

Dante and Chaucer: Trailblazers for the Reformation of the Catholic Church



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To the heedless reader, Dante's *Inferno* and Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* are generally interpreted as mere works of fiction designed and created for the sole purpose of entertainment. To fully glean the authors' intended message, though, one must carefully analyze the rhetoric and style of each work. If both pieces of art are not attentively examined, the reader would neglect Dante's and Chaucer's layered themes of the criticisms of church representatives' behaviors in their poems. These influential artists anticipated the beginnings of the Catholic Reformation, exemplified heavily in *Inferno* and *The Canterbury Tales*. In the view of the authors, Catholic church officials were found to be flawed in that they were incredibly corrupt and placed a sinful emphasis on worldly wealth. Nearly a century before the era of the Reformation, starting in 1517 with Martin Luther's *Theses*, Dante and Chaucer both catalyzed the movement for the Reformation by subtly rebuking the church, indirectly through their works of fiction.

Although Dante offers sharp commentary of the politics of his home city-state of Florence throughout the *Inferno*, his commentary about the position of church officials is of especial interest. His criticism is important because of its future roles in significant historical events of the consequent split of the Catholic church into the Protestant sect. During the lifetime of Dante, church corruption was rampant. Everyone from priests to the pope was guilty of the sin of avarice, defined by the intense gluttony of monetary wealth. Dante's disdain for church representatives is represented by the placement of them in the structure of his *Inferno*. To understand the severity of Dante's scorn directed towards the sinful church leaders, one must first understand the construction of his Hell. Dante's Hell was assembled on the severity of the

sin committed; the graver the sin, the deeper in Hell the sinner was condemned to. Thus, in Canto XIX, (page 454) many of the important church leaders, including Pope Nicholas III, are found in the eighth circle of the Inferno, which is the second to last circle of Hell. For reference, the lustful are found in the second circle, while the arch-heretics are found in the sixth circle (page 391). Now that the basis of structure has been set, form of punishment follows a similar overarching set of rules in the Inferno. Dante finds Pope Nicholas III “ writhing more than any of his comrades... licked by a redder flame” (page 454). Because Nicholas III was not a mere priest, but rather the pope of the entire Catholic church, entrusted with “ the keys into his keeping” (page 456), his form of punishment was more drastic than the others, exemplified by the brighter burning, hotter flame.

In Dante’s conversation with Pope Nicholas III, he argues that the pope “ brings grief upon the world” by instead of worshipping God, “ he worshipped hundreds... not differing from the idolater” (page 456). This very scene stands as Dante’s viewpoint of the deficiencies of church representatives; that they place more importance on worldly wealth than they did on righteously leading the Catholic church. Also, Pope Nicholas III was not the only pope guilty of these sins. As exemplified by the ability of the tormented to see into the future, but not the past, described on page 455, more popes were to be condemned to the same whole that Pope Nicholas III was already placed in, supporting the idea that multiple church representatives were enveloped in fraud and deception. While these factual events did not lead to widespread change in Dante Alighieri’s lifetime, they would provide the necessary stimulant that would lead to the events of Martin Luther. Dante

performed this role as a catalyst by first introducing the idea that the church was involved in corruption and deceit. While not directly covered in the *Inferno*, this preliminary introduction was necessary because of the sheer power of the Catholic Church, and its effective ability to silence opponents and sway public interest. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is a frame story of a variety of people on a pilgrimage to a cathedral in Canterbury. It is notable to point out; while Chaucer may have created a setting with religious overtones, being that of a pilgrimage, it is actually quite ironic because the characters described in the frame story also represent Chaucer's criticisms of church representatives.

In Dante's *Inferno*, he informs the audience of his criticisms of church representatives by their place in his Hell. In contrast, Chaucer uses irony to display his opinion on the issue. For example, when describing the Prioress, she is portrayed as "finding what pleases her best" (page 665). This claim is supported by the fact that she wears a rosary in adherence to the love and admiration of Jesus Christ, but, nuns were not allowed to wear flamboyant articles, let alone jewelry in the first place (page 666). By wearing the rosary, the Prioress is signifying that she does not pay particular attachment to the Catholic Church, or to the principle beliefs upon which it is based. This example is representative of Chaucer's viewpoint that church officials are heavily corrupted, and that the Catholic Church as a whole should not be trusted because of their dishonesty and fraud.

Chaucer further illustrates his point that many church officials are corrupt by the description of the Monk. The Monk also demonstrates the author's point that church officials are corrupt by his willingness to adhere to the religion to <https://assignbuster.com/dante-and-chaucer-trailblazers-for-the-reformation-of-the-catholic-church/>

which he is a leader of. Instead of reading the Bible and engaging in religious thought and prayer, the Monk would rather go hunting because “ he is heedless of rules” (page 666). Chaucer adds to the character development of the Monk by stating that he “ would not give you one plucked hen... for that text” (page 666). According to interpretation of this quote, the text here in question is the Holy Bible. Because the Monk does not feel any responsibility for the principles of his position, he would rather go out and use his time according to his hobbies, which are to hunt. All of these quotes support the claim that Chaucer is again creating a contrast in his characters, representative of his viewpoint as a whole. The specific contrast in these characters has been that they are both in positions of authority in the church, but they act as if they are corrupted, further exemplified by the choice of the Monk’s clothing, which is very ornate. Jesus Christ taught that his followers should be humbled, and show modesty towards other people, but the Monk is comprehensively disregarding this teaching, additionally exemplifying his malfeasance.

Perhaps the most notably and intriguing example of corruption in Chaucer’s tale is that of the Pardoner, who confesses that he advertises false relics to Christians (page 713). Chaucer’s description of the Pardoner is a direct representation of the type of church official that Martin Luther will later take advance against, as described in The 95 Theses. Similar to Dante, by exposing the public to the idea of church corruption masked by a façade of fiction, Chaucer was able to pave the way for the Reformation. When the Reformation actually came around, many of these ideas published by

Reformists such as Luther were already discussed by literary greats such as Chaucer or Dante.

Dante and Chaucer were both influential authors who shaped the view of the public in their works of fiction, the *Inferno* and *The Canterbury Tales*. They claimed that the representatives of the Catholic Church were unfit for their respective positions, based on the scandals of church corruption. Church corruption was a substantial issue of the time because the widespread grip it had among the lower class, and the power it bestowed to the higher-class elites, who could use this position for monetary gain. Chaucer and Dante would herald in an era of Reformation by first introducing the idea that church officials were corrupt to the general public. These ideas would eventually catch fire like an *Inferno* and be spread by religious pilgrims all over the continent of Europe.