

**Social Satire in *Canterbury Tales***

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### **Social Satire in *Canterbury Tales***

The 14th-16th centuries period received the name *Renaissance* in European history. As a cultural phenomenon, the Renaissance marked a slow transition from medieval era to modernity. During that time period, a significant part of European states experienced severe changes in their social structures, as well as the rise of science and arts. In the late 14th century national languages started to gain influence, which lead to creation of national literary traditions across all Europe. Italian writers Dante Alighieri, Giovanni Boccaccio and Petrarch can be recognized as the pioneers of European Literary Renaissance. The famous English poet Geoffrey Chaucer can be seen as their equivalent from the Northern Europe. In his *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer created an atmospheric encyclopedia of the 14th century England and a vivid image of the rising English nation. Through the tales of the pilgrims to Canterbury Abbey, Chaucer masterfully portrays their personality and language, while simultaneously adding a healthy share of social satire, well-aimed at most characters from the group and their corresponding estates.

### **Historical Context**

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* were strongly affected by his position in society and ongoing state of events. The Catholic Church still was one of the strongest social and political powers in Europe. The clergy possessed significant influence, and even had a right to collect special taxes. At the same time, England waged a protracted war against France, and the king used any means to fill the treasury and fund his armies. Another attempt to collect extra taxes caused a bloody 1381 Peasant's Rebellion. Chaucer, who was a lifelong court man, and received appointments to prestigious offices under Richard II, was not a rebel by his nature (Giancarlo, 2020). However, he had a lot of opportunities to witness harsh nature of king's justice and intrigues of the royal

court. Given his position, Chaucer couldn't openly criticize authorities or state of affairs in England without compromising his position. This is the reason, why the *Canterbury Tales* are filled with wry satire and irony in the style of Italian Renaissance literature instead of anger or open criticism.

### **Estate Satire**

In Chaucer's times, England still had a medieval social structure, which consisted of three estates – the Church, nobility, and peasantry, but by the end of the 14th century this structure started to decay due to social mobility. The crisis of traditional social model caused an emergence of a special literary genre – the *Estate Satire*. *Canterbury Tales* can be considered as one of the most prominent works written in that genre. Chaucer was unwilling to criticize English reality directly due to his position at the royal court, and turned his critique into satirical representation of the pilgrims and their corresponding estates. Nobility was represented by the Knight and his son, the Squire, and while the Knight is indeed a brave warrior and a gentleman, his son is looking quite soft and careless (Grennen, 2019). The third estate, is divided between the members of peasantry and growing class of town-citizens, with the most notable characters in form of shrewd but entitled Merchant and wise, but greedy Sergeant of the Law. In several centuries people like them will evolve into bourgeoisie and seriously challenge the English royalty.

### **Critique of Clergy**

None of the three estates managed to avoid Chaucer's satirical criticism, but he specifically underscored his concerns regarding the demeanor of the first estate – the Church. The Catholic Church kept on amassing wealth despite all proclaimed vows of poverty and

humility, while at the same time often neglected its duties before the flock. Chaucer portrays some pilgrims with connection to the Church in quite negative light. For example, the Monk prefers wine, clothes and fine horses to praying and following the rules of his monastic order. The Friar squeezes money from the people and shamelessly spends it in the taverns. However, Chaucer does not shame or criticize them openly. Edmondson (2020) argued, that in his style of humor Chaucer simultaneously acts as a benevolent father to his characters, and a satirist, who tries to make the readers look between the lines and make their own mind about his characters. Still, since the clergymen were clearly violating the tenets of the Church, Chaucer decided to be more open in his critique towards them.

### **Satire on Human Vices**

Almost all of the pilgrims are prone to one or several vices, and with careful use of satire Chaucer exposes them and present his characters to reader's judgement. Greed, indifference, hypocrisy, lust, pride, drunkenness —the pilgrims are anything but perfect, and that makes them human and alive. Ironically, one of the worst offenders in that regard are the characters related to the Catholic Church — the Monk, the Pardoner, and the Friar. Chaucer is definitely concerned with moral problems of England (Giordano, 2019) and did not hesitate to show moral ambiguity of his pilgrims when he deemed it necessary. However, Chaucer tried to portray English society without pretending to be a strict moralist, and honestly shows both vices and virtues of his characters, thus creating a plausible depiction of 14<sup>th</sup> century English nation.

### **Conclusion**

Geoffrey Chaucer was not only a poet, but also a significant figure at the court of the English kings. He had to be careful in turbulent atmosphere of his time, since it was entirely

possible to lose one's career, property, or even life by making a wrong move. Due to his position at court and knowledge of Italian Renaissance literature, it is not surprising, that Chaucer expressed his criticism of English society in form of satire and humor. After all, his pilgrims were closer to representation of the whole English nation, rather than particular people, and since Renaissance ideas were based on love of human beings, Chaucer does not hate his characters. Human nature is imperfect, everybody has its flaws and vices, so Chaucer highlights them with satire and humor and leaves the final judgement to his readers.

## References

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