

Critical thinking on he hadde made ful many a marriage

Countries, United States



Based on your reading of The General Prologue, what do you believe are some of the predominant aspects of English society that Chaucer intends to write about in The Canterbury Tales?

Chaucer's opening 12 lines are a celebration of spring and new life, so we might expect the Tales which follow to show the variety and sheer vitality of different human experiences.

An important aspect of English society at the time was the class system and this is shown in The General Prologue. Chaucer begins his descriptions of his fellow pilgrims with a description of the Knight (because he is the pilgrim with the highest social status) and then proceeds to describe all the other pilgrims roughly in a descending order of the social hierarchy of the day. There is a strict social hierarchy which shows us that the class system in English society was fairly rigid.

Of the thirty pilgrims on the pilgrimage ten are employed either directly or indirectly by the Church and this demonstrates the importance of the Church as an institution in Chaucer's society and Christianity as a belief system. We might also expect many of the Tales which follow to have some religious content. Some of the ecclesiastical pilgrims are also clearly corrupt, which demonstrates that the corruption of the Church in English society was widely known about. For example, The Friar and the Summoner, we are told, help to arrange the marriages of young pregnant women. Chaucer reports this, but it is left to the reader to guess that these young women have been seduced by the Friar and the Summoner. He says of the Friar of yonge women at his owene cost. (Chaucer p. 57, lines 212-213)

And that phrase “ at his owene cost” alerts us to his reason for having to find these young women husbands, chaucer criticises the corrupt characters of the Church, but does so to different degrees. His portraits of the Prioress, the Monk and the Friar are satirical but very gentle in tone. However, his comments on the Summoner and the Pardoner are much more scathing and critical.

Work Cited

Chaucer, Geoffrey. The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1965. Print.