

The portrait of medieval social classes in the canterbury tales

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The General Prologue fulfils two functions: it tells the story of how the tales came to be told, and it introduces the tellers. There are about thirty pilgrims travelling to Canterbury to pray to the holy blissful martyr- St. Thomas of Becket. These characters can be considered the portrait of the whole Middle English society. All the pilgrims can be divided into particular hierarchic structure of classes. The simplest division of society was into three estates: those who fight, those who pray, and those who labour, typified by the Knight, the Parson and the Plowman.

Women were often treated as an estate to themselves. The basic tripartite division of society, for instance, is reflected in Chaucer's making his Knight, Parson and Plowman the three ideal characters on the pilgrimage- along with the Clerk to stand for those who learn and teach. However, I have to admit that this division is not so obvious, which I explained below. ' Chaucer starts the introduction of pilgrims with the highest-ranking layman, the Knight, with his entourage, and continues with the highest-ranking ecclesiastics, the Prioress and the Monk.

The Merchant, Clerk, Sergeant of Law, and Franklin who follow were regarded more or less as social equals, and various other representatives of the middle classes, most of them keen to push themselves up the social ladder, follow in somewhat haphazard order. The Summoner and Pardoner are social and moral misfits in almost every sense, with no obvious place either in a class hierarchy or in the ' common weal', society as a system of mutual support' (Helen Cooper, Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales, Oxford University Press, 1996).

According to Helen Cooper, the basic organization then is by rank, but with some telling exceptions and some haphazardness: society is not an ordered hierarchy, not least because the people who compose it are reluctant to stay in their places. The Knight and Squire represent very different types, and functions, of chivalry.

The Monk is described in terms that make him a different kind of antitype to the Knight, and the attributes that might be expected of each are exchanged: it is the Monk who hunts and loves good food and clothes, while the Knight is ascetic who has devoted his life to service of Christ (cf. Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales, Oxford University Press, 1996).

If there is a certain logic in the order of the pilgrims, however, the content of the individual portraits shows a constant variation. The stress can fall on appearance, past life, the pilgrim's own voice or self-image, moral probity, or tastes and priorities. The estates structure suggest that the pilgrims will be defined by their work, but while many of the portraits adopt an appropriate language, only few show their subject doing what his or her office requires.

In my work I will describe and submit every character and then summary the portrait of the class as a whole, and finally, in the summary I will put forward the whole portrait of society as a whole by summing up the features of each social class. Chivalry was undoubtedly the most important of social classes in middle ages. They fought for the king, his kingdom and the religion. Chivalry is also nowadays considered as a pattern of behaviour of ideal man: he has to be brave, gentle for ladies and honourable; he also has to be ready to die for his beliefs.

There are three characters representing this class in The General Prologue. These are the Knight, the Squire, and the Yeoman. The Knight is described by Chaucer with respect and honour. Chaucer does not use any irony or satire in the description of the Knight; the irony is reserved to those who fall short of the standard of perfection he sets. The function of the Knight was to fight; but throughout Christian history, and increasingly in the late fourteenth century, there was a profound unease at the thought of Christian fighting Christian.

The wars that were held in the highest esteem were those fought in the cause of God, against the infidel. 'The knight is not only a fighter: he is that most honoured of warriors, a Crusader' (Helen Cooper, Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales, Oxford University Press, 1996). He participated in many wars against Muslims in Spain, North Africa, and the Near East; and pagans around the Baltic. The Knight's portrait differs from those of most of the other pilgrims in several respects. He is described rather in terms of moral attributes than physical appearance.

It reinforces the sense of his asceticism, his devotion more to God than to things of the world. He is also described in terms of what other people think of him: he is 'ever honoured for his worthynesse', set 'aboven alle nacions' at the table of honour, 'everemoore he hadde a sovereyn prys' (op. cit. 'The General Prologue', The Canterbury Tales, Geoffrey Chaucer; lines 50, 53, 67). It is a portrait of ideal Christian knighthood. Almost every pilgrim has some particular object of desire, that the Knight's should be: 'Trouthe and honour, freedom and curteisie' (op. it. line 46).

The Knight is considered perfect by Chaucer. He is modest as a maid, he is devoted to God more than any of the characters representing clergy. He sometimes fought on the side of Muslims, but only if they fought against other Muslims; he had never fought against Christians. Despite of his valorous deeds, the knight never boasted of his actions, nor bored his listeners. The Squire would be a candidate for knighthood. He is young, probably in his twenties. He is a son of the Knight. When not in battle, he thinks of himself as a quite a lady's man.

He takes meticulous care of his appearance. He could also sing lusty songs, compose melodies, write poetry, and ride a horse with distinction. He also has all the other proper attributes to go with his being a young lover: a fine figure, a dashing military career, and all the courtly accomplishments considered those times as being appropriate for winning one's lady. According to Helen Cooper, the Squire is the iconographic image of young love and its month of May (op. cit. line 92), for the month was often presented as fashionable and gaily dressed youth on horseback.

Chaucer does not quite offer us the Squire at his own valuation- a total failure to sleep on account of love has an affectionate touch of the ridiculous about it, as well as the hyperbolic, but the 'fresshe floures' embroidered on his clothes, and his associations with the spring with sleepless birds make Squire a 'courtly version of the lifetime of spring' (cf. Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales, Oxford University Press, 1996). The Squire is not only young, strong, and in love; he is courteous,

eager to server, and in all respects perfect of his type, however different from his father's type.

The Yeoman was a servant of the Knight and Squire. He was known as an expert woodsman and an excellent archer. A knight held a position in society that had to be visibly maintained, by the presence of at least a minimal retinue. The Yeoman is the servant he brings apart from the Squire, a modesty of display that Chaucer comments in lines 100-101 (op. cit.). One would expect a Yeoman in the company of such a Knight to be a military figure, a longbowman; by the addition of green clothes and the hunting-horn, Chaucer defines him more closely, as a forester.

A forester could be anything from a senior administrative official to a gamekeeper: the Yeoman's knowledge of 'wodecraft' shows him to be one of the more practical kind. 'The Yeoman is not a standard figure in estates literature, but Chaucer creates an iconography for him as effectively as he recreates the conventional images of the Squire. Whether the Yeoman really needs his bow, peacock, arrows, and horn on a pilgrimage is less important than the way they serve to define him.

His excellence as a yeoman is summed up in the neologism Chaucer creates for him, 'yemanly' (Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, Oxford University Press, 1996). To summarize, the chivalry social class representatives are shown as brave men, skilful in battle, famous for their deeds, ready to die for their beliefs; servants of their lords and masters. The chivalry participates in wars and is appreciated by the rest of community for

its strength, honour, fame, and modesty. Priesthood The priesthood is in the middle class of medieval social hierarchy.

Chaucer uses a lot of satire and irony as he describes members of this estate in The General Prologue. Members of this social class who participate in the pilgrimage are the Prioress, the Monk, the Friar, the Summoner, the Parson, and the Pardoner. Descriptions of these characters are much more abundant in satire and irony than any other. The Prioress was a head of monastery. She was rather well educated, even though her French was not the accepted Parisian French. She was very coy and delicate. When she ate, she took great care for her table manners. She was very courteous and amiable and tried to imitate the manners of the court.

She had three small hounds with her which she treated very gently and tenderly. Her dress was very neat and tidy and she wore a gold brooch with the inscription 'amor vincit omnia'. 'Chaucer's description of the Prioress is filled with gentle and subtle irony. Here is a picture of a lady who happens to be a nun, but she never forgets that she is a lady first. Her oath, 'by Sainte Loy' implies that she has chosen the most fashionable and handsome saint who was also famous for his great courtesy' (Bruce Nicoll, The Canterbury Tales notes, Coles Notes, 1992). She emphasis on her appearance.

The Monk's description simply seems to had been 'swapped' with the stereotypical description of a knight. The Knight is described as the man who devoted his life to God, and the Monk is called 'a manly man' by Chaucer, which means his portrait is that of a country gentleman. The Monk is interested in women (on the way which he should not be, regarding to his

profession), wearing expensive clothes and jewellery, he likes hunting. He is not modest. He does all these things although his monastic orders ban him to behave this way. He is supposed to be a beggar and own no goods.

In description of the Monk, According to Helen Cooper, Chaucer introduces the materials of antimonastic satire: the good living, his failure to keep within the cloister, his approval of secular offices for religious (op. cit. line 187), and his hunting. But it is he himself, not a satirist, who relays all the standard texts and aphorisms on the ills of such life; and he then dismisses them by reference to those items of food- oysters (a cheap dish), plucked hens- that fall well below his favourite diet of roast swan (cf. Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales, Oxford University Press, 1996).

The Monk clearly breaks his vows of poverty, obedience to his rule and 'stability', staying within his monastery. The Friar, like the Prioress, is described by Chaucer with a set of epithets and attributes that in other circumstances might be complimentary; he is 'worthy' like the Knight, and 'curteis' and 'lowely of servyse' like the Squire (op. cit. lines 99, 250). But his worthiness shows itself in his refusal to fulfil the basic function of his calling, the relief of the diseased and the outcast. The Friar was hobnobbing with the local franklins and surpassing the Monk in being not just like a 'prelaat' but like a pope (op. it. line 261).

The Friar is the first of the pilgrims who explicitly sets the money above God. Destitute widows are the objects not of his charity but of his greed. 'Over twenty lines of his portrait are devoted to his skill in extracting money; seven more go to his dubious relationships with young women, fair wives, and the

barmaids. ' (Helen Cooper, Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales) Yet there is no doubt that all such things make the Friar socially attractive: the whole emphasis of the portrait falls on the busyness of his social life, on taverns and love-days, on all the people with whom he is on good terms.

The Summoner was a man paid to summon sinners for a trial before a church court. He had a fire-red complexion, pimples and boils, a scaly infection around the eyebrows, and a moth-eaten beard. ' He treats his sores as leprosy. To make matters worse, he loved to eat garlic, onions, leeks, and drink strong wine. He could quote a few lines of Latin which he was using to impress people. Chaucer calls him a gentil harlot and implies it would be difficult to find a better fellow, because for a bottle of wine, the Summoner would often turn his back and let sinner to continue living in sin.

He was also well acquainted with ladies of questionable reputation' (Bruce Nicoll, The Canterbury Tales notes, Coles Notes, 1992). According to Bruce Nicoll, the Summoner's physical appearance fits to his profession well. He is so ugly and gruesome looking that a summons from him is in itself a horrible experience. Thus, Chaucer ironically implies that he is a good fellow. But furthermore, he is a good fellow because sinners could easily bribe him (Bruce Nicoll, The Canterbury Tales notes, Coles Notes, 1992).

The Parson is the only one of the churchmen shown by Chaucer that we can call competent and fair. Although he was very poor, he would rather give his own scarce money to his poor parishioners than demand tithes from them. His principle was to live the perfect life first, and then to teach it. His life was a perfect example of true Christian priest, and by his good example, he

taught but first followed it himself. Among the other churchmen described in The General Prologue, the Parson stands out as the ideal portrait of what parish priest should be. He is the ideal Christian man.

The Pardoner was a church official who had authority from Rome to sell pardons and indulgences to those charged with sins. He had just returned from Rome with bagful of pardons which he planned to sell to the ignorant at great profit to himself. He had a loud, high-pitched voice, yellow, flowing hair. He was beardless. ' There was no one so good at his profession as was this Pardoner' (Bruce Nicoll, The Canterbury Tales notes, Coles Notes, 1992). The pardoner seems to be the most corrupted of the churchmen. In the prologue to his tale, he confesses to his hypocrisy.

The Priesthood class is widely criticised by Chaucer. The Prioress pays more attention to her manners than to the substance of her calling. The Monk cares nothing for the rules of his order, the Friar sets money above God. The Summoner and the Pardoner are corrupted. There is only the Parson to fulfil his duties well. He is that good shepherd to care for his sheep. He is the ideal set in the minority of the clergy. The other churchmen described by Chaucer are focused more on their own ' business' than on their mission given by the Catholic church.

These characters (excluding the Parson) may be called hypocrites. Higher bourgeoisie Higher bourgeoisie is the class of rich and/or well-educated townsmen and landlords who are not noblemen. The representatives of this class are, as follows: the Merchant, the Clerk, the Sergeant of Law, the Franklin, the Doctor of Physic, and the Reeve. The Merchant is anonymous, ' I

noot how men hym calle' (op. cit. line 284). He has a forked beard and a beaver hat that reveals his wealth. He talks about his occupation and the risks connected with working as a merchant.

According to Helen Cooper, the merchant, like the Knight and Squire, has his own areas of contemporary campaign (cf. Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales, Oxford University Press, 1996). Chaucer has mentioned something about the debt of the Merchant in his description, but we are not sure whether the debt is still unpaid or the Merchant had dealt with it before. The Clerk is a student of what would nowadays be considered philosophy or theology. He is introduced as a diligent person who has a wide connection of books.

He is portrayed as a perfect example of a scholar. He has a bachelor degree and is totally devoted to logic. As a subtext to this portrait, there is an opposite description of less ideal clerks: those who would treat education as a pathway to well-paid office, who would prefer expensive clothes and music-making to the books for which the Clerk longs. The Sergeant of Law is a lawyer whose main focus is to make money. His legal knowledge and skill in 'purchasing' land is apparently used primarily for himself as a purchaser.

Chaucer uses a lot of law terms in his description of the Sergeant of Law, but no such word as 'justice' appears. The Franklin is the only pilgrim to be involved in running the society. He and the Sergeant of Law are partners in graft. He is a landowner, however he is not a noble. He did not inherit his wealth and he is not a 'nouveau riche'. The Franklin accepts all the duties

and responsibilities that go with his position: he has held the office of knight of the shire, sheriff, auditor, and justice of the peace.

There is no a single word from Chaucer that would criticise the way that the Franklin fulfils his duties. The Franklin has a white beard. As Helen Cooper noticed, his love differs from the Knight's chivalry or the Squire's ladies, the Franklin loves his morning snack of bread in wine; thus the vocabulary used in his description is gastronomic (cf. Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales, Oxford University Press, 1996). Moreover, the Franklin also shares his food with other people. That makes him a perfect landlord.

The Doctor of Physic is trained in medicine, astronomy and astrology. He could quote all the medical authorities, but he knew nothing of the Bible. He had made a lot of money during the plague. He has a special love for gold, since he prescribes this metal for cures. The Reeve managed a large estate. He was skinny and bad-tempered. He had a close cut beard and short haircut. His subordinates were afraid of him because of his unrelenting preservance. Similarly to the mentioned later Manciple, he had reaped profits for himself by being clever at buying.

The higher bourgeoisie class representatives are shown by Chaucer as people who are greedy (the Manciple, the Doctor of Physic, the Reeve, the Sergeant of Law, the Merchant, the imperfect clerks described in the description of the ideal Clerk), filled with temptation (the Franklin) and devoted to their passion (the Clerk, the Reeve). This social class is not criticised so sharply as the clergy. Most of them are fair in their work, some

of them are simply perfect (the Clerk, the Franklin), on the other hand some of them cheat (the Reeve).

They all want to gain something that make other people consider them 'upper class'. Bourgeoisie Bourgeoisie are simply the townsmen who are neither that rich nor that well-educated as the people from the class I named 'higher bourgeoisie'. They are simple people who live and work in town. They are ordinary people and second most numerous class of the middle ages in Europe. The representatives of this class are, as follows: the Guildsmen, the Wife of Bath, the Manciple, the Cook, the Shipman, the Miller, and the Host.

The Guildsmen are five craftsmen (four clothworkers and the Carpenter) who belong to a single parish guild. The portrait of the Guildsmen is largely devoted to their anxiety to impress others by climbing on the social class hierarchy ladder; their knives are decorated with silver chasing, which is inappropriate for their social class, because such ornament was reserved for gentry (lower nobility class members). The Guildsmen sit on dais in a guildhall and fulfil their professional obligations. They want to be aldermen and they are improving their qualifications day by day. They work fairly and hard.

Unfortunately, the Guildsmen are being corrupted by their wives, who want them to get promoted and advanced in social hierarchy, or at least pretend so. They wish to be accorded the superior title of 'madame'. Wives of the Guildsmen want to behave 'roialliche' and be treated as higher class members and force them to participate in some kind of what nowadays

would refer to as a 'rat race'. The Wife of Bath was an excellent seamstress and weaver. She has been married five times and been on many outland pilgrimages: to Rome, to Bologna, to Jerusalem, to Galice, and to Cologne.

Her special talent was her knowledge of all the remedies of love. She was deaf a little. She always was first at the altar or offering in church. The Manciple was a steward for a law school in London. His duty was to buy the food. He was not as learned as the lawyers, but he was smart enough that he had been able to put aside a little sum for himself from every transaction. The Cook in The General Prologue is only defined by his professional skill. He works for the Guildsmen. He has a notorious running sore on his leg.

We do not know much more about him from the description in the prologue. The Shipman was the master of vessel and an expert of navigation who knew all the ports from the Atlantic to the North Sea. He was a huge and uncouth man. He could not ride horse well, but no one was a better sailor. Nevertheless, according to Jill Mann, the Shipman had bad habits of thievery, piracy, and mass murder (Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, Cambridge, 1973). The Miller was a stubborn and strong man.

His strength would let him outwrestle any man. He had red beard and a wart on his nose. He played the bagpipes as the pilgrims left the town. He had a tendency for thievery. The Host was the leader of the pilgrimage party and the host of the Tabard Inn. His name is Harry Bailey. He was loud, large and merry, although he possesses a quick temper. He was liked by the pilgrims. Members of the bourgeoisie want to get socially promoted and try to do all

the things necessary to achieve this promotion (the best example of this is the behaviour of the Wife of Bath).

They focus on making money. Some of them, as the Guildsmen, work hard to improve their social and material status, others, as the Miller and the Manciple, prefer continuous small acts of thievery to enrich. Some of them commit more serious crimes, as does the Shipman. All of them are working hard in their profession and are determined to achieve their destination, one way or another. Peasants Peasants are the lowest social class of middle ages. They are hard-working and poor. Their professions are connected with agriculture. There is only one representative of this social class appearing in The General Prologue- the Plowman.

The Plowman is a small tenant farmer who lives in a perfect peace and charity. He loves God with all his heart. He is always honest with his neighbours. He regularly pays his tithes to the church. He is a brother of the Parson, and so, they are equally good-hearted. The Plowman, unlike most of the pilgrims, is happy with his position in society. He wears his humble tabard which is appropriate for his rank and never tries to be someone else than he really is.

The portrait of the only character of peasant class introduced to us by Chaucer lead us to conclusion that peasants are the poorest and the lowest social class of middle ages, but also the most hard-working and morally good people. In my opinion, the Plowman in his morality can be compared to the Knight, although their material and social statuses completely differ. Summary The division of society portrayed by Chaucer is not obvious. In this

work I have introduced the division into social classes by the social position, profession and, wealth and education level of each character.

I think that Chaucer demonstrates his audience that class order and moral order are two different things. Members of the chivalry and the peasant class are on top and the bottom of the hierarchy. Despite of this fact, in some aspects the knighthood characters and the Plowman are equal. They are all modest, hard-working, truly devoted to god, fair to other people and proud of their position. If we exclude these two classes from the hierarchy, there appears the conclusion that the higher social class character belongs to, the richer, the more educated, and the morally worse it is.

The social class portrayed by Chaucer as the most corrupted is clergy. Those who should prevent people from sin appear to be the biggest sinners. We can see that the more powerful and richer people become, the bigger sinners they are. The classes described as these of best morality are chivalry and peasants. Every class has its exceptional ideal representative: chivalry- the Knight, clergy- the Parson, bourgeoisie (as one class with higher bourgeoisie)- the Clerk. These characters are patterns of ideal behaviour for all the members of their classes.

By this phenomena, Chaucer shows that there is no class that is totally corrupted- there is always someone who fulfils his duties perfectly. To sum up, the clergy is shown as a class of people who abuse their position for private profits; the bourgeoisie members are only wishing to make more and more money and advance their social status; the chivalry and peasants are happy with their position, neither the Knight, nor the Plowman can be

promoted to upper class. The difference is- the Knight, unlike the Plowman, is socially appreciated and respected.

Those days your origin and social class membership was the most important part of social life. So, there is no wonder why people from middle classes wanted to be promoted and were ready to do anything to achieve that, on fair or unfair way. Although the portrait of medieval social classes is a little ironical and satirical (and still may appear a literary fiction), I think that it is very likely that it is possibly a complete description of the actual English community in Middle Ages.