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CHAUCER'S ECCLESIASTICS
IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

BY

HELEN LEE COLEMAN

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INTRODUCTION

It is thought that Chaucer began composing The Canterbury Tales as a dramatic whole around 1387. This is his last and by far his best known work. In this final masterpiece Chaucer undertakes the tremendous task of presenting in poetic form a whole society. However, he does not merely explore society in general; he also develops the theme of the individual's relation to the community and the integral part that each person plays in making up the whole. The Canterbury Tales is, as George Lyman Kittredge so aptly puts it, "a micro cosmography" or a little image of a great world.[1]

The Canterbury Tales was written by a man of the world who had a keen awareness of the people of his age. Chaucer's birth, his marriage, and his station in later life brought him into easy contact with both the high- and the low-born. His experiences as burgher, soldier, courtier, officeholder, and diplomat gave him ample opportunities for observation of his fellow man.

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[1] Chaucer and His Poetry (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), p. 150.

In The Canterbury Tales he does not give merely a static picture of life; rather he creates characters who live, ones whose actions demonstrate what life was like in fourteenth century England. To accomplish this, Chaucer needed a framework that would encompass a great variety of people. The pilgrimages, which were extremely popular during the Middle Ages, offered a perfect solution to this problem, for the pilgrims came from all stations of life and therefore formed a representative group.[2]

To introduce this typical group, Chaucer summoned all of his inventiveness and created the General Prologue. This prologue is a series of vivid portraits that display the appearance, traits, and attitudes of the pilgrims. He describes these characters in a casual manner; in fact, it seems as if he has just met them and that he is merely noticing small details which he is recording rather haphazardly. This seemingly non-logical approach allows him to put down a great variety of details in a concise form. These incidentals make the characters seem individual and quite real. The garb, the manner of sitting a horse, the beards, the physiognomy are all important in creating the lifelike characteristics, which contribute to the total personality of each individual. There is no set pattern of description, for the portraits are as diversified as mankind. Shelly hails this composition as a "triumph of realism," and he also claims that it is "one of the most matter-of-fact compositions in the world." He believes it is "one supreme example of intensity in art."[3] With apparent ease and simplicity, Chaucer does manage to capture each pilgrim's character in a few lines. He does not idealize these characters: they are real human beings with virtues and faults. The poet perceives their passions, tastes, weaknesses, and aspirations. All of these portraits "are shot through with his tolerance, sympathy, humor, satire and zest—above all with his zest."[4]

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[2] In A Preface to Chaucer (Princeton, N. J., 1963), p. 243, D. W. Robertson points out that the spiritual concept embodied in the idea of a pilgrimage was that the journey symbolized the Christian soul's passage through the world's wilderness toward the Celestial City. However, in The Living Chaucer (Philadelphia, 1940), p. 194, Percy Van Dyke Shelly points out that during this period these journeys were not only considered as pilgrimages but also as holidays. This holiday atmosphere accounts for the outspokenness of many in Chaucer's group.

However, the characters presented are not just individuals; they are also representative of particular types. Each is an almost perfect example of his or her kind. Robert Root points out that it is by the successful blending of the individual with the typical that the portraits of Chaucer's Prologue attain so high a degree of effectiveness.[5] The details enumerated in this prologue establish candid pictures of the type of individuals who lived during the fourteenth century.

By using another device, Chaucer makes these static concepts come alive. In the introduction to individual tales and the links between the tales their different personalities act and react; thus the effect of a living community is achieved. Their speech and actions depicted in these links conform to the potentials that are attributed to them in the Prologue.

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[3] Shelly, pp. 194, 197.

[4] Ibid., p. 198.

[5] The Poetry of Chaucer, rev. ed. (Boston, 1922), pp. 151-52.

To give further insight into the character of these living pilgrims, Chaucer planned to have each pilgrim tell tales. The tales are not isolated entities, but they are closely related to previous information that has been given about their tellers. Nor are these stories alike in form or subject matter; this variety stems from the fact that they are told by a great variety of people. Structurally, they are merely long speeches expressing, directly, or indirectly, the characters of the pilgrims. Both Derek D. Brewer and G. G. Sedgewick warn readers to remember that the pilgrims do not live for the sake of the tales; rather all is done for the sake of characterization.[6] Thus, the Prologue, links, and tales form the dramatic whole which makes up this masterpiece.

The collection is a prototype of human life as it passed before Chaucer's eyes. As a Human Comedy of the Middle Ages, it has both a timeless and a temporal quality. The persons are so realistic that they seem to be modern characters. However, in order to understand these characters more fully, the reader must remember the great difference between their background and the twentieth century. As John Spires states, "A way of life, a whole phase of civilization; different in many respects from our own, goes into the composing of that Chaucerian depth."[7] A "whole phase of civilization" is viewed; it is fourteenth century England in its various aspects.

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[6] Derek D. Brewer, Chaucer, 2nd ed. (London, 1958), p. 155. Also G. G. Sedgewick, "The Progress of Chaucer's Pardoner, 1880-1940," Modern Language Quarterly, I (1940), 431-32.

This paper will be confined to one order of that society, the Ecclesiastical. It will also be primarily concerned with those ecclesiastics who actually appear during the pilgrimage. Before judging whether Chaucer gives a true picture of the churchmen of this period, the reader must examine the state of the Church during the fourteenth century. Therefore, the first chapter of this study will concern its organization and some of the events which took place within the Church during this era.

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[7] Chaucer the Maker (London, 1951), p. 98.

Chapter I

The History and Organization of The Church in England During the Middle Ages

The period covered by Chaucer's life, 1340?-1400, witnessed a marked decline in spirituality among the ecclesiastics. This loss of spirituality involved the total range of churchmen from the popes to the members of minor orders. The papacy was the most conspicuous failure; naturally it became the principal target of much of the criticism. The "Babylonian Captivity" or the Avignon papacy and the Great Schism were two of the most obvious causes for the laity's loss of respect for the papacy.

Clement V (1305-1314) was the first in a line of seven popes who chose Avignon, France, to be the seat of the papacy. His coming to Avignon was partly due to his desire to escape the turbulent surroundings of strife-ridden Rome. It was also through the influence of Philip IV of France that he had been elected to the papacy. He always intended to return to Rome, but he kept postponing that move. He appointed many French cardinals, who, at his death, elected another French pope who continued to reside at Avignon. Seven French popes followed Clement V, and their stay at Avignon, 1309-1378, compromised the Papacy in the eyes of the world. Many people throughout the rest of Europe bitterly resented this French hierarchy, particularly those in countries, such as England, which were hostile to France.[8] Robert S. Hoyt states that these people considered the Avignon popes as "mere chaplains of the French king."[9] Mr. Hoyt explains that actually these pontiffs lived relatively free from French control especially during the reigns of Philip the Fair (1314-1328) and John the Good (1350-1364).

Nevertheless, the papacy's lengthy stay in France brought adverse criticism from many diverse types. For instance, Petrarch (d. 1374), coined the phrase "Babylonian Captivity" to typify the evils of the Papal Court at Avignon. St. Cathrine of Siena (d. 1380) sent requests to the pontiffs and even to secular rulers pleading for the papacy to be returned to Rome.

Eventually, Avignon became unsafe as the French became very much involved in The Hundred Years War. By this time the internal conditions in Rome had improved; therefore, Urban V (1362-1370) brought the Curia Romana back to Rome. As he failed to re-establish papal authority, he returned to Avignon. After his death, Gregory XI (1370-1378) tried again, but he also failed to gain control. However, he died before he was able to leave Rome. The cardinals then elected a compromise candidate, the Archbishop of Bari. While he was being sent for, the cardinals delayed in announcing his election. Not knowing that an Italian had been selected, a mob broke into the conclave and demanded an Italian pope. When the pope-elect finally arrived and his coronation as Urban VI (1378-1389) took place, the Italians were well pleased. His election marked the end of the Avignon Papacy or the "Babylonian Captivity," but his pontificate started the Great Schism.

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[8] The Hundred Years War between France and England began in 1337.

[9] Europe in the Middle Ages, 2nd ed. (New York, 1966), p. 555.

Urban VI became a ruthless reformer who was determined to purge the clergy of worldliness. Starting at the top with the cardinals and the papal curia, he began to reduce their personal incomes and limit their influence. Naturally these churchmen resented him, but he undertook the reforms with such fury that even his followers recognized his tactlessness. Eventually the cardinals fled Rome, and when thirteen of them met at Fondi, Naples, they denounced Urban's election as invalid, charging that it had been forced on them by the Italian mob. They then proceeded to elect Cardinal Robert of Geneva as Clement VII (1379-1394). Clement VII, accompanied by these cardinals, returned to Avignon. After this Urban was forced to select a whole new college of cardinals.

The election of Clement VII marked the beginning of the Great Schism, which divided the obedience and furthered the disillusioning of medieval Christendom. Countries now pledged their allegiance to either the Roman pontiff or the Avignon claimant. Charles V of France and his allies—Scotland, Navarre, Castile, Aragon, and various German princes who were under French influence—supported Clement VII. The enemies of France--England, Flanders, Portugal, Bohemia, Hungary, the Emperor Charles IV, and most of the German princes--favored the Roman pope Urban VI. Mr. Hoyt claims that the "Italian states were ready to change sides as expediency might suggest."[10] Neither claimant was willing to admit that he was not the rightful pope, and each one excommunicated the other. As the pope was considered to be the supreme authority in spiritual matters, no other power could determine the case.

This religious conflict was reflected in the political affairs of various countries. For instance, in 1383 political groups in England divided over the question of whether to send an English expedition to join the Flemish Crusade. This crusade against the French claimant to the papacy was supported in England by four diverse factions: the papalist party who backed Urban VI; the English wool merchants, who for commercial reasons wished to assist the Flemish against the French; the enemies of Wyclif, for he preached against the crusade; and the enemies of John of Gaunt, for he wanted to employ the English troops elsewhere. Muriel Bowden reports that some called this a "holy" war, but "others bitterly denounced it."[11] An English expedition did join the Crusade, but it was defeated.

The quarrel which resulted from the claims of Urban VI and

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[10] Ibid., p. 561.

[11] A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (New York, 1949), P. 10.

Clement VII was not resolved by their deaths. When Urban VI died in 1389, the Roman cardinals elected another Neapolitan, who became Boniface IX and who claimed the papacy until his death in 1404. Likewise, when Clement VII died, the French cardinals chose the Aragonese Peter of Luna as Benedict XIII (1394-1423). In 1409 the confusion was compounded when the Council of Pisa attempted to solve the division by deposing both claimants and electing another, Alexander V. The French and Roman "popes" now denounced the council and excommunicated Alexander. This resulted in a triple schism. It was not until the Council of Constance that the schism was finally ended.

Thus Chaucer, who lived from 1340? to 1400, witnessed the resentment caused by the French popes' residence at Avignon (1309-1378), and he also saw the confusion which resulted from the Great Schism. In fact, this conflict had not been resolved at the time of his death. Other actions which occurred during Chaucer's lifetime also contributed to the Church's loss of prestige. Some stemmed from the decisions of the fourteenth century popes, for they effected changes in the organization of the Church which affected the lesser clergy and also the laity. To understand these changes in organization and the consequent loss of spirituality among the clergymen, it is necessary to explain the organization of the Church during the Middle Ages. The concern here is chiefly with the Church in England. Emphasis will be placed on the aspects of religious life which Chaucer depicts in The Canterbury Tales.

The parochial organization of the Church in England was established by the Council of Hertford, A.D. 673. This council, which was under the direction of Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury, gave each thane in England the right to choose a pastor for his manor from among the general body of the clergy. Thus the patronage of the church was vested in the lord of the manor, who was expected to provide a benefice for the pastor. Each manor or parish would have a regular pastor rather than having to depend on visiting missionaries. Each of the Saxon kingdoms became known as a diocese, and each of these was under the charge of a bishop. The body of clergy who worked with the bishops at the cathedrals were called canons. The Church in England continued under the control of these bishops and parish priests until the Norman Conquest.

Just before the Conquest newly formed monastic orders became very strong. Groups of monks had existed from a much earlier date, but it was during this particular period that they became a powerful force within the Church. In 529 St. Benedict had promulgated his monastic rule, and his code for living was considered so effective that it came to be followed by most of the monastic institutions throughout Charlemagne's dominions. However, this rather rigid rule was not followed by the early Saxon monasteries; in fact, these monasteries were much more lax in their discipline. Commenting upon this, the Rev. Edward L. Cutts states: "From Bede's accounts we gather that some of them were only convents of secular clerks bound by certain rules, and performing divine offices daily, but enjoying all the privileges of other clerks, and even sometimes being married."[12] Mr. Cutts reports that by the eighth century the monks' discipline had become very relaxed; but, in spite of this, they were respected and liked by the people. By the middle of the next century Archbishop Dunstan ordered all Saxon monasteries to follow the rule of St. Benedict. For four centuries thereafter, this rule became almost universal in the monasteries of the West.

The rule of St. Benedict centered about the observance of three vows: poverty, chastity, and obedience. Work and prayer were the two disciplines that were stressed. However, after the Norman Conquest strict observance of the rule became more and more relaxed as the monastic groups grew wealthier. After founding many new monasteries, the Normans made the monks patrons of the rectories. Under this system the monastic houses now became the holders of the benefices and the receivers of the major portion of the tithes. Such perversion of the ancient Saxon benefices resulted in poor vicars taking the places once held by rather prosperous rectors.[13] Of course, as a result the monasteries accumulated great wealth which attracted into orders many worldly men who now considered being a monk a highly prosperous profession.

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[12] Scenes and Characters of the Middle Ages (London, 1926), p. 7.

[13] G. G. Coulton, Medieval Panorama (New York, 1966), p. 137, explains that the rector had been " the spiritual ruler of his parish." His benefice was a freehold. He was "the 'parson', the person par excellence, in his little domain." However, when a monastery become the rector, "the work was done by a hired underling under the title of 'vicar': vicarius being the regular word for a substitute of any kind."

Many of these certainly were not interested in following the strict rule of St. Benedict.

First, physical labor was more or less dispensed with, for the monks claimed it took too much time from study. Also the dietary restrictions followed by the earlier communities of self-denying monks were abandoned by the less religious men. Concerning the overall character of monasticism during most of the Middle Ages, Cutts writes:

> Their general character was, and continued throughout the Middle Ages to be, that of wealthy learned bodies; influential from their broad possessions, but still more influential from the fact that nearly all the literature and art and science of the period was to be found in their body.[14]

Unfortunately, many who entered were totally unsuited to religious life, and their vices gradually brought disgrace on the Church and upon the sincere churchmen. That the latter protested is shown by the complaint of Archbishop Stantford in 1342:

> Monks and nuns of our province, procuring appropriations of churches, strive so greedily to apply to their own uses the fruits, revenues, and profits of the same, that ...they neglect to exercise any works of charity whatsoever among the parishioners. Wherefore, by this their exceeding avarice, they not only provoke to indevotion those who owe them tithes and ecclesiastical dues, but also teach them sometimes to become perverse trespassers on, and consumers of, the said tithes, and abominable disturbers of the peace, to the grievous peril of both monks' and parishioners' souls, and to the scandal of very many.[15]

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[14] Cutts, p. 9.

[15] Coulton, Medieval Panorama, p. 167.

During the tenth and eleventh centuries reformed orders of Benedictines, such as the Carthusian and the Cistercians, were established in an attempt to overcome the disrepute resulting from the increased wealth and lax living within certain monasteries. The reformed orders tried to revive the early disciplines.

Most of the clergy who did not belong to the Benedictine Orders were supposed to follow the Augustine rule. Pope Leo III (795-816) decreed that the other denominations of the clergy, including priests, canons, and clerks, who were not members of a monastic group, were to form one great order which would follow the Augustine rule. This rule was less strict than the Benedictine. Its members were divided into Canons Secular and Canons Regular. The former group included the clergy of the cathedrals and collegiate churches. They were not bound by conventual rules or vows of poverty, but the Canons Regular were obligated to live a conventual life and to renounce private property. Cutts states: "The Canons Regular of St. Augustine were perhaps the least ascetic of the monastic orders." He quotes Enyol de Provins, a thirteenth century minstrel who became a monk, as saying: "Among them one is well shod, well clothed, and well fed. They go out when they like, mix with the world, and talk at table."[16]

During the thirteenth century the monasteries began to lose power as the Popes assumed more control. The papacy now reserved the right of nominating to vacant benefices. However, this change did not cure the ills which had existed during the period of monastic control; in fact, the situation became worse. Pope Gregory IX (1227-1241) and Pope Innocent IV (1243-1254) gave the best benefices in England to Italian priests, many of whom remained in Italy and hired parish chaplains to carry on their ministry. The practice caused bitter resentment, for local revenues were being procured by foreigners. The system gave rise to another evil practice called Pluralism, which meant that one man might hold several benefices. Cutts states, "The extent to which this system of Pluralities was carried in the Middle Ages seems almost incredible; we even read of one man having from four to five hundred benefices."[17] Also benefices were frequently assigned to men who had taken only minor clerical orders.

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[16] Cutts, p. 20.

> The men had taken a minor order only to qualify themselves for holding the temporalities of a benefice, and never proceeded to the priesthood at all; they employed a chaplain to perform their spiritual functions for them, while they enjoyed the fruits of the benefice as if it were a lay fee, the minor order which they had taken imposing no restraint upon their living an entirely secular life.[18]

In an attempt to stop these abuses, in 1274 the Second General Council of Lyons ordered all curates to reside in their parishes and to take the orders of the priesthood within a year after their election. This decree had little effect. Coulton cites Bogo de Clare as an example. The younger son of the Earl of Gloucester came to be reckoned among the clergy of all English dioceses except London, Bath and Wells, Carlisle, and Worcester. In 1282, when he had obtained the twentieth of his endowments, he was not a priest, and it is not certain he ever became one.[19]

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[17] *Ibid.*, p. 200.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 200.

Such abuses continued during the fourteenth century. The Avignon popes, particularly John XXII (1316-1334), wanted to be as wealthy and powerful as the temporal rulers. To this end, an attempt was made to free the Church from temporal control by claiming that all disputes concerning the Church should be determined by the papal curia. These popes also resorted to financial extortion in order to make the Church's wealth rival that of any of the temporal powers.[20] All bishops and abbots appointed by the Pope were required to pay annual income taxes, as well as fees at the time of their appointment. The lesser clergy paid annats from any benefices received through papal appointment. Hoyt claims "that toward the close of the fourteenth century all episcopal and most monastic benefices were controlled by papal nominations," and that "Expectancies" to these benefices were sometimes sold "to hopeful candidates for the right to be considered for provision to benefices when they became vacant."[21]

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[19] Coulton, Medieval Panorama, p. 155.

[20] Hoyt, p. 556. John XXII's staff included more than four hundred members, and he also allowed each of his cardinals to have ten squires.

The source of this money was the laity. Every parishioner paid an income tax of ten per cent. Also lesser tithes were placed on almost everything else, such as cheese, etc., the only exception being crops and beasts.[22] Any person who attempted to defraud the Church was to be excommunicated.[23]

Gradually the temporal rulers began to gain more control because these abuses caused general anti-clerical feeling. In England in 1351 Edward III issued The Statute of Provisors, which prohibited papal provisions, and The Statute of Praemunire, which prohibited an appeal to the papal curia from a decision given by an English court.

In addition to the previously described abuses, the lack of parish priests also served to weaken the ties between the laity and the Church. Many ecclesiastics desired less arduous duties than those of the parish priests. Therefore, some became guild priests: this meant that they were chaplains assigned to particular guilds to celebrate daily mass for the members of the organization. This offered an easier and more lucrative life than a parish assignment. Others accepted temporary engagements to say masses for the soul of a deceased member. Some became domestic chaplains to noblemen who had private chapels in their homes. In fact, larger royal houses frequently included quite an aggregation, consisting of a dean, a canon, clerks, and a choir. Frequently churchmen were employed by the lord in secular pursuits, such as surveying or secretarial work. Such employment in worldly matters was not limited to domestic chaplains, for the bishops were frequently involved in endeavors which concerned the political state. While serving as statesmen, ambassadors, and even generals, they employed suffragan or substitute bishops to work in their dioceses. Therefore many dioceses as well as parishes remained unstaffed.[24]

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[21] Hoyt, p. 558.

[22] Coulton, Medieval Panorama, p. 156.

[23] The text of this curse may be found in the Instructions for Parish Priests by Canon Myrc. E.E.T.S., Vol. 127, ll. 750-780.

In addition to their greed and worldliness, many of the ecclesiastics also shocked the faithful by their immoral actions. "In the two hundred and eighty-one parishes of the Hereford visitation (A.D. 1397) seventy-two clerics, nearly all priests, were presented by the parishioners for incontinence: this gives more than twenty-five per cent."[25]

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[24] The ranks of the parish priests were also depleted by the Black Death (1348). G. G. Coulton states that forty per cent of the parish priests died in the epidemic. Medieval Panorama, p. 494.

[25] Ibid., p. 173. Coulton explains that the bishop's commissary or archdeacon was sent to ask questions of four synodsmen from each parish. One of the first questions always concerned the cleric's morals. Thus these statistics may be found in these visitation records.

Therefore, it is not surprising to find that the secular clergy, consisting of bishops and priests, were not respected by the medieval parishioners. For a time the laity considered the regular clergy, which consisted of monks and friars, as superior to these seculars. They thought the seculars were inferior to the monks in learning and wealth and to the friars in zeal and holiness. However, by Chaucer's time, the abuses committed by the regular clergy had become so flagrant that the poet's most unworthy figures are from this group. Nevertheless, for a time the friars were the most popular of all the medieval churchmen. The reason for this will become apparent as this group is considered.

During the thirteenth century this new class of religious orders had been formed to serve a purpose that differed totally from the objectives of the other regular clergy, the monastics. Originally, at least, monasticism implied seclusion from the world in order to allow time for religious contemplation. The truly religious monks did not stray from their cloisters. The emphasis was placed on leading a life that would secure the salvation of the individual who was involved. On the other hand, the friars were to be active churchmen whose duties involved helping mankind. Instead of living in the cloister, they were expected to spend a major portion of their time going through the country preaching and doing charitable deeds. Cutts describes them as "home missionaries."[26]

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[26] Cutts, p. 36

Four such orders were founded during the thirteenth century. The Franciscan order, whose rule was drawn up by St. Francis of Assisi, was approved by Innocent III in 1210; the Dominicans, organized by St. Dominic, were confirmed by Honorius III in 1216. The two lesser known mendicant orders, the Carmelites and the Austin Friars, were recognized by the General Council of Lyons in 1274.

The two founders, Francis and Dominic, decided out of humility that their followers should be designated Brother (_Frater_, _Frere_, _Friar_) rather than _Father_ and _Dominus_ as the monks were titled. Francis called his group _Fratri Minori_ or lesser friars; however, they were also known as Grey Friars, for during this period their habits were grey. Dominic's group, the Preaching Friars, came to be called Black Friars because of their habits.

Both groups followed the Augustine rule, taking the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience; but they placed special emphasis on poverty. They were not allowed to possess any property as a group or as individuals, and they were obliged to live on the alms they collected. Also both founders emphasized that their groups were to be concerned with helping the poor. Their followers were carefully prepared to be preachers and teachers. Before they were licensed as general preachers, they were required to study theology for three years. During the early years of these orders, the aspirants were examined as to learning and character before they were given commissions which designated them as either limitors of listers. If a friar was a limitor, he had to limit his ministry to a certain assigned district; if he was a lister, he was allowed to practice in the areas where he had listed with the bishop. This brought the friars into territories which the parish priests considered to be theirs, and this caused great conflict between the parochial clergy and the friars.

Unfortunately, these religious groups also deteriorated as they drifted away from the original ideal. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries wealth became the prime objective of many houses, and the greater number the friars, the greater the amount collected. This caused some convents to relax all character qualifications. Eventually some houses allowed the friars to keep a portion of the alms they had collected.

The Franciscan Order became divided over the question of ownership of property. The Spiritual Franciscans believed that the theory of apostolic poverty applied to all ecclesiastics including the pope. They stated that all churchmen should follow the example of Christ and his apostles in not owning earthly property. This group was opposed by the other Franciscans, called Conventuals, who wanted Church ownership. In 1323 John XXII denounced the Spiritual Franciscan's theory of apostolic poverty as heretical. Thus the greed of many friars and other clergymen was sactioned by this avaricious pontiff.

All of the previously disclosed matter—The Avignon papacy, the Great Schism, the papal taxation and centralization, and the need for reform within the regular and secular religious groups--caused a wave of anticlerical criticism during the fourteenth century. Some of this criticism produced challenges to the Church's doctrine; however, most of it was leveled at the worldliness, uselessness, and corruption of the clergy. John Wyclif became one of the most famous leaders of the opposition. At first his criticism was directed at the Church organization rather than any dogmas; for instance, he opposed the collection of papal taxes in England, he denounced Church ownership of property, and he denied the temporal power of the clergy. He also attacked the vice and immorality of many churchmen. In 1377 he was brought to trial, but a few months later the deliberation ended in confusion. Subsequently the pope issued five bulls condemning some of Wyclif's doctrines and demanding his imprisonment. However, because of his own personal popularity and also John of Gaunt's protection, Wyclif was saved from punishment and remained free for the rest of his life. When the Great Schism started the year after his trial, Wyclif changed from critic to opponent. After 1378 he questioned Church doctrine: he proclaimed his disbelief in the doctrine of transubstantiation, he challenged the authority of the Pope, and he upheld the Bible as man's sole guide to salvation. He believed that through sin and temporal greed the Church had lost all rights to power and property and that it should be reduced to absolute poverty. After Wyclif's death in 1384, his followers, called Lollards, continued to spread his teachings.[27] By 1401 Parliament passed a law which declared burning to be the punishment for heresy. However, this decree was never effectively enforced.

Other members of the Church who continued to believe in its teachings must have shared the heretics' disdain for the unworthy ecclesiastics. For example, John of Gaunt, Chaucer's patron, who was once a strong supporter of Wyclif, refused to follow Wyclif when he attacked the dogmas of the Church. "Gaunt's position was that the Church itself was not false, but that the Church's servants needed to re-emphasize the essential elements of Christ's teaching. This was evidently the position shared by Chaucer."[28]

The remaining portion of this paper will attempt to evaluate Chaucer's portraits in the light of what appears to us to have been the condition of the Church in his time. It will demonstrate that he was well aware of the unworthiness of many.

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[27] Bowden, p. 17. Miss Bowden states: "The word lollard comes from the popular O. Dut. name given to a member of a lay order of mendicants, founded about 1300 to care for the sick and to dispose of corpses. These mendicants were first called "Alexiani" after their patron saint, but because of the way they sang their prayers, the term lollaert, or lolbroether, developed. The clergy looked upon these men with disfavor; first, they would not join any of the established orders; second, many of them were free thinkers, so that lollaert and "heretic" often possessed the same meaning; and third, their conduct was frequently disorderly. In England, the transfer of the name to the followers of Wyclif probably stemmed from the identification of lollard and heretic."

[28] George Williams, A New View of Chaucer (Durham, N.C., 1965), p. 154.

Chapter II

The Ideal Churchmen

The Parson and the Clerk

In order to understand Chaucer's evaluation of the churchmen of the fourteenth century, one must know the standards by which he measured these ecclesiastics. This chapter will be devoted to a study of his criteria, his ideal churchmen, the Parson, who is the truly pious secular priest; and the Clerk, who represents the best of scholarship within the Church.

The Parson is the personification of humility, holiness, and benignity; he is a living example of Christianity in action. He is the most idealized of all the Pilgrims, but he is one of the least vividly portrayed. In the General Prologue Chaucer does not reveal his external appearance, for the Parson is to be known by his deeds. He is one of the poor but learned clerics of the Church, one who labors diligently in his wide, poor parish, seeking only spiritual gains. "He was a shepherde and noght a mercenarie" (I (A) 514).[29] "He is the parish priest whom every parish priest should try to be, and he is not individualized, because that would interfere with his universality as sovereign example."[30] His poetic force comes from the beauty of the ideal that he typifies.

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[29] All quotations are from The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Fred N. Robinson (Cambridge, Mass., 1933).

He is the antithesis of the greedy churchmen who were so prevalent during this period. His poverty is stressed throughout the prologue: he is "a povre Persoun" (I (A) 478). He does not wish to excommunicate anyone for not paying his tithes; in fact, he gives a large portion of his substance to the poor. He has not shirked his duties as Parson by hiring a vicar to work his benefice, nor has he sought one of the easier and more lucrative positions, such as those held by the guild priest or by those who said masses for the deceased.

He does his duty through preaching, good deeds, and example. He has studied so as to be able to teach Christ's gospel. During times of sickness and grief, he comes to the aid of his parishioners. He is kind to the sinner, but he will not tolerate the obstinate offender. He does not teach his followers by words alone but also by example: "This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf,/That first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte" (I (A) 495-96). Recognizing the potential danger in the clergy's scandalizing the faithful, he warns,

> That if gold ruste, what shal iren do?
> For if a preest be foul, on whom we truste,
> No wonder is a lewed man to ruste;
> (I (A) 500-02).

Chaucer sums up his impression of this Parson in the last lines of his description in the Prologue:

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[30] Harold F. Brooks, Chaucer's Pilgrims (New York, 1962), p. 36.

> A bettre preest I trowe that nowher noon ys.
> He waited after no pompe and reverence,
> Ne maked him a spiced conscience,
> But Cristes loore and his apostles twelve
> He taughte, but first he folwed it hym-
> selve
> (I (A) 523-28).

An interesting parallel to Chaucer's description of the Parson can be found in John Myrk's Instruction for Parish Priests.[31] This author tells what type of man a parish priest should be. Like Chaucer's Parson, he is not ignorant: "When the blynde ledeth the blynde/Into the dyche they fallen both." An even greater resemblance can be seen in the next few lines:

> What thee nedeth hem to teche
> And wyhche thou muste thy self be.
> For lytel is worth thy prechynge
> If thou be of evyle lyvynge.

In The Canterbury Tales the Parson is next mentioned in the link following the Man of Law's tale. The host calls on this worthy man for a tale: "Sir Parisshe Prest,' quod he, 'for Goddes bones,/Telle us a tale" (II (B) 1166-67). The Prologue indicates that the Parson is accustomed to reproving sinners. Fulfilling his priestly duty, he mildly censures the Host: "The Parson hem answerde, 'Benedicite!/What eyleth the man, so synfully to swere?" (II (B) 1170-71). Infuriated by this rebuke, the Host taunts the Parson for his strictness by calling him a Lollard. At this point the Shipman offers to tell a tale in an attempt to forestall a sermon by the Parson. Because of this the Parson's Tale is delayed until the end of the Pilgrimage. Perhaps the Host's anger may have caused him to wait until the end of the pilgrimage to call on the priest again.

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[31] E.E.T.S., Vol. 127, ll. 1-22. Lines—2-3, 18-19, 21-22—are quoted above.

However, Chaucer's main reason for placing the Parson's tale at the end of the pilgrimage is more important than this. For the first time Chaucer indicates that the journey is coming to a close. Evening is fast approaching as the Host turns to the pilgrims and says, "Lordynges everichoon,/Now lakketh us no tales mo than oon" (X (I) 15-16). He continues, "Almoost fulfild is al myn ordinaunce" (X (I) 19). To re-emphasize the point that this is the last tale, Chaucer has the priest state, "I wol yow telle a myrie tale in prose/To knytte up al this feeste, and make an ende" (X (I) 46-47). Chaucer labors this point because he has drastically altered his plan from what he stated it to be at the beginning of the General Prologue. Earlier he had said he would have each pilgrim tell four tales. Therefore this indicates a different plan, and the tale is an abrupt change in tone and subject matter.

In the prologue to the tale the Parson makes the first mention of the religious significance of the pilgrimage in its symbolic connection with man's pilgrimage toward "That highte Jerusalem celestial" (X (I) 51). He states that he will present a moral lesson. Consistent with his life of simplicity, he believes that prose is the best vehicle for relating the truth; therefore, he declares he will avoid rhyme or alliterative verse. It is fitting that the Parson should feel called upon to relate such a sermon, for he is concerned with the spiritual welfare of the pilgrims. In his sermon, he does his best to fill their minds and hearts with a consciousness of their sin.

To today's reader the Parson's sermon seems interminable; however, W. W. Lawrence believes that it would not have been considered boring by the fourteenth century man.[32] Most modern critics accept Kate Petersen's textual evidence that the content comes from two thirteenth century tracts, Summa Casuum Poenitentiae by Raymund of Pennaforte and Summa sen Tractatus de Viciis of Guilielmus Peraldus, the sermon on Penitence coming from Raymund of Pennaforte's work and the section on the Deadly Sins being derived from Guilielmus Peraldus' tract. Miss Petersen considers the passage on the Seven Deadly Sins to be a digression.[33]

Sister M. Madeleva points out that the Parson's tale is a unified theological treatise on confession. It is divided into three parts which are the three stages of confession: "Contricioun of herte, Confession of Mouth, Satisfaccioun." She states:

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[32] William Witherle Lawrence, Chaucer and The Canterbury Tales (New York, 1950), p. 18.

[33] Kate Oelzner Petersen, The Sources of The Parson's Tale (Boston, 1901), pp. 1-34.

> Part I deals with the roots or reasons for contrition, the qualities of contrition, the effects of contrition, the kinds of sin, the examination of conscience, the means of avoiding sin, the seven mortal or deadly sins, with the definition, causes, and remedies for each. Part II treats of confession, the conditioning circumstances of sin, the qualities of a good confession, the manner of making a good confession. Part III discusses satisfaction to God and to one's neighbor through alms, deeds, and penance, strictly so called, prayer, fasting, mortification of one's body.[34]

The great difference between the matter of this tale and the contents of the other tales caused some critics to doubt whether Chaucer put it in his manuscript. W. W. Lawrence, F. N. Robinson, and many other modern critics believe that Chaucer did intend to end the work on such a note and that it is an appropriate tale for the Parson to tell.[35] In the General Prologue this priest is described as a conscientious pastor who leads his flock by words and examples; while telling his tale, he is seen as he attempts to do his duty toward the pilgrims.

Chaucer's other ideal religious, the Clerk,[36] closely resembles this worthy Parson. His poverty is one of the first qualities to be noticed in his description in the General Prologue. His hollow look, and his threadbare coat, the leanness of his horse, all combine to give this impression. He is a noble ecclesiastic, but he holds no great position in the Church: "For he hadde geten hym yet no benefice,/Ne was so worldly for to have office" (I (A) 291-92). But this Clerk is not interested in worldly possessions; he uses all his energies in study and prayer. He is a truly learned man who does not display his knowledge unless there is a reason to do so: "Noght o word spak he moore than was neede" (I (A) 304). When he feels that it is his duty to speak, his words, like the Parson's, are on a lofty theme. "Sownynge in moral vertu was his speche,/And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche." (I (A) 307-08).

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[34] A Lost Language and Other Essays on Chaucer (New York, 1951), p. 73.

[35] Robinson, p. 873 and Lawrence, pp. 150-54.

[36] The New English Dictionary defines clerk as a man in religious orders. Before the Reformation the term designated a member of one of the five minor orders. A clerk did notarial and secretarial work.

The boisterous host, who represents the world in general, does not appreciate the humble bearing of the Clerk:

> "Sire Clerk of Oxenford," oure Hooste
> sayde,
> "Ye ryde as coy and stille as dooth a mayde
> Were newe spoused, sittynge at the bord;
> This day ne herde I of youre tonge a word
> (IV (E) 1-4).

The Jolly Host has no use for meditation. Knowing that the Clerk is a scholar, he fears that he will tell some tedious masterpiece of moral value. He warns the Clerk against this and also against embellishing his tale with high rhetorical style: "Speketh so pleyn at this tyme, we yow preye,/That we may understonde what ye seye" (IV (E) 19-20). With great humility the Clerk assents to the Host's command to tell a tale; however, he soon makes it clear that he will stand up for what he knows to be good, as he states he will cite a story by "Fraunceys Petrak, the lauriat poete" (IV (E) 31).[37]

In order to understand one aspect of the Clerk's Tale, the reader must consider some events which precede its telling. In a previous story the Wife of Bath aimed her feminine shaft directly at this Clerk as she made disparaging remarks against another Clerk of Oxford, her fifth husband. Since then the Clerk has been patiently waiting to vindicate his own order from the abusive charges that she made.[38]

He is a scholar, a master of argumentation, and he answers the Wife of Bath with consummate art. He says that this tale is one that was told by a great scholar. It is not a direct assault against women; on the contrary, it is one of praise of wifely fidelity and womanly fortitude. He never makes any personal allusion to the Wife of Bath; however, everyone can recognize that the heroine is the very antithesis of the Wife of Bath. This tale also points out the fallacy in her belief that woman should dominate. Insuring against the possibility of a retort by the Wife, he suddenly directs the work toward all men and women. He transfers the subject to the allegorical level, with the heroine Griselda being portrayed as the personification of the virtue of patience.

The moral lesson inherent in this story is certainly the Clerk's principal reason for selecting it, the satire at the expense of the Wife of Bath being of only secondary importance. From the description of the Clerk's character as given in the General Prologue, every reader expects an edifying tale from him, and so it is. Muscatine feels that "the poem is quite plainly designed in imitation of no 'life' in the naturalistic sense, but as something abstract and formulated essential, pared of 'accident' almost to nakedness."[39] Griselda becomes the model of Christian resignation while Walter suggests "the seemingly capricious hand of God visiting oppression upon one of the faithful."[40] However, the conclusion of the allegory emphasizes that "God tests us not that we should fall, for this would be leading us into evil, but that we may learn to submit ourselves to Him. In terms of the story, this means knowing that that God whom we thought we knew in our prosperity makes himself apparent as well in adversity."[41] This is fit matter for the Clerk's tale, as it involves a theological concept that has been discussed by many scholars throughout the ages.

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[37] Robinson, p. 814. Petrarch's Latin story _De Obedientia ac Uxoria Mythologia_ was based on the last story in the _Decameron_.

[38] Kittredge, p. 189.

However, Chaucer's scholar does not close his work with his austere religious exhortation to all men to be patient, for he suddenly changes this appeal from the general to the particular by offering to recite a song in honor of the Wife. This ironical postscript, which is extremely clever, states that even though all revere the heroine, Griselde, they must despair of finding her equal, for women are not this patient: "Grisilde is deed, and eek hire pacience,/And bothe atones buryed in Ytaille" (IV (E) 1177-78). Women are more like the Wife of Bath; so he closes his tale by satirically exhorting all wives to follow her example:

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[39] Charles Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition (Berkeley, 1960), p. 192.

[40] Paul G. Ruggiers, The Art of the Canterbury Tales (Madison, Wisconsin 1967), p. 220.

[41] Ibid., p. 221.

> Ye archewyves, stondeth at defense,
> Syn ye be strong as is a greet camaille;
> Ne suffreth nat that men yow doon
> offense.
> (IV (E) 1195-97)

By the end of the tale, the Clerk has won a complete victory over the worldly Wife of Bath. The entire piece fits his character, for it is one of the most scholarly works in The Canterbury Tales. As Kittredge claims, "His mock encomium is not only a masterpiece of sustained and mordant irony; it is a marvellous specimen of technical skill in metre, in diction, and in vigorous and concentrated satire."[42] The Clerk is a master in argumentation, grammar, satire, and allegory. His brilliance and wit lead Howard Patch to believe that he is the pilgrim who is most like Chaucer. However, the Clerk has no patience with the Wife of Bath nor with the rogues whom Chaucer finds most interesting; he is far more idealistic.[43] Like the Parson, he is presented as an ideal. He represents the wisdom and the scholarship that should have been found within the Church.

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[42] Kittredge, p. 200.

[43] On Rereading Chaucer (Cambridge, Mass, 1939), pp. 168-69.

When the other personages are judged according to the exacting standards set up by the Parson and the Clerk nearly all are found lacking. Some appear ridiculous, some self-seeking while others seem wicked.

Chapter III

The Respectable Ecclesiastics

The Prioress, the Nun's Priest, and the Second Nun

The General Prologue mentions five pilgrims headed by the Prioress: "Another Nonne with hire hadde she,/That was hir chapeleyne, and preestes thre" (I (A) 163-64). The last three words in these lines have caused some controversy. Muriel Bowden believes that Chaucer wrote the line, "That was hir chapeleyne....," and that some scribe contributed the rest to fill out the rhyme. To support her view, she cites three reasons: it would explain Chaucer's claim that there were twenty-nine pilgrims at the Tabard, it would coincide with his telling only the Nun's Priest's tale, and it seems unlikely that the prioress of a small convent would have more than one priest.[44] Whatever the number, Chaucer limns only three of these ecclesiastics, the Prioress, the Nun's Priest, and the Second Nun. The Prioress is the only one of these three to be delineated in the General Prologue, the Nun's Priest and the Second Nun not actually appearing until their tales. It seems likely that Chaucer does this to establish the superior postion of the Prioress.

The Prioress's portrait is one of the most carefully drawn pictures in the General Prologue. She is a distinct individual not a generalized type. Each of the details in the description of her is meticulously pointed; yet there is considerable controversy over the conception of her character which results from these details.

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[44] Bowden, p. 508.

Kittredge believes that, of all the Canterbury Pilgrims, the Prioress is one of the most sympathetically conceived. He interprets her entire sketch in the Prologue in this light. He pictures her as a person of noble blood who had been brought up in a convent school and who has now become the Prioress of a rich order. He finds it fitting that she should travel with a nun and three priests to protect her from any of the vulgar elements which she might encounter. This does not mean that she holds herself aloof; on the contrary, she is really quite amiable: "And sikerly she was of greet desport" (I (A) 137). Kittredge suggests that the couplet concerning the Prioress's manners has often been misunderstood. "And peyned hire to countrefete cheere/Of court, and to been estatlich of manere," (I (A) 139-40) does not mean that her manner is an affected imitation of polite behavior; rather it implies that her bearing it exquisitely courtly. Her table manners are simply in accord with her ladylike daintiness. "Nothing is further from Chaucer's thoughts than to poke fun at them."[45] Her oath, "By St. Loy," is merely another example of her ladylike character. He believes that another trait of her character, deep feeling, is demonstrated in her pity for the little things of this world, such as dogs and mice. He concludes that her picture in the General Prologue is marked by gentleness and kindness, and it is this conception of her that caused Chaucer to give her such a sweet and moving tale.[46]

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[45] Kittredge, p. 177.

Sister Madeleva's concept of the Prioress is similar to Kittredge's. She also believes that Chaucer is revealing the actions of a holy woman, her actions being in accordance with the Rule of St. Benedict, under which she is living.[47] The first line of her description in the Prologue, "That of hir smylyng was ful symple and coy" (I (A) 199), is interpreted by Sister Madeleva as being an example of the Prioress's hospitality towards strangers. This is in accordance with her Rule which prescribes charity towards others. A further example of the Prioress's observance of the Rule is found in Chaucer's reference to her singing of the Divine Office. The Benedictine Rule requires daily recitation of the Divine Office. Sister Madeleva states that the Prioress is performing this ritual in the proper manner: "The Office is in Latin and is chanted and intoned, 'entuned in the nose' in various keys."[48]

John Spiers takes an opposite stand, as he believes that the portrait of Madame Eglentyne is one of poised irony. He suggests that the phrase, "her smylyng was ful symple and coy," would be more appropriate for a young girl than for a dignified nun. He also points out that Eglentyne, the name of a wild flower, is a rather unexpected name for a Prioress. Spiers also considers the references to her table manners as derogatory: they imply that she attaches too much importance to these external things. "Her anxiety to 'ben holden digne of reverence' by affectation of courtly manners rather than by holiness of life confirms her underlying worldly vanity."[49] Aside from these externals, Spiers attempts to evaluate her inner feelings, particularly in the following lines:

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[46] Ibid., pp. 174-78.

[47] The same rule applied to both monks and nuns.

[48] Chaucer's Nuns and Other Essays, pp. 4-11.

> But, for to speken of hire conscience,
> She was so charitable and so pitous
> She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous
> Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or
>   bledde
> (I (A) 142-45).

The Prioress's tenderness seems to be aroused on a purely emotional level; it is sentimental, rather than spiritual. The objects of this sentiment do not seem to warrant such effects in a devout nun. Her charity would appear more suitable if it were expended on the sufferings of the human race. He concludes that the portrait of the Prioress in the General Prologue presents an elegant lady of the world, a sentimentalist rather than a devout nun.[50]

Many other critics agree that her portrait contains much satire.

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[49] Spiers, p. 105.

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 103-07.

Lawrence feels, "The Prioress is a lady whose affectations are shyly revealed."[51] Skeat believes that she may have invoked St. Loy because he was the patron saint of goldsmiths, "for she seems to have been a little given to love of gold and corals." He does not feel that any criticism of her French is intended, as she speaks the Anglo-French that was accepted and was reputed to have been taught properly at the Benedictine nunnery at Stratford-at-bow.[52] Both he and D. W. Robertson point out that the description of her table manners comes directly from a passage in Le Roman de la Rose.[53] Robertson further states that these manners were taken directly from "the cynical worldly-wise instructions of La Vielle." He explains that they are not the manners of a great lady nor the proper concern of a Prioress; rather they suggest the "ostentatiously" correct behavior of a social climber. Robertson seems more critical of the Prioress than many of the other authors who also believe that her portrait contains such satire. He says, "In a very real sense, the prioress is a grotesque": her position suggests one thing while her attitude is totally different.[54]

A most interesting interpretation of the Prioress is given by the historian Eileen Power. After making a careful study of the medieval nunneries, she states that the records show the "almost photographic accuracy of the poet's observation." She finds that many young girls who had entered the convent were not suited to the religious life or they were not ready to break completely from the world. The Visitation records of this period offer examples of such persons, and Miss Power believes that Chaucer's Prioress is one of these. "The nuns were supposed to wear their veils pinned tightly down to their eyebrows, so that their foreheads were completely hidden; but high foreheads happened to be fashionable among worldly ladies, who even shaved theirs to make them higher, and the result was that the nuns could not resist lifting up and spreading out their veils, for how otherwise did Chaucer know that Madame Eglentyne had such a fair forehead?"[55] She also points out that "the smale houndes, like the fair forehead and the brooch of gold full sheen, were strictly against the rules." Her pleated wimple was also against regulations. Perhaps her most obvious transgression is her participation in the pilgrimage. From early times different Church Councils had forbidden nuns to go on pilgrimages. In 1300 Pope Boniface VIII had issued a papal bull stating that nuns were not to leave their convents. In 1318 the archbishop of York also ordered that the nuns were not to leave their houses "by reason of any vow of pilgrimage which they might have taken. If any had taken such vows she was to say as many psalters as it would have taken days to perform the pilgrimage so rashly vowed."[56] No one can dispute the documented evidence that Miss Power presents.[57] However, the reader must decide how damaging Chaucer meant these infractions to be to her character. G. G. Coulton, who is also aware of all of her lapses from the regulations, still believes the Prioress to be the most sympathetically drawn of all Chaucer's religious. He thinks that Chaucer is just indulging in sly humor.[58] Paul G. Ruggiers feels that Eileen Power emphasizes her worldliness in the same way that Sister Madeleva emphasizes her religious nature.[59]

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[51] Lawrence, p. 60.

[52] The Rev. Walter W. Skeat, The Complete World of Goeffrey Chaucer (Oxford, 1924) pp. 14-15.

[53] Robertson, p. 244.

[54] Ibid., pp. 244-47.

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[55] Eileen Power, Medieval People (London, 1950), p. 77.

The opinions of these critics manifest the diversity of thought on the subject of the Prioress's character as it is conceived in the General Prologue. To gain a clearer impression, the reader must consider the other times that Madame Eglentyne appears in the Canterbury Tales. One may obtain valuable insight into her character by observing the Host's estimation of her, found in his address to her before her tale. Throughout the entire work the Host, Harry Bailey, makes biting remarks about the imperfections that he perceives in the different pilgrims. However, when he speaks to the Prioress, he changes from his usual harsh manner to a courteous demeanor. This exemplifies the high esteem which he has for the Prioress. His clairvoyant eye sees the evil in others, but he appears to judge her as a holy woman.

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[56] Victoria County Histories. Yorkshire, III, 172.

[57] Power, pp. 60-84.

[58] Coulton, Medieval Panorama. pp. 275-76.

[59] Ruggiers, p. 175.

However, the truest measure of her character is found in her own words. The Prologue to her tale begins as a prayer in praise of Our Lord and in honor of His Mother. Sister Madeleva discovered that this prologue is actually a paraphrasing of the Benedictine Breviary: the first seven lines being taken from three verses of the opening of Matins and the next seven from an antiphon of Matins.[60] The remaining lines include her dedication of the story and her invocation for aid in telling it. The tone of the complete prologue is one of sincere Christian humility, and it foreshadows the prayerful nature of her entire tale. Ruggiers points out that this section also serves as a transition between the profane and the holy, for in the preceding tale the Shipman described a wily monk. He believes that any worldliness attributed to the Prioress in the General Prologue vanishes now, as she serves as a contrast to the errant monk of the Shipman's tale.[61]

The tale is a further example of the Prioress's humility: it is short and simple. It is based on a legendary account of the martyrdom of a little boy by the Jews.[62] Even though it is a brief tale, it is perfectly proportioned. It is a "gem of flawless artistry."[63] It captures perfectly the sweetness of a little child, whose simple faith appears so dear. It is filled with deep and tender pathos. The poem dwells more on human emotions than on the supernatural aspects, as it shows a mother's anxiety over her lost child and the overwhelming sorrow that the mother bears at the death of her child. This tenderness of expression displays the motherly love that the Prioress has for little children.

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[60] Sister Madeleva, Chaucer's Nuns, p. 31.

[61] Ruggiers, pp. 177-78.

[62] Hugh of Lincoln, boy martyr, supposed to have been murdered by the Jews in 1255.

When the work reaches the moment of supreme pathos, the spirit of the tale suddenly changes to devout wonder at the performance of a miracle.

> "My throte is kut unto my nekke
> boon,"
> Seyde this child, "and, as by wey of
> kynde,
> I sholde have dyed, ye, longe tyme agon.
> But Jesu Crist, as ye in bookes fynde,
> Wil that his glorie laste and be in mynde,
> And for the worship of his Mooder deere
> Yet may I synge O Alma loude and cleere.
> (VII, 649-55)

In these lines the child shows that he is cognizant of being an instrument of God. The Mother of God has placed a seed upon his tongue, and he will continue to sing until the seed is removed. This "greyn" may represent faith, which is not needed in heaven but which the child is helping to spread on earth. It also may be symbolic of the consecrated

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[63] Brewer, pp. 147-48.

Host or of the Mission of the Church, being promulgated in the blood of the martyrs.[64]

After narrating these supernatural happenings, the Prioress attempts to convey their probability by relating them to the similar murder of Hugh of Lincoln by the Jews. Throughout this tale, which is filled with tenderness and compassion, is also found hatred and bigotry. Shelly states: "Neither the womanly compassion of the narrator, nor her truly religious temper, strong though they are, is sufficient to enable her to overcome the prejudices of her day."[65] Lounsbury points out that her sentiments do not indicate that Chaucer agreed with her anti-semitic feelings, but they do show that he recognized that during his age persons of education and position did believe tales of this sort.[66] This feeling against the Jewish people had all the force of a religious passion, as the multitude of medieval Europe felt it a sacred duty that the blood guiltiness should be brought home to the self-cursed race.

The Prioress is a basically good person, but she is not philosophically inclined. She has the unquestioning faith of a little child, for it is not an absence of faith, but a lack of wisdom, that causes her to fail to see things in their proper perspective.

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[64] Sister Madeleva, Chaucer's Nuns, p. 34.

[65] Shelly, p. 266.

[66] Thomas Lounsbury, Studies in Chaucer, Vol. II (New York, 1892), p. 490.

> She indeed does not fail so much as succeeds imperfectly in a vocation of the most exacting sort....She is not attuned to the austerity of the conventual idea; she has not sufficiently put off the lady, and her woman's instincts are in part deflected to pathetic dead mice and little pet dogs, rather than transformed and sanctified.[67]

Thus she sometimes appears a little ridiculous, but Chaucer never questions her morality, nor do the other pilgrims.

Chaucer expresses his final approval of Madame Eglentyne by showing the impression that her tale makes upon the whole company: "Whan seyd was al this miracle, every man/As sobre was that wonder was to se" (VII, 691-92). The boisterous Host unintentionally pays the Prioress a supreme compliment. After her tale he begins jesting to hide the emotional effect that the story has had on him. However, he unwittingly speaks in the rhyme royal stanza form, the very rhyme scheme that the Prioress used to relate her tale. This vividly displays the tremendous emotional impact that this story had on the pilgrims, and on Harry in particular. It has the same effect on the modern reader. "What we tend to remember, however, is a tale of transcendent innocence uttered in Chaucer's sweetest verse. The theme that comes through even the dreadful details of drawn and quartered villains is that of the special relationship of innocence to wisdom."[68]

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[67] Brooks, p. 9.

[68] Ruggiers, 183.

The Nun's Priest is a member of the group that is accompanying the Prioress. This "gentil priest" is not characterized in the General Prologue, nor is he mentioned in any of the links. Up until the time of his tale, he is completely overshadowed by the prominence of the Prioress. This leads one to believe that he does not hold the important position of father confessor to these nuns. He appears, instead, to be merely an attendant or a bodyguard. The Host's humiliating address to him seems to substantiate such a theory.[69] The Host would not have addressed a person of importance in such a haughty manner. He sees the Nun's Priest as a cleric, upon whom he can safely vent his displeasure which stems from the proceding tale, which was told by the Monk. The Host addresses the Nun's Priest in the familiar second person singular; he also does not hesitate to call him Sir John, a contemptuous nickname for priests: "And seyde unto the Nonnes Preest anon,/"Com neer, thou preest, com hyder, thou sir John" (VII, 2809-10). The priest humbly submits to the Host's demands for a "mery tale." But the Host and the Pilgrims do not expect much from this Priest who has been riding along on "a jade."[70]

However, the priest's hidden genius appears in this tale, in which he hides the very weaknesses of humanity under the feathered costumes of cocks and hens. Under the guise of this merry folk tale, he discusses some of the most weighty subjects in an interesting way. In the previous tale, another higher ranking churchman, the monk, presented a dignified subject in a most boring fashion. Accordingly the Nun's Priest Tale can be seen, in one aspect, as a parody of the Monk's Tale. Both works have as their central themes the pride that goes before a fall. However, in the Nun's Priest's Tale, the proud one is the cock, Chanticleer. The Nun's Priest gives his fable a touch of realism, by placing this dazzling cock on a poor widow's farm. The cock always remains a bird; but at the same time, he seems to possess the failings of human nature. Moreover, the tragedy, or near tragedy of the cock, comes in the wake of the stories told interminably by the monk; and the proximity of the telling, plus the mock heroic quality of Chanticleer and Pertelote adds to the humor. Also, the gravity of the Monk's Tale argues against the worldly position Chaucer gives him in the General Prologue, whereas the erudite and holy Nun's Priest evidences the genuine sense of humor he manages to keep well hidden. The drama of the tale and the humorous and ironic effects are carried off because of the subtle interrelationship of the two priests, and because of the veiled contempt the Prioress's Priest holds for the Monk.

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[69] Arthus Sherbo, "Chaucer's Nun's Priest Again," PMLA, LXIV (1949), 236-38.

[70] Chaucer's reference to his poor mount is similar to the phrase describing the Clerk's horse.

In the tale the cock is an egotist. The accomplishment of which he is especially proud is a rousing voice. This is the primary cause of his fall.

> In al the land of crowyng nas his peer.
> His voys was murier than the murie orgon
> On messe-dayes that in the chirche gon.
> (Vll, 2850-52)

This proud cock's favorite lady is Madame Pertelote. The couple presents a most natural parody of a human husband and wife. The tale centers about a conjugal dispute which comes up between them concerning the meaning of dreams.

Madame Pertelote, a very practical wife, explains the presence of horrible dreams by the humors in the body:

> Certes this dreem, which ye han met tonyght,
> Cometh of the greete superfluytee
> Of youre rede colera, pardee,
> Which causeth folk to dreden in hir dremes
> (VII, 2926-29).

After attributing the dream to purely physiological causes, Madame Pertelote prescribes a laxative.[71] To substantiate her prescription, she quotes Dionysius Cato. This is her sole authority.

> Lo Catoun, which that was so wys a man,
> Seyde he nat thus, 'Ne do no fors of dremes?'
> (VII, 2940-41)

This quotation brings forth a series of other quotations from her learned husband, contradicting her theory. He alludes to the Dreams of Nebuchadnezzar and relates many anecdotes of violent death, and he even quotes a Latin phrase. This whole episode develops the theme of pride, as he not only appears as an egotist, but also a pedant. In all of these actions, he resembles a Prince before his fall, thus echoing the fall of the princes told by the Monk. In one ironic phrase he is actually compared to a prince: "Thus royal, as a prince is in his halle."

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[71] Walter Clyde Curry, Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences (New York, 1926), pp. 220-25. Curry shows that the best medical opinions of the Middle Ages agree with her diagnosis and prescription.

The concern over the impending doom of the cock allows the Nun's Priest to introduce the subject of predestination, a favorite in the Middle Ages. He briefly touches upon it; but then, in Chaucerian fashion, he abandons it lightheartedly to such authorities as St. Augustine, Boethius, and Bishop Bradwardine.[72]

The Nun's Priest then turns to the dangerous subject of the woman's part in the fall of man. He likens the advice given by Madame Pertelote to the baleful counsel of Eve. However, he is quick to explain that these anti-feminist opinions are not his own, for he must not arouse the indignation of the Prioress. He does not withdraw the comment; he merely suggests the authorities that contain such views.

After this learned commentary on the questionable counsel of women, the speaker discusses the dangers of flattery. The pride of this cock makes him susceptible to the flattery of the fox. His pride is vividly portrayed in the description of the bird, fluttering his wings in delight at the fox's recognition of his talent. The bird's vanity is used as an example to men in high degree, to beware of flatterers; quite possibly the Nun's Priest steals a secret glance at the Knight, who has not yet gotten over his discomfort brought on by the Monk's dismal prophecies. The fox is compared to the great traitors in history. This scene, with the fox as the tempter, also seems to be a tragi-comic allegory of the Fall of Man, and perhaps has an echo of the traitors in the bottom pit of Dante's Inferno.

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[72] Bishop Bradwardine was Chancellor of University of Oxford, Archbishop of Canterbury, author of De Causa Dei. Robert French, A Chaucer Handbook, 2nd ed. (New York, 1947), p. 264.

When the fall is accomplished and the braggart is caught by the neck, the poetry of the tale rises to its superb mock heroic climax. At this point the Nun's Priest mourns his ineptitude in relating this great tragedy. He wishes that he possessed the talent of the master rhetorician, Geoffrey de Vinsauf.[73] In spite of this modest declaration, the Nun's Priest delivers the grand climax in a most illustrious fashion. The lamentations of the hens surpass the cries of famous women, on tragic occasions of history. There is a vivid picture of universal chaos.

At this climactic point, there is a reversal of fortune which results in the salvation of the cock. His deliverance is the direct result of the cock's own resourcefulness. In the end he is seen as profiting by his experience, for he is now on guard against the flatterers of the world. In the traditions of high tragedy the cock has gained wisdom through suffering.

The tale is genuine comic poetry; it is a comic image of life itself.[74] One Chaucerian suggests that the comic effect is achieved by having the reader see "the man in the bird and the bird in man." The delight in the work lies in the presentation of this beast epic with its full panoply of Chaucer's learning and rhetoric. The language is elegant, the emotions are high, and the subject matter contains nearly all the subjects of Chaucer's most serious thought. It is apparent why Chaucer would give such a tale to a scholar.

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[73] J. M. Manly "Chaucer and the Rhetoricans," Warton Lecture on English Poetry XVII (London, 1926), p. 15. Master Gaufred de Vinsauf wrote Nova Poetria, a work lamenting the death of Richard the Lion Heart. This book became one of the textbooks on rhetoric.

The Host, not being a scholar, misses the subtler points, but he thoroughly enjoys the delightful tale.

> "I - blessed be thy breche, and every stoon!
> This was a murie tale of Chauntecleer.
> (VII, 3448-49)

This tale fully restores the Host's good humor. In jest, he comments on the physical prowess of the priest. However, his whole description of his physical appearance appears to be broad irony. The total effect of the Nun's Priest's description, his tale, and the Host's comment on him seem to depict a scrawny, humble, and timid priest, one who is highly intelligent, well educated, shrewd, and witty. It is clear that he does not often have the chance to speak, but when he does, it is in a learned and interesting fashion. Raymond Preston states that "here Chaucer comes nearest to expressing in a single tale the variety and comedy of the whole Canterbury sequence."[75]

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[74] Brewer, p. 156.

[75] Chaucer (New York, 1952), p. 220.

The other associate of the Prioress, the Second Nun, is also introduced by means of her tale. She does not appear in any links, nor is she portrayed in the General Prologue. Like the Prioress she also is a member of the Benedictine Order. Her prologue is an expostulation against idleness, a vice that is strongly condemned by the Rule of St. Benedict. The method that she prescribes for overcoming this vice follows the dictate of St. Benedict, Ora et Labora.

The introduction to her tale, which comes after a brief prologue, is the most impressive part of the work. Her invocation to Mary is similar to that in the Prioress's prayer. Robert French believes the source of this invocation to be the opening lines of the last canto of the Divine Comedy.[76] However, Sister Madeleva believes that it is a paraphasing of the Little Office, which all nuns say every day.[77] Whatever the source, it becomes apparent that Chaucer merely translated it and did not give it his full attention, for in one passage he has her say, "And though that I, unworthy sone of Eve" (VII (G) 62). Nevertheless, the invocation does show her humility and love of the Mother of Christ.

Her tale, like the Prioress's,relates miraculous incidents. Here they concern the events surrounding the martyrdom of St. Celilia.

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[76] French, p. 326.

[77] Sister Madeleva, Chaucer's Nuns, p. 34.

The work is far inferior to the Prioress's Tale, as it is a mere translation which is rather poorly written. Despite the inferiority, the Second Nun may have gone further in her life of prayer than the Prioress. No indication of worldliness is ever suggested in connection with her.

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Chapter IV

The Unworthy Clergymen

The Monk, the Friar, and the Canon

Chaucer did not find the fourteenth century English monastic and mendicant orders worthy of respect. In the Centerbury Tales he examines these institutions with a realistic eye and reveals the abuses which he finds. His monk and his friar exemplify the decline in holiness and the increase in worldliness and corruption among the regular clergy during his time.

As Chapter I of this paper points out, all monastic churchmen took the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Their lives were supposed to be governed by four disciplines: "Propertylessness, Labour, Claustration, and Diet."[78] By the fourteenth century the orders had fallen into decadent dependence upon endowmments and monastic benefices for their livelihood, and misuse of funds was common. Many monks were nothing more than landed proprietors who devoted their lives to luxurious living.

Chaucer's Monk is a perfect example of this type of fourteenth century churchman. He is eminently successful in his profession although he is not yet an abbot.

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[78] Coulton, Medieval Panorama, p. 269.

> A Monk ther was, a fair for the maistrie,
> An outridere, that lovede venerie,
> A manly man, to been an abbot able.
> (I (A) 165-67)

His position of outrider[79] justifies his leaving the cloister, but it is implied that he does not limit his wanderings to those connected with his monastic duties. His favorite sport, hunting, was strictly against the rules. Although he is not outstanding for his religious zeal, he is considered a capable man of the world. In fact, the irony of his portrait depends on the striking contrast between his worldliness and his monastic vocation. The next few lines in the Prologue offer a brilliant example of this, as the profane sound of his bridle is described as rivaling the chapel bell.

> And when he rood, men myghte his brydel heere
> Gynglen in a whistlynge wynd als cleere
> And eek as loude as dooth the chapel belle.
> (I (A) 169-71)

Finding the monastic rules incompatible with the luxurious living that he desires, he simply dismisses such disciplinary measures. The colloquialisms which he uses in rejecting the texts express the contemptuousness of this sensual man:

> He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen,
> That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men,
> Ne that a monk, whan he is recchelees,
> Is likned til a fissh that is waterlees,—
> This is to seyn, a monk out of his cloystre.

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[79] Officer of the monastery whose duty it was to look after the property belonging to the monastery.

But thilke text heeld he nat worth an oystre;...
(I (A) 177-182).

Coulton explains the first two lines as follows: "The Vulgate Bible, at the passage where our Authorized Version makes Nimrod 'a mighty hunter before the Lord,' has 'against the Lord." He further points out that these lines also refer to the first volume of Canon Law which regulates against hunting. The next two lines also concern a text from Canon Law: it is St. Jerome's criticism of wandering monastics: "A monk out of his cloister dies spiritually, like a fish out of water."[80] Professor Skeat states that Chaucer has gained satire in the last two lines in this passage by inverting a pious statement: "Whoever would find them, let him seek them in their cloiser, for they do not prize the world at the value of an oyster."[81]

The billiant satire of these lines reaches its height when Chaucer affirms: "And I seyde his opinion was good" (I (A) 183). He continues: "How shal the world be served?" (I (A) 187). This question pierces the purpose of a religious vocation, for the Monk's calling should be to serve God, not the world. If the reader interprets the world as meaning his fellow man, no evidence has been given that the Monk is fulfilling this duty either.

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[80] Medieval Panorama, p. 272.

[81] Skeat, p. 22.

The remaining portion of his description relates the ways in which he flouts his vows and ignores monastic disciplines. That he totally disregards the vow of poverty is shown by his possession of fine hounds for hunting. His dress also attests to this, for his sleeves are lined with grey squirrel and his boots are of the finest leather. Brooks notes that the love knot pin he wears also demonstrates his lack of respect for his vow of chastity.[82] His hunting and his many other indulgences make it clear that he certainly does not follow the vow of obedience, for all of these were forbidden to monks. It is equally clear that he ignores the monastic disciplines: "propertylessness, labour, claustration, and diet." The violation of the first three has already been demonstrated, and the evidence of failure to observe dietary restriction is also displayed.

> He was a lord ful fat and in good poynt;
> His eyen stepe, and rollynge in his heed,
> That stemed as a forneys of a leed;
> His bootes souple, his hors in greet estaat.
> Now certeinly he was a fair prelaat;
> He was nat pale as a forpyned goost.
> A fat swan loved he best of any roost.
> (I (A) 200-06)

The full import of the satire in these lines is felt if the reader knows that originally the monks were supposed to follow a quasi-vegetarian diet; butcher's meat was forbidden to them unless they were sick. By the fourteenth century most monasteries ignored these regulations.[83]

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[82] Brooks, p. 19.

The perceptive Host has recognized the nature of this fine specimen of manhood. When he calls on the Monk for his tale, he satirically bemoans the waste of the Monk's fine qualities in a monastery. He sarcastically asks the Monk if his name is Sir John.[84] However, the position of the Monk causes the Host to refrain from further insults and to state that he is only jesting.

The series of tragedies which make up the Monk's Tale which immediately follows these remarks appears to have been placed in the Canterbury Tales solely for the sake of satire. While it is inferior to the other tales in literary value, it does serve as an excellent exposé of the Monk's character. The Monk feels that the dignity of his person and of his rank allows no unseemliness of speech. Assuming his purely professional role of a pious ecclesiastic, he embarks on a monotonous series of examples showing the fall of great men. These seventeen different accounts contain no character development and never consider the part that human responsibility plays in man's fall. The ineffectiveness is due to the brevity of each example, for although the accumulation seems lengthy, no illustration is really explored. For instance, the Monk devotes eight lines to the fall of Lucifer and eight others to the fall of Adam. Three of the tragedies concern fourteenth century personages: King Peter of Cyprus; Pedro the Cruel of Spain, father of Gaunt's wife Constance; and Bernado of Milan, whose daughter married Chaucer's first master, Prince Lionel. The Ugolino story is the most moving in the collection; most of the others are too bare to be effective. Hence the didactic tale appears to be merely a rote performance that the Monk has often repeated. It comes from a man who is not motivated by the love of God; therefore his words are "as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal." It is important to remember this tale's juxtaposition with the Nun Priest's tale, as the content of each emphasizes the contrast between the materially wealthy Monk and the spiritually endowed priest.

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[83] G. G. Coulton explains that the custom grew up within the monasteries to have "a sort of half-way chamber in which meat could be eaten--ordinary name--misericords,--Chamber of Mercy." This practice was forbidden during the thirteenth century, but by 1338 the practice was so widespread that Benedict XII permitted half the community to go to the misericordi at one time, half the other. Coulton also claims that the eating habits of the monks may be judged from the household books of the monasteries. He reports that at the Abbey of Westminster the smallest allowance of ale was a gallon each per diem and the allotment of fish was six to each monk at each meal. See pp. 269-70, 275.

[84] Reference may be to the Shipman's Tale. In the Shipman's Tale a monk named Don John has an affair with his host's wife. However, Sir John was a derisive name for a priest, and the Host also calls the Parson, "Jankin."

Chaucer uses a dramatic device to end this gloomy series of exempla. Because he finds the subject matter depressing, the Knight interrupts. However, the Host serves as the official critic, and it is he who speaks out against the boring narration. The interruption may indicate that Chaucer recognized the literary inferiority of the work, and it substantiates the theory that the tale was inserted merely for character portrayal. Before this rendition the Monk appears to be a worldly churchman; afterwards he seems to be a hypocrite as well. He tells didactic stories, for he considers them to be the proper material for a pious clergyman. Thus he shows that he is not willing to confess to the others, and perhaps to himself, the unholiness of his ways. At the end the Host asks the Monk to tell a tale about hunting, implying that he knows far more about this topic. After this insult the Monk refuses to say anything more.

No reader can doubt that Chaucer disapproves of the worldliness of the Monk, but the satire that he directs toward him is far less bitter than that which he levels at his other representative of the regular clergy, the friar. "In so far as Chaucer is capable of flaming indignation, he spends that upon the Friar."[85] The acceleration of his satire marks the descent in morals of the clergymen. For instance, Chaucer notes the Prioress's infractions of minor rules for ecclesiastics; he marks the Monk's negation of essential precepts for churchmen; he depicts the Friar's violations of the moral standards of all men, religious and lay alike.

Nevertheless, the Friar is considered a worthy member of his religious community, as Chaucer notes in one of his ironic puns: "Unto his ordre he was a noble post" (I (A) 214). He is a limiter, and this seems to have given him free range in using his priesthood as the means for fulfilling his base desires, for he appears not only avaricious but also lecherous. F. N. Robinson finds evidence of this last charge in the lines, "He hadde maad ful many a mariage/Of yonge wommen at his owene cost" (I (A) 212-13). He interprets this to mean that "he found husbands, and perhaps dowries, for women whom he had himself seduced."[86]

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[85] Coulton, p. 272.

More conclusive evidence is given of his greed; for example, he is exceptionally skillful in extracting money from penitents.

> Full swetely herde he confessioun,
> And plesaunt was his absolucioun:
> He was an esy man to yeve penaunce,
> Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce.
> (I (A) 221-24)

Most of the time he associates with the rich, but if he happens to meet a poor widow, he will manage to get something from her also. When the reader remembers that the orders of friars were organized for the purpose of helping the poor, he finds the following lines even more biting:

> He knew the tavernes wel in every toun
> And everich hostiler and tappestere
> Bet than a lazar or a beggestere;
> For unto swich a worthy man as he
> Acorded nat, as by his facultee,
> To have with sike lazars aqueyntaunce.
> It is nat honest, it may nat avaunce,
> For to deelen with no swich poraille,
> But al with riche and selleres of vitaille
> (I (A) 240-48).

That his order has also declined to the level of considering begging its principal objective is evinced in the fact that it collects rent from the friars for granting them the privilege of begging within assigned areas. Despite having to pay this fee, Chaucer's friar obviously manages very well:

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[86] Robinson, p. 758.

> For ther he was nat lyk a cloysterer
> With a thredbare cope, as is a povre scoler,
> But he was lyk a maister or a pope.
> Of double worstede was his semycope,...
> (I (A) 259-62).

Chaucer devised a clever scheme which allows him to give additional information about the Friar. The Friar and another churchman, the Summoner, have a violent quarrel that results in each telling a tale about the evils of the other's profession. This quarrel starts after the Wife of Bath's Prologue. When the Friar comments that it "is a long preamble," the Summoner jumps at the opportunity to use this uncalled-for remark to start a fight. He accuses friars of being meddlesome:

> "Lo," quod the Somonour, "Goddes armes two!
> A frere wol entremette hym everemo.
> Lo, goode men, a flye and eek a frere
> Wol falle in every dyssh and eek mateere
> (III (D) 833-36).

Without doubt the true cause of this accusation is that friars were given license to beg in territory that other religious considered to be theirs. Perhaps this friar, or one like him, has obtained some money that the Summoner thought should have been his. The Friar answers by promising to tell a tale about a summoner; the Summoner then promises to tell one about a friar. The Host manages to silence both so that the Wife of Bath may proceed with her tale. As soon as she finishes, the Friar begins. However, his tale is not as important in the development of the Friar's character as the one which the Summoner gives in response, for his is an exposé of the vices of the Friar and of friars in general.

After listening to the Friar's account of a Summoner being carried off by the devil, the Summoner devotes his prologue to a description of the special place in hell that is reserved for friars. The tale is one of Chaucer's best, for this is one instance in which he does not limit his rhetorical art to fit the ability of the teller. The content of this tale is certainly beyond the intelligence of the dull Summoner, but it is appropriate to the shrewd friar who is being depicted in the tale. It is a pointed exposé of the methods used by friars. First, the limiter asks the people in the Church to give money to have masses said for the dead; then he goes about the town begging. When he accepts the people's offerings, he writes their names on a tablet so that he will remember their names in order to pray for them later. As soon as he leaves the place, he erases the tablet. At this point Chaucer's Friar shouts, "Nay, ther thou lixt" (III (D) 1761), but the Host reprimands him and bids the Summoner continue.

The friar in the story now comes to the house of Thomas, a sick man. A minute description is given of his many revealing words and actions. He takes the most comfortable seat in the house, "And fro the bench he droof awey the cat" (III (D) 1775), and he "courteously" kisses the sick man's wife, "And hire embraceth in his armes narwe,/And kiste hire sweete" (III (D) 1803-04). His words are even more revealing.

Hinting for recompense, he tells the sick man that he has been praying for him. He then tells Thomas that he preached at his church that morning and proceeds to reveal his method to him:

> ...seyd a sermon after my symple wit,
> Nat al after the text of hooly writ;
> For it is hard to yow, as I suppose,
> And therefore wol I teche yow al the glose.
> Glosynge is a glorious thyng, certeyn,
> For lettre sleeth, so as we clerkes seyn
> (III (D) 1789-94).

Of course, he "taught hem to be charitable" (III (D) 1795).

Through his other lengthy remarks he reveals his gluttony, his deceit, his greed, and his wrath. When he is asked what he would like for dinner, he mentions many choice delicacies, but he concludes by saying that homely fare is good enough for him as he eats very little. He continues to labor the point of friars sacrificing such things as food, drink, and clothes. He compares the spare life "Of charitable and chaste bisy freres" (III (D) 1940), with the opulent life of the monks. Then he tells the sick man that he should give the good friars money so that they will pray for his recovery. When the sick man complains that he has already given much to them without noticing any improvement in his health, the Friar answers, "Youre maladye is for we han to lyte" (III (D) 1962). Another detail shows the very depths to which this hypocrite will sink: when the wife of the sick man says that her baby died two weeks ago, the Friar claims to have had a revelation showing the child being carried up to heaven. This is offered as proof of the efficacy of the friars' prayers.

The wife also complains that her husband has been in a very bad mood. This brings forth the Friar's sermon on ire. In it he cites _exempla_ from many obscure sources. This particular section is, as Ruggiers points out, totally beyond the intelligence of the Summoner, the teller of the tale.[87] After concluding the sermon, the Friar orders the sick man to shrive himself and then to give money to the friar's order so that they may enlighten the universe.

When the sick man gives him an insult rather than money, the Friar displays the very wrath that he has been preaching against. Ruggiers believes that from this point on it becomes apparent that the Summoner is the speaker.[88] Toward the end of the tale, Jenkins, another man in the Friar's district, tries to figure a way to apply the insult to the whole order. Ruggiers concludes:

> We pass back and forth between his the Summoner's revenge upon the Friar of the Prologue and the revenge of Thomas upon the hypocritical friar, enforced in the conclusion of the tale by the subtler implied revenge of Jenkins upon the whole order of friars.[89]

One critic contends that Chaucer had a contemporary figure in mind when he was writing this tale. He bases this belief on the fact that during Chaucer's day a Franciscan house did exist in the area which the author describes. He also claims that records show that these friars; like the Summoner's friars, were collecting funds to enlarge their buildings.[90] Even if this theory is not correct, it is certain that Chaucer intended to display the misdeeds prevalent in the mendicant orders during this time.

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[87] Ruggiers, p. 99.

[88] _Ibid._, p. 106.

[89] _Ibid._, p. 107.

Chaucer does not confine his portrayal of the decline in spirituality in the lives of the churchmen to the members of the regular clergy such as the monk and the friar. In the Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale he reveals the same avarice to be found among the secular clergy.

Chaucer introduces the participants in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale in a novel manner; the Canon and his Yeoman first appear as they ride up to join the pilgrimage at Boughton-under-Blean. This churchman is one of the Canons Secular of St. Augustine.[91] These ecclesiastics made up the clergy of the cathedrals and the collegiate churches. The first thing that Chaucer notices about the Canon's appearance is that he is sweating; perhaps this condition is due to his having ridden hard to catch up with the pilgrims. Before long the Canon's Yeoman begins to extol his skillful master, but the Host challenges him on this by asking why the Canon is so poorly dressed if he is so very clever. This causes the Canon's Yeoman to reveal that they have lost all they have and all that they have extorted from others in experiments in alchemy. When the Canon hears his servant's revelation, he orders him to stop, but the Host prods the Yeoman to continue. At this point the Canon flees, not wanting to be present as the Yeoman exposes his evil doings. This exposé, like the one in the Summoner's Tale, shows a mind that is totally dominated by greed.

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[90] John Manly, Some New Lights on Chaucer (New York, 1926), pp. 102-03.

[91] Skeat, p. 416. Canon is derived from a Greek word meaning a rule or measure, also a roll or catalogue. In the Church the names of the Ecclesiastics were registered; therefore, those so registered were called Canonici or Canons.

Chaucer does not stop with the disclosure of this one avaricious Canon, but allows the Yeoman to continue his tale by offering an example of another infamous canon. By using a clever confidence trick, this swindler dupes another ecclesiastic, "an annueleer."[92] Ruggiers likens "the subtle alchemist and his stupid victim" to the devil and the summoner in the Friar's Tale.[93] Thus, within this one tale Chaucer depicts three secular churchmen, who are just as greedy as any of the regular clergymen that he has portrayed.

According to Muscatine, "The Canon and Priest's activity is a deep apostasy, a treason, a going over to the devil himself. They are Judases." He also believes that Chaucer purposely juxtaposed this tale with the Second Nun's Tale, which precedes it: because of her faith St. Cecilia remains unharmed amidst flames, but these alchemists have their demoniac fires blow up in their faces.[94]

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[92] One who sang annual or yearly masses for the dead.

[93] Ruggiers, p. 137.

The clergymen who have been considered in this chapter--the Monk, the Friar, the Canons and the Priest--present Chaucer's most serious condemnation of the decline in spirituality among the ecclesiastics of this period. They display many of the vices which have been attributed to the churchmen of Chaucer's day. All are priests of the Church who have received Holy Orders and who have taken the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Because they have received the honor of the priesthood, their transgressions are more detrimental to the Church's prestige than the evils that are committed by any of the minor officers in the Church. If corruption is found among these officials, it can also be expected among the lesser functionaries.

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[94] Muscatine, p. 216.

Chapter V

The Ecclesiastical Parasites

The Pardoner and the Summoner

The members of the last group, the Summoner and the Pardoner, are merely affiliated with the Church, since they have not received Holy Orders nor are they the members of any religious community. However, they appear to be motivated by the same greed that has been so vividly displayed among some of the official churchmen. Even though they are not ordained clergymen, they also stand in condemnation of the system within the Church that allowed their evil practices to exist.

The Summoner makes a living by giving sinners summonses to appear before the Papal Court. Before Chaucer reaches his individual portrait in the General Prologue, he mentions him together with the Pardoner, the Reeve, the Miller, and the Manciple. All of these are cheats. When Chaucer begins his individual sketch of the Summoner, the first thing he notices is his repulsive physical appearance.

> A Somonour was ther with us in that
>   place,
> That hadde a fyr-reed cherubynnes face,
> For saucefleem he was, with eyen narwe.
> As hoot he was and lecherous as a sparwe,
> With scalled browes blake and piled berd.
> Of his visage children were aferd.
>   (I (A) 623-28)

Curry points out that these details are "marks of vicious living."[95] He explains that according to the medical lore of the Middle Ages this Summoner had all the symptoms of a kind of leprosy called alopicia. Chaucer is evidently following this medieval medical opinion; of course, there is actually no connection between his skin disease and leprosy. The medieval scientists thought that some signs of leprosy included the eyes appearing narrow and the voice sounding husky. Chaucer seems to indicate this second symptom when he describes the Summoner's duet with the Pardoner: "This Somonour bar to hym a stif burdoun;/Was nevere trompe of half so greet a soun" (I (A) 673-74). Lechery and gluttony were thought to be the causes of this condition, and Chaucer states the Summoner's excesses quite frankly.[96]

After discussing his physical appearance, Chaucer turns to his mental ability, or lack of it. Despite his denseness he manages to extort money by allowing offenders to get off for a price. He assures them that they will be freed from the penalty of excommunication if they give money to the Church:

> He wolde techen him to have noon awe
> In swich caas of the ercedekenes curs,
> But if a mannes soule were in his purs;
> For in his purs he sholde ypunysshed be.
> "Purs is the ercedekenes helle," seyde he
> (I (A) 654-58).

This last remark is leveled at some of the members of the hierarchy;

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[95] Curry, p. 40.

[96] *Ibid.*, pp. 40-45

therefore, it represents a serious condemnation of the Church. Chaucer safeguards himself against any furor that this charge may cause by having it made by a simpleton and by immediately disavowing it himself: "But wel I woot he lyed right in dede" (I (A) 659). He continues to stress the depravity and the stupidity of this rogue in the closing lines in the General Prologue.

> In daunger hadde he at his owene gise
> The yonge girles of the diocise,
> And knew hir conseil, and was al hir reed.
> A gerland hadde he set upon his heed
> As greet as it were for an ale-stake.
> A bokeleer hadde he maad hym of a cake.
> (I (A) 663-68)

As is true in the case of the Friar, the further characterization of this rogue stems from the fight between the Summoner and the Friar. Some idea of the Summoner's nature may be gathered from the coarser parts of his tale about the Friar; however, as was pointed out in the last chapter, much of its content is far beyond the intellectual capacity of the teller. Once again the opponent's tale, in this case the Friar's tale, is more important in evaluating the character. In his prologue the Friar gives a definition of a summoner:

> A somonour is a rennere up and doun
> With mandementz for fornicacioun,
> And is ybet at every townes ende
> (III (D) 1283-85).

He begins his tale with an inclusive list of crimes that fall under the archdeacon's jurisdiction. The archdeacon has a summoner who uses spies and even employs sinners to encourage others to do evil so that his profits will be increased. He manages a brisker trade than the archdeacon realizes: "His maister knew nat alwey what he wan" (III (D) 1345). This last line seems important because it may lessen the responsibility of the Church authorities, as it indicates that some of his actions are done without permission. On the other hand it may be simply that he cheats the cheater. After comparing him to Judas, the Friar concludes by calling him "A theef, and eek a somnour, and a baude" (III (D) 1354). It should be noted that he equates all three terms as being equally derogatory.

After exposing a few more methods that are used by this summoner, the Friar proceeds to the central incident in his tale. It begins with the devil meeting the summoner and ends with the devil winning the summoner's soul. Ruggiers explains that a preacher could easily convert this tale to fit different groups. In this instance the Friar cites the vices of summoners in the middle of this exemplum.[97] At first the Summoner is ignorant of the demon's identity. By having the Summoner ashamed to admit his profession to his new acquaintance, the Friar implies the degrading nature of this occupation.

> "Artow thanne a bailly?" "Ye," quod he.
> He dorste nat, for verray filthe and shame
> Seye that he was a somonour, for the name.
> (III (D) 1392-94)

As the summoner becomes better acquainted with his nameless companion, he openly confesses his evil ways and ends by saying, "Stomak ne conscience ne knowe I noon;/I shrewe thise shrifte-fadres everychoon" (III (D) 1441-42). Immediately after this, the devil reveals his identity. The Summoner is not disburbed.

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[97] Ruggiers, p. 95.

Throughout the remainder of their discussion, the devil's knowledge appears in strong contrast with the summoner's blind ignorance. As Robertson points out, the summoner is curious about visible things, such as the shapes that devils assume, but he totally misses the devil's hints concerning his own damnation and he completely ignores the devil's explanation of God's reason for allowing evil. This last point is made evident by the summoner's return to his questions concerning the physical shapes of the devil; these trivia are asked immediately after the demon's succinct discussion of temptation. He displays the same ignorance when he fails to understand the difference between the carter's curse and the old woman's.[98]

This last curse occurs when the Friar offers a final example of the summoner's depravity. After he accuses an old woman whom he knows to be innocent, she places a curse upon him unless he is willing to repent. His refusal of this chance clearly makes him the sole cause of his own damnation. This is followed by the devil's parody of Christ's words to the thief, as the demon states: "Thou shalt with me to helle yet to-nyght" (III (D) 1636). He then mentions the special place in Hell that is reserved for Summoners.

The Friar ends the tale by asking the Pilgrims to pray for the redemption of summoners. Concerning the closing lines, Rev. Paul E. Beichner writes,

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[98] Robertson, pp. 266-68.

> The Friar is not concerned with summoners in general, but with this Summoner, his adversary. By asking the pilgrims to pray that summoners will repent—a good work which they could hardly oppose—he implicitly assumes that they concur in his opinion of summoners, namely that they need to be prayed for, especially the pilgrim Summoner. In the context, this is a refined but devastating insult.[99]

Ruggiers reminds the reader of the genial Friar of the General Prologue, and he compares him with the genial devil of the narrative: "the teller's malice takes on the appearance of urbanity in the destruction of an enemy." The reader cannot miss the fact that this same relationship is found between the devil and the summoner in the tale. Therefore, if the Friar intends the Summoner to be the companion of the devil, he unconsciously makes himself the very devil.[100] If intelligence enters into the degree of guilt, by the end of this tale the diabolically clever Friar appears more guilty than the debased dullard whom he intended to expose.

The other member of this group, the Pardoner, is also a despicable character. It is fitting that he and the Summoner are found riding next to each other, for they are both predatory rogues in ecclesiastical habits. They are corrupt hangers-on of the Church, who use their offices as a means of exploiting human weaknesses. The satire of the Pardoner, like the satire of the Summoner, presents an exposé which reveals not only the wickedness of a single pardoner but also the institutional decay within the Church that made his existence possible.

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[99] "Baiting the Summoner," MLQ, XXII (1961), 375.

[100] Ruggiers, p. 196.

Pardoners were orginally nothing more than messengers who communicated indulgences or pardons from the Pope.[101] Under Canon Law pardoners had no power to forgive sins nor to sell indulgences. However, during the latter part of the Middle Ages abuses in this area were very widespread. Pardoners issued sweeping indulgences, absolved people from sin, and even claimed to be able to free souls from purgatory or hell. In 1311-1312 the Council of Vienna attempted to control such abuses by allowing the diocesan Bishops to examine the credentials of their pardoners before they were granted freedom to circulate in the dioceses. The bishops were empowered to punish them for any unlawful practices; however, they frequently failed to enforce these restrictions because the pardoners' collections built many churches and produced a large part of the Church's revenue. The abuses committed by the fourteenth century pardoners constituted one of the greatest weaknesses within the Church. Chaucer's character serves as a typical example of these charlatans.

The opening lines of the Pardoner's description in the General

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[101] Alfred Kellogg, Louis Haselmayer, "Chaucer's Satire of the Pardoner," PMLA, LXVI (1951), 251-56. These critics explain that pardons as indulgences have nothing to do with the forgiveness of sins. They are considered as effective only in the satisfaction for sin as a means of reducing the temporal punishment for sin.

Prologue reveal that he is from Rouncivale. Manly points out that this would have meant a great deal to Chaucer's contemporaries. During the fourteenth century the churchmen of the Hospital of St. Mary's at Rouncivale became notorious because of their misdeeds during their building fund drive. The mere fact that the Pardoner is labelled as coming from here would have been a clear connotation of his corruption to the people of Chaucer's era.[102]

To the medieval reader who was familiar with the theories of physiognomy, the details of the Pardoner's appearance also would have served as a definite indication of his character. From his studies of the medieval beliefs Curry observes that glaring eyes that were prominently set were thought to indicate a glutton, a libertine, and a drunkard; bright eyes and a high-pitched voice were considered signs of an impudent and dangerous nature, and long hair that was unusually fine and reddish or yellow in color was considered to be an indication of effeminacy.[103] Chaucer re-enforces this last point by expressing his own opinion of the Pardoner: "I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare" (I (A) 691).

In the succeeding lines of the General Prologue, Chaucer begins his revelation of the Pardoner's deceitful practices by exhibiting his sale of fake relics as one of his most flagrant misdeeds. He also mentions his oratorical proficiency which always reaches its height just before the offering is received. He continues his characterization of the Pardoner as an arch hypocrite throughout the Pardoner's Introduction, Prologue, and Tale. When the Host calls on the Pardoner for a "mery" tale, the latter says he must have a drink first. It becomes apparent that the other characters have perceived his evil character, for they quickly add:

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[102] Manly, pp. 129-30.

[103] Curry, pp. 57-58.

> "Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye!
> Telle us som moral thyng, that we may leere
> Som wit, and thanne wol we gladly heere"
> (VI (C) 324-26).

The Pardoner is glad to comply with their wishes because it will give him an opportunity to demonstrate his skill as a preacher.

The Pardoner's Prologue is a confession, or a dramatic scene in which the villain comes to the center of the stage and unmasks himself. In this cynical disclosure he fully reveals the hypocrisy of his life. This self-revelation is not improbable, for he is an exhibitionist who glories in his art. He offers two excellent examples of his skillful handling of a crowd:

> And after that thanne telle I forth my tales;
> Bulles of popes and of cardynales,
> Of patriarkes and bishopes I shewe,
> And in Latyn I speke a wordes fewe,
> To saffron with my predicacioun,
> And for to stire hem to devocioun
> (VI (C) 341-46).

The second is even more diabolically clever:

> Goode men and wommen, o thyng warne I yow:
> If any wight be in this chirche now
> That hath doon synne horrible, that he
> Dar nat, for shame, of it yshryven be,
> Or any womman, be she yong or old,
> That hath ymaad hir housbonde cokewold,
> Swich folk shal have no power ne no grace

> To offren to my relikes in this place.
> And whoso fyndeth hym out of swich blame,
> He wol come up and offre in Goddes name,...
> (VI (C) 377-85).

After his candid descriptions of the techniques he uses in his profitable roles as a fraudulent preacher and as a peddler of pardons and sham relics, he seems to delight in his own depravity: "...it is joye to se my bisynesse" (VI (C) 399).

He knows that he is a damned soul, and he admits it with the sardonic irony of a man who has ceased to care. He explains his sinful motivation in the following words:

> Of avarice and of swich cursednesse
> Is al my prechyng, for to make hem free
> To yevan hir pens, and namely unto me.
> For myn entente is nat but for to wynne,
> And nothyng for correccioun of synne.
> I rekke nevere, whan that they been beryed,
> Though that hir soules goon a-blakeberyed!
> (VI (C) 400-06).

Almost as if he fears that someone has missed his evil purposes, he repeats:

> But shortly myn entente I wol devyse:
> I preche of no thyng but for coveityse.
> Therfore my theme is yet, and evere was;
> Radix malorum est Cupiditas.
> Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice
> Which that I use, and that is avarice
> (VI (C) 423-28).

Preston explains that the Pardoner's revelation may seem repetitive, but it is done so that it will be remembered throughout his tale. Chaucer is using "the technique of modifying context"; therefore, these repetitious words form an ironical contrast before the entire sermon.[104] The supreme irony comes from the fact that the Pardoner is doing good despite his evil intent:

> But though myself be gilty in that synne,
> Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne
> From avarice, and soore to repente
> (VI (C) 429-31).

After laying bare his very soul, the Pardoner offers to give the company a typical example of his pulpit oratory. Hence, his tale takes the form of a sermon. Opening it with a highly dramatic discourse on the deadly sins, he furiously denounces the evils of blashphemy, gluttony and drunkenness, gambling, and swearing. French observes that this part of the Pardoner's Tale is almost identical with sections of the Parson's sermon. This is another example of Chaucer's deft use of irony.[105]

After this intense sermon on vices, the Pardoner begins his principal _examplum_, which primarily concerns the evils of gluttony and avarice but also encompasses the other sins. The tale concerns three debauched revelers who have been watching the work of death during the plague. In their drunken arrogance they decided to slay death. During their search they meet an Old Man who is as mysterious and as deathless as death itself. Kittredge believes that he is the personification of death, but Brewer thinks that he is old age incarnate.[106] No matter which symbol he is, he shows he knows the secret of the way to death. His solution to their quest is based on the theory that death is a retribution for sin. By using the revelers' greed, the Old Man leads them to their mutually-inflicted deaths.

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[104] Preston, p. 232.

[105] French, p. 279.

[106] Kittredge, p. 215. & Brewer p. 161.

After finishing this stock sermon, the Pardoner appends to it his usual call for his hearers to come forth to make offerings for his relics and to receive his absolution. Kittredge believes that he is so overcome with satisfaction at the power of his oratory that he forgets that these pilgrims know of his trickery.[107] Curry disagrees, for he thinks that the Pardoner sees this as a test of his powers. If he can swindle these pilgrims after he has warned them of his ways, it would be considered a crowning achievement in deception.[108] Whatever his reason, he picks on the wrong one when he calls on the Host: "I rede that oure Hoost heere shal bigynne,/For he is moost envoluped in synne" (VI (C) 941-42). The furious Host answers him with a foul invective.

In his comments before and after his tale, the Pardoner reveals himself as "a walking exemplum" of the vices which were condemned in his sermon.[109] Patch believes that this condemnation of the Pardoner expresses how Chaucer felt about holiness and about the men who betrayed it.[110] The whole portrait is a fearless and unsparing satire, a masterpiece of characterization. "The depth of the satire on the Pardoner lies in the excellence of the morality of his tale."[111] He preaches what he does not believe, but what he ought to believe; and he inadvertently enforces a moral lesson by the example of his own shamelessness.

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[107] Kittredge, pp. 217-18.

[108] Curry, p. 67.

[109] Preston, p. 229.

[110] Patch, p. 168.

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[111] Brewer, p. 159.

Conclusion

After examining the decay of the Church during the fourteenth century, the reader is not surprised to find a spirit of criticism running though Chaucer's characterization of many of the ecclesiastics. He sees the corruption within the Church, and he clearly recognizes the evil of it, but he does not attempt to bring about reforms. Concerning this, William Lawrence writes:

> No man of Chaucer's wide experience and clear vision could have been blind to the scandals in the Church at the time when The Canterbury Tales were written—the Great Schism (1379 on), the corruption of the minor clergy and of ecclesiastical parasites, the indecent scramble in higher places for money, preferment, and power. The effect of all this upon the English people had been marked and bitter. But it would be a great mistake to think of Chaucer as a Wicklifite or a Lollard, or as anticipating the ideas of the Reformation. In the Tales he strikes at the corruption of typical individuals, never at doctrines. Nothing in his ironical portraits suggests the moral indignation of Langland. Castigation of obvious abuses was a very different matter from questioning, as Wyclif did, the fundamental of dogma.[112]

He is merely trying to give a realistic picture of society; hence, he must present the good and bad details of the picture. He shows as much power and personal interest in describing the good Parson and the virtuous Clerk as in depicting the worldly Monk and wicked Friar.

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[112] Lawrence, p. 166.

Chaucer's work, like Dante's, centers around the conduct of life which will enable man to save his soul. However, Dante's gaze is fixed on the goal; Chaucer's is fixed on the creatures in the process of reaching that goal.[113] His unreserved acceptance of life does not imply moral complacency, for he always portrays the good as admirable and the evil as deplorable, though sometimes amusing. His poetry is a most delicate evaluation of life during the Middle Ages. He does not present a picture of the best possible world, but he does give a candid view of the actual world. Few English poets have observed the ways of their fellow man so minutely and so accurately. This perceptive ability causes Kittredge to say that "next to Shakespeare Chaucer is the greatest delineator of character in our literature."[114]

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[113] Patch, p. 177.

[114] Kittredge, p. 29.

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