

Satirizing the upper
class throughout
history: chaucer,
congreve, and baitz



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Satirizing the Upper Class Before even knowing what it is, any modern consumer of television, literature and other creative work is influenced by satire. Masked as innocent comedy, satire is the gateway for creatives to give their take on real, topical issues on their own constructed platform through the lens of humor. Since the middle ages, satire has played a functional role in society. One could even argue that satire, in all forms combined, has become a fundamental pillar of contemporary culture, serving as both a reporter and a watchdog over society and keeping a close eye on the world's powerful and influential institutions, exposing them when necessary of wrongdoing or maltreatment of others.

In the fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer kept the upper class in line by proclaiming that the idea of "gentillesse" or aristocratic and ideal characteristics in the wellborn is false, and that polite, gentleman like qualities are not inherent of the rich but of the virtuous. Three hundred years later, the characters in William Congreve's play *The Way of the World* lived under the faulty impression that money (and beauty, which came from money) equaled power, and suffered unfulfilled lives with dissatisfying relationships in dramatic irony as Congreve pointed out the ridiculous "truths" the upper class lived by. Today, these perceptions of the upper class seem to be more established and readily available to the creators of satirical prose, television and other forms of writing. It's plausible that this is, in part, thanks to writers like Chaucer and Congreve — because of them, playwrights like John Robin Baitz can satirize rich families like the Wyeth's in a straightforward manner, with no need to defend his criticism like writers once did. The upper class has been and still is a highly criticized portion of

society in satirical literature. It ranges vastly in terms of seriousness and defensiveness from the author, but what has stayed fairly consistent over the centuries from various works by Chaucer, Congreve's *The Way of the World*, and Baitz's contemporary *Other Desert Cities* is that each author, when satirizing the upper class, always ends up criticizing the misconceptions rich people have, particularly what they think money and high status consequently gives them.

Until the middle ages, literature was read and written only by those who could afford to learn how to read and write — the rich. Families in the working class were only able to learn and teach through oral tradition, and because of that, had no way of disseminating their stories and teachings to a larger audience. For this reason, it's easy to imagine the power and responsibility some early romantic writers, such as Chaucer, must have felt when writing the first works for the middle and lower class populations. His *Canterbury Tales* takes a stab at almost every institution, class and social structure in his fourteenth century society, and he certainly doesn't fall short when discussing the upper class. In *Wife of Bath's Tale*, Chaucer discusses the aforementioned "gentillesse," an adjective-equivalent to what we'd now refer to as "gentleman" and, for the progressive, "gentlewoman." But, for ye speken of swich gentillesse But, for ye speken of such gentleness yourself well As is descended out of old rechesse, As is descended out of old richness, That therefore sholden ye be gentil men, That therefore shalle ye be gentlemen; Swich arrogance is nat worth an hen. Such arrogancy is not worth a hen. Looke who that is moost vertuous alway, Look who that is most virtuous always. While telling his stories, there are a few themes that

Chaucer constantly reintroduces. Gentillesse is one of them with which he always seems to be preoccupied.

Chaucer is seemingly determined to use his writing to break apart the idea that noble qualities like humility and politeness are God-given at birth only to the rich. Here in Wife of Bath's Tale, he chastises the upper class for their arrogant attitudes and assumption that because they have more money, they are intrinsically better people. He reinforces this claim in the Clerk's Tale: For God it woot, that children ofte been For God it would, that children often be Unlyk hir worthy eldres hem bifore; Unlike their worthy elders before them; Bountee comth al of God, nat of the streen Bounty come to all of God, not of the strain Of which they been engendred and ybore. Of which they've been engendered and born. I truste in Goddes bountee, and therefore I trust in God's bounty, and therefore My mariage and mynestaat and reste My marriage and mindset and rest I hym bitake; he may doon as hym leste. I him be taken; he may do as he likes. (155-161) Revealed here is the root of Chaucer's belief. In the Clerk's Tale, a handsome young king named Walter is forced to marry, so he finds a beautiful young woman he's seen before and admired, Griselda, the daughter of a poor man. Upon meeting Griselda, Walter is pleasantly surprised by her patience, obedience, modesty and moral values despite her class. It is at that point that he questions what he thought he knew about gentillesse, and throws away the concept, even as a rich person himself, that these noble qualities are God-given only to the elite.

One of Chaucer's noble characters could not be constructed to be perfect, though, of course. Walter goes on to "test" his wife's patience, taking their <https://assignbuster.com/satirizing-the-upper-class-throughout-history-chaucer-congreve-and-baitz/>

daughter and then their son away from her and making her promise she will not love him less because of it, then faking a divorce and new marriage to another woman, all to just be forgiven by the virtuous Griselda and live happily ever after. Beyond dismantling the concept of gentillesse once again, I believe Chaucer is trying to display another level of superiority the upper class self-perceives. King Walter already seems to have the choice of any Italian woman to become his wife. When he chooses Griselda and she effortlessly agrees, he treats her with a level of dehumanization, putting her through misery for his own sake and sanity. This is not simply a narrative of one person's maltreatment toward another; Chaucer is satirically portraying the sense the upper class that it is naturally better, more human and the only sector of society that deserves to be treated with dignity.

If his routine criticisms of the false notions that the upper class had of itself was not enough, Chaucer solidifies his denouncement of gentillesse in his supplemental minor poem, "Gentillesse" in which he wrote alongside another minor poem "Truth." Like a footnote, Chaucer used this short piece to nail in the ideas he wrote about in Canterbury Tales so he wouldn't have to be too overt in the novel, but rather stick to the narrative. Here he unpacks his exact criticism of the upper class' misconception of its supposed noble characteristics: Vice may wel be heir to old rechesse Vicious men can inherit ancient wealth, but there may no man, as ye may wel see but no man may, as you can plainly see, biquethe his heir his vertuous noblesse. give his heir his own noble virtue. (15-17) He also takes a Christian approach to convey his thoughts. This firste stok was ground of rightwisnesse, Jesus founded right behavior, Trewe of his word, sobre, pitous, being truthful, self-

controlled, merciful and generous, and free, Clene of his ghost, and loved business. spiritually pure, and energetic in good deeds. (8-10) Religion, Christianity in particular because it was so ubiquitous in his region, was an easy frame for Chaucer to build claims from, and he commonly did. This piece is different from Canterbury Tales because Chaucer is allowed to speak directly to his audience, rather than use his characters as puppets. Because of this, he can give his readers a true call to action: " We should give social honor to those with moral strength, rather than assuming those with high status are virtuous." This is the apex of Chaucer's entire argument, which he spreads across his entire novel. He pushes his claims to a very aggressive degree, but in this, it's easy to identify patterns of upper class criticism used in other literary works, like Congreve's.

A comedy of manners, which satirizes the affectations of contemporary society and questions societal standards, Congreve's play *The Way of the World* is a story of rich people who inadequately base their own value off of power. That power is obtained mostly by money and subsidiaries of money in addition to wit, the trickiest one of all (because it can't be purchased with money). In Act 3, Lady Wishfort, one of the main characters, displays concern and anxiety over her diminishing youth: " I look like an old peel'd Wall," (2384). This is a recurring metaphor that Congreve uses. The crumbling wall, later used symbolically as " cracks discernible in the white vernish," represent the anxiety of weakening authority, something highly coveted by all the play's main characters. In this case, the cracks in the wall represent the aging of Lady Wishfort's face. Everyone wants authority, so readers can empathize with that, but Congreve uses common stereotypes of

the upper class, such as the unattainable desire for youth and beauty, in which you can only purchase to an extent, to satirize Lady Wishfort's feeble attempt at maintaining her own authority. Lady Wishfort also attempts to maintain her authority directly with money — which she has a lot of. In order for Millamant to receive the entire fortune waiting for her, Lady Wishfort, her aunt, must approve of her marriage. With this, Lady Wishfort is using her control of money to unrightfully generate power and authority. She then attempts to use beauty, disguising herself as a young woman, to win the love of Mirabell.

The misconception that money, beauty and youth will help one obtain power and will, therefore, make one better, is the main criticism of the rich that Congreve satirizes throughout his play. Millamant also falls victim to the idea that her beauty, youth and even cruelty equal power, and since she actually is a young woman, she uses it to her fullest extent only to be disappointed. In a conversation about her love for Mirabell, she tells him: "One's cruelty is one's power, and when one parts with one's cruelty, one parts with one's power, and when one parts with that, I fancy one's old and ugly." Millamant feels she must hold on to these superficial qualities in order to maintain her power, but Mirabell replies, "Ay, ay, suffer your cruelty to ruin the object of your power, to destroy your lover- and then how vain, how lost a think you'll be! ... The ugly and the old, whom the looking glass mortifies, yet after commendation can be flattered by it, and discover beauties in it: for that reflects our praises, rather than your face," (2379). Here, Mirabell shuts down Millamant's theory of how she can maintain her power, but replaces it with an equally superficial claim that she will lose her beauty if she loses him

and is left alone. Congreve constructs each of his scenes around an argument, both of which are usually ridiculous to some degree, piling atop each other the stereotypes of the superficial ways the upper class thinks they hold control of their power, ultimately showing how power-hungry he observes them to be. A difference I observed between middle aged and contemporary satirical literature, from the writings that I studied, is that the criticisms in newer works seemed to be more established. This, I think, is because writers like Chaucer and Congreve were partially paving the way for satire of their kind, and therefore needed to defend their criticisms more aggressively. Now, thanks to those authors, those stereotypes are a given, and do not need to be argued as heavily because consumers of satirical material know them almost as truths.

Baitz's *Other Desert Cities* is a contemporary comedy of manners, which questions societal structure in a noticeably different way than Chaucer and Congreve's works. Like Congreve and Chaucer, Baitz selects a general superficial trait commonly withheld by the upper class and just rips it to shreds. Here, he utilizes the starring family's children, Brooke and Trip Wyeth, and their aunt Silda, to criticize their parents: old, adult rich people with the need to maintain a spotless reputation, abandoning their authentic selves and putting up a facade of relentless aristocratic correctness. He darkly satirizes the habit of the upper class to protect their image at any cost by using potentially the most extreme sacrifice of them all: one's own child. In the play, Brooke and Trip's older brother apparently committed suicide before the play began, due to neglect from the family, and Polly and Lyman, the parents, do anything to cover it up, even letting Brooke suffer from

severe depression in the process. Brooke's unpublished memoir recounting the events that led to her brother's death causes the play's tension and serves as framework for the story. Her memoir ultimately asks the question of who is responsible for her brother's death, which is what the play's audience is asking the whole time, too. And this is what leads to the culmination of Baitz's satire: the upper class avoids responsibility for all of its wrongdoings, using power and wealth to cover up the evidence and move on to the next scandal. Chaucer, Congreve and Baitz each satirize a separate criticism of the upper class: Chaucer with the allusion of gentillesse, Congreve with the notion that one can buy value and Baitz with the avoidance of responsibility and need to maintain a spotless reputation.

Altogether, these satirical works shed light on the more general stereotype that the upper class identifies itself as better than everyone else because they have more money and more power. And with that excess money and power, they can obtain a higher degree of things like beauty and a positive reputation, which the superficial, exemplified in all three works, would equate with characteristics of high virtue. Satire takes observations of society and amplifies them with humor and exaggeration in order to make a clear point about topical issues. In all three of these time periods, the wrongdoings of the upper class seemed to be issues to these three writers, and each took what they observed and worked it into their narrative to convey their criticisms of the upper class to each of their audiences.

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