

# A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CHAUCER'S "PROLOGUE TO THE CANTERBURY TALES" AS A CRITIQUE OF CATHOLICISM.

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## Abstract

Chaucer's "Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" is a profound literary work that subtly and masterfully critiques the Catholicism of his time. Written in the late 14th century, this piece offers a compelling commentary on the moral and ethical complexities of medieval Catholicism. Through a diverse group of pilgrims embarking on a journey to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket, Chaucer unveils a scathing critique of the Church. Chaucer's characters, drawn from various societal strata, serve as vessels through which he exposes the moral decay and hypocrisy within the clergy and religious institutions. These pilgrims, including clergymen and church officials, are depicted with remarkable candor, revealing their personal vices, avarice, and moral failings. Such portrayal challenges the prevailing idealized image of religious piety, presenting a stark contrast between the teachings of the Church and the actions of its representatives. The character of the Pardoner stands out as a symbol of the Church's corruption, as he shamelessly peddles indulgences and relics for personal gain. Chaucer's critique of this exploitative figure serves as a scathing commentary on the Church's commercialization of faith.

## Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer's "Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" is a literary masterpiece that transcends its medieval origins to offer a thought-provoking critique of Catholicism in the late 14th century. Set against the backdrop of a pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket, this work introduces readers to a diverse cast of pilgrims who represent various facets of medieval society, from nobility to laborers. Within the vivid tapestry of their narratives and interactions, Chaucer skillfully weaves a critique that peels back the layers of the Catholic Church, revealing its moral complexities, ethical contradictions, and pervasive influence on the lives of individuals and communities. At its core, Chaucer's critique revolves around the examination of the moral and spiritual dimensions of Catholicism, particularly within the clergy and religious institutions. In an era when the Church held unparalleled authority and shaped the moral compass of society, Chaucer fearlessly exposes the moral decay that had infiltrated its ranks. His pilgrims, often revered as embodiments of religious piety, are presented with striking realism, baring their own moral failings, greed, and licentiousness. Through their vivid portrayals, Chaucer challenges the idealized image of holiness perpetuated by the Church.

One of the most salient critiques within Chaucer's work is embodied in the character of the Pardoner, a church official who brazenly sells indulgences and relics for personal gain. This character serves as a powerful symbol of the Church's corruption and exploitation of the faithful, casting a searing spotlight on the commercialization of faith and the erosion of spiritual values. We will delve into the nuanced ways in which Chaucer exposes the moral and ethical contradictions within the Church and its representatives, inviting readers to contemplate the enduring relevance of his commentary on religion, morality, and human nature. Chaucer's masterful storytelling and astute observations continue to resonate, making this work a timeless testament to the power of literature to challenge prevailing norms and provoke deep reflection on the interplay between faith and society.

### **The Influence of Augustine's Ideas in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales**

The Canterbury Tales, written by Geoffrey Chaucer in the late 14th century, stands as one of the most significant and enduring works of English literature. This collection of stories, framed within the narrative of a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket in Canterbury, offers a vivid portrayal of medieval English society, with its diverse characters and their tales reflecting various aspects of human nature, morality, and social dynamics. Amidst the rich tapestry of narratives, one can discern the influence of St. Augustine of Hippo, a towering figure in Christian theology and philosophy.

St. Augustine, who lived in the 4th and 5th centuries, was a profound thinker whose writings profoundly impacted medieval Christian thought. His exploration of topics such as sin, grace, free will, and the nature of evil left an indelible mark on the intellectual landscape of the Middle Ages. Chaucer, drawing from the theological and philosophical currents of his time, wove Augustine's ideas into the fabric of The Canterbury Tales.

This essay explores the influence of Augustine's thought on Chaucer's magnum opus, highlighting key themes and concepts that resonate throughout the tales. It delves into the complex interplay of sin and virtue, the role of free will in human actions, and the theological underpinnings of Chaucer's narratives. By examining specific characters and their stories, we can discern how Chaucer engages with Augustine's ideas, often in subtle and nuanced ways.

### **Boethian Influence on Chaucer**

Boethius' work, "De Consolatione Philosophiae" (The Consolation of Philosophy), exerted a lasting influence not only on Chaucer but also on nearly all his contemporaries during the Middle Ages. The extent of its popularity was immense, as evidenced by numerous translations, including one by King Alfred into Old English, and later translations into Middle English by Chaucer and John the Chaplain. Additionally, the text found its way into other European languages, notably Old French through the translation by Jean de Meun.

Boethius holds a uniquely significant position in the examination of Western philosophy as he serves as a bridge between the classical and medieval eras. Following the decline of the Roman Empire, Byzantine Christianity took a path towards eastern mysticism, drawing on Platonic ideas. In contrast, the western regions of the former empire were deeply rooted in Aristotelian thought. Boethius, situated at this transitional juncture, played a crucial role in navigating the philosophical landscapes of both worlds. At the Council of Florence (1438-45), attempts were made to reconcile the Greek Eastern Church and the Latin Western

Church, yet it became evident that they had already drifted significantly apart. The divergence was rooted in the emphasis placed by Eastern Christianity on elucidating the being and nature of God, the Trinity, and the creation of the world. In contrast, Western Christianity relied on Holy Scripture for knowledge. The former perspective, championed by Boethius in the sixth century, addressed issues that were paramount in the late classical and early Christian worlds.

Boethius' significance in the Middle Ages is easily understandable because the issues that deeply engaged the prominent Roman thinker remained relevant in that era. These matters took on new perspectives shaped by the medieval interpretation of Aristotelian concepts. Chaucer, along with his literary and philosophical peers in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, felt compelled to inquire into various aspects, including the extent and nature of human knowledge, the divine nature, ideas within the divine mind, being and essence, the eternity of the world, the nature of the created universe, elements and scientific processes—both physiological and astrological— as well as the nature of grace, beatitude, the Church, and its sacraments. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to assert that the roots of the Reformation can be traced to the discussions initiated by these thinkers, who, unknowingly, were sparking debates.

Despite the calm demeanor portrayed in his poetry, Chaucer consistently raised questions that delved into profound moral and spiritual truths. This may seem unexpected, given his role as a courtier and civil servant, rather than a university scholar or a member of the clergy.

Chaucer was not an extensive scholar of the classics; rather, he approached them with a cursory reading, simplifying and incorporating them into his poetry in his own distinctive manner. Among the limited number of classical authors directly read by Chaucer, Boethius stands out. Additionally, he engaged with Ovid, whose "Metamorphoses" is featured in Chaucer's works such as "The Book of the Duchess," "The House of Fame," and "The Canterbury Tales." In "The Man of Law," Chaucer references Ovid's tales of lovers to highlight them as his primary sources. For instance, when the Host encourages the lawyer to fulfill his promise of telling a tale, he specifically mentions:

"The tales of lovers that I read and find,  
Wherein I hope you'll bear me witness true,  
For my accord, as I have told, is due  
To you."  
But natheless, certeyn,  
I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn  
That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly  
On metres and on rymyng craftily,  
Hath seyde hem in swich English as he kan  
Of olde tyme, as knoweth many a man;  
And if he have nocht seyde hem in another.  
For he hath toold of loveris up and down

More than Ovid made of mention  
In his Epistles, that been full old.

While Chaucer was familiar with Virgil, his acquaintance was confined to the "Aeneid," as evident in works like "The House of Fame" and "The Legend." However, it was Boethius who exerted the most significant influence on Chaucer's thinking among the classical authorities he engaged with. Boethius's impact was profound, not only directly manifesting in Chaucer's translation of "The Consolation of Philosophy" and his shorter poems but also playing a pivotal role in shaping Chaucer's overall perspective on matters of good and evil.

### **Influences of Aquinas reflected in the tales**

Thomas Aquinas's influence on Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" is evident in the moral, ethical, and theological themes explored within the narrative. Aquinas's emphasis on morality and ethics is reflected in the characters' struggles with moral dilemmas and ethical choices throughout the tales. Chaucer's multifaceted characters mirror Aquinas's understanding of the complexities of human nature, portraying individuals who grapple with their desires and inclinations. The theological concepts of faith and reason, central to Aquinas's philosophy, are echoed in characters like the Prioress and the Parson, who represent different facets of religious life. Moreover, Chaucer's portrayal of virtue and vice in characters like the Knight, Summoner, and Friar aligns with Aquinas's discussions on these ethical concepts. Aquinas's influence on Chaucer's exploration of the nature of God and theological inquiries is evident in characters like the Clerk and the Parson, who engage in philosophical contemplations regarding divinity. Overall, Aquinas's philosophical and theological ideas permeate "The Canterbury Tales," shaping its moral, ethical, and theological dimensions.

Medieval poetry has often been categorized into two broad groups: 'religious' and 'secular,' with the latter encompassing works not explicitly focused on Christian themes. Under this classification, much of Chaucer's work falls into the secular category, while Gower and Langland are considered religious. However, just as "Piers Plowman," despite being an overtly Christian poem, can be appreciated for its portrayal of contemporary society, Chaucer's so-called secular tales can also be shown to be significantly influenced by the religious ideology of the Middle Ages. For instance, "Troilus and Criseyde" was once primarily seen as a courtly love romance with a conventional Christian addendum at the end. However, contemporary scholarship treats the epilogue as an integral part of the poem, intertwined with Boethian and ironic elements found throughout. This study contends that even "The Canterbury Tales," with its seemingly secular content, can be viewed as a product of a culture deeply shaped by Christian concepts of good and evil. It's worth noting that the overarching structure of the poem is that of a pilgrimage, often seen as an allegory for the journey of human life itself. Even the seemingly offensive tales, like those of the Miller and the Merchant, have been interpreted as commentaries on Christian morality and doctrine. This perspective of interpreting medieval works through a religious lens is justified by scholars like Donald R. Howard, who argue that it reflects a shift in our contemporary attitudes towards religion. In a world that has become progressively less religious, the religious ideas of the age of faith may seem exotic and unfamiliar to us.

## Nature of God

In Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales," the characters' grappling with theological questions about the nature of God offers a profound reflection of Thomas Aquinas' philosophical inquiries into divinity and spirituality. Chaucer's diverse cast of pilgrims embarks on a journey to the shrine of Thomas Becket, and during their travels, they engage in conversations that often delve into matters of faith and theology. One prominent character who raises questions about the nature of God is the Clerk in his tale, "The Clerk's Tale." The Clerk tells the story of Griselda, a virtuous and patient wife who endures numerous trials at the hands of her husband, Walter. Through Griselda's unwavering obedience and submission, the Clerk's tale grapples with the idea of divine providence and the nature of God's will. The story presents a moral dilemma, highlighting the tension between human suffering and God's divine plan. This theme echoes Aquinas' exploration of divine providence and theodicy, where he sought to reconcile the existence of evil and suffering with God's benevolence.

Another character who touches upon theological questions is the Parson, who delivers a sermon on penitence. In his tale, the Parson emphasizes the need for true repentance and sincere confession as a means to seek God's forgiveness. This aligns with Aquinas' theological views on the sacrament of penance and the importance of genuine contrition in achieving spiritual reconciliation with God. The Parson's tale underscores the concept of divine mercy and the transformative power of genuine repentance. Additionally, the Prioress, a devout religious character, demonstrates her piety through her tale, "The Prioress's Tale." Her story centers on a young boy who sings a hymn to the Virgin Mary and is ultimately martyred for his faith. The tale reflects the medieval devotion to the Virgin Mary and the belief in her intercessory role in connecting humans to God. This Marian devotion was a significant aspect of medieval spirituality, influenced by Aquinas' theological discussions on the Virgin Mary's place in Christian theology.

The Knight's Tale, while primarily a tale of chivalry and courtly love, also touches upon themes of fate and divine intervention. The characters in this tale, particularly Palamon and Arcite, express a sense of destiny and the belief that the gods have a plan for their lives. This exploration of fate and divine will reflects the medieval fascination with predestination and the influence of divine forces on human affairs, a topic that Aquinas also contemplated in his writings on providence. Chaucer's characters in "The Canterbury Tales" engage in thought-provoking discussions about the nature of God and theological concepts, mirroring Thomas Aquinas' philosophical inquiries into divinity and spirituality. Through their tales and dialogues, these characters grapple with questions of divine providence, repentance, divine mercy, and the intercession of the Virgin Mary, providing readers with a rich tapestry of medieval theological thought that resonates with Aquinas' enduring influence on medieval Christian philosophy and theology.

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed the emergence of a burgeoning Aristotelianism in Europe, which promoted the inclination towards formalization. Saint Thomas Aquinas, renowned for his scholastic logic, not only influenced Dante in his literary analysis but also left an indelible imprint on prominent English poets, including Chaucer. It is worthwhile to explore Chaucer's treatment of the concept of evil in certain works, drawing parallels with

Aquinas. This examination is valuable not only because Chaucer held profound spiritual beliefs but also because, as noted by critics, philosophers have increasingly incorporated Aquinas into secular philosophical discourse. Aquinas, through his systematic approach to philosophical theology, addressed virtually every realm of thought, always emphasizing the inseparable connection between the existence and nature of God and every philosophical consideration.

### **Chaucer's Philosophical Contemplation**

Geoffrey Chaucer, the author of "The Canterbury Tales," occasionally interjects his own voice and engages in philosophical contemplation throughout the narrative. These moments offer intriguing insights into Chaucer's own philosophical outlook and how they align with or challenge the philosophical ideas of Thomas Aquinas, a prominent medieval philosopher and theologian.

One notable instance of Chaucer's philosophical contemplation occurs in the General Prologue, where he provides a detailed and often satirical description of each pilgrim. In these character sketches, Chaucer demonstrates a keen awareness of human nature and the complexities of human behavior. He portrays a wide range of characters, each with their own virtues, vices, and idiosyncrasies. This portrayal aligns with Aquinas' philosophical view of human nature as multifaceted and influenced by both reason and desire. Aquinas believed that humans possess free will and can make moral choices, which is reflected in Chaucer's characterizations. Chaucer's use of irony and satire throughout "The Canterbury Tales" can be seen as a form of philosophical commentary. For instance, the Pardoner, a character known for his hypocrisy and manipulation of religious relics, exposes the corruption within the medieval Church. Chaucer's satirical treatment of the Pardoner challenges the institutionalized beliefs and practices of his time, echoing Aquinas' call for moral integrity within the Church. Aquinas emphasized the importance of living a virtuous life in accordance with Christian ethics, a message that can be interpreted in Chaucer's critique of hypocritical clergy. Chaucer also explores questions of justice and ethics in several tales, such as "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and "The Franklin's Tale." In "The Wife of Bath's Tale," the character of the Wife presents a provocative argument about women's sovereignty and control within marriage. Her narrative challenges traditional medieval views on gender roles and the nature of authority in relationships. While Aquinas' views on gender roles were more conservative, Chaucer's exploration of women's agency aligns with broader discussions on justice and equality. Another aspect of Chaucer's philosophical contemplation is his treatment of fate and providence, particularly evident in "The Knight's Tale." The characters in this tale grapple with the concept of destiny and the influence of divine forces on human affairs. Chaucer raises questions about whether human actions are predetermined or influenced by external forces. Aquinas, too, engaged with questions of fate and divine providence in his theological writings, although his views leaned more towards divine governance and human free will. Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" provides instances of philosophical contemplation that both align with and challenge Thomas Aquinas' philosophical ideas. Chaucer's portrayal of complex characters, his use of satire to critique societal norms, and his

exploration of themes like justice and fate reflect his philosophical engagement with the medieval world. While Chaucer's views may differ from Aquinas in some respects, both thinkers contribute to the rich tapestry of medieval thought, shaping discussions on ethics, human nature, and the role of institutions in society.

### **Virtue and Vice**

In "The Canterbury Tales" by Geoffrey Chaucer, various characters embody and challenge Thomas Aquinas' ideas of virtue and vice, shedding light on the complex moral landscape of medieval society. Two notable characters who provide insight into this theme are the Knight and the Pardoner.

The Knight, a paragon of chivalry and honor, exemplifies many virtues valued in medieval society. He is described as a "worthy man" who has participated in numerous battles and always acted with integrity. The Knight's embodiment of virtues such as courage, humility, and loyalty aligns with Aquinas' conception of virtue as a mean between extremes. Aquinas argued that virtues are the right balance between deficiency and excess, and the Knight's character personifies this idea.

### **Nominalist-Realist Controversy and the Philosophical Tradition**

Chaucer's evolution as a poet is evident in his later lyric poems through several distinct developments. Firstly, his thematic focus shifted from the exploration of universal love or courtly love to a keen examination of the ironic disparities between universal love and the specific objects of affection that people cherish, particularly courtly love. Secondly, as Chaucer matured, he displayed a growing fascination with nominalism, particularly its argument that the human mind can apprehend only particulars instead of universals. He made various efforts to make his poetry more particular in subject matter. Moreover, his inherent curiosity about language and his penchant for linguistic experimentation led him to delve into the nominalist skepticism regarding the accuracy of terms. Given that words were seen as several degrees removed from direct experiential reality, there arose doubts about their capacity to convey truth effectively in a manner comprehensible to the human mind.

These poems depart from featuring generic "everyman" personas with characteristics that could apply to anyone from any background. Instead, they introduce actual characters with distinct personalities, providing a specific and defined context for the universal lyrical themes. What Chaucer initiated in the Envoys to Truth and Lak of Stedfastnesse, he further developed in complete poems like Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan, Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton, the concise Chaucers Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn, and the renowned Complaint of Chaucer to his Purse. In each of these works, the speaker is no longer a faceless representation of humanity but is unmistakably Geoffrey Chaucer, or at least the public facet of him. The situations depicted revolve around specific and personal interactions of Chaucer, the poem's speaker, with individuals from his public life. This includes his relationships with fellow poet Henry Scogan, Peter Bukton, a Knight from Yorkshire, Adam, his scribe, and the newly crowned King Henry IV.

In this regard, Chaucer successfully conveyed universal lyrical sentiments by embedding them within specific narrative or dramatic contexts. A remarkable example of this achievement can be found in one of Chaucer's finest short poems, "Scogan." Despite

Kittredge's characterization of the poem titled "Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan" as a mere trifle, a product of the poet's momentary comic frustration, it actually holds greater significance than initially perceived.

In reality, "Scogan" transcends Kittredge's assessment. While much has been written about "Scogan," surpassing the attention received by many other lyrics, it is evident that readers generally regard it as a poem deserving of study. Early criticism primarily revolved around external aspects of the poem, such as its composition date and the identity of the individual named Scogan. It is generally accepted that the poem was composed in the autumn of 1393 and addressed to a man named Henry Scogan, who, like Chaucer, served in the public sector and was also a poet. However, delving into these details does not fully explore the essence of the poem.

### Conclusion

Geoffrey Chaucer's "Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" serves as a remarkable and enduring critique of Catholicism during the late 14th century. Through a diverse assembly of pilgrims representing various strata of medieval society, Chaucer artfully and incisively scrutinizes the moral and ethical complexities inherent within the Catholic Church and its practitioners. Chaucer's critique extends beyond the superficial piety often associated with the Church, laying bare the moral decay, hypocrisy, and moral failings that had infiltrated its ranks. His pilgrims, portrayed with striking realism, serve as a microcosm of human imperfections and highlight the chasm between religious ideals and human behavior. The character of the Pardoner stands as a striking symbol of the Church's moral erosion and the commercialization of faith. Through this figure, Chaucer exposes the Church's willingness to exploit the spiritual needs of its followers for personal gain, offering a searing commentary on its ethical decline. Chaucer's "Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" remains a timeless masterpiece that challenges the dominant religious narrative of its era while inviting readers to engage in a critical reflection on the intersection of faith, morality, and human nature. Its enduring relevance underscores the power of literature to interrogate societal institutions and provoke introspection, making it an invaluable contribution to the discourse on religion and society across centuries.

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