaucer performatively asserted that even the common voice ought to be given a hearing.

III. The construction of *The Canterbury Tales* emphasizes social organization and deconstructs traditional hierarchy.

A. Chaucer inaugurates the story with the formation of a society of misrule, indicating that this society is a space where normative social protocol is suspended.

1. The 'Lord of Misrule' custom was designed to allow the release of social tension by inverting socially normative hierarchies.

2. The election of the Innkeeper as governor mirrors the custom of Misrule.

B. The way in which Chaucer engages the social structure seems calculated to make a reader question the legitimacy of gentrified hierarchy, and favor a social meritocracy.

1. Chaucer emphasizes social rank when introducing characters.

2. After stating the assumed worth of each character, Chaucer details the actual merits or demerits of the individuals.

- a. He underscores the Prioress' pretentiousness and anxiety to assert herself in court, both features unseemly in a prioress.

- b. The Monk is a monk in name only; functionally, he is indistinguishable from other secular characters.

- c. The Parson, who is poor and traditionally among the lowest classes, is introduced as virtuous and genuine.

C. The framework of *The Canterbury Tales* reinforces support for a social meritocracy.

1. The characters operate with total competitive equity, which would be impossible within either the guild system or strict feudalism.

2. The prize for which they compete mirrors the position for a noble, thereby advocating merit-based distribution of social authority.

IV. Chaucer employs the internal discourse between characters, social description in the tales, and relationships between individuals within the work to build a vision of proper social interaction.

A. He re-evaluates the tacit social contract between a storyteller and his audience, using the content of the *Tales* to build a case for the entertainment duty of story driven literature.

1. The characters make use of a variety of literary forms, which are critiqued by the dialogue immediately following each tale.
2. Through the words of the Host, Chaucer contends that literature ought to be judged based on entertainment value, rather than coherence to a particular literary or poetic tradition.
3. The discourse between the tales guides the reader in forming judgments about a narrative's literary merit.
 - a. Interaction following engaging or light-hearted tales is lively and positive, as in the case of the Knight's, Miller's, and Nun's Priest's tales.
 - b. Dialogue following morose, allegorical, or overly moralizing tales is either subdued, as is the case after the Prioress' tale, or openly hostile, as is the case after the Pardoner's tale.
 - c. Chaucer cuts off tales which fail the standard or undermine community, such as Sir Topaz's unbearably bad poetry and the Monk's morose tragedies.

B. Chaucer embedded a vision of an alternative social structure within the framework of the *Tales*, which is revealed through characters' actions, views presented within the narratives, and Chaucer's depiction of the characters as virtuous or vicious agents,

1. Characters (such as the Pardoner) who transgress against the new community by misusing power or exploiting their fellows are threatened and silenced.
2. Several characters describe alternative forms of social order within their tales, which are established as preferable either by the individual virtue of the actor, or by the general positive reception of the tale.
 - a. The Franklin's tale suggests that nobility ought to be calculated not based on social rank, but on the grace extended in human interaction.
 - b. The Clerk's tale argues that gentleness is solely based on action, and not on inherited rank.
3. Chaucer evaluates characters' worth based on virtuous or vicious actions, praising the men who invest in their community, and rejecting those who exploit or undermine it.

Chaucer's Social Criticism:

Social Order Within The Canterbury Tales

Vast quantities of ink have been spilled analyzing the *Canterbury Tales*, and for good reason: Chaucer's unfinished masterpiece is both an entertaining poem and an intricate labyrinth of meaning. This paper will explore the way in which Chaucer's selection of language, his emphasis on the inversion of social forms, his construction of characters, the narratives, and the order of the *Tales* function as a social commentary. I will argue that Chaucer organizes the community of pilgrims in a way that intentionally protests the gentrification of medieval society, presenting instead a vision of a meritocracy that allows for social mobility. Thus, the entirety of the *Canterbury Tales*—its structure, language, and content—is a critique of prevailing social hierarchy.

To establish the intentionality of this protest, one must simply show that Chaucer could not have been unaware of the incongruity of his actions with prevailing social order. A brief enquiry into his cultural background reveals that as an individual in the upper middle class or lower gentry in the late 1300s, he was necessarily very conscious of 'proper' social hierarchy. At the time that Chaucer wrote, the feudal system was beginning to fade in England. While the landed gentry lived very much the way they always had, the economics of the lower estate had begun to alter. Rural farmers were able to save a small profit margin, and were powerful enough to force landlords to keep rent rates at manageable levels. These newfound economic freedoms were not, however, paired with new social freedoms; the distinction between classes was as confining as it had ever been, which cast the limitations on social mobility into sharp relief¹. This state of affairs fostered dissatisfaction with gentrified society, beginning in the middle-

¹Lee Patterson, "No Man His Reason Herde," in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain: 1380-1530* ed. by Lee Patterson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press., 1990), 121.

lower classes with the guilds, and spreading to encompass the majority of the lower class, finally culminating in the Peasant's Revolt of 1381.

Chaucer himself was not heavily affected by issues of the lower class, nor was he a member of the threatened gentry. Rather, he fell somewhere in between, in the upper crust of the attendants on the gentry—a social group quickly developing into a middle class. As biographer Derek Pearsall writes,

[Chaucer] had no power-base either in the aristocracy or in the church, and no rooted commitment to either. He received patronage because his father was rich, because he was useful, and in some measure, also, because he was clever, funny, and inoffensive.²

Chaucer was financially secure, and thus could not immediately sympathize with the woes of the rural class; but also socially unstable, since his position was vulnerable to shifts in the political makeup of the country. As a well-read, relatively secure individual, Chaucer was in a unique position to see both sides of the social tension, and play them off each other to articulate a critique in *The Canterbury Tales*. In fact, Paul Strohm goes so far as to argue that the way that he employs mixed genres of narrative mirrors Chaucer's own social experience, writing:

Chaucer's poetic of high and unresolved generic and stylistic contrast may ultimately be seen as a literary restatement of his own varied social and political experience, and particularly of his experience of political faction.³

Even in the most conservative view, Chaucer can justifiably be seen to be employing multiple elements of the *Tales* to argue in favor of a mixed society, in which neither faction dominates the other.

²Derek Pearsall, "Advances: the 1360s," in *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: a Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 100.

³Paul Strohm, "Politics and Poetics: Usk and Chaucer in the 1380s," in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530* ed. by Lee Patterson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press., 1990), 111.

First, Chaucer made a critical move in choosing the vernacular English as the language for *The Canterbury Tales*. Prior to his writing, English existed primarily as a spoken language, with no literary or academic merit. Latin and French were the recognized serious languages, and though a cleaned-up version of Italian had gained some notoriety as a result of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the vernacular languages were still considered unfit for serious or permanent use. By employing the English language in a literary way, Chaucer elevated the vernacular and performatively argued for the acceptance of the vulgar as a valid form of expression. Dialogue and language are intensely significant; in elevating the common tongue, Chaucer gave it a position of authority in the shaping of culture.

A second, equally important result of Chaucer's selection is that he conferred permanence on English as a language. Existing until that point as a blend of Saxon and French, *The Canterbury Tales* acted as a stabilizing and solidifying force on the language. Thoreau expressed the value of Chaucer's contribution as follows:

A great philosophical and moral poet gives permanence to the language he uses, by making the best sound convey the best sense. He was as simple as Wordsworth in preferring his homely but vigorous Saxon tongue, when it was neglected by the court, and had not yet attained to the dignity of literature, and rendered a similar service to his country to that which Dante rendered Italy.⁴

The service to which he refers—the glorification of the common tongue—is precisely the effect that *The Canterbury Tales* achieved. This move enabled the common people to grapple with the academic and philosophical issues of the day by making the literary language accessible to them. Additionally, by writing great literature in the vernacular, Chaucer performatively asserted that even the common voice could have something worthwhile to say, and should be given a hearing.

⁴ Henry David Thoreau: *Collected Essays and Poems*, comp. Elizabeth Hall Witherell, *Homer. Ossian. Chaucer*. (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2001), 147.

Within the work, the way in which Chaucer begins the *Tales* is significant in the context of English social customs. Since he is working in a new tradition—writing to entertain and please, without direct use of allegory or religious sentiment—the parallels of his work to other entertainment forms are helpful to indicate both his intention, and the way in which the *Tales* society functions. One very common old English custom, the ‘Lord of Misrule’, was designed particularly to allow the release of social tension by inverting socially normative hierarchy. Phillip Stubbes provides a helpful overview of the workings of the event, explaining that on the day of misrule:

... all the wildheads of the parish, conventing together, choose them a grand captain (of all mischief) whom they ennoble with the title of “my Lord of Misrule,” and him they crown with great solemnity, and adopt for their king.⁵

This king would be selected from the fools or buffoons of a society, and charged with the task of leading the community in merriment. Even the higher classes would act as his subjects and follow his orders for the extent of his short, merry rule. The intent of such a custom, as C. L. Barber clarifies, was to create an avenue for the release of social tension through revelry.⁶

Chaucer capitalizes on this custom of social inversion, and references it in the framework of the *Tales*. Within the first several stanzas of *The Canterbury Tales*, the characters must organize into a specific social structure. Since they have a common goal and are traveling in a group, there is a sort of natural society already present, and one could reasonably expect traditional social roles to prevail even on the pilgrimage. Under any ordinary circumstances all

⁵ Phillip Stubbes, *Anatomie of Abuses... in the Country of Ailgna* (1583), ed. F. V. Furnival (London, 1877-82), p. 149, quoted in C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study in Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 27.

⁶ Barber remarks, “... formal misrule would be most used in formal households, where people regularly ate, more or less in awe, under the countenance of My Lord. My Lord of Misrule, burlesquing majesty by promoting license under the forms of order, would be useful to countenance the revelry of such a group” (Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, 25).

characters would defer to the rule of the highest-ranking character, in this case, the Knight. However, Chaucer instead utilizes the Misrule custom to indicate that this society is a space where normative social protocol is suspended, and the characters operate under new rules. Paralleling the custom, the citizens of this traveling society form their own rules to govern their interaction, and then agree on, or, in other words, elect, a common ruler. They all accept the innkeeper as a governor, taking oaths to the effect that: “In things both great and small; by one assent, / We stood committed to his government.”⁷ Their choice of a ruler is especially important since it is counterintuitive, both for misrule and for traditional social order. If he were following the misrule custom directly, Chaucer ought to select a total buffoon for the position. However, both the Miller and the Reeve are better comic characters than the innkeeper, so in not choosing them, Chaucer signals a departure from the misrule custom. The next most intuitive choice, therefore, would be a character in a higher-class position that is recognized as leadership material by traditional society, such as the Knight, Squire, or Merchant. However, though Chaucer introduces all of these characters, he notably does not give them leadership roles. Rather, the innkeeper receives the task, having merited it by virtue of his expertise in orchestrating merry pilgrimages. Thus, even in the beginning, Chaucer establishes a framework of social deconstruction that creates a space for a merit-based evaluation of the individual tales and characters.

Though one could assert that Chaucer’s social emphasis is accidental to some other purpose, the primacy and urgency he bestows upon the characters’ status within the gentrified hierarchy indicates otherwise. In the construction of the characters, he explicitly directs his reader’s attention to their social roles even before introducing them individually, writing:

⁷Chaucer *The Canterbury Tales* (trans. J. U. Nicolson, with an introduction by Gordon Hall Gerould [Covici.Friede.Inc., 1934]) p. 25.

It seems to me accordant with reason
 to inform you of the state of every one
 of all of these, as it appeared to me,
 and who they were, and what was their degree, [...] ⁸

In fact, the first thing we learn about each character is his location within social structure, and the method which Chaucer employs in engaging the structure seems calculated to make a reader question the legitimacy of gentrified hierarchy.

Chaucer introduces the characters as discrete social units, ranging from gentry, to church, to middle class, to laborers. The first descriptors we are given about any character in the General Prologue are first, where s/he fits in society as a whole, and second, where s/he ranks within his/her sub-society. Entering the narrative at this level, we are highly conscious of social hierarchy. The next movement, therefore, is particularly significant. After emphasizing the assumed worth of each character, Chaucer details the actual merits or demerits of the individuals. At this point in the *Tales* we meet the pretentious Prioress, the exploitive Pardoner, the fat Friar, and several others. As he introduces the characters, dissonance emerges between the supposed level of virtue due to social strata, and the actual vice of the individual.

The Prioress is a particularly interesting character, since she is high on the social ladder, but is within the church, which operates under different protocol than the court. She would therefore have no need to imitate courtly manners, yet Chaucer writes about her that:

She was at pains to counterfeit the look
 Of courtliness, and stately manners took,
 And would be held worthy of reverence. ⁹

⁸Ibid., 2.

⁹Ibid., 5.

By so saying, he suggests that though granted a position of authority and respect, she does not properly deserve it. He underscores her pretentiousness and anxiety to assert herself not merely in the church, but also in the court, both features which are unseemly in a prioress.

His introduction of the Monk is even more explicit. The initial comments about him are that he is “An outrider, who loved his venery;”¹⁰, and who does not abide by the Franciscan rule, but rather “This said monk let such old things slowly pace / And followed new-world manners in their place.”¹¹ In short, he is a monk in name and social position only; functionally, he lives as a gentleman. He hunts, lives loosely, and is practically indistinguishable from the Franklin or other secular characters.

In contrast, the Parson, who is poor and traditionally viewed as lower class than either of these religious figures, is introduced as virtuous and genuine. Describing him as “A country parson, poor, I warrant you; /But rich he was in holy thought and work”¹², Chaucer comes extraordinarily close to explicitly arguing that the Parson should be more respected than either of the two figures that comes before, even though he is socially inferior. The reader is led to believe that in fact, the whole community would be better served if the Parson were more honored than either the Monk or the Friar. In fact, one begins to think that the best distribution of social power would be achieved if the social positions of the characters were deserved not by inheritance, but rather by the actual virtue or vice of each character.

Chaucer reinforces support for such a social meritocracy in his articulation of the framework for the *Tales*. The characters are all united by a common goal: a pilgrimage to

¹⁰Ibid., 6

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., 15.

Canterbury. Further, they are all competing for a common prize: to be judged to have told the best tale, and “have a supper at the others’ cost”¹³. The competition is cleverly crafted to reflect a partial image of nobility—the winner will be recognized as the top of the social bracket, and the others will labor to support him/her financially—and yet this title is earned by merit rather than inheritance. The characters operate with total competitive equity: all travel the same distance with the same difficulty and at the same pace in order to reach Canterbury, and all have an equal opportunity to deliver a good tale. The tales of the Knight and the Nun’s Priest have similar positive receptions¹⁴, and it is unclear which may have won the prize. These relationships are impossible within either a strict feudal hierarchy or even the guild system; all would be bound to defer to either the Knight or the Clerk, given their greater social authority, while the Nun’s Priest, as merely an attendant to an attendant, would have no place to compete with the Prioress, his superior. Clearly, Chaucer is working in multiple ways to deconstruct the traditional gentrified hierarchy.

However, *The Canterbury Tales* is not purely a deconstructive work. Chaucer employs internal discourse between characters, social description in the tales, and the relationships between individuals within the work to build a vision of proper social interaction. He focuses this constructive effort on two specific inquiries: the proper framework for distribution of authority in social hierarchy, and the tacit social contract between a storyteller and his audience. These two relationships play off each other, and though Chaucer dedicates the majority of his explicit argumentation to the first question, he uses the content of the tales to build a case for the entertainment duty of story-driven literature.

¹³Ibid., 24.

¹⁴Ibid., 281.

While he allows the characters to make use of a variety of literary forms, the social interaction immediately following or interrupting the delivery of a tale functions to critique said forms. In this manner, *The Canterbury Tales* are at least in part a discourse on the art of the Story. Rather than presenting a standard of coherence to a particular literary or poetic tradition, Chaucer's Host describes the ideal tale teller as "he who plays his part the best of all, / That is to say, who tells upon the road / Tales of the best sense, in the most amusing mode,"¹⁵ thereby proposing entertainment value as the new standard. It seems that Chaucer is engaging in some self-referential literary criticism, offering *The Canterbury Tales* as a thought provoking, enjoyable read, while suggesting that it need not be moralizing or allegorical to be valuable.

The discourse between tales guides the reader in forming judgments about a narrative's literary merit by illustrating the practical application of Chaucer's entertainment standard. These interludes compose the connective thread between the *Tales*, and usher the reader through an extended conversation on rules governing acceptable social interaction. Such discussions are lively and positive when immediately following engaging or light-hearted tales such as the Knight's, Miller's, or Nun's Priest's narratives. In contrast, the discourse following morose, allegorical, or overly moralizing tales is either subdued, like the response to the Prioress's tale, or even outright hostile, as the reaction to the Pardoner.

Lest the reader miss the point due to his subtlety, Chaucer actively cuts off tales that fail the standard and are bad for the community. Sir Topaz's unbearably forced and stilted poetry is truncated by the Host's protestation, "No more of this, for God's high dignity!"¹⁶—a clear

¹⁵Ibid., 24.

¹⁶Ibid., 188.

indication that this literary form “is not worth a turd;”¹⁷ and is doing nothing to help the pilgrims pass the time in an enjoyable manner. Similarly, after allowing the Monk to drone nearly seventeen depressing anecdotes of sudden death and destruction, the Knight finally interjects “Good sir, no more of this,”¹⁸ and begs him to leave off telling such morbid tales before they are all bored to death. The Host concurs, adding that “such talking is not worth a butterfly; for in it is no sport nor any game.”¹⁹ Such incidents within the work reinforce the point that tales ought to be told with the goal of amusing and diverting the audience, and judged based on how well they achieve that goal.

Chaucer’s re-definition of the author/audience relationship addresses one aspect of social interaction, but the other aspect remains, as yet, unexplored. In addressing the second question, Chaucer did not merely deconstruct medieval social hierarchy. Rather, he embedded a vision of an alternative structure within the framework of the *Tales*, which is revealed through characters’ actions, views presented within narratives, and Chaucer’s depiction of the characters as virtuous (or vicious) agents. The structure that emerges is a meritocracy, wherein birth neither positively nor negatively determines an individual’s social worth.

Chaucer brings the two social forms into conflict by allowing a few of the characters step out of the newly defined lines of social interaction. The most evident example of this is the Pardoner, whose delivery of his tale is an unapologetic attempt to exploit his audience. He enters into the tale in much the same way as the others, offering his own prologue, and introducing the source of his narrative. The difference is that he openly reveals his purposefully exploitive

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., 263.

¹⁹Ibid., 264.

actions, confessing that generally his “intent is only pence to win, / And not at all punishment for sin”²⁰. Furthermore, he explicitly admits that he lives in a manner that violates the moral of his own tale, and intends at the end to deceive and exploit his current audience, commenting:

“By God, I hope that I can tell something
That shall, in reason, be to your liking.
For though I am myself a vicious man,
Yet I would tell a moral tale, and can,
The which I’m wont to preach more gold to win.”²¹

This misuse of authority is a transgression against a mutually supportive, merit-based society, and betrays the worthlessness and vice of the actor. Consequently, the society reacts violently, rejecting him and threatening various punishments if he does not modify his behavior.²²

Descending further into the narrative structure of the text, Chaucer permits his characters to tell tales describing alternative forms of social order. When these tales are accepted well by the community, or told by a character introduced as a virtuous person, their visions of social structure can be accepted as Chaucer’s proposal for society.

The Franklin’s tale is most the obvious engagement of socially normative hierarchies. The plot action revolves around a knight, his wife, and a squire—to that extent, nothing is new—and suggests that the squire and the wife are just as ‘gentle’ as the knight himself²³. It is an interesting tale, and a radical suggestion. Previously, a lady could be a gentlewoman, but she would never have been compared directly with a knight. Furthermore, the position of squire is

²⁰Ibid., 295.

²¹Ibid., 296.

²²The Host’s threat consists of the comment, “I would I had your ballocks in my hand / instead of relics in a reliquary; / Let’s cut them off...” (Ibid., 309).

²³The philosopher’s comment, “Each one of you has nobly dealt with other” (Ibid., 486), puts all actors on an equal plane of gentility.

directly subservient to knighthood, and thus the suggestion that “a squire can perform a gentle deed / As well as can a knight”²⁴ challenges socially normative assumptions. The Franklin ends by driving this point home and clarifying his vision of social structure: ‘Nobility’ should be calculated not based on social rank, but on the grace extended in human interaction. In addition, given the mutual submission adopted by the knight and his wife, it appears the Franklin would argue that social status should be a title or exterior position only, and ought not be used to make others relationally subservient.²⁵

The Clerk’s tale subtly pushes this concept farther, arguing that gentleness is solely dependent on action, and not on inherited rank. He tells the tale of a marquis and a peasant woman, who, as the story progresses, reverse roles: the woman is clearly noble, while the man’s actions are base. He makes his point inescapable by designing the characters to be complete opposites: the marquis is the “lord of all that land, / As were his noble ancestors before;”²⁶, while his chosen wife, Griselda, is a peasant, daughter of “a man / Who was considered poorest of them all;”²⁷ and is therefore the bottom rung of the social ladder. The story concludes that she was in fact nobler than the marquis, which can only be the case if nobility is based on action and individual merit rather than inheritance.

Finally, Chaucer evaluates characters as virtuous or vicious agents, praising the men who invest in their community, and rejecting those who exploit or undermine it. The Knight, Squire,

²⁴Ibid., 484.

²⁵The knight voluntarily surrenders any right to assert himself over his wife, and retains only the title of Lord: “never in his life, by day or by night, / Would he assume a right of master / Against her will”... “Save that the name and show of sovereignty, / Those would he have, lest he shame his degree” (Ibid., 463).

²⁶Ibid., 376.

²⁷Ibid., 380.

Franklin, and the Parson are presented in a good light. The Knight is introduced as “a worthy man”²⁸, with a good entourage, all keen on benefiting their community. He submits readily to the leadership of the Host²⁹, and engages carefully in dialogue to suggest charitable treatment of one’s fellows.³⁰ Both the Knight’s and the Squire’s³¹ tales are received well, and each man is generally accepted as a good, or even a model, citizen. The Franklin is introduced originally as a man who enjoys a good feast³²—and is, in that respect, no different from the Friar—but also cares a great deal for respect.³³ He tells a tale focusing on the virtue of grace within community, and generally comports himself in a merry manner. The reader is given no reason to dislike him, and though there is no one place in the text where Chaucer establishes the Franklin as an excellent fellow, he is at least contextually likeable.

However, the Parson presents the clearest statement of virtue and simultaneously holds one of the lowest possible societal positions. In the introduction, Chaucer reveals the Parson as a self-sacrificing, genuine man who cares for his community, avoids hypocrisy, and leads by example. He shows equal care to the poor and to the rich, and is motivated by a love of his people rather than a desire for personal advancement.³⁴ Unlike other characters, the Parson never engages in antisocial action, and is never criticized by the narrator. In contrast, self-

²⁸Ibid., 2.

²⁹Ibid., 26.

³⁰The knight diffuses the tension between the Host and the Pardoner by interjecting, “No more of this, for it’s gone far enough; / Sir pardoner, be glad and merry here; / And you, sir host, who are to me so dear, / I pray you that you kiss the pardoner.” (Ibid., 310).

³¹Ibid., 461.

³²Ibid., 11.

³³ “And pray you all, you do not me disdain” (Ibid., 462).

³⁴ Ibid., 15.

serving characters and characters that undermine the community are either highlighted as distasteful, or rejected outright, as seen most clearly in the Pardoner. Chaucer thus uses his treatment of characters to reinforce behaviors that build and serve society, while discouraging actions that are destructive or harm the society.

In conclusion, it is evident that Chaucer intentionally employed multiple aspects of *The Canterbury Tales* to advocate a new social order. He elevated the common tongue by employing vernacular English in a literary work, and used a variety of mechanisms to invert socially normative authority structures in order to draw attention to an alternative social hierarchy. Having thus set the stage, Chaucer constructed his characters in such a way as to recommend a meritocracy as the best structure for the distribution of social authority. Thus, while *The Canterbury Tales* can be read merely as an entertaining collection of stories, one cannot fully appreciate it without attending to Chaucer's criticism of social hierarchy.

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