

THE CANTERBURY TALES:

A Study of certain of the Characters  
and their Tales as an Expression of  
Chaucer's Concern Regarding Abuses  
among the Priesthood and Religious  
Orders during the 14th Century.

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## INTRODUCTION

Geoffrey Chaucer (1340 (43)<sup>1</sup> - 1400) lived and wrote in a century which, while filled with excitement and challenge, was also marked by numerous widespread disasters; disasters which had a significant effect on all aspects of life in that period and which gave rise to an increased questioning of doctrines, beliefs and values which had until a short time previously been considered permanent and immutable.

The previous century had seen an upsurge in the amount of trade between the European countries and between the east and the west and a consequent improvement in economic conditions in all the major European countries. However, in the fourteenth century this upward curve levelled off and "Europe", as Pirenne expressed it, "lived, so to speak, on what it had acquired".<sup>2</sup>

This slowing down in the rate of progress was due, among other causes, to various natural calamities with which Europe was visited in the fourteenth century. The most disastrous of these were the great famine which lasted from 1315 to 1317 and the various outbreaks of the Black Death which made its appearance at regular intervals from 1349 to 1376 and which resulted in the death of about one third of Europe's population. Then, too, Europe was, during this century, torn apart by internal and external violence and political intrigue. Particularly harmful was the Hundred Years' War which "ruined France and exhausted England".<sup>3</sup>

By the fourteenth century the English class system had become slightly less rigid, for some of the English merchants who had grown very wealthy as a result of the improved trading of the previous century had succeeded in buying their way into the ranks of the nobility.<sup>4</sup>

Ironically, the Black Death had also contributed to this hint, for it was not much more than a hint, of social levelling for labour

1. J.A. Burrow (ed.), Geoffrey Chaucer (Middlesex, 1969), Table of dates.
2. H. Pirenne, Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe  
Translated by I.G. Clegg.  
(London, 1936), p.195.
3. *Ibid.* p.196.
4. See also: R.J. Unstead, The Medieval Scene  
(London, 1962), p. 216.

became so scarce after the successive outbreaks of the plague that labourers could, in practice, seek slightly more congenial work and could demand wages for their work. It was also possible for peasants, although still bound by legal prescription to the soil, to seek and find work in the towns. This fact aroused in the peasants feelings of increased self respect and a desire for greater freedom. These feelings were encouraged by preachers, like John Ball, who made the peasants keenly aware of the injustices of the class system and led them to believe that it was possible for them to improve their situation by their own unaided efforts. This belief was one of the causes of the Peasant's Revolt which broke out in 1381 under the leadership of Wat Tyler. The initial success of the revolt was, however, shortlived and it collapsed soon after Wat Tyler was treacherously murdered. The other leaders were subsequently captured and executed.

The revolt did, nevertheless, enjoy a certain measure of success because the nobles were sufficiently alarmed to initiate a system of renting out part of their lands to peasants and of paying wages for work done rather than to attempt to maintain the prevailing system of forced labour at the risk of further outbreaks of violence.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Church had been forced to relinquish some degree of the absolute control she had previously exercised over education<sup>5</sup> because secular educational institutions had made such rapid progress that they were offering as good an education as and better than, that provided by the schools and universities controlled by the Church. By the middle of the fourteenth century therefore the professions were no longer entirely dominated by clerics. Merchants, prosperous farmers and members of the lesser gentry were now able to obtain a sound education and entrance into any profession they chose. Chaucer, whose father was a vintner, probably known in court circles, was able to receive an

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5. For mention of the Church's loss of educational domination see: D. Knowles, The Religious Orders in England (Cambridge, 1950), p.291.

excellent education even though he did not take the tonsure.

After the twelfth century the study of law, medicine and mathematics became more popular than that of the disciplines of rhetoric and grammar which had previously been believed to be among the most important branches of knowledge. Ecclesiastic disapproval of the works of the classical authors had become somewhat less severe by the thirteenth century. St. Thomas Aquinas translated the works of Aristotle into Latin and by means of commentaries tried to reconcile the ideas of this philosopher with mediaeval Christian principles. The works of Virgil, Ovid, Cicero and Horace were widely read during the fourteenth century and extensive use was made of these works in art and literature. So highly was the work of Virgil valued that Dante chose the spirit of this poet to guide him on his pilgrimage through the regions of hell and purgatory.

Equally important at this time and more strongly recommended by the Church was the study of the early Church fathers such as Jerome, Augustine and Isidore. The works of the other Christian writers, among them Cassiodorus and Prudentius were also carefully studied.

The works of the philosopher Boethius, who wrote de Consolatione Philosophiae were also frequently studied during the middle ages as Boethius's ideas were so similar to many of the tenets of Mediaeval Christianity that he was thought by mediaeval scholars to have been a Christian philosopher. This belief is illustrated by the fact that although Boethius does not include any specific reference to Christian revelation in his discussion, his treatment of fate, fortune, divine providence and the relationship between man's free will and the foreknowledge of God was considered to be so important to Christians that the Consolation is one of the most frequently translated of mediaeval philosophical works. It was translated by, among others, King Alfred, Jean de Meun, Geoffrey Chaucer and Queen Elizabeth I.

Despite the growing popularity of other branches of learning,

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however, theology remained the queen of the sciences; the pivot around which all the other branches of learning revolved. Thus, although the religious fervour which had been a feature of the tenth and eleventh centuries had waned considerably, practice of and belief in the doctrines of Christianity as propagated in the teachings of the Catholic Church still formed an integral part in the lives of the people. Baldwin states with truth that society in the middle ages was " .....formed by religion to an extent never equalled in any other epoch of history; and as a result, an inextricable association of things religious and secular developed." <sup>6</sup>

For this reason the apparently irreversible decline in religion, a decline which had infiltrated all clerical ranks and which had by the third decade of the fourteenth century become all too obvious even to the simplest and least educated must surely have been regarded by the sincere Christian of the time as a greater disaster than the Hundred Years' War and at least as destructive, spiritually if not materially, as the various outbreaks of the Black Death.

For centuries the orders of monks and, more recently, the orders of friars had contributed in no small way to the advancement of learning and scholarship in Europe. That this was so can be seen from the fact that most of the great scholars of the middle ages were monks or friars.<sup>7</sup> So great, in fact, was the contribution of the mediaeval monasteries that monastic life may be said to have been one of the greatest formative influences on the lives of the people of the middle ages and therefore on the character of the age as a whole. R.W.Southern says of religious orders of the middle ages that "they stamped on those communities - even the most resistant - two features which are found in every part of medieval life, a strong grasp on the things of the world and an ardent desire for the rewards of eternity."<sup>8</sup> He goes even further and

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6. M.W. Baldwin, The Mediaeval Church (Cornell University Press, 1953), p.1.
  7. Roger Bacon, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure.
  8. R.W. Southern, Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages (Middlesex, 1967), p.216.

states that, "in the history of the Religious Orders: .... more obviously than anywhere else the history of the medieval church is the history of medieval society".<sup>9</sup>

Monachism was made popular in the west by Saint Benedict who founded the first Benedictine monastery in the year 529 A.D. The rule which he drew up for his followers was for many years the only one of its kind. According to this rule every man or woman who entered a monastery or convent had to renounce all personal possessions and had to bind himself or herself to a communal life of poverty and penance with a fixed routine of prayer, meditation, liturgy, work and even diet. This rule of life was a difficult one and was "...intended to train its followers for positions in the forefront of religious and intellectual life.....".<sup>10</sup>

The Catholic Church teaches that her priests have the power to forgive sins under the authority of and in the name of Jesus Christ. All the faithful who have sinned deliberately in serious matters are obliged to confess their sins to a priest and receive absolution from him. If the priest deems the penitent to be truly contrite his sins will be forgiven him but he will be expected to perform some penitential act or say certain prayers as satisfaction for the punishment due to his sins. This obligatory "penance" is determined by the priest and its severity depends on the gravity of the sins committed. In the middle ages the penance given for sins was sometimes so severe that it would have taken the penitent several years to complete it. Fortunately, however, someone else could assist the penitent in his task or could even substitute for him as long as a definite arrangement was made that the penance would be carried out on the penitent's behalf.

Since the Catholic Church was the only orthodox church in England during this time and since every penitent was obliged in

9. Ibid. p. 215.

See also: D. Knowles, The Religious Orders in England  
op. cit., p.318.

10. M.W. Grose, Chaucer  
(London, 1967), p.31.

conscience to carry out the penance enjoined by the Church the faithful welcomed the establishment of convents and monasteries in their communities because these permanent centres of prayer and work offered a surer way of paying the penitential debt than any other method of substitution, whether it be by almsgiving or by the assistance of lay helpers. Monks and nuns could be relied upon to perform their service of substitution for as long as it was necessary. The "Opus Dei" of the monks and nuns, then, "was work of a very practical kind: its wages were eternal life, and this was earned for their founders and benefactors as well as for the monks themselves."<sup>12</sup> A decline in the fervour and discipline of the monastic orders can therefore be seen to be a matter of serious concern to mediaeval man, whatever his station in life, for he was deeply aware of the fact that we are all sinners and need to do penance.

During the second decade of the thirteenth century the two most important orders of friars, the Friars Minor, the Franciscans, and the Order of Preachers, the Dominicans, were founded. Within the next two decades groups of friars from both orders had been sent to work in England. Austin and Carmelite friaries were also established in Britain but the friars of these orders were not as numerous as the Franciscans and Dominicans. It was the function of the friars to teach and preach and, in the case of the Franciscans, to practise the virtue of poverty in a special way. The friars were called mendicants because they were expected to make a living by begging and by working among the people in the towns. In contrast to the monks who were expected to have as little as possible to do with the world outside the monastery walls, the friars were enjoined to work towards the redemption of the world by remaining part of that world.

As had been the case with the early monks, the way of life and

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11. Opus Dei - Work of God - was used with reference to the recitation of the Liturgical Hours.
  12. R.W. Southern, Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages op. cit., p.227.

ideals of the early friars inspired the laity to give generously of both their money and their goods for the benefit of their immortal souls. For a short while the friars were able to withstand the materialistic influence of wealth and status but before very long they too, like the monks before them, succumbed to the temptation to be rich and important and they lost that austere, penitential character which had previously inspired the emulation of the faithful.

Church authorities, saints and scholars from all over Europe had for the previous two centuries been making valiant but largely unavailing attempts to combat abuses among clergy and in the convents and monasteries. In singulis regnis of the Lateran Council of 1215 was directed against abuses in monasteries. In 1274 Pope Gregory X instituted an investigation into the affairs of the Church with an eye to legislating for necessary reform,<sup>13</sup> while St. Bonaventure, in his works Quaestiones circa Regulam and Quare Fratres Minores Praedicant,<sup>14</sup> attacked religious and clerical abuse as did Roger Bacon, David of Augsburg and Cardinal Jacques de Vitry.

Nonetheless, religious abuse had escalated to alarming proportions in England by the end of the thirteenth century.<sup>15</sup> By the time that Chaucer wrote his Canterbury Tales many individual religious and priests and even, in some cases, entire religious houses, had abandoned all pretence of leading lives according to the rules and ideals of their founders.<sup>16</sup> These religious and clerics no longer devoted themselves to lives of prayer, penance and labour but endeavoured to enjoy the fleshpots of Egypt as much as they possibly could without actually being excommunicated. It is only fair to point out,

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13. In this connection see also:  
G.G. Coulton, Life in the Middle Ages  
Vol. 1.  
(Cambridge, 1954), p. 105.  
and  
G.G. Coulton, Ten Medieval Studies  
(Boston, 1959), pp. 70, 75.
  14. S. Bonaventurae, Opera Omnia,  
Tomus viii. Ad Claras Aquas (quaracchi)  
Prope Florentiam (Ex Typographia Collegii)  
S. Bonaventurae). mdcxcviii, pp. 337-374, 375-385.
  15. G.R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Mediaeval England  
(Cambridge, 1933), pp. 210-86.
  16. The fourteenth century did, however, produce, among others, the important mystics Walter Hilton, author of The Cloud of Unknowing Dame Julian of Norwich and Richard Rolle.

however, with Mr. Grose that "scandalous behaviour attracts more attention than an ordinary sober life", and that "even if the monasteries and convents were no longer, in Chaucer's time, the homes of devout intellectuals, they were more likely to be run with a stable respectability than to be given over entirely to the affairs of this world".<sup>17</sup>

There was, however sufficient serious abuse in evidence to alarm many an earnest Christian of the fourteenth century. Though popes and bishops had made attempts to ensure that priests were sufficiently trained and educated to carry out the tasks demanded of them by their office it was difficult at that time to maintain an effective check on such matters and many priests were only slightly better educated than the people they were expected to guide. Then, too, the Black Death had decimated the populations of convents and monasteries and had left many churches without a parish priest. Ignorance and superstition were rife and it was not difficult for charlatans and rogues to take advantage of the fact that the people had no one to teach them and to line their own pockets in the name of Holy Mother Church.

It is sufficient to glance at the registers of the bishop's visitations in the York, Lincoln and Exeter dioceses and to read even a fraction of the sermon literature of the time, sermons such as those of John Bromyard, William of Saint-Amour and Richard de Bury, to appreciate their concern regarding the extent of the abuse prevalent in the lives of religious and priests of the fourteenth century. This literature also provides an indication of the fact that the hierarchy was well aware of the situation and was attempting to remedy it.

Besides the officials of the Church there were other men of genius and faith who were saddened and even appalled at the evidence of increasing decadence in the Church and who, because they appreciated the detrimental affect of such decadence on the faithful, were moved to finding some means of expressing this concern in the

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17. M.W. Grose, Chaucer  
op. cit., p.31.

literary form which they used as a vehicle of expression.

The problem of religious abuse was, of course, not restricted to England and therefore we find comment on it coming from the pens of the greatest writers of the age in various parts of Europe. In so far as literature is a commentary on a certain society at a given period in time, those themes which are most frequently encountered in the best literature of the period may be taken to reflect the themes which are of most interest to the people. The fact, therefore, that most of the major literary figures who wrote between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries make it their business to comment on religious abuse in at least one of their important works is a reliable indication of the significance of religion in the life of mediaeval man.

Boccaccio and Dante rank among the greatest Italian writers of the middle ages and both make mention of religious abuse in their work. Boccaccio, in his Decameron, wrote not only of the social customs of his time but poked fun at the monks and friars; their love of wandering about and of money and their affairs with women.

Dante was a more serious poet who, in his Divine Comedy, wrote of a dream journey which he took to hell, purgatory and heaven. He makes St. Bonaventure, for example, a thirteenth century friar, who tried to combat religious abuse, one of the stars in his heaven. He peoples his hell, on the other hand, with avaricious popes such as Boniface viii and Nicholas iii (Inferno. xix) and with priests who did not try to be faithful to their vow of poverty.

The French mediaeval poem Roman de la Rose was written during the thirteenth century in two separate parts. The first 4058 lines were written by Guillaume de Lorris and the rest (4059 - 21780) by Jean de Meun. Various historical references appearing in this section of the poem lead to the assumption that it was written between 1268 and 1283. This work which is in the form of a dream vision and which relates how the Dreamer or Lover sets out to find and gain possession of the rose is recognized as a serious satire of cupidinous love.

In the course of the poem the authors refer on various occasions

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to abuses prevalent among clergy and religious. One of the significant references of this type is found in the section "The Overthrow of Reason" where False Seeming is required by the God of Love to tell the story of his life and to give the followers of Love an indication of where they may find him. False Seeming then explains that he can be found in the habits of ".....false religious, the malicious criminals who want to wear the habit but do not want to subdue their hearts " (11023). The poet's appreciation of the harm caused by such abuse is revealed in lines 11133-62 where he has False Seeming say:

"If there are even a few such wolves among your new apostles, O Church, you are in a bad situation. If your city is attacked by the knights of your table, your lordship is very weak. If those to whom you have given its defense attack the city, who can protect it against them? It will be captured without feeling a shot from a mangonel or a catapult, without displaying a banner to the wind. And if you don't want to rescue it from them, then you let them run everywhere. Let them! But if you command them, then there is nothing for you to do except to surrender or become their tributary by making peace with them and keeping it, as long as no greater misfortune comes to you than that they become lords of the entire church. In fact they know now how to mock you. By day they run around strengthening the walls, and by night they don't stop undermining them. Think about setting out elsewhere the grafts from which you want to gather fruit; you should not wait to do so. But peace! I shall come back from that subject. I want to say no more now about it, if I may pass along, for I could tire you too much."

In England all the major poets and writers of the fourteenth century took as their theme the less favourable aspects of life in England at this time. All of them made a point of drawing attention to the glaring abuses in the lives of the religious and priests of that century. Of these writers, John Wycliff was probably the most prominent and prolific critic of clerical and religious abuse. He was the leader of the heretical Lollard sect and was violently opposed not only to abuses in monastic and clerical life but even to the very principles and ideals which inspired the monastic way of life. For this reason some of his strictures against religious are suspect. Nevertheless, a significant amount of the criticism which he levels at religious and clergy is substantiated from other sources. This is especially true with regard to his criticism of lax and ignorant priests.

Another serious writer, this time an orthodox thinker, was John Gower.

Gower wrote in Latin and French as well as in English. He made his sharpest attack on dissolute religious and priests in his works Miroir de l'homme and in Vox Clamantis in which he complained specifically about the fact that chastity was dead in the monastery and that lechery had taken her place (iv. 327 ff.).

William Langland author of Piers Plowman, wrote in didactic terms about the religious decadence evident in his day. In the following lines, taken from the B text of the Prologue to his work, he bewails the abuse prevalent among friars,

"I fonde there freris . alle the foure ordres,  
 Preched the peple . for profit of hem-seluen,  
 Glosed the gospel . as hem good lyked,  
 For coueitise of copis . construed it as thei wolde.  
 Many of this maistres freris . mowe clothen hem at lykyng,  
 For here money and merchandise . marchen togideres  
 For sith charite hath be chapman . and chief to shryue Lordes,  
 Many ferlis han fallen . in a fewe ȝeris" (B. Prol. 58-65).

It seems in fact that religious abuse among the friars is Langland's chief concern,<sup>18</sup> for he attacks them on numerous occasions.

"The moste myschief on molde . is mountyng wel faste" (B.Prol.67). Also in B. iii. 35-63 and speaks of friars giving easy penances for lechery if they are paid enough. In C.x. 203 - 12 Langland complains of the fact that labourers leave their jobs to become hermits because they see how fat and prosperous the friars are. In A. ii. 186-208 the poet describes how the friars rescue "fals" and take him to live with them.

Langland is concerned, too, about the scandal of Pardoners selling pardons, for he says:

"There preched a pardonere . as he a prest were,  
 Brouȝte forth a bulle . with bishopes seles,  
 And seide that hym-self myȝte . assoilen hem alle  
 Of falshed of fastyng . of vowes ybroken.  
 Lewed men leued hym wel . and lyked his wordes,  
 He bonched hem with his breuet . and blered here eyes,  
 And rauȝte with his ragman. rynges and broches.  
 Thus they geven here golde . glotones to kepe,  
 And leueth such loseles . that lecherye haunten". (B.Prol.68-77).

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18. See also: R.W. Frank, "The Conclusion of Piers Plowman"  
JEGP, 49 (1950), pp. 310-313.

Langland speaks in Passus I of the disregard of the people for the authority of the Church rulers. He idealizes the honest worker and the Plowman, personifies the seven deadly sins and discusses the problem of predestination in B. x. 375 ff.

Chaucer, like his contemporaries and immediate predecessors wrote about various aspects of the society in which he found himself. The style in which he wrote a good deal of his work is, according to Charles Muscatine, a direct parallel to the style used in the earlier French tradition.<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer is much indebted to the authors of the Roman de la Rose for much of the material as well as the style of many of his earlier works, in particular, The Book of the Duchess, supposedly written at the request of the Duke of Lancaster after the death of his wife, Blanche. In this poem, as in The House of Fame and The Parliament of Fowls, Chaucer writes in the first person and makes use of the dream-vision convention. He was not, however, the first or the only English poet to make use of these literary devices, for Langland made successful use of them in his Piers Plowman and John Gower used them in his Confessio Amantis which he is said to have written in 1390. There is also a degree of similarity between Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and Langland's Piers Plowman as regards both format and material used. Piers Plowman is similar to The Canterbury Tales in that its poet also makes use of the theme of pilgrimage. While the whole of The Canterbury Tales, however, is in the form of a pilgrimage, pilgrimages are only one of the forms used by Langland. Then, too, Chaucer, like Langland, idealizes ordinary people and provides instruction on the seven deadly sins.

Chaucer's writings, however, give a more comprehensive picture of life in England during the fourteenth century and his characters have more charm and immediacy than those of any other famous writer of the period.

Like the other writers of that age Chaucer was well versed in the works of the classical authors and, through them, in the tales of ancient Greece. In his Legend of Good Women Chaucer makes exclusive use of classical narratives and he makes, in many of his other words, specific references to Virgil, Ovid, Cicero, Claudian and Statius.<sup>20</sup>

19. C. Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition (University of California, 1964), p.247.
20. J.S.P. Tatlock & A.G. Kennedy, Chaucer Concordance (Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1927), pp. 128,143,664,880,1005.

That Chaucer made a very thorough study of both astronomy and astrology is evident from his Treatise on the Astrolabe and from his numerous references to the heavenly bodies.<sup>21</sup> Bertrand Bronson, writing on Chaucer's preoccupation with the heavens, goes so far as to say "the.....evidence seems to show that Chaucer and his contemporaries more frequently raised their eyes to the heavens than lowered them to the earth".<sup>22</sup> He goes even further and maintains that the poet "seldom tries to describe an actual landscape or natural scene", and when he does he always "emphasises the most ethereal aspect of them..... which borrow their attributes from above".<sup>23</sup>

Chaucer was familiar, too, with various other topics which were frequently used as literary material. His Troilus and Criseyde deals with the problems of the code of courtly love and is based on Boccaccio's Il Filostrato. Chaucer also translated the Roman de la Rose on the same theme.

Chaucer was influenced to a certain extent by the works of the Italian, Dante. The English poet refers frequently to Dante's works, in particular to the Divine Comedy, and has transplanted a number of the Italian poet's passages verbatim into his own poems. Most noticeable among these borrowings is Chaucer's doxology at the conclusion of Troilus and Criseyde. (Parad. xiv 28-30) and St. Bernard's prayer to Our Lady in the prologue to The Second Nun's Tale (Parad. xxxiii).<sup>24</sup> Chaucer accepts, too, as most mediaeval Christians would have done the same Christianized idea of the universe as Dante holds and shares his interest in astronomy. We see, too in Chaucer's The Parliament of Fowls<sup>25</sup> an echo of Dante's pilgrimage under the guidance of Virgil's Scipio (African).

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21. J.S.P. Tatlock & A.G. Kennedy, Chaucer Concordance  
op. cit., pp. 430-3.

22. B.H. Bronson, "In Search of Chaucer" in Geoffrey Chaucer  
(Middlesex, 1969), p.214.

23. Ibid. p. 216.

This fact is very noticeable in the first ten lines of  
The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales.

24. See also: D.R. Faulkner (ed.) The Pardoner's Tale  
(New Jersey, 1973), p. 4.

25. See also: J.A.W. Bennett, The Parlement of Foules  
(Oxford, 1957), pp. 56, 57.

Like the other major writers of his time Chaucer demonstrates in many of his works an interest, sometimes a very marked one, in orthodox religious principles. Of the poet's earlier works his translation of The Consolation of Philosophy by Boethius was probably the greatest proof of his interest in religion. This belief is reinforced by the fact that Chaucer not only translated Boethius but made himself so familiar with his ideas and principles that he was able to use them repeatedly in his works. In this connection Dr. Jefferson says that the poet's references to Boethius's work "would seem to indicate a thorough assimilation of the Boethian philosophy". He concludes that this "would result from a thoughtful reading of that work".<sup>26</sup>

Of Chaucer's shorter works Gentillesse, Lak of Steadfastnesse and Truth are all influenced to some extent by the work of Boethius.<sup>27</sup>

While I believe that Dr. Jefferson's assumption that Truth is the epitome of The Consolation of Philosophy is somewhat exaggerated I do agree with him that the poem "expresses an attitude towards life - an aloofness, an interest, a bigness of view, and a hope which would be almost necessary for the writer of a Canterbury Tales to have", and that, "whatever the occasion of the poem, it stands out as one of the most sincere and noble of Chaucer's utterances".<sup>28</sup> I believe that Truth serves too, as an expression of the poet's religious insight and conviction.<sup>29</sup>

When reading this poem, one is immediately struck by the lack

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26. B.L. Jefferson, Chaucer and the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius Ph.D. Thesis Princeton University 1914. (Princeton University Press, 1917), p. 58.
27. In the Chapter "Love Vision and Debate" in Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry Vol. 1. (London, 1972), p.39, Miss P.M. Kean states that she finds closer parallels to Truth in the work of Seneca than in Boethius. This is very probably correct but since, as she herself has pointed out, there is some degree of "overlap between Boethius and Seneca" as regards the subject matter of Truth, and since the sentiments expressed in it are as reminiscent of the ideas of Boethius as they are of those of Seneca, I find I agree with Robinson (p.860) that at least a certain degree of Boethian influence must be conceded. Furthermore, Miss Kean does not give evidence of actual "borrowings" from Seneca.
28. B.L. Jefferson, Chaucer and the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius op. cit., p. 108.
29. But see: P.M. Kean, Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry op. cit., p.40.

Miss Kean is of the opinion that Chaucer "does not overtly attempt to Christianize the stoic good man...."  
However the number of easily traceable references to the New Testament in particular seems to indicate the contrary.

of ornamentation and the absence of overt reference to the classical authors. This may be due to the fact that, as Robinson states, this ballade is usually thought to have been written during Chaucer's last years and even, perhaps, on his deathbed.<sup>30</sup> If this is so, then Truth, together with the Retraction at the end of The Canterbury Tales, forms a fitting conclusion to Chaucer's work.

Truth is particularly remarkable for its simplicity and directness and for the fact that Chaucer makes no attempt to disguise his convictions by placing them in the context of a tale or by making use of a narrator to draw the attention of the reader away from himself. It is a significant indication of the likelihood that Chaucer was known among his contemporaries to be interested in religion that he makes no apology for his undisguised use of this poem to express his religious convictions but expects his readers to accept this aspect of his poetry as readily as they accepted his legends and "leccherous lay(s)".

Chaucer, like Christian saints and scholars through the ages, appreciated the fundamental role which truth plays in Christian living<sup>31</sup> for he sums up each stanza of the poem with a reference to the Evangelist's words: "And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (John viii: 32). To the Christian knowledge of the truth is closely associated with obedience to the word of God. Chaucer, therefore, by his reference to St. John, expresses in the last line of each stanza the essence of Christianity - the following of Christ through obedience to His word. The fundamental virtue of truth forms the framework within which mention is made of the other virtues which the Christian would do well to cultivate.

In the first stanza of Truth Chaucer speaks of the Christian's need for a certain amount of silence and solitude and of the serious attempt he should make to avoid the "prees" (1). Robinson feels that this word refers specifically to the "ambitious throng of the court",<sup>32</sup> but I think it could equally well apply to any type of noisy, superficial gathering which, but its very nature, discourages the development of one's spiritual powers. This line could therefore be a plea for spiritual contemplation.

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30. F.N. Robinson, The Complete works of Geoffrey Chaucer Second Edition (London, 1957), p.860.

31. Another aspect of truth is explored in The Franklyn's Tale where Arveragus advises his wife to honour the agreement which she ill - advisedly made with Aurelius. Arveragus says: "Trouthe is the hyste thyng that man may kepe '-" (v. 1479). Here loyalty (keeping faith, being reliable) is in view.

32. F.N. Robinson, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer op. cit., p. 861.

One is reminded of Griselda in The Clerk's Tale and the widow in The Nun's Priest's Tale by Chaucer's advice, in line 5, to: "Savour no more than thee bihove shal" because it, like the characters in these tales, as also Constance, in The Man of Law's Tale, speaks of an unfeigned contentment with whatever God sends and the absence of ambition regarding those things which do not form part of one's state in life. The following line: "Reule wel thyself, that other folk canst rede,"<sup>(6)</sup> contains advice which occurs, sometimes by implication and sometimes explicitly, in various of his other works<sup>33</sup> and are an indication of Chaucer's belief that self control is a very important feature in Christian living.

The idea, contained in the first stanza, of a spiritual harvest being gleaned in an atmosphere of silence, solitude and self control rather than by much activity in crowded places is reinforced in the second stanza where the poet advises his readers not to be continually busy about many things as was Martha: "Gret reste stant in litel besnesse" (10), but to choose the way of quiet attention to Christ as Mary did.

Chaucer refers, in the fourth stanza, to the Christian belief, expressed in various parts of the New Testament but most comprehensively in 2 Cor. v: 1-9, that we are exiles in this world and are on pilgrimage towards our eternal home.<sup>34</sup> The Poet's exclamation, regarding our heavenly abode, in line 19: "Know thy contree, look up," has the same power to startle the reader into a deeper spiritual awareness as the words of the poet Hopkins: "The world is charged with Grandeur of God".<sup>35</sup>

33. The Clerk's Tale, The Nun's Priest's Tale and The Parson's Tale give explicit advice on the desirability of self control while The Wife of Bath's Tale, The Manciple's Tale and the poems Gentilesse and Lak of Stedfastnesse are implicit statements of the value of this virtue.
34. Other references to our exile here may be found in: Rev. xxi: 1-2; Phil. iii: 20; 1 Pet. ii: 11.
35. The opening line of G.M. Hopkins's sonnet of the same name.

Since there does not appear to be any evidence of this poem's being a translation or an actual "borrowing" from any of the numerous sources which the poet is known to have used,<sup>36</sup> we must assume that what we have in Truth is, as mentioned earlier, an expression of Chaucer's personal religious convictions. This poem is, moreover, a significant indication of the poet's regard for and familiarity with scriptures, especially the New Testament, for he makes clear references to various books of the word of God.

Boethius, in his Consolation, argued that nobility - gentilesse - lay not so much in rank or riches as in true nobility of character. This thought is explored in Chaucer's poem Gentilesse and his essay on "gentilesse" in The Wife of Bath's Tale (iii. 1109 - 64). In The Knight's Tale, too, the concept of "gentilesse" is introduced into the relationship between the various characters, but it is most fully explored in The Franklyn's Tale. In Lak of Stedfastnesse Chaucer again elaborates on the ideas of Boethius, in this case, the necessity for good faith between men and the cessation of destructive strivings one against the other.

One of Chaucer's earliest poems, An A.B.C. is a typical expression of and an accurate reflection on the extent of mediaeval man's devotion to Mary, the Mother of God.<sup>37</sup> According to M.W. Baldwin, mediaeval man "above all ....held the Virgin Mary" in esteem. "Mary was the 'gracious advocate' for sinful souls fearing divine punishment".<sup>38</sup> An A.B.C. may not generally be regarded as great poetry but although it loses, to the modern mind, some of its immediacy by its being a translation, it remains a very sincere expression on the part of the poet of his willing participation in this orthodox devotion to the Virgin Mary.

These shorter poems, then, contain evidence of Chaucer's genuine involvement with the pursuit and attainment of Christian virtue, but it is only in The Canterbury Tales that the poet reveals the extent of his knowledge of and concern regarding the abuses prevalent in the fourteenth-century Church and more especially in the lives of clergy and religious.

36. F.N. Robinson, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer op. cit., p. 861.

Prof. Robinson suggests certain parallels between Truth and parts of Gower's Confessio Amantis but does not give evidence of actual "borrowings".

37. Her shrine at Walsingham was a favourite place of pilgrimage and many Lyrics were addressed to her.  
See also: R. Woolf, Religious Lyrics (Oxford, 1968), pp. 274-308. (Lyrics on the Virgin and her joys).

38. M.W. Baldwin, The Mediaeval Church op. cit., p. 112.

That critics were aware of this interest can be seen from the fact that Chaucer has at various times been accused of having been a Lollard or, at least, of having been sympathetic towards the heretical teachings of John Wycliff. Miss Murial Bowden maintains that Chaucer had definite Lollard sympathies and uses the fact that the poet "recognizes frankly and denounces by implication Church abuses of his time"<sup>39</sup> to support her claim. R.S. Loomis goes even further and expresses the opinion that Chaucer very probably was a Lollard, first, because he idealized the Parson of The Canterbury Tales according to Wycliffite ideals and, second, because some of his close friends, including Sir Lewis Clifford and Sir Richard Stury, were avowed Lollards.<sup>40</sup>

This evidence is, I am afraid, too flimsy to convict a man of, to the mediaeval mind, so heinous a crime as heresy. A critic of Church abuses Chaucer most certainly was, much more so, indeed, than is generally recognized. But a critic is not necessarily a heretic. If this were the case anyone drawing attention to various abuses in the Church through the ages could be called a heretic. According to this way of thinking people like Pope Saint Gregory the Great, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and numerous other illustrious popes and canonized saints should in fact, have been denounced by the Church as heretics. Since this is manifestly nonsense, the poet Geoffrey Chaucer cannot be called a heretic solely because he had the courage to denounce abuses when he became aware of them.

To be able to convict a man of heresy or even of heretical leanings an ecclesiastic court must prove beyond reasonable doubt that he stubbornly and wilfully denies a promulgated dogma of the Church in favour of his own private opinion.<sup>41</sup> The Lollards attacked, for example, the doctrine of transubstantiation,<sup>42</sup> and it is this and other doctrinal

39. M. Bowden, A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (London, 1969), p. 10.
40. R.S. Loomis, "Was Chaucer a Lollard?" in Chaucer Criticism (University of Notre Dame, 1960), pp. 300-303.
41. The failure of the Lollards to obey the true Church is denounced by Langland in Piers Plowman (c.x. 213-45).
42. Wycliff first attacked the doctrine of transubstantiation at Oxford in the summer of 1379.

attacks which stamped them as heretics, and not an opinion about the sort of man a parish priest should be.<sup>43</sup>

There does not appear to be a shred of evidence in any of Chaucer's writings that he departed in even the smallest detail from the orthodox teaching of the Church. There are, on the contrary, in the poet's so-called Retraction, at the end of The Parson's Tale, indications that the poet Chaucer was, in fact, most anxious to remain in full and perfect communion with the orthodox Catholic Church.<sup>44</sup>

It has been pointed out, on the other hand - on the evidence of some half dozen words in The Canterbury Tales - that the poet was not a particularly ascetic individual. Many critics, among them E. Talbot Donaldson<sup>45</sup> and J. Norton-Smith,<sup>46</sup> however, distinguish between Chaucer the narrator or pilgrim and Chaucer the poet. If there is such a distinction, and there is sufficient evidence to indicate that there most probably is, Chaucer the pilgrim's statement that he was not much given to penance, could be considered from two angles: it could be seen either as a revelation of one who is so deeply aware of the extent of his sinfulness that he does not consider himself ever to have done any penance worth the mention or it could possibly be part of the character of a particular pilgrim being established by the poet.

43. In the Epilogue to The Man of Law's Tale the Parson rebukes the Host because of his blasphemy. Since the Lollards were particularly averse to blasphemy, the Host laughingly replies: "I smelle a Lollere in the wynd" (ii. 1173). There is no indication, either in his portrait or tale, however, that the Parson subscribes to any of the heretical tenets of the Lollards.
44. E.R. Cole, "Chaucer's Retraction and the Parson"  
UPortR 20: 2 (1968), 35-41.
- I am in agreement with Cole's statement to the effect that Chaucer's retraction is his final statement regarding his whole literary production. ".....Chaucer's motive was a sense of guilt about certain of his works which did not entirely conform to the Christian ideal as he knew it.....".
45. E. Talbot Donaldson, "Chaucer the Pilgrim"  
PMLA lxix (1954), pp. 928-36.
46. J. Norton-Smith, Geoffrey Chaucer (London, 1974), p. 118.

In the second case the statement need not necessarily apply to Chaucer the man at all. Be this as it may, a disinclination to do penance would not have been considered an indication of a lack of faith on Chaucer's part as the laity were not really expected to perform the more severe forms of penance laid down by the Church. Chaucer knew, as did the majority of his fourteenth-century readers, that one of the more important features of the lives of those who had consecrated their lives to God was the practice of asceticism. It was the duty of the members of religious orders to live lives in particularly close harmony with the teachings of the gospel and to offer their prayers and penances for the welfare of the living and the repose of the dead.

It is important, however, to realize that Chaucer was not as intentionally didactic an author as other writers of the same period.<sup>47</sup> He was not a moralist in the sense that Gower and Langland were, but, as I have shown, his religion was important enough to the poet for him to feel the need to express certain aspects of it in his poetry.<sup>48</sup> An important feature of the Catholic faith is the value of the ecclesiastical and religious vocations to the Church as a whole and, therefore, Chaucer's concern regarding abuses in this area of Christian living is understandable, indeed self-evident.

Unlike the reformers, however, Chaucer does not posit a definite solution for the abuses he sees around him, perhaps because he does not believe this to be within the province of the poet. What he does, however, is to use his most effective vehicle of expression, his poetry of human comedy, in order to encourage his audience, through laughter, to wake up to the fearful truth embodied in what he shows them, so that they can make their own value judgements and seek solutions themselves.

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47. See also: G. Shepherd, "Religion and Philosophy in Chaucer" in Writers and their Backgrounds: Geoffrey Chaucer ed. D. Brewer (London, 1974), p. 271.

48. That Chaucer was seen to be a thinker and therefore likely to concern himself with these matters can be seen from the following:

J.A. Burrow (ed.) Geoffrey Chaucer (Middlesex, 1969), pp. 41, 45.

Burrow quotes Thomas Hoccleve as saying:

"Also, who was hier in philosophie  
To Aristotle, in our tonge, but thow?"

He also quotes William Caxton as follows: ".....we ought to gyve a synguler laude unto that noble and grete philosopher Gefferey Chaucer.....".

In the absence, therefore, of any indisputable evidence to the contrary, it seems reasonable to assume that the poet, Geoffrey Chaucer, was an orthodox, learned Christian with a serious interest in his religion and in everything pertaining to it. This interest was, as I hope to demonstrate by an analysis of certain parts of The Canterbury Tales, not merely academic but practical enough to find some expression in his poetry.

When one considers The Canterbury Tales, which is generally accepted as being Chaucer's most important work, as a whole, one encounters two facts which immediately suggest an interest in the religious and ecclesiastical states and a deep concern resulting from the prevalence of abuses in the lives of these representatives of the Church. The first of these facts is Chaucer's use of the concept of a pilgrimage as framework for his tales. One cannot, of course, completely discount the suggestion that the poet's use of this framework could have been motivated by the fact that, in the fourteenth century at any rate, only a pilgrimage could have provided a socially acceptable dimension for keeping so diverse a group of people together for long enough to tell their tales. However, the fact that a pilgrimage was fundamentally a religious act was, I feel, a more important consideration to the poet in his choice of this particular framework for his tales.

Baldwin, writing about the significance of pilgrimages in the middle ages says: "Pilgrimage was a well-established feature of European society, it was a journey of devotion to a holy shrine. At first simply a pious act, pilgrimage had, in the course of time, been adopted by the Church as a form of canonical penance."<sup>49</sup> John Norton-Smith sees a probable connection between the poet's Retraction and his choice of a pilgrimage-framework when he says: "the biologically based metaphor of the pilgrimage of life and the final spiritual resignation of the author suggests a powerful tendency towards an acceptance of the orthodox 'other-worldly' religious view of human activity".<sup>51</sup>

A pilgrimage was, therefore, primarily a penitential activity

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49. In Truth Chaucer refers to man as a pilgrim (18).  
 50. M.W. Baldwin, The Mediaeval Church op. cit., p.99.  
 51. J. Norton-Smith, Geoffrey Chaucer  
 op. cit., p.86.

designed to turn the mind and the heart to the love of God. Since the abuses of which the religious and clergy were accused were, for the most part, the result of a weakening of the life of penance and self denial and a turning away from divine love, the poet's choice of a pilgrimage as the framework for The Canterbury Tales might also be interpreted as the first indication Chaucer gives of his concern regarding the abuses he observed in the fourteenth-century Church.<sup>52</sup>

The second indication that Chaucer used The Canterbury Tales as a vehicle through which to express his concern regarding the religious and ecclesiastical abuses he observed, is the inclusion among his twenty nine pilgrims of no fewer than eleven who are directly or indirectly involved in the religious or clerical life<sup>53</sup> and who represent every kind of ecclesiastic and religious with whom the faithful were likely to come in frequent contact. It is an indisputable fact that the clergy and religious still accounted for a large percentage of the population in the fourteenth century, but there does not appear to be any indication that this number is as high<sup>54</sup> as would be expected if Chaucer's main aim in the assembling of his pilgrimage was to obtain a cross section of fourteenth-century society.

In the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales Chaucer sets the scene for what might be described as a systematic revelation of fourteenth-century religious and ecclesiastical abuse.<sup>55</sup> In his seemingly innocuous and often amusing portraits<sup>56</sup> Chaucer had to find ways of achieving his aim without having recourse to conventional moralizing and without

52. See also: J. Mann, Chaucer and the Medieval Estates Satire (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 9, 14.
53. Prioress, Monk, Friar, Clerk, Nun's Priest, two other priests, Second Nun, Pardoner, Summoner and Parson. Later Chaucer introduces a canon but he does not tell a tale.
54. It is also a recorded fact that numbers in the convents and monasteries dwindled during the fourteenth century and were further decimated by the Black Death.
55. See also: T.A. Kirby, "The General Prologue" in A Companion to Chaucer Studies (Oxford University Press, 1968), p.215.
56. J. Norton-Smith, Geoffrey Chaucer op. cit., p. 112.  
"The mediaeval portrait was never politically or morally neutral..... It always had an aim attached to it: either to 'praise' or to 'blame'".

exposing himself to the social and occupational hazards which a direct attack on the clergy and religious might involve at this time.<sup>57</sup>

He achieved his aim by arranging his pilgrims in such a way that a description of each character was required and each was obliged to tell at least one tale. The poet further precluded any unpleasant consequences which could have resulted from his revelation of various types of abuse by inventing a narrator—a rotund, insignificant figure who, in the eyes of the Host and of the other pilgrims, could produce no better poetry than a few stanzas of doggerel verse.

Chaucer's special interest in the clerics and religious, sometimes referred to as the Church party, of the pilgrimage can be seen in the manner in which he positions these pilgrims in The General Prologue. The fact that the religious and clerical pilgrims are placed throughout the Prologue in such a way that there is little possibility of any audience being able to dismiss this party from its consciousness for any length of time is easily discernible. We find, for example, that the Prioress is the fourth pilgrim mentioned, the Clerk the tenth, the Parson the eighteenth and the Pardoner the last of the pilgrims described.<sup>58</sup> This method of placing particular pilgrims can hardly be dismissed as a coincidence since other pilgrims connected with each other such as the Knight, Squire and Yeoman, and the company of Guildsmen, are kept together.

Then, too, there is the very obvious fact that Geoffrey

57. Chaucer's patrons and benefactors could quite easily have had relatives in the monasteries and convents as the majority of monks and nuns were connected with the nobility.
58. See Note 45 and 46 above.
59. K. Malone, Chapters on Chaucer (Baltimore, 1951), pp. 155-6.  
Malone cites Schütte's law to the effect that the last place in a traditional list goes to the person or group in which the author is most interested.

Chaucer devotes considerably more time to and goes into much greater detail in his descriptions of the clerical and religious pilgrims than he does with the secular pilgrims. To the seven religious figures the poet devotes nearly half of The General Prologue (three hundred and twenty lines), while the nineteen secular pilgrims are described in three hundred and forty nine lines.<sup>60</sup> The audience is given, too, a much more comprehensive account of the actions, dress, physical appearance and motivations of the clerical and religious pilgrims than of the other pilgrims.

A study of the technical composition of The General Prologue reveals, therefore, the distinct probability that Chaucer had a special interest in the religious and clerical members of his pilgrimage to Canterbury and that, as we will see from a consideration of the portraits and tales of each individual, this interest was expressed in the revelation of the various kinds of abuse which the poet had observed in the lives of religious and ecclesiastics of fourteenth-century England.

Since the integrity of the priesthood is essential to the spiritual welfare of the faithful, Chaucer devoted much time, both in The General Prologue and in the individual tales of the various characters, to those pilgrims who fell within the group which I will refer to as the Ecclesiastics.

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60. T.A. Kirby, "The General Prologue" op. cit., p.215.  
 "A total of 320 lines is devoted to the seven religious figures.....but only slightly more, 349 lines, to the other nineteen..... Within each of these groups the pilgrims are listed in descending order according to the length of each portrait."

CHAPTER TWO  
ECCLESIASTICS

Contrast Between Idealized and Corrupt Ecclesiastics in the  
General Prologue.

The first method Chaucer uses in his task of revealing ecclesiastical corruption is that of pointing certain very clear contrasts between the pilgrim ecclesiastics whom he idealizes and those he depicts as not living up to the ideals expected of them.

In this way the worthy clerics are made to act as foils against which the failures, shortcomings and weaknesses of the less worthy ecclesiastics<sup>1</sup> may be evaluated.

The pilgrim Clerk and Parson are portrayed as simple, holy men - simple in the sense that their loyalties are in no way divided between God and Mammon. Since avarice, pride and sloth with its attendant vice, lechery, appear to have been at the root of the ecclesiastical corruption of the fourteenth century,<sup>2</sup> Chaucer emphasizes the poverty, humility and diligence of his worthy ecclesiastics in such a way as to underline the fact that the ideals which they embrace are not merely a possible "better way" for those who wish to attain perfect holiness but a "sine qua non" for all who desire to travel the road to the "Heavenly Jerusalem".

In the General Prologue, Chaucer places the descriptions

1. The unworthy ecclesiastics discussed in the General Prologue are the Friar, Pardoner and Summoner. The Canon is discussed later.

In this connection see also:

R. Wolf, "Chaucer as a Satirist in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales"

Critical Quarterly Vol. 1 (1959), pp. 150-157.

2. G.N. Shuster, The World's Great Catholic Literature

(New York, 1944) p.94.

Shuster quotes Roger Bacon as saying: "the whole clergy is intent upon pride, lechery and avarice."

See also: G.R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Mediaeval England op. cit., pp. 210-86.

of the idealized Clerk and Parson after the portrait of the Friar and before his descriptions of the Summoner and the Pardoner. It appears, therefore, that the poet advisedly places his ideal characters<sup>3</sup> in the centre of the General Prologue so that his readers cannot avoid drawing the desired contrast between them and the other clerics.

The first contrast Chaucer points out is concerned with the appearances of the different clerics. When one reads that the Clerk of Oxenford is so thin that he "loked holwe" (i.288) and that his horse is not much better one is almost compelled to refer back to the portrait of the pilgrim Friar<sup>4</sup> whose

"...eyen twynkled in his heed aryght,  
As doon the sterres in the frosty nyght."  
(i.267-8)

and who gives no indication at all of being in the least abstemious. In contrast to the Pardoner, with his yellow locks flowing behind him, who rides along singing "Com hider, love, to me!" (i.672), the Clerk is as quiet and sober in appearance as he is in manner. Twentieth-century readers tend to forget that the colourful, even bizarre, Pardoner and Summoner were members of the clergy and there is an inclination to regard them merely as ordinary, though somewhat repulsive, members of society. Geoffrey Chaucer ensured that his audience recognized these pilgrims as members of the Church Party by comparing them with other clerics like the Parson and the Clerk and not with any of the secular pilgrims, like the Knight or the Plowman, whom he idealizes.

3. See also: T.A. Kirby, "The General Prologue" op cit., p.216.  
and R. Nevo, "Motive and Mask in the General Prologue"  
in  
Critics on Chaucer  
(London, 1970), p.107.
4. Friars are also religious, but since the pilgrim Friar is presented mainly in relation to his pastoral duties, I am including him among the Ecclesiastics.

Of so little real importance are appearance and clothing that Chaucer does not even make any mention of them in his portrait of the Parson, the most highly idealized of his pilgrims. He does not neglect to mention, however, that his pilgrim Parson is "povre" (i.478). It is significant that this is the first specific item of information we are given about the Parson, after our introduction to him as a good man of religion, because it gives an immediate statement of what qualities the poet really considers to be of importance in a priest.

By contrasting the poet's introduction of the Parson with that of the Friar, Summoner and Pardoner we gain some insight into the kind of ecclesiastics the poet was about to describe. The Friar is introduced as being "a wantowne and a merye" (i.208), the Summoner has sores, which Chaucer's audience would recognize as being associated with lechery,<sup>5</sup> on his face and the Pardoner joins the company of pilgrims singing a love song. Also very obvious is the contrast between the "povre" of the Parson and the Clerk and the comfortable life styles of the other ecclesiastics. The Friar looks like "a maister or a pope!" (i.261) and the Pardoner made

"Upon a day . . . . . moore moneye

Than that the person gat in monthes tweye;"  
(i.703-4).

The word "povre" is the nearest Chaucer comes to an even indirect allusion to the Parson's appearance while descriptions of a physical nature form a major part in the portraits of all the less worthy clerics.

Having demonstrated that appearance is not important

5. T.J.Garbaty, "The Summoner's Occupational Disease" Medical History 7:4 (Oct., 1963) p.348-58. He says that the Summoner suffers from a syphillitic type of disease complicated by chronic alcoholism. See also: F.N.Robinson, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer op. cit., p.666. It "was technically known as 'alopicia', a form of leprosy" which was connected with lechery.

to the spiritual man, Chaucer proceeds to reveal just how far from spiritual the less worthy ecclesiastical pilgrims really are. This he does more by omission than by commission. While the poet does not say in so many words that the pilgrim Friar, Summoner and Pardoner are worldly, he neglects to make any mention whatever of their possession of spiritual qualities and allows his pilgrim narrator to describe them wholly on the basis of external appearance and material achievements. We read about the Friar's talent for begging and his winning ways with women; about the Summoner's generosity towards priests who kept concubines, provided, of course, that they kept him supplied with wine, and about the Pardoner's voice and the eloquence which he uses in the pursuit of riches. When we contrast this materialism<sup>6</sup> with the portraits which the poet presents of the Clerk and the Parson we realize just how revealing these small, seemingly casual omissions really are. The Clerk of Oxenford spends his time studying and praying. He uses whatever money he gets from his friends, though there is no indication that he begs for it, on books rather than on clothing or entertainment. This cleric speaks little, to the point and only about that which is morally good as against the Summoner's incomprehensible babbling when drunk (i.636) and the Pardoner's frivolity (i.672). Far from being concerned with "moral vertu" (i.307), as is the Clerk, the Pardoner uses his gift of eloquence to trick the faithful into buying worthless pardons. Thus he maintains that a piece of cloth that he carries is "Oure Lady('s) veyl" (i.695) and that he possesses a piece of the sail from the boat in which St. Peter had been sailing on the occasion

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6. See also in this connection: J. Bromyard, "Munus" in Literature and Pulpit in Mediaeval England op. cit., p. 252. "By means of a little money given to the sumners or the ecclesiastical judges, who ought to be punished along with them an equal punishment, adulterers and fornicators are always able to persist."

when Christ empowered him to walk to the water (i.696-7).

Chaucer reveals, too, in their portraits, that the pilgrim Parson and Clerk are not ambitious to fill the lucrative or highly esteemed positions which were open to those who cultivated the right connections. The Clerk:

"....hadde geten hym yet no benefice,  
Ne was so worldly for to have office"

(i.291-2),

and the Parson was not interested in leaving his parish and going off to

".....Londoun unto Seinte Poules  
To seken hym a chaunterie for soules"

(i.509-10).

The poet stresses, furthermore (i.292 and 496), that this lack of interest in worldly advancement is the result of an inner conviction and is not indicative of a lack of either the ability or the strength to make the best use of one's opportunities.

The highly idealized portrait of the Parson and the images of sheep and shepherds which are scattered throughout the portrait<sup>7</sup> suggest the probability that Chaucer intended his pilgrim Parson to be a figure of the Good Shepherd after whose example all Christians, and especially those consecrated by Holy Orders, should try to live. In this connection, the poet says:

"Wel oghte a preest ensample for to yive,  
By his clenness, how that his sheep sholde lyve"

(i.505-6).

By demonstrating in detail the fidelity of the Parson in the execution of his pastoral duties, Chaucer draws a sharp comparison between his life and that of the other ecclesiastical pilgrims.

The Parson and the Pardoner, though sharply contrasted, have one thing in common: they are, humanly speaking, the least

7. i.495, 496, 504, 506, 508, 512-4.

credible of the pilgrims. The Parson does not reveal any shortcoming or failing whatsoever and the Pardoner is so wicked as to make one wonder uncomfortably whether such a degree of evil is really possible in a mere human being. Chaucer advisedly creates in both his best and his worst pilgrims figures which are more "types" than "individuals" so that the virtues of the one and the vices of the other should not be dismissed by his audience as mere individual characteristics, not, for that reason, to be taken too seriously.<sup>8</sup> The Parson and Pardoner are placed at either extreme of the scale of good and evil with the other ecclesiastics between. The pilgrim Parson is a figure of what the priest should be and of the advantages accruing, to the faithful, of true priestly concern. The Pardoner, on the other hand, is a figure of what the priest can become, when he deserts God to serve Mammon, and a vivid presentation of the chaos and despair inevitable in such a life.

A single line in the Parson's portrait probably sums up best the essential difference between this good priest and the money-loving, worldly Friar, Pardoner and Summoner:

"He was a shepherde and noight a mercenarie" (i.514).

The pilgrim Parson does not seek money or glory - nor does he get them, Chaucer is careful to point out - but only the welfare of those under his care. This concern for the welfare of souls holds so central a place in the concept of the priesthood that the poet goes to the trouble of re-emphasizing this contrast between the worthy and unworthy ecclesiastics by a closer examination of certain aspects of the pastoral activities of the clergy.

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3. In The Clerk's Tale Griselda is also presented as more a "type" than an "individual."

Apart from stressing his voluntary poverty and providing evidence of the extent and depth of the learning<sup>9</sup> which he intends his pilgrim Parson to reveal, Chaucer depicts a priest who:

"...Cristes gospel trewely wolde preche;  
His parissshens devoutly wolde he teche"  
(i.481 - 2).

The pilgrim Clerk, too, is aware of his responsibility to guide those who depend for instruction on his greater learning, for this cleric is shown to be just as ready to teach as he is to study.

"And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche"  
(i.308).

On the contrary the pilgrim Friar, Hubert, who has taken a vow of poverty, fraternizes only with the rich and powerful (i.248) and, far from teaching anyone "devoutly" on the true significance of the sacrament of penance, is known as:

"....an esy man to yeve penaunce,  
Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce"  
(i.223-4).

The full extent of the teaching of the pilgrim Summoner, an official of the ecclesiastical court, the spiritual guide of the youth of the diocese and its moral "policeman", is as follows:

"And if he foond owher a good felawe,  
He wolde techen him to have noon awe  
In swich caas of the ercedekenes curs,"  
(i.653 - 5).

The Summoner is, in fact, so ignorant concerning even the significance of the prescriptions of the Canon Law, the observance of which it is his duty to enforce, that if

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9. The pilgrim Parson quotes from nineteen different Biblical sources, from ten Church Fathers and from four classical authors.

See also Note 37, p. 73.

anyone questioned him beyond the few Latin words he was able to recite parrot-fashion when drunk, they would find that he had, in these few words, "spent al his philosophie" (i.645).

The actual antithesis in every way of the pilgrim Parson, as has been indicated, and the nearest approach to the devil incarnate among the pilgrims, is the Pardoner, a highly intelligent man, as Lucifer was the most intelligent of the angels. The pilgrim Pardoner, again like Lucifer, willingly, knowingly and deliberately (i.705-6) leads people along the broad way to damnation by his erroneous teaching - erroneous, not because he does not believe but because his profit is far more important to him than the welfare of the faithful. The Pardoner is certainly an eloquent preacher but, unlike the Parson,

"He moste preche, and wel affile his tonge,  
To wyne silver, as he ful wel koude;" (i.712-3).

Another aspect of ecclesiastical corruption about which Chaucer was concerned and regarding which he drew pointed contrasts between his ideal characters and his rogues is the attitude to and the use of money. The poet shows every indication of having been concerned about the general corruption brought about by too great a love of money since he mentions it, mostly for the harm it can do, in no fewer than eight of the Tales<sup>10</sup> he assigns to his pilgrims. As I mentioned earlier, the first adjective Chaucer uses regarding the Parson is "povre" (i.478). As the portrait of the pilgrim Parson progresses we are told a good deal more about his attitude to both the procuring of money and to the use of such monies as he did have at his disposal:

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10. Miller's, Cook's, Friar's, Summoner's, Pardoner's, Shipman's, Canon's Yeoman's and Parson's Tales.

"Ful looth were hym to cursen for his tithes,  
 But rather wolde he yeven, out of doute,  
 Unto his povre parisshens aboute  
 Of his cffryng and eek of his substaunce.  
 He koude in litel thyng have suffisaunce "  
 (i.486 - 90).

Like the Parson, the Clerk of Oxenford has very little money - so little, in fact, that he does not get enough to eat and wears threadbare clothing (i.289-90). We are told that, like the Parson, the Clerk does have a small amount of money (i.298) but that he is far more interested in using this money to further his education, especially as regards the study of Aristotle, than in buying rich food or expensive clothing.

The readers of the Canterbury Tales would not have failed to notice the difference between the attitude of these clerics and that revealed by each of the rascally ecclesiastical representatives in turn. The Friar is mentioned first. Apart from the facts, as I have mentioned, that he concerned himself only with the rich and the powerful and gave "esy" absolutions to those who were prepared to pay whatever he asked for them, he also did all in his power to take even what little the poor did have away from them:

"For thogh a wydwe hadde noght a sho,  
 So plesaunt was his In principio ,  
 Yet wolde he have a ferthyng, er he wente "  
 (i.253-5).

The pilgrim Summoner and Pardoner need not necessarily have been priests, though it seems likely that they would have been clerks, and while they were not directly concerned with the teaching and guiding of the faithful they were obliged by their positions in the hierarchical structure to safeguard the flock from error. In the

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General Prologue, Chaucer makes no explicit reference to the avarice of his pilgrim Summoner apart from his mention of this cleric's attitude to priests who kept concubines (i.649-51), but in The Friar's Tale,<sup>11</sup> which will be discussed later, the poet shows very clearly the extent of the avarice of summoners in general and, one may suppose from the innuendoes of Friar Hubert, of the pilgrim Summoner in particular. The Pardoner is presented, even by the naive narrator, as being a past master in the gentle art of extortion as:

".....with feyned flaterye and japes,  
He made the person and the peple his apes."  
(i.705-6).

This corrupt cleric has also become adept at reading the lesson and singing the offertory (i.709-10) merely so that he could

".....wynne silver, as he ful wel koude;"  
(i.713).

The attitude of the ecclesiastic to the sinner is another area in which Chaucer contrasted the pilgrim Parson with the other ecclesiastics. Since we are all sinners, and since forgiveness of sins through the sacrament of penance was an essential feature of mediaeval life, Chaucer was understandably concerned at the way in which the corrupt clergy of the fourteenth century were using the obligation of the faithful to confess, at least serious sins, to line their own pockets. For this reason he emphasizes the attitude of the good priest to sin and the confession of sins. The pilgrim Parson is always gentle with the penitent but he does not give absolution to either the rich or the poor unless repentance is sincere. In this, as in other aspects of the priestly vocation, the poet uses his pilgrim Parson to highlight the abuses which he has observed in the

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11. See p. 37.

pilgrim Friar and the other two corrupt clerics. The Parson,  
 ".....waited after no pompe and reverence,  
 Ne maked him a spiced conscience,  
 But Cristes loore and his apostles twelve  
 He taughte, but first he folwed it hymselfe "  
 (i.525-8).

As regards his attitude to the sinner the Friar, unlike the Parson, is completely dominated by the desire for financial gain. If the sinner had enough money to pay for it, he could obtain absolution of his sins without real repentance.<sup>12</sup> Since repentance was, and still is, laid down by the Church as a prerequisite for the reception of the sacrament of penance, the harm done by the pilgrim Friar to the souls in his care is far more serious than one would at first realize. By his "esy" confessions he lulled people into a false sense of security so that they lost their appreciation of the horror of sin and eventually became confirmed in their evil ways.

The attitude of the Pardoner<sup>13</sup> to sinners is similar to that of the Friar, though pardoners were concerned, not with the forgiveness of sin but with the remission of the punishment due to sin after the guilt has been forgiven. This cleric is sufficiently blatant about his lack of interest in the welfare of souls to say that he does not care,  
 ".....whan that they been beryed,

12. The concept of repentance includes a sincere contrition for sins and a determination to avoid committing them in the future.

13. N. Coghill & C. Tolkien, Chaucer: The Pardoner's Tale

(London, 1958), p.88.

"Some Pardoners were laymen, but these lines (Pardoner's Portrait) seem to show fairly clearly that Chaucer conceived of his character as a clerk, at least in minor orders; but all are not agreed on this subject."

See also: General Prologue (i.708) where the Pardoner is called an "ecclesiaste".

Though that hir soules goon a-blakeberied!"  
(vi.405-5)

as long as he is able to make a profit from the sale of his pardons.

Chaucer made use of the areas of pastoral care, attitude to money and treatment of the sinner as points of contrast between the Parson and, in some areas, the Clerk, and the corrupt ecclesiastics because the spiritual welfare of the ordinary people, the faithful, could, without a doubt be undermined by any shortcomings in these areas on the part of the clergy.

Tales in which Ecclesiastical Abuse is Revealed by another Pilgrim.

Thorough as is the contrast which Chaucer points between the different types of ecclesiastic, he appears not to be entirely satisfied that his point has been taken for he uses other methods to ensure that all who heard and laughed at his Tales would note the seriousness behind the lighthearted and perhaps even, at times, coarse comedy. In his presentation of the vices and weaknesses of the Summoner and the Friar the poet uses, besides contrast with the idealized ecclesiastics, the method of exposure by another pilgrim. In the Prologue to The Wife of Bath's Tale, the reader is shown how the hidden antagonism between the Friar and the Summoner flares up into open enmity when both clerics compete for the attentions of the redoubtable Alison. Bernard Huppé's explanation<sup>14</sup> that they

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14. B.F.Huppé, A Reading of the Canterbury Tales  
(State University of New York, 1964,  
revised 1967) p.190.

Huppé feels that she is the perfect victim for these "confidence men" because "she has money, she has a bad conscience which needs soothing, and they are masters of the art of soothing - at a price ....."

both looked on the rich, proud Wife as a possible victim of extortion, perhaps even of blackmail, is acceptable in the light of what we already know of the characters of these clerics. Whatever the reason for the outburst, each becomes so angry with the other that he determines to tell a tale that will make his enemy the laughing-stock of the whole company.

The pilgrim Friar opens the firing with a rather chilling tale of a summoner, the Summoner of the Tales,<sup>15</sup> no doubt, who is taken off to hell as the lawful booty of the devil. Friar Hubert commences his Tale with a description of a summoner who seems to have few, if any, redeeming features. Apart from the fact that he employs bawds and prostitutes to trap his victims and then blackmails the guilty parties heavily, he makes a habit of serving false summonses on poor people and of terrifying them, even though innocent of any crime, into paying him the sum he demands. In this Tale, the Summoner's victim is a poor widow and he:

"Rood for to somne an old wydwe, a ribibe,  
Feynyngge a cause, for he wolde brybe "  
(iii.1377-8).

The devil, who becomes the Summoner's travelling companion, was considered a much more potent personage in the Middle Ages than he is today, and the merest suggestion that anyone had dealings with Satan was tantamount to saying that he was doomed. The Summoner is told in unambiguous terms that his companion is the

15. The Friar says in the Prologue to his Tale:

"I wol yow of a somonour tello a game.

Pardee, ye may wel knowe by the name " (iii.1279-80).

Also, his description of the summoner of the Tale:

"For thogh this Somonour wood were as an hare," (iii. 1327)

is reminiscent of Chaucer's statement in the General Prologue concerning the pilgrim Summoner:

"Thanne wolde he speke and crie as he were wood."  
(i.636).

devil for the supposed "yemen" says:

"I am a feend; my dwellyng is in helle,"  
(iii.1448).

The cleric chooses, however, to continue the association as he believes that he can strike an advantageous bargain with the "good felawe" (iii.1385). Money is so important to the Summoner that he is prepared to be on friendly terms with even Satan if this is likely to be to his financial benefit. This mentality is similar to that revealed by Chaucer's Summoner in the General Prologue, for this pilgrim is shown to be perfectly willing to connive at sin - thus making himself equally guilty - if he is satisfactorily recompensed.

Avarice, as The Friar's Tale points out, can result in a form of spiritual blindness so complete that the avaricious man can call Satan "deere broother" (iii.1395) and not be aware of the implication of what he is saying. Thus the devil, knowing his victim very well, overcomes any slight apprehension that the Summoner may feel regarding their arrangement to travel together when he mentions the fact that he has gold at home (iii.1400-2). Home is, as the devil will shortly indicate, hell, but the Summoner sees only the glitter of gold and goes cheerfully to his doom.

What is strange, though, is the Summoner's unwillingness to admit to the devil that he is a summoner. He says that he is a "bailly" (iii.1392) and repeats the lie later when he knows he is speaking to Satan who would surely not object to travelling in the company of a summoner no matter how evil he may be. To the devil the Summoner says:

"I am a yeman, knowen is ful wyde;  
My trouthe wol I holde,....." (iii.1524-5).

Perhaps this deceit on the part of the Summoner is an indication of the presence of a certain degree of shame regarding

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either his occupation<sup>4</sup> or the fact that a person as sinful as he is should hold the position of summoner. That he does evince some sort of shame regarding his shortcomings shows the Summoner to be conceived of as being slightly less wicked than the Pardoner who openly delights in the cover his profession gives him for the pursuit of riches.

The pilgrim Summoner, having sweated under the lash of the Friar's words, eagerly prepares to tell a tale which will, as he has threatened, "hym quiten every grot" (iii.1292). We may suppose, then, that Friar John of the Tale is in reality the pilgrim Friar. Then, too, Friar John is also a "lymytour" and, again like Friar Hubert, devotes his time and talents only to those who make it financially worth his while.

Unlike the Friar's Tale, which, in accordance with Hubert's station in life, is urbane and sophisticated, the Summoner's Tale tends to be rough and coarse. The introduction to the Tale in which the Summoner reveals the particularly distasteful details of the place in hell reserved for friars is an indication of the direction in which the Tale will proceed.

The Summoner tells of a friar who goes from house to house begging for his order. Before commencing each begging session he preaches a sermon in which he exhorts the faithful to give him "Trentals" i.e. money for thirty Masses for the dead. The Summoner points out that this particular Friar says only one Mass a day and cannot, therefore, carry out his obligations towards his benefactors. As the friar

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16. T.W.Craik, The Comic Tales of Chaucer  
(London, 1964), p.105.

Craik feels that the Summoner was genuinely ashamed of his "trade" as such.

goes from house to house he has the name of his benefactor written on a slate but as soon as he leaves the house he erases the name in spite of his promise to pray for the person concerned. The Friar of the Tale and, therefore, also the pilgrim Friar, is thus portrayed as a thoroughly deceitful, avaricious cleric.

In the course of his business, Friar John eventually arrives at the home of a certain Thomas with whose wife he appears to be on more than usually friendly terms. In fact, the passage implies, especially through the use of the word "sparwe",<sup>17</sup> that there is a possibility that there is some degree of sexuality in the relationship between the Friar and Thomas's wife.

"The frere ariseth up ful curteisly,  
And hire embraceth in his armes narwe,  
And kiste hire sweete, and chirkeþ as a sparwe  
With his lyppes:....." (iii.1802-5).

The shallowness of the relationship is, however, revealed in the Friar's insincere reaction to the information that the woman has lost a child. In order to impress her with his holiness, Friar John tells her that he has had a vision of the child in heaven, as have his brethren, because of the "poverte" and "abstinence" (iii.1873) in which they live their lives.

The Friar then asks to speak to Thomas in private and the reason he gives for wishing to do so exposes him as either a despicable hypocrite or else as one so blind to his own shortcomings that he actually believes what he is saying. He says:

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17. See also: B. Rowland, Blind Beasts

(York, Toronto, 1969), p.20, 24.

Also relevant is the description of the pilgrim Summoner in the General Prologue where he is said to be "As hoot ..... and lecherous as a sparwe," (i.626).

"In shrift; in prechyng is my diligence,  
 And studie in Petres wordes, and in Poules.  
 I walke, and fische Cristen mennes soules,  
 To yelden Jhesu Crist his propre rente;  
 To sprede his word is set al myn entente "  
 (iii.1818-22).

We see from the Tale, however, that the Friar's only "diligence" is to extract as much money as possible from the faithful; that he is interested only in what "rente" Thomas, a sick man, is prepared to yield him and his nagging wife and that he spreads Christ's word only so that he can benefit from it. In his exhortation to Thomas to give his money only to his order, the Friar quotes from the New Testament the words: "Blessed be they that povere in spirit been " (iii.1923). Friar John obviously does not apply the beatitude to himself for he has just asked Thomas's wife to prepare him a simple meal, not much, only the best a wealthy mediaeval household could afford. The Friar applies this beatitude solely to Thomas from whose "poverty of spirit" he intends to take the greatest possible financial advantage.

The passages quoted not only expose the hypocritical blindness and avarice of the Friar, but also serve as a contrast between the rascally Friar's attitude and the ideals which he should be striving to embrace. Because he is a master in the use of human comedy as a medium of expression, Geoffrey Chaucer frequently introduces his ideal lightly, almost jokingly but he always succeeds in introducing it in such a way that his audience will not misunderstand him.

Friar John preaches to Thomas on the subject of anger, one of the seven deadly sins. He is capable of twisting even doctrine, however, to suit his own ends, as the pilgrim Parson's doctrinally sound explanation of

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this sin and its effects shows<sup>8</sup>. A careful reading of Friar John's sermon reveals that he is not, in fact, discussing Thomas's own anger, but warning the sick man not to provoke his wife's anger.

".....twenty thousand men han lost hir lyves",

he asserts,

"For stryvyng with hir lemans and hir wyves"

(ii.1997-8).

Further on he emphasizes this point when he says:

"Ther nys, ywys, no serpent so cruel,

Whan man tret on his tayl,ne half so fel,

As womman is, whan she hath caught an ire;"

(iii.2001-3).

We have already had some indication of the type of relationship existing between the Friar and Thomas's wife and can therefore appreciate the cleric's attempts to keep her happy while at the same time pretending a concern for Thomas's welfare. Friar John probably hopes, too, that she will be able to persuade her husband to give more money to the "poor" Friars.

The insistence of the Friar is eventually rewarded and he gets his "gift" from Thomas. When he becomes aware of how he has been tricked, he immediately commits the very sin of anger against which he has been preaching and goes off in a rage to complain to the lord of the village. Chaucer's audience would have laughed heartily at the joke but they would also have noted the fact that the Friar, unlike the Parson, was not the kind of cleric who ".....taughte, but first he folwed it hymselfe " (i.528).

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18. see Parson's Tale (x.533-653).

When the pilgrims are nearing Canterbury they are overtaken by a Canon and his Yeoman who have ridden hard to catch up with and join them. The Canon has little to say but the Yeoman, in recommending his master to the company of pilgrims, describes him in a way which recalls the narrator's description of the pilgrim Friar. The Canon, like Friar Hubert, "loveth daliaunce" (viii.592); he is also "ful jocund" (viii.596) and can also tell a merry tale. On further questioning, however, the Host discovers a much more sinister side to the Canon's character: he is an alchemist. This cleric is poor and ill-clad not because, like the Parson and the Clerk, he has better use for his money than adornment, but because he is obsessed by the desire to turn base metal into gold or silver.

The Yeoman's revelation angers the Canon who, after trying vainly to silence his servant,

".....fledde away for verray sorwe and shame!"  
(viii.702)

and leaves his Yeoman to describe the kind of life he has lived with the Canon and to tell all he "kan" (viii.704) about the science of alchemy.

Chaucer does not state whether the Yeoman's master is a regular or a secular canon, but he does show, in the first part of The Canon's Yeoman's Tale, that this priest is so completely involved in his alchemical experiments that he scarcely pauses to eat, drink or sleep, let alone to pray or to carry out his pastoral duties. The Canon's obsession with alchemy is the more reprehensible in the light of Pope John xxii's encyclical against the "false crime of alchemy".<sup>19</sup> In this document the pope states that

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19. Decree of Pope John xxii: "Against the Crime of Alchemy" (circa 1325) from Corpus Juris Canonici editio Lipsiensis secunda, ed. Friedberg. Pars secunda. (Lipsiae, 1881), col. 1295.

any cleric found making or using alchemical gold or silver would be deprived of benefices for the rest of his life.

Chaucer, therefore, exposes the shortcomings of the Canon in the same way as he exposes those of the corrupt ecclesiastics in the General Prologue: he multiplies external, material details connected with the pilgrim in question and omits any mention of the prayer, pastoral work and study to which a priest should devote all his time and energy.

In his Tale, the Canon's Yeoman speaks specifically of a regular Canon (viii.972) and the poet includes an injunction to canons not to allow any of their number to practise alchemy. As the Yeoman's Tale proceeds it becomes obvious that both the Canon, who pretends to be able to change base metals into precious metals, and the priest, who wishes to learn the science, are motivated solely by avarice and not by any desire to master a science the knowledge of which may be of advantage to those they are supposed to serve.

The Canon's Yeoman points out repeatedly - five times in the course of his Tale<sup>20</sup> - that those persons who dabble in this craft not only lose all they possess or can borrow but become so enslaved by it that they cannot desist from their experiments even though they have no success whatever.

Although the Canon's Yeoman seems to treat the duped priest sympathetically, he actually exposes the cleric as a pleasure-seeking priest, one who falls far short of the ideal Chaucer sets up in his pilgrim Parson. The priest of the Tale, unlike the Parson, lives a life of ease and is supported by a landlady who thinks so highly of him that she will not allow him to pay rent and even provides him with spending money.

".....she wolde suffre hym no thyng for to paye

For bord ne clothyng, wente he never so gaye;  
 And spendyng silver hadde he right ynow."   
 (viii.1016-18).

Had he been prepared to live in poverty, to spend his time visiting and helping his flock and to give what little money he did have to the poor, he would have had neither the time, the inclination nor the money to indulge in such worldly pastimes. The fact, too, that this ecclesiastic was willing to take from his landlady any amount of money she was pleased to give him shows that he was shamelessly avaricious before ever the rascally canon approached him. The cleric's avarice is also the reason why he is so easily duped by the canon; the prospect of instant wealth has blinded him to every other consideration.

The poet uses The Miller's Tale to draw certain parallels between the lax clerks, Nicholas and Absolon, and the corrupt clerics among the pilgrims and to indicate the contrast between the good Clerk of Oxenford and those Clerks who do not live up to the requirements of their vocation. One is immediately struck by the fact that Nicholas, like the Pardoner, uses his good voice for his financial profit (i.3219-20) and his eloquence and learning to dupe the carpenter who is less intelligent than he is. Like the pilgrim Summoner, too, this clerk is as "lecherous as a sparwe" (i.626) as is evident from his determined attempts to seduce the lusty Alison.

Unlike the pilgrim Clerk, however, Nicholas spends little time at his studies for he makes "a-nyghtes melodie" (i.3214) on his "gay sauterie".<sup>21</sup> It is obvious, moreover, from her description, that Alison would not have been attracted to Nicholas had he, like the pilgrim Clerk, looked "holwe" or worn a "thredbare..... overeste courtepy" (i.290).

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21. The poet mentions the fact (i.295-6) that the pilgrim Clerk prefers his copies of Aristotle to "...robes riche, or fithle, or gay sautrie".

Absolom, too, is contrasted to the pilgrim Clerk in his lack of studiousness and sobriety for he is "jolif..... and gay" (i.3339) and, like Nicholas, spends much time performing on a musical instrument, a "giterne" (i.3333) for the amusement of his secular friends, especially ladies. His hair is the same colour as that of the Pardoner (i.3314) and he is equally effeminate in his manner of dress. Absolom, too, is not successful in his pursuit of members of the opposite sex, although he, like the Pardoner, would like to boast about his prowess with the ladies (vi.453).

Chaucer, therefore, does not assign the Tales discussed to the narrators simply and solely for the narrative content of the Tales. He is also demonstrating the possible fate of those priests and clerics who do not attempt to carry out the duties of their state but seek to live lives of wealth, indolence and self indulgence.

#### Self-Revelation by Corrupt Ecclesiastics.

The method of self-revelation is another effective method Chaucer uses to reveal the vices, short-comings and weaknesses of the representatives of the different types of ecclesiastic. There is often the danger of abuses revealed by another pilgrim being dismissed by the audience as the result of spite or malice but there is no such danger in self-revelation for we are not very likely to exaggerate, when speaking to others, the weaknesses and shortcomings of which we have reason to be ashamed. The poet, then, leaves the audience with no possibility of excusing the Pardoner when he cheerfully reveals aspects of his life style about which he should have been

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thoroughly ashamed.

The Friar, Summoner and Canon show some degree of shame or are at least blind to some extent regarding their vices and shortcomings. For this reason we feel that there is some hope, be it ever so slight of their eventual redemption. In his prologue the pilgrim Pardoner, however, betrays not the slightest hint of shame or even blindness as regards his vices. He seems to know exactly what he is doing and glories in his ability to make fools of the people he should be assisting on their way to the Kingdom (i.705-6). It is clear that this cleric despises his fellow pilgrims and believes that his companions, in spite of their first hand knowledge of his villainy, will succumb to his trickery just as easily as they would have done had he revealed nothing about himself. That is why he makes no attempt to disguise the evil of his deeds and can state with chilling callousness:

"I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete,  
 Al were it yeven of the povereste page,  
 Or of the povereste wydwe in a village,  
 Al sholde hir children sterve for famyne"  
 (vi.448-51).

At the end of his Tale, too, this cleric has the audacity to remind the other pilgrims of their good fortune in having a "suffisant pardoneer" (vi.932) among them and to tell Harry Bailly that he may have the honour of being the first to be "assoille(d)" (vi.939) since he is, of all the pilgrims, "moost envoluped in synne" (vi.942).

The Pardoner is the one pilgrim for whom Chaucer does not appear to show any sympathy at all. Even the complaisant narrator has nothing to say in this man's favour except that he is in "chirche a noble ecclesiaste" (l.708). The reason for this unwonted harshness on the part of the poet is that the Pardoner, because of his greater intelligence, is in a position to do more harm than the other corrupt ecclesiastics. Had it been his

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purpose merely to portray human beings as he saw them Chaucer could have given the Pardoner at least one attractive feature, something which would have made him appear more human and not so much a type of the Anti-Christ of whom St. Paul says: "Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders." (2 Thess. ii:9).

The Pardoner cheerfully admits that he preaches against avarice but practises it quite openly himself:

"Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice  
Which that I use, and that is avarice.  
But though myself be gilty in that synne,"  
(vi.427-9).

This ecclesiastic appreciates the advantage gained by looking impressive while preaching from the pulpit and is fully aware of the effect which his eloquence has on the people. However, so proud is he of the fact that his "entente is nat but for to wynne" (vi.403), that he repeats this boast no fewer than three times in forty lines.<sup>22</sup>

Chaucer's corrupt cleric reveals the depth of his cynicism when he explains that he always produces his "bulles" (vi.336) and "Oure lige lordes seel" (vi.337) so that priests and clerks will not disturb him while he is doing "Cristes hooly werk" (vi.340). Perhaps his most frightening boast, however, and the surest sign of his wickedness is:

"Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe  
Of hoolynesse, to semen hooly and trewe"  
(vi.421-2).

The Pardoner's knowledge of human nature is evident from the manner in which he tricks people into buying his pardons. The poet gives the first indications of this trickery in the General Prologue when he lists some of the Pardoner's

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22. vi. 389-90; 402-3; 424.

spurious relics (i.695-700) and tells how he makes "apes" of the priests and the people. In the Prologue to his Tale, the Pardoner speaks at length on his ability to dupe the faithful. After preaching a sermon on "Cupiditas", he invites the people to offer to his relics stating first that no-one who has "doon synne horrible," (vi.379) and no woman who has been unfaithful to her husband will be permitted to give their offering. He knows that nobody will want to be seen to be guilty of these sins and so everyone will feel obliged to offer to his relics. Even while he preaches on sin, he states:

".....myn entente is nat but for to wynne,  
And nothyng for correccioun of synne"  
(vi.403-4).

The pilgrim Pardoner boasts that he sells useless relics and hoodwinks the people into believing that the "sholder-boon.... of an hooly Jewes sheep" (vi.350-1) when dipped in water would empower the water to cure sickness in live-stock and jealousy, even when perfectly justified, in a husband.

Particularly spiteful is the Pardoner's manner of revenging himself on those who "doon (him) displesances" (vi.420). When preaching the pilgrim defames the unfortunate who has displeased him in such a way that, though his name is not mentioned, all those present in the church are left in no doubt regarding the identity of the person concerned (vi. 416-9).

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To ensure that his audience will grasp as fully as possible the implications of the revelations which the Pardoner makes in the prologue to his tale, the poet assigns to this pilgrim a tale which not only reinforces the impression already gained but also scrutinizes certain other aspects of the lifestyle of his unworthy cleric.<sup>23</sup>

Although the tale is rich in irony there is little humour present probably because Chaucer does not wish to make it easy for his audience to identify with this pilgrim. Just as the prologue is a chilling recitation of complete enslavement to sin, so the tale is a sombre catalogue of the inevitable consequences of such an enslavement.

As regards the attitude of his audience to this pilgrim, Chaucer seems even more determined than he is with the other pilgrims he satirizes to ensure that those who read or hear his tale will be left with no illusions regarding the type of person he portrays his Pardoner to be. The highly moral tale following a prologue in which the Pardoner cheerfully acknowledges his indulgence in the very vices he so vigorously condemns in

23. See also: J. Lawlor, Chaucer (London, 1968), p.112-3.  
 G. Kittredge, Chaucer and his Poetry (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), p.155.  
 K. Malone, Chapters on Chaucer (Baltimore, 1951), p. 224.

Mr. Lawlor and Mr. Malone are in agreement on the point that the tales do not usually characterize their narrators but that The Pardoner's Tale does so.

his tale (vi.463-659) cannot fail to give a graphic idea of the extent of this ecclesiastic's degradation and hypocrisy. One of the ways in which Chaucer uses this tale to give the audience an insight into his Pardoner is to provide some indication of the various attitudes this pilgrim himself might have towards his tale.

The first question one might be tempted to ask on reading the tale is whether or not the Pardoner is portrayed as himself believing the sentiments and ideals which he expresses in his tale. Chaucer indicates the possibility of his pilgrim's having lost his faith completely by demonstrating in him a total lack of any sign of repentance. The fact that he does tell a religious tale is no indication of the fact that he believes what he says because he does so only on the insistence of the other pilgrims and after some thought - he says he needs time to

".....thynke  
Upon som honest thyng....." (vi.327-8),

and also because of his boast: "..... I kan al by rote that I telle." (vi.332), as opposed to speaking from the heart.<sup>24</sup>

Then too, if true belief is the source of conduct, lines 403-6 of the prologue show the Pardoner to be so callously indifferent to religious doctrine that belief, in his case, is a word only: in practice, he does not believe.

On the other hand, Chaucer does not permit his pilgrim at any time to confess that he does not believe what he preaches and since it would not have been difficult or inappropriate to confess his unbelief while he was confessing his other atrocities it would appear that this cleric does have some degree of theoretical belief, at least, in the virtues which he refuses to practise, and that his having to think of a moral tale to tell is merely part of his calculated roguery. The fact that he does not openly deny his faith and yet refuses even to attempt to live according to its teachings, will, of course, add to his culpability in the eyes of his

24. See also: D.S. Brewer, Chaucer (London, 1953), p.160.

audience.

The Pardoner's frequent recitation of a tale which ought to have made him feel guilty enough to have excluded it from his repertoire could indicate, too, a degree of callousness a hardness of heart and a spirit of defiance which would be completely consistent with the image Chaucer paints of the Pardoner in the prologue to his tale. The Pardoner has decided that material comforts mean more to him than anything else "I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete," (vi.448) - and having made his decision is prepared to wipe every other consideration from his consciousness.

At the same time, because Chaucer portrays his Pardoner as one who, in spite of his wickedness, still believes, however tenuously, there are indications in the tale of hidden and unacknowledged feelings of guilt experienced by this ecclesiastic which cannot be discerned in the prologue to the tale. Considering how difficult and fraught with guilt and suffering are the forfeiture of the respect and friendship of one's peer group, who pay at least lip service to religious modes of thought and behaviour; a complete disregard for the weight of centuries of tradition and a total abandonment of the influences, attitudes and practices of childhood and early youth, it would be surprising if Chaucer had failed to reveal at least some suggestion of guilt in his creation of this Pardoner.

The poet, therefore, assigns to this rogue who has already revealed the full extent of his perfidity a highly moral tale; one by means of which it may be possible to discern, however faintly, some insight on the part of the Pardoner into the consequences attendant on his living the kind of life he does and, therefore, perhaps, the stirrings of regret.

It appears, then, that Chaucer has created a pilgrim who is consciously callous and hard-hearted but in whom can still be detected indications of hidden and unacknowledged feelings of guilt resulting from the fact that his faith in those virtues which he refuses to practise is not quite dead.

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Since the tale is assigned to this pilgrim with the intention of revealing the abuses of which he is guilty it will obviously contain certain references to the lifestyle and behaviour patterns of this corrupt ecclesiastic.

It is ironical that the Pardoner, who is spiritually dead and therefore already in the power of death, should send his three rioters to seek out and kill Death<sup>25</sup> because he has slain one of their friends (vi.699-701). This irony would not have been lost on Chaucer's audience but would have been heightened by their awareness of this pilgrim's spiritual blindness.

The use of a tale in which Death is the intended victim may likewise be an indication of Chaucer's desire to reveal in this pilgrim a real, if unacknowledged, fear of death and, therefore, an attempt on his part to destroy death, to remove it as an influence in his life. It is significant that the rioters when referring to Death use words such as "false" (vi.699) and "traytour" (vi.699,753), fly into a violent drunken rage (vi.705) and swear ".....many a grisly ooth....." (vi.708) to destroy their enemy.

Another point of reference between the tale and the lifestyle of its teller is that of murder. While their greed for money leads each of the rioters to plan the bodily death of the brothers for whom he has sworn to ".....lyve and dyen....." (vi.703), the Pardoner because of his avarice plans and executes the spiritual murder of his brothers for whom Christ lived and died. (vi.405-6). The audience will readily call to mind Christ's admonition to fear those who can kill the soul as well as the body more than those who can kill only the body.

25. See also: N. Coghill, "The Poet Chaucer" in Geoffrey Chaucer ed. J.A. Burrow (Middlesex, 1969), p.157.

R.P. Miller, "Chaucer's Pardoner, The Scriptural Eunuch and the Pardoner's Tale" in: Chaucer Criticism : The Canterbury Tales (Notre Dame University Press, 1960). p. 241.

Mr. Miller gives reasons why the Pardoner should indeed have been a seeker of Death.

While the rioters, however, die for money, the Pardoner lives for it and gives the impression in the prologue to his tale that avarice is followed by lasting security and happiness. In the tale itself, however, he proves conclusively that this is not the case and that death - spiritual and often physical - is the necessary consequence of greed for money.

The poet, then uses the tale in order to condemn the Pardoner by means of his own words which contrast with and are far more effective in forming the attitude of the audience to this pilgrim than his own boasting in the prologue to his tale would have been.

The kind of impression which the poet intended to make on his audience can be gathered from the attitude which he permits the Pardoner's audience, the other pilgrims, to reveal towards this ecclesiastic.<sup>26</sup>

From the description in the General Prologue we gain the impression that the narrator, himself one of the pilgrims, is inclined to feel hostile towards the Pardoner. Since the narrator has been shown to be more naïve and flattering than the other pilgrims an indication of hostility on his part would almost presuppose open hostility on the part of the other pilgrims. This suspicion is confirmed in the introduction to the Pardoner's Tale where the pilgrims show their displeasure by their cry:<sup>27</sup>

"Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye!" (vi.324).

The suspicion which the audience has as regards the villainy and hypocrisy of this pilgrim is confirmed in both his prologue and tale. It is, therefore, not surprising that no voice is raised in the Pardoner's defence when he is so rudely insulted by the Host.

26. For comments on the attitude of the audience see also:  
C. Elliott and R.G. Thomas: "Two Points of View:  
The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale"  
Anglo - Welsh Review, xiii: 32, Winter 1963, pp.9-17.
27. For reasons for their outcry see also:  
B.F. Huppè, A Reading of the Canterbury Tales  
(State University of New York, 1964), p.210.

I believe that the conclusion to this tale is one of the surest indications we are given of Chaucer's intentions with regard to this pilgrim. There have been various explanations offered as to why the Pardoner tried to sell his pardons to the other pilgrims and more especially to the sophisticated, worldly-wise Host after he had openly confessed that he carried worthless pardons and had demonstrated without a shadow of doubt how wicked and hypocritical he himself was.

It has been maintained that he was carried away by his vanity,<sup>28</sup> that he could not resist the opportunity the sight of "a ring of serious faces around him" offered,<sup>29</sup> that the "momentum" of his tale carried "him beyond the point at which, on this particular occasion, he ought to have stopped,.....".<sup>30</sup>

The truth of the matter is, however, that Chaucer permits his Pardoner to offer his merchandise for sale not because he wants to show the Pardoner up as stupid or impetuous - both of which he has proved himself not to be - but because he is determined to ensure that the audience is not left with a favourable impression of his Pardoner; that they are sure that he, because of his wickedness and hypocrisy, is as spiritually dead as he is "dead" sexually.

Parson, Clerk, Summoner, Friar, Canon and Pardoner are all employed as vehicles of Chaucer's expression of his concern regarding the poor state of the priestly

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28. H.S. Corsa, Chaucer  
(University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), p.192.
29. J. Lawlor, Chaucer  
(London, 1968), p. 112.
30. G.L. Kittredge: Chaucer and His Poetry  
(Cambridge, Mass., 1915), p. 215.

## CHAPTER THREE.

## RELIGIOUS

Contrast between idealized Ecclesiastics and Unworthy Religious in the General Prologue.

The religious, like the clergy, of the fourteenth century were subject to much adverse criticism, often bitter and sometimes even vituperative, at the hands of secular poets, orthodox preachers and heretics.<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, schooled by more than a century of popular sermon-literature,<sup>2</sup> also found ways of expressing his concern in this regard. The poet of The Canterbury Tales included among his pilgrims two nuns, a monk and a friar and pointed out through the medium of his sparkling human comedy and the employment of somewhat the same methods as those he used in his treatment of the corrupt ecclesiastics,<sup>3</sup> how these religious had fallen short of the ideals set before them by the saintly founders and foundresses of their orders.

The first religious presented in the General Prologue is a nun, the Prioress, whose shortcomings and weaknesses the poet reveals partly by contrast and partly by omission. The pilgrim narrator describes this noble lady in such flattering terms that the reader is at first not aware of any faults in the character of this religious. It is only when one takes cognisance of Chaucer's subtle use of contrast and omission that one begins to realize that

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1. For an explanation of the use of the term "religious" see M.W.Grose, Chaucer op. cit., p.31.
  2. G.R.Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Mediaeval England op. cit., pp.210-86.
  3. Ibid. p.229.

this perfect lady is not a perfect nun. The poet's treatment of the Prioress, a woman of some social standing<sup>4</sup>, remains gentle throughout, however, because as John Norton-Smith correctly observes, the rhetorical tradition in which Chaucer wrote required that "people of high social status ..... receive a more idealized treatment in character description. For them, abstractions (moral and physical) are not only more appropriate socially, but convey a more realistic emphasis in spite of any lack of particularization."<sup>5</sup> Chaucer's gentle tone and his use of omission and contrast, in the case of the Prioress, instead of a more direct attack also gives the impression that her faults and weaknesses were more the result of blindness and self-delusion than of wilful unfaithfulness to her vocation<sup>6</sup>.

In the General Prologue, the Prioress is described as being the possessor of impeccable table manners as well as of various other social graces. The lady is exceedingly sensitive to the sufferings of mice caught in traps and intensely devoted to the comfort of certain "smale houndes" (i.146) which she keeps in defiance - a gentle and ladylike defiance, no doubt, but nonetheless defiance - of the rules of her order,<sup>7</sup> and the edicts of several mediaeval bishops.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the poet's gentleness, however, and his strict adherence to the rules of mediaeval rhetoric, Chaucer's concern regarding religious abuse is evident in the fact that he does not pass too lightly over the faults of even a gracious lady belonging to the same class

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4. G.H.Cook, English Monasteries in the Middle Ages op. cit., p.222.

"The abbess or Prioress was always a person of some social standing or of a wealthy family."

5. J.Norton-Smith, Geoffrey Chaucer op. cit., 114-115.

6. See also: U.C.Knoepfmacher, "Irony through Scriptural Allusion: a note on Chaucer's Prioress" ChauR 4:3 (1970), 180-3.

7. M.Bowden, A Reader's Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer op. cit. p.49.

8. Ibid.

in society as that to which his patrons and benefactors belonged. The fact that the Prioress's name, Eglantyne, and her table manners and appearance are closely associated with descriptions of the typical romantic heroine of the period has been sufficiently dealt with by various critics and does not require further elaboration apart from an observation to the effect that the obvious similarity between the manners and appearance of the Prioress and those of mediaeval romantic heroines probably includes a suggestion that the nun, Madam Eglantyne, was well aware of her physical attractiveness and was pleased when others noticed it.<sup>9</sup>

It is unlikely that any mediaeval audience would have failed to notice the poet's omission, in his portrait, of any type of spiritual basis for the Prioress's actions. Chaucer does, indeed, say of her,

"And al was conscience and tendre herte."  
(1.150),

but apart from the mention of her emotional reaction to certain small animals, does not specify how or in what circumstances her "conscience" and "tendre herte" operate. There is also the fact that the word "conscience" need not have applied to moral rectitude at all, but could have been understood merely as a kind of emotional sensitivity.

That Chaucer was aware of the virtues one would expect to find in the different groups of people he dealt with and that he did not hesitate to describe them when he saw them is evident from the amount of space he devotes to the virtues of the pilgrim Knight, the Plowman, the Parson and the Clerk.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the poet makes

9. An example of a description of a romantic heroine of the period may be found in Chaucer's The Romaunt of the Rose (538-80).

See also; M. Bowden, A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales op. cit., p.94.

and G.G. Coulton, Five Centuries of Religion Vol. III. (Cambridge, 1936), p.408.

10. Knight: 25 out of 30 lines; Plowman: whole portrait; Clerk: 12 out of 22 lines; Parson: whole portrait.

precisely one reference to the accomplishments of the Prioress as a nun - the manner in which she sings the Divine Office (i.122-3) - and even here he takes care to comment only on the external manner in which she applies herself to the recitation of the Hours, one of the most sacred of her duties. Chaucer does not say that the Prioress recites the Divine Office with great devotion as he says of the pilgrim Parson:

"His parisshens devoutly wolde he teche."  
(i.482),

but merely that she "Entuned" the Office "in hir nose ful semely," (i.123). Furthermore, the mention of the Prioress's skill in "entuning" the Office is sandwiched, as it were, between her name, Eglantyne, which has no religious connotation whatever, and a remark about her knowledge of French (i.124-5).<sup>11</sup> This fact seems to indicate that the recitation of the Divine Office had little true religious significance to the lady Prioress.<sup>12</sup>

Chaucer omits, too, in the Prologue, to justify the facts that the Prioress is on pilgrimage at all; that she swears by any saint whatsoever and that she wears a dainty gold brooch.<sup>13</sup> It is certainly significant that while the poet's obtuse and complaisant narrator fully agrees with the pilgrim Monk to

"Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved!"  
(i.188),

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11. The casual positioning of the reference to the Divine Office cannot really be ascribed to the shortcomings of the narrator, as he makes no such "mistakes" when he lists the virtues of the idealized pilgrims.
  12. L.Eckenstein, Women under Monasticism (Cambridge, 1896), p.359.
  13. Nuns were strictly forbidden to go on pilgrimage, swear oaths of any kind or wear any type of jewellery or fine clothing.  
See also: G.H.Cook, English Monasteries in the Middle Ages op. cit., p.225.  
and M.Bowden, A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales op. cit., p.98.

and glibly justifies the pilgrim Friar's snobbery with the words:

"For unto swich a worthy man as he  
 Acorded nat, as by his facultee,  
 To have with sike lazars aqueyntaunce,"  
 (i.243-5),

he does not have any favourable comment to make on these aspects of the Prioress's behaviour.

In contrast to the idealized pilgrims in whose portraits details of an external materialistic nature are kept to a minimum or omitted altogether the Prioress is described in terms of precisely such external materialistic details.<sup>4</sup> This fact is very probably an indication that she, like the corrupt ecclesiastics, places more emphasis on the material than on the spiritual aspects of her life.

Madam Eglantyne's "smylyng.....ful symple and coy" (i.119), reminds the reader of the "merye" (i.208) Friar and is a contrast to the quiet sobriety of the pilgrim Clerk (i.289). A sharp contrast is drawn, too, between the type and range of the learning of these two Church representatives. The Prioress is able to speak French and

"At mete wel ytaught was she with alle:"  
 (i.127),

while the clerk takes "moost cure and moost heede" (i.303) of study and especially study of the works of Aristotle.

Chaucer says of the Prioress:

"In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest:"  
 (i.132),

implying that the cultivation of courtly manners was an

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14. Knight: 4 out of 38 lines; Clerk: 4 out of 22 lines;  
 Parson: nothing; Plowman: nothing.
15. In the Prioress's portrait 31 of the 44 lines are concerned with descriptions of an external or material nature.

important feature in her life. It might even perhaps have been, because of Chaucer's use of the words "ful muchel" and "lest", indicated as the most important feature in the nun's life just as hunting is the most important feature in the Monk's life and the pursuit of pleasure, in the Friar's life. The Clerk's life, on the other hand, is devoted to the study of philosophy and the Parson's to the spiritual and temporal welfare of his flock.

Particularly noticeable, too, is the contrast between the "charitee" and "pitee" of the Prioress, who demonstrates a tearful concern for small animals, and that of the Parson who exhibits true Christian charity for his flock whom he:

".....ne lefte nat, for reyn ne thonder,  
In siknesse nor in meschief to visite  
The ferreste in his parisshe, muche and lite,"  
(i.492-4).

The pilgrim Monk, like the Prioress, would have been either a member of the nobility or a close associate of at least one member of this class.<sup>6</sup> However, he is treated much less gently and his shortcomings and weaknesses are made much more obvious than is the case with the Prioress. This is probably so because monks had, due to their functions as priests, more contact with the general body of the faithful than nuns had. Besides this, sermon-literature of the period tended to emphasize the infidelities of monks more frequently than those of nuns.<sup>7</sup> In accordance with the rhetorical tradition, however, Chaucer had to

16. The Monk loved hunting and, since this sport was the preserve of the nobility, Daun Piers must have had fairly close connections there.  
See also: M. Bowden, A Reader's Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer op. cit., p. 51.
17. G.R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Mediaeval England op cit., pp. 93, 382. Owst quotes from only two sermons in which the infidelities of nuns were discussed. Regarding the type of religious character Chaucer portrays, R. Preston says in his book Chaucer (New York, 1952), p.160.  
"Chaucer (had) no new target to display, only a new sort of archery, which quietly transfixed the object without contorting it".

make his attack on this more or less privileged member of the clergy as indirect as possible while still maintaining its force. Thus he appears to mitigate the force of his exposition by allowing the pilgrim Monk to be described by a complaisant, flattering, rather obtuse narrator.

Choir monks,<sup>18</sup> among whom the pilgrim Monk, Daun Piers, certainly would have been numbered, were usually priests as well as religious and had been known to rise in the ranks of the hierarchy even to the position of pope.<sup>19</sup> Those choir monks who were in charge of parish churches carried out the same tasks as parish priests, but the majority of monks in orders were not directly connected with the guidance and instruction of the faithful.<sup>20</sup> Daun Piers was this latter type of monk. He said Mass either in private or in the semi-public chapels of the monastery or "celle"<sup>21</sup> (i.172) to which he was attached, and was not, as a rule, expected to hear the confessions of the faithful or to minister to their spiritual or temporal needs. For this reason, the pilgrim Monk is represented mainly as an erring religious, although Chaucer does make mention, in the Shipman's Tale, of an erring monk's performance of his sacerdotal duties. (vii.251).

The introduction to the Monk in the General Prologue is cheerful, sufficiently respectful and ostensibly approving. The light, faintly bantering tone, however, (i. 165-7) is in marked contrast to the gentle, reverential tone used to introduce the Prioress.

18. Some monks joined orders as lay brothers. They did not present themselves for ordination, nor did they sing the Divine Office with the choir monks.
19. L.M.Smith, Cluny in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries (London, 1930), p.312.  
 Odo (Otto) of Lagery, Cardinal Bishop of Ostia, former Prior of Cluny became Pope Urban 11 (1088-99).
20. M.W.Grose, Chaucer op cit., p.31.
21. A "celle" was a subordinate monastery.

The portrait that follows carries the suggestion that the reasons for the difference in tone between the introductions of the two religious are: first, that the pilgrim Monk belongs, perhaps, to a slightly lower social class than the Prioress; second, that, being a man, he can be treated somewhat less gently than a woman can and, third, that Chaucer means to reveal, through this pilgrim, more serious religious abuses than Madam Eglantyne appears to be guilty of, and that Daun Piers is, therefore, worthy of less respect.

The words "to been an abbot able"(i.167) seem at first reading to preclude the possibility that the pilgrim Monk was of a lower social standing than that of the Prioress since abbots, like prioresses, were always gentry. However, the three lines preceding this statement, that is, the reasons given by the narrator for his opinion that the Monk has the ability to be an abbot, are so obviously inadequate, that this pilgrim's status cannot really be established from his supposed ability to be an abbot. The attributes for which the narrator would confer on Daun Piers the title of Abbot are: he is handsome, he is an outrider, he loves hunting and, perhaps most important, he is a "manly man" (i.167). These qualities, as the poet's audience knew full well, were very far removed from the qualities in reality required by a mediaeval abbot. Apart from the spiritual qualities required to maintain the intensity of the prayer life and the quality of study and labour undertaken in the monastery, the man who held the position of abbot would have to possess remarkable organizational abilities such as those listed by G.H.Cook: "The successful management of a monastery called for organizing ability, tact and self-sacrifice on the part of the superior, whose judgement was exercised in the choice of suitable brethren to act as obedientiaries. The spiritual and temporal affairs of the house needed constant supervision, and, in a convent of any size, the

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abbot can have had<sup>22</sup> very little time for such pastimes as hunting and hawking.<sup>22</sup>

One sees in these revealing lines of Chaucer's portrait that the pilgrim Monk is not interested in the humble service of God as a simple monk,<sup>23</sup> but sees himself as someone who is capable of assuming the important position of abbot.<sup>24</sup> Mr. Cook rightly observes that "apostacy was a crime in the eyes of the world as well as of the Church, for the religious were under the legal obligation of offering up prayers for the founders and benefactors of their houses."<sup>25</sup> Since it was impossible, then, for worldly monks to aspire to positions of power outside their orders, they coveted the highest form of power within their grasp, the control of a monastery. As will be evident from my quotation from English Monasteries in the Middle Ages, on the previous page, the control which the mediaeval abbot exercised over all the monks and over the land and goods of the monastery was as absolute as that of any of the most despotic sovereigns of the period. To be an abbot was the pinnacle of success, therefore, to which those monks aspired who no longer found satisfaction in prayer, labour and study, as their rule enjoined, and who thus sought some compensation for their irrevocable renunciation of the possibility of secular power and prestige. This does not suggest

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22. G.H. Cook, English Monasteries in the Middle Ages op. cit., p.102.
23. It is true that many abbots, too, forgot that they were, in fact, simple monks in the service of God, as records of episcopal visitations show, but this does not detract from the fact that it was the ideal that a humble, holy religious should be abbot.
24. M. Bowden, A Reader's Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer op. cit., p.53. "....(his) implied resentment against the world (although he is 'able' to be an abbot, he is but a prior) (is) manifest."
25. G.H. Cook, English Monasteries in the Middle Ages op. cit., p.14.

that all or even the majority of abbots were bad monks,<sup>26</sup> but it does suggest that those monks who actually aspired to and worked for the honour of being the abbot of a monastery and who considered themselves more worthy of holding that position than were their brethren, had succumbed to the deadly sin of pride which, Chaucer causes his idealized Parson to tell us, is "the general roote of alle harmes" (x.386).

Chaucer indicates, then, in the first three lines of the pilgrim Monk's portrait, that Daun Piers considers himself capable of being an abbot only because he is, in fact, so unworthy of fulfilling that high office. An example of Chaucer's awareness of and effective use of the incongruous is his placing, immediately before the narrator's statement of high praise: "to been an abbot able" (i.167), a suggestion that the pilgrim Monk is guilty of one of the serious infidelities of which mediaeval monks were accused. Daun Piers is said to love "venerie"<sup>27</sup> (i.166), commonly glossed as "hunting" but, according to Beryl Rowland, having obvious sexual overtones as the sport of Venus.<sup>28</sup> Thus we find one serious fault, indulgence in the sport of hunting, definitely noted, and another, lechery, strongly suggested.

Hunting was the preserve of the rich and the noble and certainly not to be engaged in by the poor and the lowly. In fact, hunting changed its name and became "poaching" when a poor man went out to catch himself a bit of fresh meat. Priests and religious were expected

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26. See also: The Prioress's Tale  
 "This abbot which that was an hooly man,  
 As monkes been - or elles ogthe be - " (vii.641-2).
27. F.N.Robinson, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer  
 op cit., p.987.  
 W.W.Skeat, Chaucer: Complete Works  
 (London, 1912), p. 280 (Gloss).
28. B.Rowland, Blind Beasts op. cit., p.87.

to identify themselves with the poor and the needy and were, therefore, strictly forbidden to take part in the hunt.<sup>29</sup> However, numbers of the clergy and religious, and even some abbots, took no heed of these prohibitions, as they, like Chaucer's pilgrim Monk, asked the question "How shal the world be served?" (i.187) and thus ingratiated themselves with the rich and the powerful by indulging in this expensive sport.<sup>30</sup> The money spent on "deyntee hors(es)" (i.168) could have been spent on the alleviation of the lot of the poor and of the suffering as it was the intention of the benefactors that it should be. The poor were, moreover, not slow to note and resent this fact.

Trivial as it may appear to be at first glance, the tinkling of the bells on the bridle of the Monk's horse proves, on further examination, to be a significant indication of other failings and shortcomings, in the life of the mediaeval monk, about which Chaucer expressed concern. The almost casual comparison of the horse's bells to the bells of the chapel,

"Gynglen in a whistlynge wynd als cleere

And eek as loude as dooth the chapel belle!"  
(i.170-1),

is a clear suggestion that the amount of time and trouble spent on his horses and his hunting by the pilgrim Monk far outstripped the amount of time and interest he devoted to his chapel duties, in particular, the celebration of the Mass and the recitation of the Divine Office, which were, in fact, the "raison d'etre" for the existence of

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29. P.E. Beichner, "Daun Piers, Monk and Business Administrator" Speculum xxxiv (1959), 616.

30. Ibid. p. 618. Fr. Beichner quotes from Knighton who says of William de Cloune, Abbot of the Augustinian Canons of Leicester, (1345-1378): "In hunting the hare he was held the most famous and renowned among all the lords of the realm, so that the king himself and his son, Prince Edward, and many lords of the realm were held by an annual pension to go and hunt with him."

the monasteries and the reason why the rich and powerful endowed these monasteries so richly. Small tinkling bells were also frequently worn on sexual amulets at this time, and there was a famous, or infamous, brothel called "the Belle" near Harry Bailly's Tabard Inn.<sup>31</sup> The tinkling of the horse's bells symbolizes, therefore, the external, the worldly and the sensual; all that is foreign to the ideals by which the monk lives. The chapel bell symbolizes prayer, penance and sacrifice: the life to which the Monk has vowed himself. The pilgrim Monk appears, from this reference, to prefer his horse's bells and all they symbolize. Thus the poet uses a seemingly trivial detail to compare the empty jingling, which erring monks choose, to the spiritual riches signified by the chapel bell.

The manner of dress of the corrupt clergy and less worthy religious was a matter of serious concern to mediaeval preachers<sup>32</sup> and it appears to have been of equally serious concern to Geoffrey Chaucer for he takes pains to describe, sometimes even in the most trivial detail, the clothing of his unworthy clerical and religious pilgrims, while he makes scarcely any mention of dress or external appearance when discussing those pilgrims whom he uses to demonstrate the ideals towards which all clergy and religious should continually strive. Of the forty two lines in the portrait of Daun Piers, twenty six are devoted to dress, physical preferences and achievements in worldly matters. One is immediately struck by the resemblances between the poet's portrait of the pilgrim Monk and that of the Prioress and it appears that it was intended by the poet that this similarity

31. B. Rowland, Blind Beasts op. cit., p.113.

32. G.R.Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Mediaeval England op. cit., p.271.

should be fairly obvious<sup>33</sup> just as it was his intention that the similarity between the pilgrim Clerk and Parson<sup>34</sup> should be noted.

Of course Daun Piers is portrayed as being much grosser and much more obviously worldly than the gentle, refined Prioress, Madam Eglantyne. Nevertheless, it cannot be gainsaid that, setting aside the very definite hints regarding lechery which appear in the pilgrim Monk's portrait and not in the Prioress's, there is an unmistakable similarity in the shortcomings and failings which Chaucer reveals in the lives of these two upper-class religious pilgrims.

The Prioress is introduced as a lady whose smile is, as mentioned earlier, "ful symple and coy" (i.119); the Monk is introduced as "a fair for the maistrie" (i.165). In both cases Chaucer creates an impression of a concern with physical or trivial detail. This is especially obvious when these introductions are compared with Chaucer's introductions of the Clerk and the Parson. The Clerk is introduced as follows:

"A Clerk ther was of Oxenford also,  
That unto logyk hadde longȳgo." (i.285-6),

and the Parson in similar terms:

"A good man was ther of religioun,  
And was a povre Persoun of a Toun," (i.477-8).

33. K.Malone, Chapters on Chaucer op cit., p.181.  
"Madam Eglantyne is the female counterpart of Dan Piers, but her worldliness is . . . . different" from the gentleman's. Miss Bowden disagrees and says that her deviations "from conduct proper to her calling belong to elegance and refinement of manners rather than to the gross self-indulgence of the Monk".  
A Commentary to the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales op cit., p. 321.  
It seems to me that "self-indulgence" may apply as much to an excess of "elegance and refinement" as it does to "grosser" matters.
34. See below Chapter 4 on idealized ecclesiastics.

Chaucer devotes a good deal of space to the description of the Prioress's table manners and he does the same with the Monk's love of hunting. In each case the activity described in so much detail has absolutely no spiritual significance and is closely associated with the type of life lived by members of the noble classes - the sort of life which both religious should have renounced completely. Both Prioress and Monk are conspicuous for the quality of their raiment; the cloak worn by the Prioress is "Ful fetys" (i.157) and the sleeves of Daun Piers's habit are edged at the wrist with fur (i.193-4). Chaucer reveals the attitude of the Church to rich clothing, and in particular to rich clothing worn by ecclesiastics and religious by means of the words he puts in the mouth of the pilgrim Parson, "For certes, if ther ne hadde be no synne in clothyng, Crist wolde nat so soone have noted and spoken of the clothyng of thilke riche man in the gospel" (x. 413).

Over indulgence of the palate is another failing which the pilgrim Monk and Prioress have in common. The poet's description of the Prioress's inclination towards over indulgence in respect of food is a masterpiece of understatement:

"For, hardily, she was nat undergrowe." (i.156),  
and probably, for that reason, even more evocative than the more robust description of the Monk who

"....was a lord ful fat and in good poynt;"  
(i.200).

Both these religious are certainly a contrast to the "holwe" (i.289) looking Clerk of Oxenford and to the Parson who was equally abstemious and who could,

"..... in litel thyng have suffisaunce"  
(i.490).

Chaucer is careful, too, to stress, and the narrator eager to approve, the fact that Daun Piers considers food

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eaten by the common people, and by good religious, beneath his dignity. For this reason Chaucer permits this pilgrim to speak of a "pulled hen" (i.177), often the most common form of meat eaten by ordinary people, and the "oystre" (i.182), one of the cheaper molluscs, freely available in the Monk's dining-room, in a derogatory manner as terms of contempt. Daun Piers's favourite dish is roast swan (i.206), a dish indulged in only by the very rich. The swan was also the sign for both a tavern and a brothel, suggesting, once more, the possibility of infidelities in the Monk's observance of his vow of chastity. The swan is also referred to in Colin Blowbol's testament<sup>35</sup> where it is associated with sloth, a sin which the pilgrim Parson, in his condemnation of negligence in the service of God and of "recchelesnesse" (x.680,710,-711), would certainly ascribe to the Monk. Chaucer's Parson would also find the pilgrim Monk guilty of the deadly sin of gluttony for he states that, according the Church father, Saint Gregory, the second "speces" of this sin is committed when "a man get hym to delicaat mete or drynke" (x.828).

Because this self indulgence in matters of food, clothing and recreation caused great resentment among the people<sup>36</sup> Chaucer repeatedly refers to these shortcomings in his ecclesiastic and religious pilgrims.

Both the Prioress and the Monk wear a gold brooch in defiance of the ruling of several mediaeval bishops to the contrary and in each case the ornament bears an

35. See also:

B. Rowland, Blind Beasts op. cit., p. 90.

36. See also:

M. Bowden, A Reader's Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer  
op. cit., p.52.

Miss Bowden states that this self-indulgence was the main reason for which monks were criticized during the fourteenth-century. That they were severely criticized for this failing is certainly true, but there is sufficient evidence to suggest that they were criticized, at least equally severely, for their sexual misdemeanours,

ambiguous motto connected with love. Madam Eglantyne's brooch bears the legend "Amor vincit omnia" (i.162), and the end of the gold pin with which Daun Piers fastens his hood is fashioned in the form of a love knot. The love referred to could, of course, be either divine or secular, but the picture which the poet has painted up to this point of each of these two religious must make the reader question the extent, especially in the case of the Monk, to which this love was in fact divine, as it should have been.

The negligence of many monks in the service of God is revealed with particular emphasis in the poet's mention of his pilgrim Monk's attitude towards the precepts of the founder of his order, St. Benedict and of St. Augustine. Chaucer does not make any explicit mention of this lax Monk's attitude to the many hours of prayer enjoined on the monks each day. However, the negative attitude of Daun Piers to the life within the cloister, the manual labour which, ideally, formed a large part of the monk's day and to the study, translation and illumination of the Scriptures and the Doctors leaves the reader, as Chaucer very probably intended it to do, in little doubt as to how much the obligation to pray really did mean to the pilgrim Monk and how much sincere devotion he brought to the recitation of those hours which he could by no means avoid.

Daun Piers's contemptuous dismissal of St. Augustine,

"Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved!"  
(i.188),

invites comparison with the Parson's Tale, not only as regards the sin of sloth, as mentioned earlier, but also in the matter of the Monk's attitude, in general, to this great theologian and doctor of the Church. While the pilgrim Monk reveals some knowledge of the classics,

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modern events and the more popular sections of the Old Testament in his Tale, he does not evince any regard for or knowledge of the theologians, doctors or philosophers of the early mediaeval Church. Nor does this pilgrim's choice of tragedies for his Tale reveal any depth or subtlety in his reading.

Chaucer advisedly draws the attention of the reader to the superficiality of the Monk's learning because such a shortcoming is particularly reprehensible in a religious whose life should be devoted to just such a study of scripture and theology. The pilgrim Parson, in contrast to the Monk, demonstrates a comprehensive knowledge not only of the scriptures, but also of all the most important of the early doctors and theologians.<sup>37</sup> The Parson further highlights the ignorance which the Monk displays in his casual dismissal of St. Augustine by quoting from the works of this revered doctor more often than he does from any other source outside the scriptures.<sup>38</sup>

The poet reveals, then, not only a vain and worldly Monk, but one who is also inadequately informed regarding those things which are really important to the way of life he has chosen to follow.

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37. Besides the Scriptures (Old and New Testament) from which 213 references are taken, there are references and quotations from St. Ambrose, St. Isidore, St. Gregory, St. Augustine, St. John Chrysostom, St. Bernard, St. Anselm, St. Basil and St. Damascene. Even if Chaucer did assemble this knowledge from his sources (e.g. St. Raymond of Pennafort ?), which is quite probable, it remains a significant fact that he assigned this particular Tale, and not a simpler, more homely one such as would be more suited to the brother of the Plowman, to his Parson.
38. The Parson refers to or quotes from St. Augustine 25 times. For exact references for this and note 37 above see F.N. Robinson, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer op. cit., pp. 767-73.

Tales in which Abuses are Revealed by another Pilgrim.

The monk in The Shipman's Tale is not necessarily the pilgrim Monk though it seems probable that Chaucer intended his audience to see a strong enough similarity between the two monks for them to regard the faults of Daun John as being also those of Daun Piers. For this reason both men are handsome, virile clerics, both spend much time away from their monasteries and both are out-riders. By using one of the other pilgrims, a rascal at that, to tell the tale of another erring monk, who strongly resembles the pilgrim Monk, Chaucer succeeds in discussing a serious evil of which monks were accused without referring directly to a particular monk and, at the same time, of subtly drawing attention to one of the weaknesses of Daun Piers in a way that need not arouse the ire of the pilgrim Monk.

The alleged love that mediaeval monks had for pleasure and ease is again emphasized in The Shipman's Tale, banteringly and in a spirit of comradeship such as the Shipman would naturally feel towards one who, like himself,

"Of nyce conscience took .... no keep" (i.398).

The first fact that we learn about Daun John is that he is "a fair man and a boold." (vii.25) and we are immediately reminded of the pilgrim Monk who is also "fair" (i.165). Also, as is the case with Daun Piers, there is no mention, in the Tale, of the presence, in Daun John, of those virtues which the mediaeval Christian would have expected to find in a monk. It is scarcely possible, in fact, that there would be, since Daun John was

"....evere in oon .... drawyngge to that place."  
(vii.27)

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(the merchant's house) and would, therefore, seldom have been in the monastery.

Chaucer, it would seem, intends to draw a contrast between the Merchant, who is wholly dedicated to his work and the monk, who is pictured as a more-or-less useless sycophant. There is also a marked contrast between the friendship offered by the merchant and that offered by Daun John. Again, the comparison is to the detriment of the monk who thinks nothing of seducing his "cousin's" wife, at the same time defrauding his best friend of "an hundred frankes" (vii. 181). The merchant, on the other hand, gives Daun John the freedom of his house, lends his friend money when he asks for it, and, even though he is in need of it himself, hesitates to ask for a return of the money.

Avarice and lechery form the main themes of The Shipman's Tale and are so closely intertwined that it is difficult to establish exactly where the one ends and the other begins. This intertwining is indicative of the close association between the sins of which mediaeval monks were often accused. That a monk should sin was perfectly understandable, but that a monk should be able to sin with a degree of impunity impossible to the ordinary person and that he should sin at the expense of those for whose eternal welfare he was supposed to strive was galling indeed and is the reason why the laugh at the expense of the trusting merchant would have been rather a wry one. The corrupt monk and the woman have their desire and the merchant is left one hundred francs poorer and a cuckold to boot merely because he trusted his wife and his close friend, his sworn brother, Daun John. Chaucer's Shipman was probably unaware of the existence of "poetic justice".

It is generally accepted that this type of behaviour

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was alarmingly prevalent among the monks of the fourteenth century and that householders, far from welcoming these "spiritual guides" very often dreaded their visits and tried to keep their womenfolk out of the way.<sup>39</sup> Little wonder, then, that Geoffrey Chaucer was concerned and expressed his concern in the most effective way open to him, poetry. Indeed, in view of the seemingly widespread monastic and ecclesiastic abuse and the amount of sermon-literature devoted to it, Chaucer could not have avoided some expression of concern unless he was totally oblivious of his surroundings and of other human beings or had so shallow a Christian faith that he did not care what became of the Catholic Church.<sup>40</sup> Chaucer differed from the moralists of the period in the methods he used to express his concern and in his greater appreciation of the comical aspect of human nature, but he was as concerned about the abuses which he saw around him as they were. Chaucer loved the sinner while deploring the sin and so was content with the lighter touch.

In the Shipman's Tale the poet is careful to stress Daun John's attitude to money, since avarice and lechery are so closely associated in this Tale. Daun John uses money to buy people. He makes it his business to buy the friendship of the servants with gifts<sup>41</sup> so that they will welcome him any time he chooses to come to the house, even if the master should not be there. The monk promises to "lend" the merchant's wife a

39. See also: G.R.Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Mediaeval England op. cit., p.263.

40. See also: Chapter One. Introduction.

41. If Daun John had observed his vow of poverty faithfully, he would not have had money to spend on casual gifts.

hundred francs and, while the Merchant is in "Seint-Denys" (vii.67), he brings the woman the money which he has borrowed from her husband. However, a return is expected for the money and

"This fairewyf acorded with daun John  
That for thise hundred frankes he sholde al nyght  
Have hire in his armes bolt upright;"  
(vii.314-6).

While appreciating the humour of the situation, Chaucer does not condone the Monk's action and is careful to emphasize, in his idealized ecclesiastics, the Christian attitude to money.<sup>42</sup> In this way the poet makes it quite clear that monks like Daun John and, by implication Daun Piers, are not just "mild apostates from monastic rule",<sup>43</sup> but are seriously remiss both in their attitudes and in their actions.

A very clear indication of Daun John's lack of religious principle is seen in his attitude to the Mass. The celebration of the Sacrifice of the Eucharist, the Mass, is the greatest privilege which a priest has, and it should be the pivot around which his day revolves. It is the most sacred of his duties and deserves his entire attention and devotion. The circumstances under which Daun John says Mass on the day of the merchant's departure for "Brugges" (vii.61) are anything but devotional or meaningful either to his own life or to the lives of those for whom he is celebrating Mass. The celebration is sandwiched in between a sexually-charged interlude which the monk has with the pretty wife, and lunch. Also, Mass is hastily said to avoid delaying the lunch which appears, to all the parties concerned, to be the more important of the two actions.

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42. See below Chapter Four on idealized ecclesiastics.

43. B. Rowland, Blind Beasts op. cit., p. 90.

"But hastily a messe was ther seyde,  
 And spedily the tables were yleyde,  
 And to the dyner faste they hem spedde,  
 And richely this monk the chapman fedde."  
 (vii.251-4).

It was a feature of fourteenth-century clerical and monastic abuse that the Masses for which stipends had been offered either were not being said at all or were being negligently offered. This fact caused increasing alarm among the faithful to whom both a spiritual and temporal injustice was being done by this negligence. For this reason, no mediaeval audience would have missed the significance of Chaucer's mention of the monk's celebration of Mass. His lack of propriety in this matter makes of him, not just an erring religious, but a blackguard and a hypocrite. Daun John need not necessarily have said Mass in the house,<sup>44</sup> and he certainly should not have done so under the circumstances, but Chaucer intentionally reveals in this action the monk's concern with appearances rather than with truth.

In expressing his concern regarding the prevalence of abuses among monks, Chaucer presents a suave, sophisticated, charming man of the world, one who, like Madam Eglantyne, would be perfectly at ease in the company of royalty and nobility, but who, as a monk, is so obviously inadequate that he cuts a pathetic figure in spite of his social success.

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44. It was, and still is, considered a privilege to have a Mass said in a private house. The merchant would have appreciated his friend's according him this privilege while residing in his house.

## Self-Revelation by Unworthy Religious.

In the portrait of the pilgrim Monk in the General Prologue, Chaucer skilfully and seemingly lightheartedly sketches a worldly, erring, sometimes even corrupt mediaeval monk. While, however, the poet emphasizes his concern at abuses in the Church by demonstrating how incongruous a figure the worldly religious cuts, he never seriously condemns or even criticizes monasticism as an institution. In the prologue to the Monk's Tale such a criticism may seem to be implied when Harry Bailly laments the detrimental effects on the population of the pilgrim Monk's withdrawal from parenthood. (vii.1944-8). Robinson correctly asserts, however, that "to take the Host's banter here as serious theological argument would clearly be to 'maken ernest of game'".<sup>45</sup> Looking at this passage as a jest makes of it a laughing prelude to the more serious statement that married women tended to rely more on the "virile" monks for their sexual satisfaction than on their puny husbands.

Since the Host's tone has been bantering, perhaps, to Daun Piers, almost objectionably familiar, from the beginning of the prologue to The Monk's Tale, the reader is not surprised to hear the disclaimer, "I pleye" (vii.1963) towards the end of Harry Bailly's speech. Yet his parting shot,

"Ful ofte in game a sooth I have herd seye!"  
(vii.1964),

is a further sly hint that the reputation monks had earned, justly or otherwise, for taking other men's wives to bed, was anything but a joke. The apparent

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45. F.N. Robinson, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer  
op. cit., p.745.

lack of resentment in the Host's tone and his genuine admiration for the manliness of the Monk seems to substantiate Miss Bowden's statement to the effect that lechery was not one of the main reasons why monks were seriously censured.<sup>46</sup> Harry Bailly, by no means as obtuse as the pilgrim narrator, omits to make any comment, however, regarding the Monk's rich clothes, his "deyntee" horses or his love of hunting. He knows that any mention of these aspects of the Monk's life are likely to cause resentment so, being the leader of the group he avoids them in order to keep relations between the pilgrims as friendly as possible. Thus Chaucer underlines the extent of the resentment caused by the self-indulgence of many mediaeval monks. The poet cannot, however, resist a final reminder of the corpulence and high colour of the pilgrim Monk in the Host's comment in this connection:

"Thou art nat lyk a penant or a goost:"  
(vii.1934).

The question arises as to why Chaucer allows a Monk who is so obviously proud, vain and accustomed to dealing only with the elite to take Harry Bailly's familiar banter with such apparent good grace. Three possibilities suggest themselves. First, that the pilgrim Monk considers the Host beneath contempt and not worth the trouble of a reply; second, that the Monk had heard this particular accusation, or comment so often that he no longer attached any significance to it, and third, that, while he certainly could not say so explicitly, he was in full agreement with the Host's statement that he was a very virile, attractive man indeed. While Chaucer probably meant the motive for the Monk's "paciencie" (vii.1965) to be a combination of all three possibilities, his emphasis on the physical attributes of Daun Piers, his love of fine clothes and good food and the hints

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46. Refer to note 36 above.

at a certain infidelity in the observance of his vow of chastity, make the third possibility the most likely of the three.

The dreary Tale which the poet assigns to this pilgrim comes as something of a surprise after the picture that has been painted of a jovial, sporting "prelaat" (i.204). However, it accords well with the self-importance of the Monk which Chaucer reveals in the General Prologue.

Daun Piers wishes to restore his impaired dignity by impressing his audience with his knowledge of the meaning of tragedy and its different manifestations and, by his boast that he had "an hundred in (his) celle" (vii.1972), to demonstrate how well read he was.

The poet re-emphasizes in the Monk's Tale much of what has already been revealed regarding the worldliness of many monks and their materialistic attitudes. The fact that many of the tragedies, and certainly those in which the main emphasis is on physical prowess and the attainment of riches are dreary, lifeless and empty,<sup>47</sup> is an indication of the belief that a life devoid of spiritual values is not life at all but living death. Chaucer, by giving the Monk "dead" heroes demonstrates the spiritual lifelessness of that pilgrim. The heroes of even the most interesting of the tragedies reveal few individualizing features nor is there, as a rule, any depth of thought or feeling in their actions.<sup>48</sup> Physical

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47. Among the examples of such tragedies in the Monk's Tale are, Hercules, Balthasar, Pedro of Spain, Pedro of Cyprus, and Barnabo of Lombardy.

48. An exception would perhaps be Ugolino, "De Hugelino Comite de Piza" in which a deep, strong relationship is revealed between the count and his children.

See also: Dante's account in Inferno Canto xxxiii - 14.

prowess and riches appear to be the only criteria according to which Chaucer permits his pilgrim Monk to assess the characters of his tragic heroes. This fact, together with the emphasis on the physical and material in the General Prologue portrait, seems to imply that external achievements are a very important feature in the life of the pilgrim Monk himself.

Paul Beichner says, and rightly so, that the Monk's error is that he has made his secular occupation his way of life. This error is even more fundamental than Fr. Beichner makes it out to be.<sup>49</sup> It is what one might almost call an occupational hazard of religious life. This fact would not be readily appreciated in the secular atmosphere of our highly technical society but it would have been quickly noted and justly deplored in an age when everyone understood the chief occupation of religious to be a dedication to a life of prayer and penance. A secular task, no matter how absorbing, should never become the way of life of a religious; it must always remain a means to an end - the greater glory of God.

Chaucer expresses concern, in this instance, for the disturbing fact that the religious who makes his occupation his way of life becomes orientated towards the secular, the external, the physical and loses his taste for prayer and the concerns of the spiritual. This orientation towards the secular would not cause much concern to the ordinary twentieth-century man, but, as I pointed out in Chapter One, the man consecrated to God had as indispensable a function to fulfill in mediaeval society as the doctor or the lawyer. Indeed, this function would probably have been considered more important, as it was directly concerned with the attainment of eternal life, the final goal of every mediaeval man.

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49. P.E.Beichner, "Daun Piers, Monk and Business Admininstrator" op. cit., p. 616.

Chaucer was by no means alone in expressing concern regarding the increasing worldliness of so many of the clergy and religious. Sermon-literature of the fourteenth century abounds in examples of sermons preached against this worldliness. "More do they abound in eatings and drinkings", laments John Bromyard, the great Dominican preacher, "than do lay-people as a rule and they are more given up to idleness; for neither in bodily nor in spiritual things do they know how to occupy themselves usefully."<sup>50</sup> This preacher is implying that religious who do not devote themselves faithfully to their vocations are useless members of society because, by their commitment, they have rendered themselves legally incapable of functioning in any other capacity. A religious is either a good religious, or trying to be one, or he is nothing.

The Prioress, too, is given a Tale in which some of the weakness revealed in the General Prologue and others, merely hinted at, are discussed. By means of Madam Eglantyne's portrait, we are given to understand that her doctrinal, spiritual and even, in certain areas, her cultural equipment is inadequate, that she is overly concerned with external appearance and worldly achievements and that she does not scruple to disregard those rules and regulations of religious life which limit her freedom of movement <sup>and</sup> ~~to~~ interfere with her comfort and convenience. The audience is given, too, a hint of this lady's propensity towards emotionalism and sentimentality in the poet's description of her attitude to her dogs and to trapped mice. In the Tale assigned to her, Chaucer places particular emphasis on Madam Eglantyne's spiritual inadequacy and on her indulgence of her emotionalism.

50. G.R.Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Mediaeval England  
 op. cit., p. 260.  
 Owst quotes from John Bromyard's collection  
 of sermons: Ordo Clericalis.

The Prologue to The Prioress's Tale takes the form of an invocation to Mary the Mother of God. This prayer with its Old Testament references is taken from parts of the Divine Office and is, according to Russell, indicative of the depth of the Prioress's piety and devotion.<sup>51</sup> I am inclined to agree with Schoeck, however, who points out the "irony of having an anti-semitic legend prefaced"<sup>52</sup> by this type of prayer and I would point out that references to the Divine Office need not necessarily be an indication of "piety and devotion" but may merely demonstrate an easy familiarity with the psalms and readings achieved after many years of repetition, since the larger part of the Divine Office is repeated at least once a week. That Chaucer implies, moreover, a lack of doctrinal and theological foundation in the life of the Prioress is evident from the fact that he limits her references to those traceable to either the Divine Office or to the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and that the Tale in no way refers to, or even reflects, the thoughts or ideas of the "auctoritees" with which the idealized clergy are so familiar.

The weaknesses and failings of the Prioress which are revealed in the Tale itself can perhaps be most clearly seen by comparing and contrasting the Prioress's Tale with that assigned by the poet to her "chapeleyne" (i.164), known only as the Second Nun. A certain contrast can be seen even in the Prologue to the Tales of the two nuns. The Prologue to The Second Nun's Tale reveals some

51. F.H.Russell, "Chaucer: The Prioress's Tale" in Mediaeval Literature and Civilization (University of London, 1969), pp.214, 225.
52. R.J.Schoeck, "Chaucer's Prioress: Mercy and the Tender Heart" in Chaucer Criticism (Notre Dame University Press, 1960), p.249.

knowledge of works other than books of Hours and the martyrology for it contains, besides references to the Divine Office, a reference to the writings of St. Bernard (viii.30), two references to the New Testament (viii.59-61,64) and mention of the works of philosophers (viii.113).

The Second Nun's Tale, being a direct translation,<sup>53</sup> lacks the spontaneity and immediate appeal of The Prioress's Tale - a moving tale of a boy martyr - but it demonstrates, I believe, a deeper insight into Christian virtue and into the virtues proper to the religious state.<sup>54</sup>

Both Tales are set in a foreign country and both treat of a saint who is cruelly martyred. The Prioress tells of a little "clergeon" (vii.503) who, for love of the Virgin Mary, memorizes the Alma Redemptoris Mater, sings it while walking home from school through the Jewry and is brutally murdered by the incensed Jews. The Second Nun tells the tale of the famous Roman martyr, St. Cecilia.

A significant contrast between the Tales can be seen in the manner in which each appeals to the audience. The appeal of The Prioress's Tale is chiefly an emotional one - its hero is a defenceless little boy who is murdered by unbelievers. He sings a song the meaning of which he does not understand,

"Noght wiste he what this Latyn was to seye"  
(vii.523),

to the Virgin Mary of whom, as yet, he can have little

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53. A translation of this nature was much more highly regarded by mediaeval audiences than it would be today, for these audiences had a greater respect for the ideas and forms of expression of the "auctoritees" than is generally the case today.

See also

54. T. Whittock, A Reading of the Canterbury Tales (Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp.251-61.

understanding and he goes unknowingly to his death. The emphasis is placed, not on the child's faith and good works, to which sixty lines of the Tale are devoted, but on his death and on the highly emotional and dramatic events which follow it. One hundred and sixty lines are devoted to these incidents.

The appeal of The Second Nun's Tale is largely intellectual and spiritual. Cecilia, the heroine of the Tale, is a mature, informed Christian, well-instructed in her faith, who understands, as far as this is possible, why she believes what she does. She does not go to her death unwittingly but deliberately chooses to die rather than to renounce her faith. Only thirty five of the four hundred and thirty three lines of this Tale are devoted to Cecilia's martyrdom and burial.<sup>55</sup> The rest are concerned with the living and teaching of her faith.

In assigning an emotionally-charged Tale to the Prioress, therefore, Chaucer reveals the fact that her actions are more likely to be motivated by emotion than by logic, theological considerations or Christian Doctrine. In this he is highlighting what he has already demonstrated in the General Prologue where he says that the lady weeps at the sight of a mouse in a trap, "if it were deed or bledde" (i.145). It does not seem to occur to her that mice are destructive vermin.

A further example of Madam Eglantyne's propensity towards emotionalism may be discovered by contrasting the emotional reactions of the characters in The Prioress's Tale, in time of tragedy, with those of the characters in The Second Nun's Tale. The truly convinced Christian will, almost instinctively exhibit at least some degree

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55. viii. 515 - 549.

of trust and fortitude when faced with tragedy or confused by uncertainty. When Cecilia's husband and brother-in-law are arrested and sentenced to death, she visits them and bids them farewell with a "ful stedfast cheere" (viii.382). While the modern mentality might find it difficult to credit the fact that Cecilia really loved a husband whose bed she would not share, Chaucer's audience would, without undue strain, have recognized the possibility and might even have accepted it as an ideally Christian type of love. Cecilia does not evince excessive anxiety at the arrest of those dearest to her, nor does she yield to uncontrolled grief at their deaths because her faith is deep enough to enable her to accept calmly whatever God sees fit to send her. The clergeon's mother, in The Prioress's Tale, however, falls into excessive anxiety and sorrow (vii.594) when she is faced with uncertainty and tragedy - a sorrow which does not reflect deep trust in God's goodness, and willingness to do His will under all circumstances.

The point being made here is that the love of God and trust in his goodness which controls one's emotional reaction to any situation does not make one less human but, in fact, more so. To be human means to act in a rational manner, for we are rational animals. We cannot, of course, deny our emotions and instincts the right to a certain amount of expression, but any actions proceeding from these sources must be informed and controlled by our reason. To be human, therefore, we must act in a certain way because we have decided so to act. Unfortunately this is not always the case but it remains, nevertheless, a fact that the more our actions are informed and controlled by our reason, the more human we are. This being the case, the Christian, another Christ, becomes more human as he becomes more closely conformed to the humanity of Christ. In his humanity Christ suffered

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with a patience and courage which the Christian knows he can never equal, but which he must try to emulate. In this he has the example of Christ's Mother who stood quietly beneath the Cross for three hours and watched her Son die.

This belief formed an integral part of the daily lives of mediaeval Christians and is still in evidence in those regions in which the faith has endured through the ages. It is this belief, too, that Chaucer reveals in Griselda's calm reaction to the loss of both her children, in Constance's courageous acceptance of injustice and exile and in Virginia's choice of death rather than the violation of her virginity.

The Prioress's "hooly" abbot, who swoons at the bier of the boy martyr can be compared to Pope Urban, a canonized saint, who attends St. Cecilia on her deathbed, listens in silence to her last request and, after her death, quietly takes her body to the cemetery where he buries it at night "Among his othere seintes honestly" (viii.549). The implication arising from this comparison is that sanctity is not necessarily connected with emotional or physical manifestations<sup>6</sup>, as the Prioress seems to intimate, but that it is, for the most part, hidden, silent and undemonstrative.

The Second Nun's Tale, unlike that of the Prioress, contains no indication of hatred for her persecutors,

56. Fourteenth-century mystics Walter Hilton and the author of The Cloud of Unknowing do not mention visions, trances, etc. in their writings on contemplation. They anticipate much of the thought of St. John of the Cross who goes so far as to state that "an ecstasy is a weakness, a failure on the part of a soul that is not yet perfectly pure; the soul that is truly strong does not experience such things." D. Knowles, The English Mystical Tradition (London, 1961), p.12.

See also:

F.C.Happold, Mysticism (Penguin, Middlesex, 1963), p.37.

a desire for revenge, or even the expression of a wish that the criminals be justly punished. Cecilia asks God for three days "respite" (viii.543) solely so that she might have the opportunity to bring more souls to the knowledge and acceptance of the faith for which she is dying. All she asks of Pope Urban on her deathbed is that he build a church on the site on which her house stands (viii.546).

Chaucer allows his pilgrim Prioress, on the other hand, to make the fullest possible use of the anti-semitic sentiment, at that time still prevalent in England, to arouse in her audience feelings of hatred and a desire for revenge. Anti-semitism had reached its peak in England with the massacre of 1190<sup>57</sup>, but the Jews were expelled from the country in 1290 by Edward I and hatred for them should and would have become less virulent by the fourteenth century had it been allowed to be so. Of course, there had to be a fairly malevolent villain to oppose the innocence of the child martyr, but the ideal reaction of the Christian to even the most horrible of crimes should be one characterized by sorrow and prayer for forgiveness of the sinner and not, as in The Prioress's Tale<sup>58</sup>, by the Old Testament conception of an eye for an eye. The punishment meted out to the murderers and, what is worse, to anyone who had knowledge of the deed, is unchristian in the extreme and certainly demonstrates the fact that the Prioress's "conscience and tendre herte" (i.150) did not extend to her less fortunate fellow human beings and certainly not to her enemies concerning whom Christ said:

57. See also: M.F. Modder, The Jew in the Literature of England (Philadelphia, 1939), p. 5.

58. See also: A.T. Gaylord, "The unconquered Tale of the Prioress" Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Art and Letters xlvii (1962), 613-36.

Gaylord feels that the Tale betrays a heightened anti-semitism, is marked by sentimentality and betrays the Prioress's emotional and intellectual level as childish.

"Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to shine on the evil and on the good ...." (Matt.v:44-5).

Critics who are inclined to see little or no similarity between Chaucer's Prioress and his other, "worse" religious and clerics would do well to bear in mind the fact that spiritual mediocrity is the worst possible state in which a religious can find herself or himself. Because such a religious does not do anything really bad, her conscience does not trouble her unduly and she is not spurred on to making any special effort to live a more penitential, spiritual life. It is to this type of religious that the Spirit utters his warning to the Church in Laodicea: "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou were cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth" (Rev.iii:15-6).

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## CHAPTER FOUR.

## THE IDEAL

Pilgrims Idealized in the General Prologue

Having a deep understanding of human nature, Chaucer realized that his audience would be as receptive to the positive influence of good example as it was to the negative influence of satire and ridicule. For this reason he uses some of his pilgrims to act as foils against which the vices and shortcomings he exposes through his pilgrim Monk, Friar, Prioress, Summoner, Canon and, especially Pardoner may be evaluated.

It is significant that of the six, and possibly seven, pilgrims whom the poet idealizes, or, at least, refrains from severely satirizing, four are clerics or religious.<sup>1</sup> It seems reasonable to assume that Chaucer idealized fewer of his secular pilgrims because he was less concerned with the duty of the laity to strive for Christian perfection than he was with evidence of this striving, or lack of it, in the leaders and guides of the faithful, the ecclesiastics and religious.

The poet did, however, idealize in a particular way two of the secular pilgrims, the Knight and the Plowman but even here, the emphasis is placed more on their practice of Christian virtue than on their achievement of any worldly prestige. The Knight, for

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1. The idealized pilgrims are: Knight, Plowman, Clerk, Parson. The Nun's Priest and Second Nun are idealized in their Tales and the Franklyn is not severely satirized though the lavish table he keeps could be faulted in terms of the Parson's definition of gluttony.

instance, is praised for his meekness (i.69) and for the fact that

"He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde

In al his lyf unto no maner wight" (i.70-1).

Even when he enumerates the battles in which this pilgrim has fought, Chaucer places so great an emphasis on his participation in religious wars,<sup>2</sup> that the words "lordes werre" (i.47) could as easily apply to the wars of Christ, perhaps the Crusades, as it could to the wars of an earthly king.

The portrait of the Parson's brother, the Plowman, is even more redolent of instances of specific Christian virtue than is that of the Knight. In fact, this pilgrim is probably, after his brother, the most highly idealized of the pilgrims. Like the Parson, and in contrast with the unworthy clerics and religious, the Plowman carries out as perfectly as possible the duties of his state, showing no reluctance, unlike the Monk, to carrying out even the most menial of tasks for he, "ylad of dong ful many a fother;" (i.530).

The Plowman, too, in true Christian fashion, "loved" God, "best with al his hoole herte" alike in sorrow as in joy, and loved his neighbour "right as hymselfe" (i.533-5). Chaucer's pilgrim proves his love by his fidelity to the duties of his state and by his willingness to help the poor, whenever this is possible, without expecting any remuneration for his work.

Just as the pilgrim Parson demonstrates his true concern for the welfare of his flock by being "looth ..... to cursen for his tithes" (i.486), so the Plowman shows respect for Church regulations and an

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2. F.N. Robinson, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer  
op. cit., p.652.

awareness of his responsibility to contribute to the support of his pastor by paying his tithes regularly and in full:

"His tithes payde he ful faire and wel,  
Bothe of his propre swynk and his catel"  
(i.539-40).

Chaucer does not permit his audience to forget, however, that it is chiefly to the clergy and religious, who have consecrated their lives to the service of God, that the faithful must look for guidance and example.<sup>3</sup> In this connection he says in the General Prologue of priests:

"....if gold ruste, what shal iren do?"  
(i.500).

Even when the poet does not state explicitly that a particular cleric or religious does or does not set a good example, he implies it through a careful emphasis on those areas in which he knows a good example or lack of it will be obvious and will be duly noted by his audience.<sup>4</sup>

It is a further indication of Chaucer's determination to keep the attention of his audience focussed on the religious and ecclesiastical members of the pilgrimage that he not only includes the best and the worst - the Parson and the Pardoner - of the pilgrims among their number, but assigns to **them** the outstanding Tales of his collection.<sup>5</sup>

Chaucer has different methods of presenting his

3. This obligation is referred to in the following lines: 1.496, 520; *vii.* 643.
4. An example of such an emphasis would be in the matter of poverty which, in the Middle Ages, was regarded as a mark of holiness.
5. The Pardoner's Tale, The Nun's Priest's Tale and The Prioress's Tale are generally held to be outstanding Tales and The Parson's Tale is the longest and most instructive as well as being the last of the Tales. In this regard see note 59, Chapter One.

idealized characters. The Second Nun and the Nun's Priest are idealized chiefly by means of the Tales assigned to them, while the Clerk and the Parson are idealized both in their portraits in the General Prologue and in the Tales assigned them in the course of the pilgrimage.

The pilgrim Parson is the most highly idealized of the Canterbury pilgrims and is, therefore, the most important means Chaucer uses of assessing the characteristics which he shows his other pilgrims to possess. This fact is particularly noticeable in the contrast drawn between the actions and attitudes of this pilgrim, as revealed in his portrait, and those of the corrupt clergy and unworthy religious. In the General Prologue The Parson is shown, as I have mentioned,<sup>6</sup> to be the ideal parish priest in his self-sacrificing care for the spiritual and temporal welfare of his flock and the ideal Christian in his determination to follow Christ closely in both word and deed. Chaucer concludes the portrait of his Parson with the words:

"But Cristes loore and his apostles twelve  
He taughte, but first he folwed it hymselfe"  
(l.527-8).

Another of Chaucer's idealized pilgrims is the Clerk of Oxenford. Clerks took minor orders and on completion of their studies proceeded to Ordination if they so wished. There does not, however, appear to have been, at that stage, any obligation for clerks to become ordained within any specified period of time after the taking of minor orders.

In the General Prologue the Clerk is shown to be poor, hardworking and discreet and it is again by means of contrast with the corrupt clergy and worldly religious that the poet highlights the virtue of this quiet, sober pilgrim.<sup>7</sup>

6. For further information on the virtues of this pilgrim as presented in the General Prologue see chapters two and three.

7. As note 6 above.

As regards poor clerks at Oxford see also:

J.A.W. Bennett, Chaucer at Oxford and at Cambridge

(Oxford, 1974), pp. 12-14 and 117-119.

Tales of the Idealized Clergy as an expression of the Poet's appreciation of virtue and as a further revelation of religious and clerical abuse.

The Tale which Chaucer assigns to the Clerk serves in a particular way as an extension and completion of the portrait he paints of this pilgrim in the General Prologue<sup>8</sup> as the poet shows the cleric, in his tale of Griselda, to have an appreciation of and deep insight into the virtues of humility, diligence and obedience.

In this connection, even Professor Malone, who is opposed to the view that the Tales are directly or indirectly an extension of the portraits painted in the General Prologue, concedes that The Clerk's Tale is exceptionally well suited to the picture Chaucer has painted of the pilgrim Clerk of Oxenford. "It seems needless", he points out, "to comment on the matter beyond exclaiming over the inspiration that brought the two together in Chaucer's mind."<sup>9</sup> The "inspiration" to which Professor Malone refers, was not the matter of chance that he implies it to be, but a product of the concern engendered in the poet by the abuses which he observed in every stratum of the hierarchical and religious life of the late fourteenth-century Church. This Tale was, in all likelihood advisedly chosen by Chaucer not only as a further expression of his appreciation for the virtues of diligence, humility and obedience,<sup>10</sup> but also to indicate that the worldly pilgrims - including the unworthy religious and clerical pilgrims, those

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8. See also: G.L.Kittredge, Chaucer and His Poetry (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), p.155.  
 9. K.Malone, Chapters on Chaucer op. cit., pp.222, 234.  
 10. See General Prologue portraits of idealized clergy.

supposedly dedicated to the pursuit of holiness - had fallen short of the ideals towards which all Christians should be striving. He achieves this by demonstrating the heights of holiness to which a simple peasant girl is able to rise.

Griselda is shown, first of all, to be poor, the daughter of the poorest man in the village. Yet, she, like the Clerk and the Parson, is shown to be rich in spiritual treasure and is the object of the love and respect of her neighbours. As is the case, again, with the Clerk and the Parson, Griselda's poverty is dwelt upon at some length and is even made to appear the basis of her virtue for the poet says of her:

"For povreliche yfostred up was she,  
No likerous lust was thurgh hire herte yronne."  
(iv.213-4),

and this is followed immediately by an indication of the extent of her virtue, though still so young:

"Yet in the brest of hire virginitee  
Ther was enclosed rype and sad corage;"  
(iv.219-20).

It is not the physical fact of Griselda's poverty which is to be admired, for poverty, as such, is not a virtue. The girl's poverty must be seen as an acknowledgement that the possession of material goods is not an indication of the moral status of an individual but is, in fact, an obstacle to moral integrity when valued above the pursuit of those virtues demanded by one's state in life. Griselda's virtue lies in her willing acceptance of the poverty which is part of her station in life. She is satisfied with just sufficient to provide herself and her aged father with the necessities of life. Griselda shows no desire for wealth or for the enjoyment of pleasures beyond her reach and she spends long, laborious hours at menial tasks in order to make a meagre living. So great is the poet's regard for Griselda's

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attitude to material possessions that he makes it appear as if the attention of the Marquis is drawn to the young girl precisely because of her poverty:

"Upon Grisilde, this povre creature,  
Ful ofte sithe this markys sette his ye"  
(iv.232-3).

This poverty of spirit can be seen as being in a direct contrast to the love of luxury and the desire for the good things of life Chaucer has shown his less worthy religious and ecclesiastic pilgrims to be guilty of.

The most obvious miscreants in this regard are shown to be the Summoner and the Pardoner. Chaucer demonstrates in the General Prologue the detrimental effect on their characters and personalities of their complete involvement with money. Their relationship with their fellow-pilgrims, too, suffers on this account. It is a little-noted fact that Chaucer makes his pilgrims increasingly unpleasant and unscrupulous as their absorption with money increases. For this reason it is no coincidence that the two pilgrims who are the most deeply concerned with the acquisition of money are also the most unpopular pair on the pilgrimage. Their other faults, undoubtedly, played a part in their lack of popularity but their enslavement to money engendered a greater distrust and dislike than the other faults would have done. The poet shows his pilgrim Summoner and, particularly, his pilgrim Pardoner to be devoid of any kind of finer feeling and emphasizes, in so doing, his appreciation of the value of a correct attitude to the possession of material goods and of his approval of his "poor" pilgrims to whom he ascribed the greatest rectitude of character.

Those who are poor must work; thus we find the poet dwelling upon Griselda's devotion to labour. He

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says of her:

"She knew wel labour, but noon ydel ese"  
(iv.217),

and again:

"She wolde noght been ydel til she slepte"  
(iv.224).

Griselda shows no resentment at having to work long hours at menial tasks and even arranges her household chores in such a way that she does not have to neglect her work in order to see the marquis passing by on his way to his wedding. Even when she is recalled, after her unjust dismissal from the palace, to prepare her former home for its new mistress she shows no indication that she thinks that such tasks are now beneath her dignity.

Once more, it is not the work itself that is shown to be of value, since little reference is made to the actual work that Griselda does. It is in the girl's attitude to work that her virtue lies; it is in her appreciation of the contributory role which work plays in the development of a strong, disciplined character that Griselda demonstrates her insight and maturity. The poet shows this to be the fact when he motivates her willingness to work hard with the statement:

"..... and for she wolde vertu plese"  
(iv.216).

Griselda's diligence is also a sign of her dependence for she accepts the fact that she is not her own master, and that she is, therefore, not entitled to a life of idleness. She works because it is one of the duties of her state to do the kind of work that she willingly, cheerfully and efficiently does.

By emphasizing the facts of her poverty, diligence and devotion to the duties of her state, and the virtues of patience, steadfastness and self-discipline which

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are the accompaniments of such a life, Chaucer again draws attention to those of his pilgrims who despise, explicitly or otherwise, the duties imposed upon them by their state in life. This applies particularly to the less worthy religious and clerics for they, who are expected to excel in the practice of virtue, fail, by their idleness and self indulgence to make use of the opportunities they are given to cultivate virtue.

The emphasis which Chaucer places on the humility of Griselda<sup>11</sup> is yet another way in which he indicates his awareness of the lack of virtue in the clergy and religious of the late Middle Ages. If, as the Parson states, pride is at the root of all sin, it is reasonable to suppose that its opposite virtue, humility, may be considered to be at the root of all the virtues. This is the reason why Chaucer makes such frequent reference to Griselda's humility. When Walter expresses his desire to make the girl his wife, Griselda replies in the following words:

"...Lord, undigne and unworthy  
Am I to thilke honour that ye me beede"  
(iv.359-60).

This reply is very like the response of the centurion to Christ's offer to visit his house and cure his servant (Matt.viii:8) and even more similar to the prayer said by the congregation at the most solemn part of the Mass.<sup>12</sup> The association between Griselda's attitude to Walter's proposal and the attitude of the Christian in respect of the favours he receives from Christ in the sacrifice of the Eucharist would have been clear to Chaucer's audience.

Griselda's humility is shown to be sincere because her elevation to the position of marchioness does not cause her to lose her lowly opinion of herself. She

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11. iv.215,359, 566-70, 603, 814-7, 923-5, 1011.  
12. The words said just before the Communion of the faithful are: "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you. Say but the words and I shall be healed."

remains an unworthy creature dependent in every way on the goodness of her lord. Griselda remains kind, gentle and understanding towards the common people and shows not the slightest inclination towards arrogance of any sort. Unlike the pilgrim Monk and Friar, she does not make use of her position to take advantage of those less powerful or less fortunate than she is.

Chaucer and his audience knew, as we do, that it is comparatively easy to maintain a façade of humility<sup>13</sup> in times of ease and prosperity, but that that façade quickly drops when we are faced with contradictions, hardships and suffering, for we are quick to wonder why we should be the ones who must suffer, and to feel ourselves unjustly treated by God and by our fellow humans. This is not the case with Griselda. She accepts without question whatever it pleases Walter to do to her, even to the extent of acquiescing in the intense humiliation of having to prepare the palace for the woman who is to take her place. Griselda's reply in this instance shows the same degree of cheerful willingness as did her reply to Walter's proposal of marriage. She says:

"'Nat oonly, lord, that I am glad,.....  
 'To doon youre lust, but I desire also  
 Yow for to serve and plese in my degree  
 .....'" (iv.967-9).

Neither the portraits nor the Tales of those religious and clerics who are satirized by Chaucer give any indication of the presence of this type of humility or, indeed, of any kind of humility. These pilgrims are all shown to have an exalted opinion of their own excellence based, not upon a knowledge of self and an appreciation of virtue, but on external appearance and material success. Griselda, on the other hand, sets no

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13. See The Parson's Tale (x.476-83) where the poet speaks of the necessity for the practice of humility.

store by material gain or external appearance. We know she does not desire riches and the poet does not consider mention of her physical appearance to be of any importance. Griselda's evaluation of herself is based on the realization of her infinite unworthiness in the eyes of God, as seen in her subjection to Walter, in the words:

".....as ye wol youreself, right so wol I"  
(iv.361).

Chaucer links Griselda's poverty and humility with that of the Clerk, who tells the Tale, and confirms his expression of his appreciation of the value of these virtues in his creation of an ideal pilgrim, a Parson, who is a poor man himself and who regards humility as the basic virtue required by all Christians (x.476), and especially by religious and ecclesiastics, being called, as they are, to a special degree of holiness.

Griselda is shown to be patient, humble and long-suffering because that is what she chooses to be. She accepts her poverty and her lowly status, not because she has no other choice, but because she sees it as part of God's plan for her.

The most remarkable virtue the poet shows Griselda to possess is her unquestioning obedience to the obviously unreasonable demands of her husband, Walter. Chaucer implies, moreover, in his mention of the girl's constant attention to the practice of virtue:

".....for she wolde vertu plese"  
(iv.216),

that her perfect obedience is the logical outcome of a lifelong practice of the virtues of poverty, self-denial and the spirit of humble service.

The first test of Griselda's obedience is Walter's command that she leave behind her in her father's cottage everything she possesses, including the clothing she is

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wearing at the time. While this might not be considered to be a severe test of Griselda's obedience since she had very little to leave behind her, her willing acquiescence is an indication of the mature self-discipline, as regards things, which will enable her to leave the riches and comfort of the palace without complaint or resentment.

Obedience may be said to be largely a matter of trust - the greater the trust the more perfect the obedience. Griselda trusted her lord perfectly, "Ye been oure lord," she says, when he takes away her daughter, "dooth with youre owene thyng/ Right as yow list; axeth no reed at me."(iv.652-3), therefore, she obeys him willingly and without question. When the marquis puts to Griselda the question of obedience before he marries her, he leaves her perfectly free to refuse him when he says:

"Wol ye assente, or elles yow avyse?"  
(iv.350).

Griselda, however, protests her unworthiness (iv.359-60) and declares herself willing to obey Walter's slightest command even though it should cause her death (iv.362-4). There is no suggestion of mental or physical coercion on the part of Walter; indeed, Griselda makes even the possibility of coercion remote as she accords to Walter's wishes, be they never so outrageous, almost before he utters them.

On various occasions Chaucer allows the pilgrim Clerk to comment on the marquis's treatment of his wife, Griselda.<sup>14</sup> His purpose in doing so is not so much to draw attention to Walter's cruelty as to emphasize the nature of Griselda's obedience. She obeys Walter not because he is good and kind to her but because he is her lord and master and because she has promised him her unquestioning obedience.

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14. iv.455-62; 621-3.

There is little virtue attached to obedience when the one who commands is good and kind and when the things commanded appear to be just and reasonable. Griselda could not see the reasonableness of Walter's command that she surrender her children to the executioner and the poet shows that she feels his rejection of her person very keenly,<sup>15</sup> but she never questions her husband's right to her absolute obedience. This sort of obedience is also evinced by Constance, the heroine of The Man of Law's Tale. Although she has serious misgivings about leaving her country and family to marry someone as alien to her in faith and culture as the Sultan of Syria, she obeys her father's will in this regard as she would that of Christ:

"Allas! unto the Barbre nacioun  
 I moste anoon, syn that it is youre wille;  
 But Crist, that starf for our redempcioun  
 So yeve me grace his heestes to fulfille!"  
 (ii.281-4).

John P. McCall adds to this the view that Chaucer uses the trials of Griselda, and those of Constance, to particularize a two-part theme: by voluntary submission, the will becomes triumphant; and, analogously, by acceptance of death, the soul conquers it. That Griselda submits to Walter follows the tradition that submission to a superior person is equivalent to submission to God.<sup>16</sup> Thus, while Walter's cruelty is not condoned, Griselda's patience is praised as being symbolic of the unquestioning obedience man owes to God.

It is important to note at this point that, while Griselda is conceived of as a type of the faithful

15. iv. 855-61; 1037-43.

16. J.P. McCall, "The Clerk's Tale and the Theme of Obedience" MLQxxvii:3 (Sept., 1966), 260-9.

Christian, patient in adversity as was Job,<sup>17</sup> Chaucer does not intend his audience to see Walter as representing God; he is merely a vehicle of God's Will as is the bolt of lightning which may strike down and kill one. This fact is plain from the poet's open criticism of the marquis's treatment of Griselda and even of his motives for this treatment.<sup>18</sup> The mediaeval Christian may have found some of God's actions incomprehensible, as we often do, but he would have been very slow to question his Maker's love and mercy, more especially had he been an ecclesiastic. Had Chaucer meant Walter to represent God, there would have been no thought in the idealized Clerk's mind of criticisms such as:

".....what neded it  
Hire for to tempte, and alwey moore and moore"  
(iv.457-8),

which he levels at Walter. Regarding his, and the mediaeval Christian's attitude to what God ordains, Chaucer says:

"And suffreth us, as for oure exercise,  
With sharpe scourges of adversitee  
Ful ofte to be bete in sondry wise;  
.....  
And for oure beste is al his governaunce"  
(iv.1156-8,1161).

Another very significant contrast between the heroine of the Clerk's Tale and the unworthy ecclesiastics and religious is their differing attitudes to their responsibility regarding the common good. The prayer, penance

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17. Chaucer refers three times to the Book of Job in connection with Griselda's virtue: iv.871-2; 902-3; 932.
18. The references to Walter's treatment of Griselda are: 460-3; 621-3; 785-91.

and labour undertaken by religious and clergy was not solely, or even chiefly, for their own sanctification. They were representatives of the faithful and prayed, worked and suffered on their behalf. This being the case, any refusal on the part of the clergy or religious to perform the duties of their various states properly was detrimental to the common good. By their disregard, therefore, of the due performance of those duties demanded by the state in life they had chosen, the pilgrim Monk, Friar, Prioress, Pardoner, Summoner and Canon display a lack of regard for the welfare of the body of the faithful for whose salvation they carry a heavy responsibility.

Chaucer shows Griselda, on the contrary, to be deeply concerned, as wife of the marquis, for the welfare of all his subjects. She is not content to be merely a good wife and mother, but sees her responsibility as extending to all that concerns the good of her husband's people. So we read:

"The commune profit koude she redresse.  
 Ther nas discord, rancour, ne hevynesse  
 In al that land, that she ne koude apese,"  
 (iv.431-3).

Walter, too, is aware of his wife's concern for the common good, for on each occasion when he tests her,<sup>19</sup> he says that he is acting in the manner he does, not because he, personally, wishes to do so, but, "as my peple leste" (iv.490). He realizes that of all the excuses he can find for his actions, this one will be the most effective.<sup>20</sup>

In the first part of the conclusion to his Tale, the Clerk sums up what he has demonstrated to be true: if

19. As regards Griselda's concern for the common good as well as reference to it elsewhere in Chaucer's work see also: J.A.W. Bennet, The Parlement of Foules (Oxford, 1957), pp.33-4.

20. iv. 486-90; 631-7; 741; 800.

Griselda could be so patient when tested by an imperfect, even cruel, human being, we should, with much more reason, be patient when God, who is concerned only with what is to our eventual advantage, sends us any kind of adversity (iv.1145-55).

The poet admits, however, that owing to the weakened moral fibre of the times (iv.1164-9), it would be difficult to find many people of the moral calibre of Griselda, yet he does not hesitate to present these ideals as goals towards which Christians should be striving. Chaucer makes no apology for Griselda's extreme humility and obedience though he would probably have been aware of the fact that these extremes of virtue would be regarded by some as embarrassing indications of weakness or stupidity. The poet ensures, instead, that his audience is made aware of his approval of the patient Griselda by references to the likeness which she bears to both Christ and His Mother.<sup>21</sup>

In St. Luke's account of the annunciation, the Virgin Mary says, in reply to the angel's message: "Be it unto me according to thy word" (Luke i.:38), although her "fiat" would cause her great suffering. Similarly, Griselda says, when submitting to the loss of her daughter: "werketh after youre wille" (iv.504). The poet's description of Griselda as being as meek and as quiet as "a lamb" (iv.538) when her child is taken from her, calls to mind the passage in Jeremiah where he refers to Christ as the "trustful lamb being led to the slaughterhouse" (Jer.xi:19). Christ, too, as an example to Christians, obediently "accepted death on a cross" (Phil.ii:8). The pilgrim Parson is, like Griselda, likened to Christ,

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21. Griselda should be regarded more as a representative than as an individual fictional character. She is shown to be a representative of the faithful Christian.

in this case Christ the Good Shepherd, when he is called a "shepherde and noight a mercenarie" (i.514), but there is no mention of a likeness to Christ or of any attempt to imitate his virtues in the portraits or Tales of the pilgrim Monk, Friar, Prioress, Pardoner or Summoner, clerics and religious who should be completely involved in the devout following of Christ.

Having pointed his moral, the Clerk of Oxenford turns laughingly to the Wife of Bath and offers to sing for her ".....a song to glade yow, I wene;" (iv.1174). The audience knows that, to please dame Alison, the song must be connected with the "maistrye" of women for she has shown herself to be more interested in this topic than in any other.<sup>22</sup> The listeners know, too, that they will not be expected to take the Clerk's song too seriously because he says: ".....lat us stynte of ernestful matere" (iv. 1175).

It is uncertain why Chaucer decided to take over from the Clerk at this point with his own "envoy". Perhaps the heading of the "envoy" was a mistake on the part of the poet's scribe, Adam,<sup>23</sup> or perhaps Chaucer thought that such a song was not suited to the character of his sober, studious pilgrim whose speech was always "Sownynge in moral vertu" (i.307). However this may be, Chaucer appears, in this song, to be pouring scorn on the patient Griselda and all that she stands for:

"Grisilde is deed, and eek hire pacience,  
And bothe atones buried in Ytaille;"  
(iv.1177-8).

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22. See: Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale.
23. Chaucer, himself, has left no indication as to why he has made the "envoy" his own. He did, however, address a poem to Adam, his scribe, in which he accuses him of inaccurate work. (Chaucers Words unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn). There exists, therefore, the possibility that this "envoy" could have been one of Adam's errors which had been overlooked by Chaucer.

The poet then advises husbands, and, by implication, all who hold any kind of authority, not to expect humility and obedience from their subjects because, although they may have a right to it, they will not receive it (iv.1180-2). He tells these wives and subordinates not to be humble or obedient,

"... commune profit sith it may availle"  
(iv.1194),

in the same way as the common good was furthered by Griselda's humility and obedience.

Chaucer's advice to wives not to reverence their husbands but to resist their authority and to gain mastery over them by means of their sharp tongues is accompanied by animal references such as those connected with the camel (iv.1196), the tiger (iv.1199) and the quail (iv.1206). Perhaps the inference to be drawn here is that such shrewish rejection of legitimate authority is more appropriate to the traditional stupidity and stubbornness of the camel or the vicious, illogical cruelty of the tiger than it is to the actions of a reasonable human being. In this respect, too, the poet implies that the husband who submits to such treatment has no more courage than a quail.

A comparison between the closing lines of the "envoy" and those of the Tale will make the final message to the Wife of Bath, regarding the relationship between husbands and wives, clear. The merry song, in which wives are advised to resist the authority of their husbands and to neglect their duties, ends on a note of unhappiness and disunity with the words:

"And lat hym care, and wepe, and wrynge, and waille!"  
(iv.1212).

The Tale of patient Griselda, on the other hand, the woman who was humble, obeyed her husband and accepted willingly whatever adversity was sent to her, ends on a note of

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happiness, peace and fulfillment:

"Ful many a yeer in heigh prosperitee  
Lyven thise two in concord and in reste,"  
(iv.1128-9).

Chaucer's presentation of his Nun's Priest, sir John,<sup>24</sup> differs from that of his other two, more obviously idealized and, therefore, less enigmatic ecclesiastics, the Parson and the Clerk. Both the parish priest and the scholar are sketched in straightforward, unambiguous language in the General Prologue and are treated by the Host, to a certain extent, at least, in accordance with the impressions of their characters and personalities created in their portraits. Not so sir John. In the General Prologue Chaucer merely mentions the fact of his presence among the pilgrims as one of the clerics in attendance on the Prioress, and the prologue and epilogue of this cleric's Tale are so contradictory<sup>25</sup> that they cannot be relied upon to provide any real evidence regarding the character and personality of the pilgrim Nun's Priest.

After the Monk has refused to tell a second tale, his first having been interrupted by an impatient Knight, seconded by the Host. (vii.2767-91), Harry Bailly calls upon the Nun's Priest to tell a tale. The tone of the Host's address:

"Com neer, thou preest, com hyder, thou sir John!"  
(vii.2810),

is as disrespectful, at the very least, as that with which

24. K.Sisam, Chaucer: The Nun's Priest's Tale  
(Oxford, 1927), p.29.

Sir John was the name familiarly used for any priest but professor Sisam is of the opinion that Sir John is the Nun's Priest's real name.

25. The prologue to the Tale gives the impression that the priest is a timid weakling, while mention is made in the epilogue of his large neck and chest (vii.3456).

he addresses even the worst of Chaucer's scoundrels,<sup>26</sup> and is certainly a significant contrast to the respectful, even honeyed tones with which he addresses sir John's employer, the Prioress, when requesting her to tell a tale. To Madam Eglantyne the Host says:

"My lady Prioress, by youre leve,  
 So that I wiste I sholde yow nat greve,  
 I wolde demen that ye tellen sholde  
 A tale next, if so were that ye wolde "  
 (vii.446-9).

Since Chaucer does not show sir John's character or actions to have given the Host grounds for the disrespect he shows, and since Harry Bailly himself changes his mind in the epilogue to the Tale and becomes much more amiable, even commenting, perhaps jestingly, on and lamenting sir John's lost opportunities as a "trede-foul aright" (vii.3451),<sup>27</sup> we must assume that the poet seems not to intend the audience to gain much relevant information about the Nun's Priest from the remarks of the Host. This is probably due to the fact that it would have been considered a serious breach of mediaeval courtly etiquette to show a retainer to be in any way superior to his lord, or, especially, his lady. Chaucer has demonstrated, very subtly, but no less definitely for that, that his pilgrim Prioress falls far short of the ideals towards which she is supposed to strive, and it would, therefore, be unwise in the extreme

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26. The nearest approach to the tone used here is the "beel amy" (vi.318) with which the Host addresses the Pardoner.

27. M. Lumiansky, "The Nun's Priest in the Canterbury Tales" *PMLA* lxxviii:4 (1953), 897.

Professor Lumiansky comes to the conclusion that the Host would not have had the courage to treat sir John disrespectfully had this cleric had the physique of a "trede-foul".

for her attendant to be shown to possess any obvious spiritual or intellectual superiority over his mistress, the lady Prioress.

In both the General Prologue<sup>28</sup> and the prologue to the Tale, Chaucer does, however, find ways of preparing his audience for the idealized ecclesiastic which the Nun's Priest's Tale will reveal. The first of these stratagems is the subtle, yet unmistakable, resemblance which the poet creates between the Nun's Priest and his idealized pilgrim Clerk and Parson by his reference to sir John's horse as a "jade" (vii.2812). This "foul" and "lene" mount is indicative of poverty and because the pilgrim Clerk's horse is also "leene" (i.287), the poverty of the Nun's Priest is suggested as being of the same type as that of the scholar and the parish priest. The horses of the Nun's Priest and the Clerk are also in direct contrast to the sleek, fat horses, symbolic of their worldliness, which belong to the corrupt clerics.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, since Chaucer has his pilgrim Parson preach by word and example on poverty as a virtue, the audience is left in little doubt regarding the virtue of Chaucer's Nun's Priest as regards poverty and, by association, as regards the other virtues practised by the idealized Clerk and Parson. Then too, sir John's calm, accommodating reaction,

"'Yis, sir,' quod he, 'yis, Hoost, so moot I go,  
But I be myrie, ywis I wol be blamed!"  
(vii.2816-7),

to the Host's request is indicative of the genial nature

28. See General Prologue (i.478; 490; 497).

29. The Monk, for example, rides a "palfrey.....as broun as is a berye" (i.207).

and affability, even in the face of rudeness, of the person with true strength of character.

Yet another indication of the poet's regard for his pilgrim Nun's priest, appears at the end of the prologue to this cleric's Tale where the narrator speaks of sir John as:

"This sweete preest, this goodly man sir John"  
(vii.2820).

Since this line is quoted in the Middle English Dictionary as an example of the use of "goodly" to refer to "an excellent, good, noble, valiant, virtuous person", it may reasonably be assumed that the narrator's comment would have strengthened the impression that the Nun's Priest was indeed a just man.

Thus Chaucer refrains from presenting a portrait of the Nun's Priest and permits the Host to treat him disrespectfully at first and later with fatuous praise so that only the most sensitive members of his audience, and certainly not those pilgrims who are likely to take offence, will be prepared for the articulate, spiritually and intellectually superior, narrator of The Nun's Priest's Tale.

In his Tale, Chaucer shows his pilgrim Nun's Priest to be well aware of the mediocrity and spiritual blindness of his employer, the Prioress, and also of the limitations of her intellectual ability.

Sir John is also able to comment subtly and amusingly on the pride and vanity of that other unworthy religious, the pilgrim Monk, and on the shortcomings of Friar Hubert.

This Tale, certainly among the best in Chaucer's collection, revealing him at his wittiest and most amusing, may be interpreted in several ways. In this study I wish,

30. S.M. Kuhn and J. Reidy (ed.), Middle English Dictionary (Michigan, 1963), Vol. 4, p. 211.

That Chaucer held the Nun's Priest in high regard can also be implied from the latter's mention of Bishop Bradwardine which, according to J.A.W. Bennett, would suggest that Sir John was an Oxford graduate.

J.A.W. Bennett, Chaucer at Oxford and at Cambridge op. cit., p. 59.

however, to demonstrate only the manner in which the poet uses aspects of the Nun's Priest's Tale as an expression of his awareness of and concern regarding the abuses prevalent among the clergy and religious in the late fourteenth-century Church.

As is the case with a large number of his tales, Chaucer expresses his concern, in the Nun's Priest's Tale, through the medium of human comedy. He makes use of a type of comedy, however, which never allows its audience to forget, even in the midst of laughter, that the abuses being revealed are matter for deep concern.

Because sir John is employed by the Prioress, Madam Eglantyne, there will be a tendency to compare the tales each tells and to make some degree of character or personality evaluation accordingly. For this reason, the poet assigns to the Nun's Priest a tale which, indubitably, has more to offer to the intelligent, thoughtful audience than the Prioress's Tale. In his Tale sir John avoids all trace of sentimentality and prejudice and includes an effervescent, mischievous humour wholly absent from the Prioress's Tale.<sup>31</sup> The Nun's Priest is able to laugh at himself and at the world around him, a fact which immediately gives him a more balanced perspective on the realities of life than his too-serious employer. The Nun's Priest's thoughts and comments range with ease from the farmyard, to theology, to science, to the scriptures, to the classics and back to the farmyard, while the Prioress includes in her Tale only the actions and emotions surrounding the boy martyr, his mother and

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31. It is true that the Prioress's Tale is of a different genre to that of sir John, but a touch of humour, even wry humour, would have served to temper the highly-charged emotions in some of the scenes had Chaucer intended to present a more emotionally balanced Prioress.

In connection with humour in Chaucer see also H.R. Patch, On Re-reading Chaucer (Harvard, 1939), p.8.

the Jewish malefactors.

In the Nun's Priest's Tale there is no indication of the hatred and vengefulness which is revealed in the Prioress's Tale, and even the fox, the villain of the piece, is so charming a rogue that one is relieved rather than disappointed when the widow and her motley assortment of helpers fail to catch him. The Nun's Priest does evince some degree of anti-feminism when he allows the cock to take mean advantage of Pertelote's ignorance of Latin (vii.3163:6) and when he blames the counsel of women for man's downfall (vii.3253-8), but this mild anti-feminism seems, especially in view of the fact that it is a woman who heads the cock's rescue attempt and that Chaunticleer certainly does not follow his wife's advice<sup>32</sup>, scarcely more than a token adherence to the mediaeval tradition whereby clerks were supposed to revile women, and certainly not the direct attack on the Prioress that Professor Owen believes it to be.<sup>33</sup>

Sir John's informative discussion on predestination and free will (vii.3235-51) is a comment on the lack of any theological or doctrinal basis to the Prioress's religious Tale. This subordinate cleric's references to the sacking of Troy (vii.3356-9), to the various authorities on the subject of dreams (vii.2970-3148) and to mediaeval medical lore (vii.2945-67) serve to emphasize, too, the paucity of his employer's secular learning.

The first twenty lines of the Nun's Priest's Tale

32. Pertelote advises Chaunticleer to take "som laxatyf" (vii. 2943).
33. C.A.Owen Jr., "The Crucial Passages in Five of the Canterbury Tales: A study of Irony and Symbol" in Discussions of the Canterbury Tales (Lexington, Mass., 1961), p.87.

are devoted to a description of the lifestyle of a poor, old widow and her family. The audience at once becomes aware of the contrast between the simplicity and sobriety of this very ordinary old woman and the obvious avarice and love of luxuries of which the majority of the religious and ecclesiastic pilgrims, the supposed cream of Christian society, are shown to be guilty. The widow, like the Parson and the Clerk, is depicted as being perfectly content to live a simple, frugal life, as is Griselda, for the Nun's Priest says of her:

"In pacience ladde (she) a ful symple lyf"  
(vii.2826),

and later:

"By housbondrie of swich as God hire sente  
She foond hirself and eek hir doghtren two"  
(vii.2828-9)..

The even, regular tempo of the passage serves further to strengthen this impression of the peace and order which temperance and self-discipline introduce into a lifestyle.

A significant contrast to this frugality and simplicity is created with the introduction of the cock, Chauncleer. He is in every way the antithesis of his quiet, self-effacing mistress, just as the quiet, self-effacing sir John is the antithesis of his employer, the Prioress, who may, in certain respects, be compared with the cock of the Tale. Chauncleer is colourful, loud, proud, boisterous and sensual; the kind of creature who would, without a doubt, always be at the centre of an admiring crowd - of hens. The Prioress, while certainly not loud, colourful or boisterous, is unquestionably proud of her good looks and does enjoy being the centre of attraction. Madam Eglantyne's pride in her ability to "entune" the Divine Office well, is paralleled by Chauncleer's near-fatal pride in his ability to crow well. The point the poet makes is that the singing of

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the Divine Office, if unaccompanied by a growth in spiritual stature, is as empty and meaningless as is the crowing of a cock.

Of considerable significance in the Nun's Priest's Tale is Chaucer's continual emphasis on the fact that this gorgeous creature, Chaunticleer, is a mere bird. We read, for instance, that the hero of sir John's Tale must take "digestyves/ Of wormes" (vii.2961-2) and that he must search out the appropriate herbs to take as a "laxatyf" (vii.2943) and "Pekke hem up right as they growe" (vii.2967). We are told, too, that after his long discourse on the meaning and significance of dreams, Chaunticleer "... fley doun fro the beem," (vii.3172). We are assured, then, that this "manly man", this Chaunticleer, is nothing more than a fowl, living the earthy, limited life of farmyard poultry.

The widow, on the other hand, so dull and drab in comparison with her beautiful bird, is a person with all the depth and meaningfulness which the term implies. Thus the poet makes a point which he emphasizes again in the Parson's Tale:<sup>34</sup> external finery does not necessarily, or even usually, indicate the presence of those virtues and attitudes which make life meaningful. On the contrary, too great an emphasis on external appearance can very easily indicate the reverse - a disregard for the spiritual and a disinclination to practise the self-discipline which is a prerequisite for a life of virtue. Chaunticleer, the proud, flamboyant bird, is shown in spite of all his strutting, to be wholly dependent for his life and sustenance on a poor, colourless widow whose external appearance would not warrant a second glance.

Chaucer uses the Nun's Priest, too, to satirize

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34. See below, page 126.

the Monk, an unworthy religious and the pilgrim Friar, a corrupt ecclesiastic. In his treatment of the cock, Chaunticleer, Chaucer indicates the inappropriateness of the Monk's preoccupation with material goods and external appearance. He now goes a step further and shows how narrow the Monk's view of life is in comparison with that of the Nun's Priest, sir John, by allowing the Nun's Priest's Tale, also a "tragedy", to follow immediately on the tragedies of Daun Piers. The Monk relates a long series of short tragedies in which there is little or no character development and in which no allowance is made for the exercise by man of his ability to correct his errors and to recover from their affects.<sup>35</sup> The Nun's Priest, on the other hand, provides a more normal and humane view of the results of man's day to day (and even more serious) errors of judgement. We may lose a certain amount of face and we may suffer a certain degree of spiritual and temporal harm, but we are usually able to regain our equilibrium and, in time, make good our losses.

Chaucer shows his Nun's Priest, too, through his light-hearted use of a wide range of references, to be more learned and less pedantic than the Monk. The Nun's Priest's discussion on predestination and free

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35. See also: P.G. Ruggiers, "The Nun's Priest's Tale" in The Canterbury Tales: A Casebook (London, 1974), p.223.  
 "...the (Monk's) concept of tragedy, although it does not entirely omit the role of the will, is more mechanical than human..... The form itself prevents a thoughtful interest in the development of ethos in the agents, in their ability to argue themselves into or out of situations and in the important consideration of the degree of human responsibility which the agents may assume in this life."

will is particularly significant in this regard as it points to the absence of any such philosophical basis in the Monk's Tale. Every fourteenth-century scholar should have been well-versed in the tenets of philosophy which, during the eleventh century, had come to be regarded as the most instructive branch of learning.<sup>36</sup> The Monk, however, is obliged to limit his references to the much less highly regarded classical and mediaeval literary figures. The implication is that the pilgrim Monk, who would not make himself "wood" (i.184) poring over books, lest he become dull, does, in truth, become exceedingly tedious because of the paucity of his learning, while the Lowly Nun's Priest, by judicious application of his considerable secular and philosophical learning, produces one of the cleverest and most amusing of the Tales.

Chaucer draws, too, certain parallels between the cock and the Monk. Both are handsome and self-opiniated and both take pleasure in demonstrating their learning which, in each case, is really rather limited. The parallel is heightened by Chauncleer's mention of some of the Monk's tragic heroes<sup>37</sup> in his rebuttal of his wife's dismissal of dreams as one of the results of certain physical disorders. Another reference to the Monk can be seen in Daun Russell, the fox's, reference to "Daun Burnel the Ass" (vii.3312), because the author, Nigel Wireker, a monk of Christchurch, makes the ass represent a monk who is ambitious for an abbotship. Thus, the pilgrim Monk:

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36. See also:  
E.R.Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages (trsl. W.R.Trask) (London, 1953), p. 59.
37. Chauncleer mentions Croesus (vii.3138), Adam (vii.3258) and Nero (vii.3370).  
See also: M.Lumiansky, "The Nun's Priest in the Canterbury Tales"  
PMLA lxviii:4 (1953), 903.

"A manly man, to been an abbot able."  
(1.167),

is, very subtly, being called an ass.

Beryl Rowland sees a resemblance between the fox and the poultry-loving Monk<sup>38</sup> and adds another dimension to the parallels Chaucer draws between the Monk and the cock by pointing out that the Monk is just as "recchelees/ And necligent," (vii.3436-7) in his refusal to perform the duties proper to his state as Chauncicleer is when he closes his eyes in the presence of the fox. Like the cock, the Monk is in great spiritual danger while he persists in his blindness.

Chaucer's Nun's Priest uses Chauncicleer to comment on the shortcomings of that other priest-religious, the pilgrim Friar. Just as the Friar uses the "In principio" to extort her last farthing from a poor widow (i.254), so the cock uses the same phrase as an indication of the degree of truth in a well-known Latin indictment of women, which he quotes, and immediately deceives Pertelote regarding the meaning of the words he quotes (vii.3163-6). Sir John is commenting here on the custom of the Friars of using the supposed powers of the phrase "In principio"<sup>39</sup> to deceive people into giving them large amounts of money. The cunning of Friar Hubert in securing his own advantage at all times is noted by the poet in his reference to the fox in the Nun's priest Tale as

38. B. Rowland, Blind Beasts op. cit., p. 56.

39. K. Sisam (ed.), Chaucer: The Nun's Priest's Tale (Oxford, 1927), p. 46.

"'In Principio' is the opening of the Gospel of St. John, and the short name for its first fourteen verses, which were the most popular gospel-excerpt of the later Middle Ages, and were supposed to have extraordinary powers. The Friars, quick to catch the taste of the people, recited them from house to house ....."

"daun Russell" (vii.3334) because the fox often appears as a Friar in French vernacular literature of the previous century and is, according to Miss Rowland, twice called by the name of Russell.<sup>40</sup>

P.J.Pearcy, writing in Notes and Queries, says that the cock was a common symbol of the Christian priest in literature associated with biblical exegetical tradition.<sup>41</sup> If this is so, yet another link can be discovered between Chauncleer and the two priest-religious pilgrims, the Monk and the Friar. The hero of the Nun's Priest's Tale is conceived of, however, as being an exceedingly libidinous character:

"He fethered Pertelote twenty tyme,  
And trad hire pekas ofte, er it was pryme"  
(vii.3177-8).

When this "virility" is seen in conjunction with hints of probable occurrences of "de lapsu carnis" on the parts of Friar Hubert and Daun Piers,<sup>42</sup> the association between Chauncleer and these two ecclesiastics<sup>43</sup> immediately becomes obvious, as it would in all likelihood have been to the Nun's Priest's audience.

Another indication of Chaucer's awareness of the futility of the lives of ease and pleasure desired by the corrupt clergy and religious pilgrims can be seen in the lines:

"For evere the latter ende of joye is wo  
God woot that worldly joye is soone ago;"  
(vii.3205-6),

which are an aside by the Nun's Priest regarding the

40. B.Rowland, Blind Beasts op. cit., p.55.

41. P.J.Pearcy, "Epilogue to the Nun's Priest's Tale" Notes and Queries 213 (Feb., 1968), 44.

42. See above Chapter Two, p.37 and Chapter Three, p.67.

43. There is little likelihood of an association being formed between the cock and the Nun's Priest, Parson or Clerk because the portraits and Tales of these pilgrims all conspire to create an image of outstanding moral rectitude.

"sorweful cas" (vii.3204) which is to befall Chaunticleer in the midst of his physical enjoyment of life. Perhaps it is a warning to the pilgrims that those who pursue physical pleasures with too great an intensity will lose their spiritual alertness and become an easy prey for the wiles of Satan in the same way as Chaunticleer, almost immediately after his cry of joy:

"Ful is myn herte of revel and solas!"  
(vii.3203),

falls into the power of his "contrarie" (vii.3280), his natural enemy, the fox.

The Nun's Priest ends his Tale with the prayer that God may:

".....brynge us to his heighe blisse!"  
(vii.3446),

a traditional ending, it is true, but one, nonetheless, in keeping with and emphasizing the concern the Nun's Priest had demonstrated, during the Tale, for the salvation of souls.<sup>44</sup> He warns against becoming enmeshed in the joys of the world (vii.3206), against the cunning of flatterers (vii.3325-30), and against being "recchelees" (vii.3436) and "necligent" (vii.3437) in the performance of one's duties. Again there is the sharp contrast between the Nun's Priest and the Monk, Friar, Pardoner and Summoner who demonstrate no concern, in either their portraits or the sentiments expressed by them, for the welfare of souls. This is, perhaps, the fundamental difference between the good and the bad clerics - concern, or the lack of it, for the salvation of souls.

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44. But see also: J. Mann, "The 'Speculum Stultorum' and the Nun's Priest's Tale" Chaucer Review, 9:2 (1975), p.277.

## CHAPTER FIVE.

## CONCLUSION

The Poet's final Statement Regarding the Nature of the Abuses he observed in the Lives of Clergy and Religious of the Fourteenth Century.

In the portrait and, more especially the Tale, of his idealized pilgrim Parson Chaucer unambiguously affirms what he has already indicated regarding the nature of the shortcomings and failings of all the pilgrims he satirizes and, more definitely, those of the religious and clerical pilgrims on the way to Canterbury.

In the Parson's Tale, the last of the Tales and, therefore, the most significant, the poet gives his humble parish priest the final word on the spiritual states of the other pilgrims and even on some of the issues raised and argued by them.<sup>1</sup>

As I mentioned earlier, Chaucer makes reference, through the Parson, to all the most important thinkers studied during the Middle Ages, and more specifically to the great Christian thinkers revered<sup>2</sup> at the time. The poet also allows the Parson to display a depth of knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures,<sup>3</sup> something he could have avoided doing had he not assumed that his audience would have been conversant enough with the

1. The Parson gives in his Tale, for instance, the authoritative teaching on marriage and conjugal love in lines: x.859-61; 904-6; 925-43 .
2. See notes 37 and 38 p. 73.
3. See note 37 p. 73.

contents of the Scriptures to be able to follow the priest's line of argument. In his Tale, far from avoiding or rejecting the Scriptures<sup>4</sup>, which is what the Lollards accused the mediaeval Church of doing, the orthodox Parson refers to these Books at least five times as often as he does to any other single source.

The contrasts, shown in the General Prologue, between the Parson and the unworthy religious and ecclesiastics have been discussed in Chapters Two and Three. It remains now to consider the extent to which Chaucer made use of the Parson's Tale to state finally and explicitly his acceptance of the orthodox teaching regarding the failings and even vices of which he has shown the majority of his ecclesiastical and religious pilgrims to be guilty.

The Parson's Tale is, for the most part, an explanation of the "mechanics" of the sacrament of penance and its essential components: contrition, confession and satisfaction.<sup>5</sup> As a background to an understanding of the reason for the vast amount of detail included in this Tale, details with which, one would have thought, all mediaeval Christians would have been familiar, it is well to remember that at the time Chaucer wrote The Canterbury Tales a bitter controversy had been raging for a century and a half between the secular clergy and the friars. One of the areas which caused most bitterness was that of confession. Archbishop FitzRalph, primate of Ireland and champion of the secular clergy, argued that the authority of parish priests was being undermined by the freedom which had been granted to the different orders

4. For reference to the Parson and the Lollards, see Chapter One, page 19 Note 43.

5. H.G. Pfander, "Some Mediaeval Manuals on Religious Instruction in England and Observations on Chaucer's Parson's Tale" JEGP xxxv (1936), 243-58.

Pfander states that the Parson's Tale is a manual of instruction of the confession type rather than a sermon. Numbers of these manuals were drawn up by bishops for the instruction of parish priests many of whom were abysmally ignorant of the doctrines of the Church.

of friars to hear the confessions of whoever they wished whenever and wherever they wished. The archbishop argued, with some justice, that this fact encouraged the faithful to go from one confessor to another and thus avoid being reprimanded or being given severe penances for continued commission of the more serious sins. This ease in obtaining absolution would thus lead to a decrease in both the penitent's degree of contrition and in his determination to amend in the future.<sup>6</sup>

The parish priests also accused the friars of giving absolution regardless of whether or not the penitent was sincerely sorry for his sins provided that he had enough money to give a generous donation to the order to which his friar-confessor belonged. This attitude, the secular clergy argued, led to a definite weakening of the efficacy of the sacrament of penance and a lessening in the degree of veneration in which the faithful were, and are, expected to hold this sacrament.

In devoting so much time and trouble, therefore, to an exposition of all the subdivisions of the sacrament of penance, the poet, through his pilgrim Parson, not only presents an authoritative attack on the "esy" (i.223) absolutions of the pilgrim Friar and the kind of friar he represented ("He was an esy man to yeve penaunce" (i.223) ), but also provides a thoroughly orthodox instruction on the subject of the sacrament of penance for the benefit of those of the faithful who might be beguiled into the belief that an "esy" absolution is of necessity a valid one just because it is given by a priest.

In the middle of the pilgrim Parson's explanation of the second part of this sacrament, viz. confession

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6. A. Williams, "Chaucer and the Friars"  
Speculum xxviii (1953), 499-513.

(x.386), Chaucer introduces a long, detailed instruction on the seven deadly sins.<sup>7</sup> These sins: pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony and lechery, are known as the Cardinal Sins because it is from them that all other sins are believed to arise. The poet, through his Parson, discusses all the branches and ramifications of each of these sins and also the most efficacious remedies to be applied in each case, as is the common usage in this type of manual.<sup>8</sup>

The significance of this instruction to The Canterbury Tales, as an expression of the poet's concern regarding religious and clerical abuse, is the inclusion, under the several branches of the seven deadly sins, of precisely those sins of which certain of the less worthy religious and ecclesiastic pilgrims are shown to be guilty. Chaucer includes these sins in the general discussion of each type of deadly sin in such a way that the audience would, in all probability, not have failed to make the appropriate connections, nor would they have failed to recognize the poet's acceptance of the Church's thinking regarding certain failings of which his narrator had approved<sup>9</sup> or which he had dismissed as being far less serious than they actually were.

In the Parson's Tale, the poet devotes no less

7. Treatises, sermons and instructions on the seven deadly sins abound in 14th century literature.  
See also: M.Bloomfield, The Seven Deadly Sins (Michigan State College Press, 1952), pp.156-91.
8. See also: H.G.Pfander, "Some Mediaeval Manuals of Religious instruction in England and Observations on Chaucer's Parson's Tale" op. cit., 243-70.
9. An example of this approval would be the attitude to the Monk's refusal to labour or study (i.184-7). This attitude is rebutted in the Parson's Tale (x.720). Faults which the narrator dismisses are mainly those connected with rich food and expensive clothing. The Parson demonstrates the gravity of these faults in (x.412 and 821).

than twenty lines (x.412-32) to the question of the connection between expensive clothing and the sin of pride. The Parson quotes St. Gregory as saying: "precious clothynge is cowpable for the derthe of it, and for his softenesse, and for his strangenesse and degisynesse, and for the superfluitee ..... of it" (x.414). The Parson then goes into some detail regarding what is sinful in clothing and makes specific mention of: "costlewe furrynge in hir gownes" (x.418) and "wast of clooth in vanitee" (x.417). The specific mention of these particular examples is, at the very least, an oblique criticism of the fine clothes which the pilgrim Prioress, Monk, Friar and Pardoner are shown to enjoy wearing. In connection with apparel and in the section of the Tale on the sin of pride appears, in addition, a discussion on the sinfulness attached to the possession of many richly caparisoned, expensive horses. The nine lines commencing with "Also the synne of aornement or of apparaille is in thynges that apertenen to ridynge, as in to manye delicat horses that been hoolden for delit, that been so faire, fatte, and costlewe;" (x.432), are a direct attack on the pilgrim Monk, Daun Piers, whose expensive horses are a matter of great pride to him.

The poet then speaks, through his Parson, of "Pride of the table" (x.444) and the audience is reminded once more of the love of good food and dainty dishes which, he indicates, is an important feature in the lives of the less worthy religious and ecclesiastic pilgrims. This section of the discussion would also serve as a comment on Madam Eglantyne's excessive attention to the cultivation of impeccable table manners.

In discussing remedies for the various types of deadly sin, Chaucer reinforces the attacks or criticisms he makes during the discussion of the various sins by drawing attention to the contrary virtues which the

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unworthy pilgrims should, but obviously do not, practise if they wish to avoid committing the serious sin under discussion. After the poet's description of the virtue of "humylitee" (x.476) which, he says, is "a vertu thurgh which a man hath verray knoweleche of hymself, and holdeth of hymself no pris ne deyntee, as in regard of his desertes, considerynge evere his freletee." (x.477), the audience is left in little doubt about the fact that the pilgrims whom the poet satirizes possess little or no part of this virtue<sup>10</sup> which is so necessary a component in the lives of priests and religious because of their function to lead and guide the faithful.

In his discussion of the branches of the sin of envy (*Invidia* (x.484)), Chaucer includes a type of sin which his audience would, without much effort, have connected with the corrupt and unworthy ecclesiastics and religious. This sin is, according to the pilgrim Parson, "hardnesse of herte in wikkednesse, or elles the flessh of man is so blynd that he considereth nat that he is in synne, ... which is the hardnesse of the devel" (x.486). The words "hardnesse of herte in wikkednesse" appear to apply most directly to the Pardoner and then, in a slightly lesser degree, to the Summoner. The Pardoner displays absolutely no trace of shame regarding his sacrilegious behaviour in respect of his "pardons" or his deliberate attempts to deceive his fellow Christians. He assumes, on the contrary, a positively boastful tone when he relates the details of his trick, "gaude" (vi.389) for extorting money from the faithful (vi.335-88). The pilgrim Summoner is not quite as boastful as his companion, but he is, nevertheless, a vicious man, open to any

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10. The pilgrim Monk and Friar, for example, consort only with the rich and powerful and the Pardoner is proud of his ability to dupe the poor and the uneducated.

kind of extortion or chicanery which is likely to increase his income.

Chaucer presents his pilgrim Monk, Friar and Prioress as being so spiritually blind that they cannot, or will not permit themselves to, acknowledge their shortcomings and weaknesses. Daun Piers, being an intelligent, well-educated nobleman, is able to adduce many plausible excuses for his expensive tastes in food, clothing and recreation and for the fact that he does not observe the rule of his order enjoining cloistration, labour and study. This cleric is not prepared to see in himself any weakness or failing and he is thus guilty of that branch of the sin of envy which the poet refers to when he says that "the flessh of man is....blynd" (x.486).

Chaucer portrays Friar Hubert as being just as blind to his own faults and infidelities as is the pilgrim Monk. According to the portrait in the General Prologue, the pilgrim Friar almost delights in being able to wheedle from poor widows even their last farthing (i.255); nor does he give any indication that he considers the frequenting of taverns (i.240), the avoidance of the poor and needy (i.245) and his servile fawning on the rich and powerful (i.241) in any way inconsistent with the type of life to which he has vowed himself.

Madam Eglantyne, too, takes such obvious pride in her appearance, her table manners and her little dogs that one is left with the distinct impression that she, like the Monk and Friar, is not aware of any inconsistency in her actions. She appears to be quite convinced that she is a good nun, or rather, that she certainly is not a bad one.

Because, as the Parson states, the "flessh" of these pilgrims is so "blynd" (x.486), none of them would have applied any of the details of the Parson's instruction to themselves. A characteristic feature of this kind of

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blindness, one which, it seems certain, the poet intended his audience to note, is that the person so afflicted will apply all the strictures in detail to his neighbours and look upon the instruction as nothing more or less than a confirmation of what he had always known regarding the sinfulness of these people. The pilgrim Monk, Friar and Prioress, then, while by no means equally culpable in the matter of actual sins committed or suggested, are shown very definitely to be equally blind as regards any shortcoming or failing of which they are guilty and they are perfectly happy to travel at their ease along the path through life fulfilling only those duties of their state which they cannot by any means avoid.

As a remedy for envy Chaucer's Parson places, appropriately, in the first place: "..... the love of God principal, and lovyng of his neighebor as hymself; for soothly, that oon<sup>ne</sup> may nat been withoute that oother" (x.515). This is precisely the area in which Chaucer shows his pilgrim Monk, Friar, Prioress, Pardoner, Summoner and Canon to be most obviously lacking. Each of these pilgrims, to a greater or lesser degree of culpability, it is true, but nonetheless surely, loves himself and his own comfort, convenience and desires more than he loves his neighbour and, therefore, more than he loves God.

The actions and attitudes of the less worthy men and women of God are also commented upon in the Parson's discussion of the deadly sin of anger (Ira (x.533) ), which the poet defines as being, in the words of St. Augustine, "wikked wil to been avenged by word or by dede./ Ire, after the philosophre, is the fervent blood of man yquyked in his herte, thurgh which he wole harm to hym that he hateth" (x.535-6). This definition immediately calls to mind the Prioress's Tale and the terrible revenge which the citizens were allowed to

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take on any Jews who even knew about the death of the young clergeon (vii.628-30). One also recalls the Pardoner's Tale concerning the three rioters each of whom determined to murder the other so that he could have all the treasure.

Speaking of the sin of anger in the Tale of Melibee, the poet says, through Dame Prudence, ".....he that is irous and wrooth, as seith Senec, ne may nat speke but blameful thynges, / and with his viciouse wordes he stireth oother folk to angre and to ire" (vii.1127-8). Thus Chaucer shows the Summoner, in his anger at the Friar's Tale and his desire to "quiten" this cleric "every grot" (iii.1292), to be guilty of the sin of anger.

The poet shows Friar John of the Summoner's Tale to be guilty of the same sin in his desire to be revenged on Thomas for his "gift" (iii.2155). The pilgrim Pardoner, too, is shown to be guilty of the sin of ire when he reacts angrily to the Host's insult after he suggests that Harry Bailly "offer" to his worthless relics (vi.952-5).

The remedy which the poet suggests for the sin of wrath is a virtue which the Parson calls "debonairetee" (x.657), described by St. Jerome as a virtue that "dooth noon harm to no wight ne seith; ne for noon harm that men doon or seyn, he ne eschawfeth nat agayns his resoun" (x.657). Chaucer indicates the practical holiness of his idealized pilgrims when he says of the Knight:

"And of his port as meeke as is a mayde"  
(1.69)

and of the Parson:

"And in adversitee (was he) ful pacient,"  
(1.484).

This statement of the Parson's patience is a further

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indication of the fact that this priest:

".....taughte, but first he folwed it hymselfe."  
(i.528),

for he teaches in his instruction that patience is a virtue which is very useful in the control of anger. He defines this patience as the virtue which "suffreth debonairely alle the outrages of adversitee and every wikked word" (x.660). Chaucer implies, then, that those pilgrims who are quick to yield to the impulse of anger have not tried to cultivate the virtue of patience in their dealings with others, as have his idealized pilgrims.

Sloth, one of the branches of "Accidia" (x.677), will suffer "noon hardnesse ne no penaunce" (x.688). Chaucer also quotes "the book" (x.680) as stating, "Acursed be he that dooth the service of God negligently" (x.680). One is reminded by this quotation of Chaucer's pilgrim Monk who despises work and study and devotes his time to so profitless a pastime as hunting (i.166). No direct reference is made to the virtue of diligence in the portraits of the Friar and the Summoner or in their Tales but the Pardoner states categorically, in the prologue to his Tale,

"I wol nat do no labour with myne handes,"  
(vi.444).

On the other hand, the Parson is described as being "wonder diligent" (i.483) and the Clerk devotes more time and care to studying than he does to anything else (i.303). The fact that Chaucer does not show work or study to play an important part in the activities of the unworthy religious and clerical pilgrims<sup>11</sup> is an indication

11. An exception might, however, be made in the case of the Prioress who says, in the prologue to her Tale: "To telle a storie I wol do my labour;" (vii.463). There is no indication, in the Tale or elsewhere, however, that this is the same type of labour as that undertaken by the Parson.

that they, like Daun Piers, were content to

"Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved!"  
(i.188).

The remedy suggested for sloth is the practice of the virtue of fortitude, known as the "manly" (i.167) virtue, another subtle reference to the pilgrim Monk. Through the practice of fortitude man is enabled to overcome his repugnance for the difficult and the laborious and is given strength to spend himself in God's service. Chaucer shows the pilgrim Prioress, Monk, Friar, Summoner, Pardoner and Canon to be lacking in this virtue because there is little evidence in his portraits of them<sup>12</sup> that they are prepared to spend themselves in the service of God. Friar Hubert, it is true, spends some considerable time collecting money for his order, but it is quite evident from his portrait in the General Prologue that this cleric enjoys, for its own sake, the company of the rich and powerful and, therefore, it is no "labour" for him to work among people whom he likes and where money is readily available (i.248-9). Besides this, he enjoys being the "beste beggere in his hous" (i.252) because it gives him a good excuse to spend as much time as he wishes out of his convent.

According to St. Augustine, the deadly sin, Avarice, is a "likerousnesse in herte to have erthely thynges" (x.741). There can be little doubt, when one considers the portraits and Tales of the pilgrims, that Chaucer intends to indicate that all his unworthy religious and ecclesiastics are, to some extent, at least, guilty of

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12. Chaucer does not provide a portrait of the Canon in the General Prologue, but he does give a good idea of the sort of man he conceives this pilgrim to be in the prologue to The Canon's Yeoman's Tale.

a desire to "have erthely thynges" (x.741). Although Madam Eglantyne is probably the least obviously avaricious of the less worthy members of the Church group, she is sufficiently concerned with the possession of good "thynges" for Miss Bowden to say with truth: "She is the nun who remembers life beyond the convent walls, and who longs sufficiently for some of the ..... forbidden pleasures of that life to circumvent politely her conventual restrictions".<sup>13</sup>

The pilgrim Monk, Daun Piers, certainly seems, from the evidence of his portrait in the General Prologue, to possess anything and everything that contributes to his physical comfort, as do his "souple" (l.203) boots. Boots are, of course, a necessity and it is not in their possession but in the possession of the best and most expensive of boots and of every other type of comfort, that the poet shows Daun Piers to be avaricious.<sup>14</sup> The Monk is, therefore, shown to be more obviously guilty of "likerousnesse ..... to have erthely thynges" (x.741). than is the Prioress.

Chaucer does not show Friar Hubert, in his portrait or the Tales connected with friars, to be seriously concerned for the welfare of souls, especially of those entrusted to his care. He considers people only to the extent to which they are or are not potential sources of income. The acquisition of as much money as possible is, in fact, so important to this Friar that, in order to ensure that he receives substantial donations from his wealthy friends, he is prepared to give them, and anyone else who can afford to pay the amount required,

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13. M.Bowden, A Commentary on the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales op. cit., p. 103.

14. For further evidence of the belief that Monks would be satisfied with only the best, see J.Gower, "Mirour de l'Omme" in The Complete Works of John Gower 11, 20,953-76.

invalid absolutions, thereby endangering their souls as well as his own.

The pilgrim Summoner is a degree worse than the Friar because he is prepared to stoop to blackmail in order to obtain the money he desires. It seems certain that at least some portion of the money Friar Hubert collects from the faithful finds its way into the coffers of his order, because he would hardly have had the doubtful privilege of being the best beggar in his house (i.252), unless he brought in a considerable sum of money. All the money for which the pilgrim Summoner cheats and extorts, however, appears to go straight into his own purse. In fact, Chaucer makes use of a play on the word "purs" (i.656-658) in the General Prologue in connection with the Summoner's avarice. The poet makes a statement to the effect that he whose soul is in his purse will be punished in his purse (i.656-7). He follows this statement with another in the same vein: "Purs is the ercedekenes helle" (i.658). This can be interpreted to mean that, for the avaricious man, there is no hell worse than to be fined and it seems to imply, also, that the special punishment of the avaricious in hell will be the lack of those very "thynges" for which they have damned themselves.

Of all the unworthy religious and ecclesiastic pilgrims, none is more callously avaricious than the Pardoner is shown to be. This pilgrim admits quite cheerfully that he never does anything at all unless he is paid for it (vi.433) and that he is not in the slightest concerned about the eventual fate of those whom he is so easily able to dupe with his trickery (vi.406). The Pardoner, like the Summoner, is prepared to go to any lengths to procure money. He will even lead the faithful to venerate fraudulent relics if this

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practice will make him richer. Chaucer thus shows his Pardoner to be the sort of person who lives solely for money and its concomitant pleasures. The pilgrim's soul is shown to be truly in his "purs" when he shamelessly announces:

"I wol noon of the apostles countrefete;  
I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete,"  
(vl.447-8).

The Parson calls the remedy for the sin of avarice "misericorde and pitee" because "the av~~a~~ricious man sheweth no pitee ne misericorde to the nedeful man, for he deliteth hym in the keynge of his tresor, and nat in the rescowyngne ne releevyngne of his evene-Cristen" (x.805). In assigning these words to his idealized Parson, Chaucer, in fact, attacks another of the fundamental shortcomings of all the ecclesiastics and religious he satirizes: they do not have any thought for the needs of their fellow-Christians, instead, on the contrary, they often take away what little they do have<sup>5</sup>. Thus, they are shown not to make any attempt to practise the virtues of "misericorde and pitee" and, therefore, to combat the sin of avarice.

Gluttony is a vice which includes not only eating and drinking to excess but also, according to the Parson, a preference for unusual foods, and even the desire to have food served in beautiful, ornate dishes and to have meals appetisingly prepared. The sin of gluttony seems, in fact, to include any excesses whatever in the matter of what is eaten or drunk, where and how it is consumed

15. The actions of the Summoner, Friar and Pardoner in this connection are particularly reprehensible because they boast of being able to extort from the poor even their last farthing. See also Chapter Two and J.Gower, "Mirour l'Omme" op. cit., 21,373-84, especially as regards the avarice of friars.

and the manner in which it is prepared and served. Regarding this sin, the Parson says: "He that is gosaunt to this synne of glotonye, he ne may no synne withstonde. He moot been in servage of alle vices, for it is the develes hoord ther he hideth hym and resteth" (x.826). This being the case, the gluttony which the poet suggests in the Monk, who loves a fat swan, is corpulent himself and has a ruddy colour, is far more closely associated with his other weaknesses and infidelities than is at first appreciated. The poet, in fact, makes the point here that the religious whose inclination towards gluttony leads him to be dissatisfied with the plain, wholesome diet prescribed for monks may be expected to desire only the best in clothing and horses, participate exclusively in the most expensive sport of the day, despise all forms of labour and study and consider the observation of the rule of cloistration old fashioned (i.174).

Chaucer does not make any explicit statement regarding any inclination Friar Hubert may have had towards the commission of the sin of gluttony, but the reader is given the distinct impression, by words like "wantowne" and "merye" (i.208) as well as by phrases like, "eyen twynkled in his heed aryght" (i.267), that the pilgrim Friar was not much given to penance and mortification in the area of food and drink or in any other area of life, for that matter. However, the poet ensures that his audience is aware of the fact that gluttony was one of the very obvious failings of the "poor" friars<sup>16</sup> by his reference, in the Summoner's Tale (iii.1839-41), to the gluttony of Friar John, who considered the best food a wealthy mediaeval household could afford a simple meal.

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16. For references to the gluttony of mediaeval friars, see also: E. Rickert, Chaucer's World (New York, 1948), p.375.

No mention is made of the gastronomic preferences of the pilgrim Pardoner apart from the fact that he felt it necessary to fortify himself with food and an alcoholic drink before he commenced his Tale. We notice, however, that this pilgrim devotes at least a quarter of his Tale to a blistering attack on the vice of gluttony (vi.495-587), and that the three rioters were sitting in a tavern getting drunk (vi.663) when they were given the information which sent them to their eventual death. The implication is that the three men were really too drunk to realize fully what they were doing when they set out to find the elusive old man "death", but find him they did.

Of the Summoner we told that he loved to drink "strong wyn, reed as blood" (i.635), and that he drank until he was intoxicated when he would begin to speak in Latin, that is, he would repeat again and again the few words of Latin that he did happen to know. This pilgrim appears, also, to have been excessively fond of: "garleek, oynons, and eek lekes" (i.634), which foods, it was believed, would aggravate his already revolting skin condition. With regard to the connection between gluttony and the other sins, R.E.Kaske states, with reason, that this passage suggests a spiritual parallel to the perversity of eating foods that aggravate one's physical discomfort: the more one sins the greater the grief.<sup>17</sup>

According to the Parson, gluttony and lechery are so closely connected that it is almost impossible to separate them. He says in his Tale: "thise two synnes

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17. R.E.Kaske, "The Summoner's Garleek, Onyons and eek Lekes"  
Modern Language Notes lxxiv: 6  
 (June, 1959), 481-4.

been so ny cosyns that ofte tyme they wol nat departe" (x.836 ). Since this fact was very well known to the poet's fourteenth-century audience they would not have been surprised to have found at least a suggestion of lechery in some form in the lives of those pilgrims who were inclined towards the commission of the sin of gluttony in any of its manifestations. Thus we find references, sometimes direct, sometimes indirect, to the commission of the sin of lechery in the Monk, the Friar, the Pardoner and the Summoner. There could, of course, not be any suggestion of this sin in the presentation of so gentle and refined a lady as the Prioress. There is, however, a hint in the General Prologue (1.162) that this nun's love is less divine than it might be.<sup>18</sup>

The pilgrim Monk loved "venerie" (1.166), a word which, as I have indicated in Chapter Three, could mean either hunting or the sport of Venus.<sup>19</sup> In the event, however, of his audience having missed the implication, the poet portrays, in the Shipman's Tale, a monk who commits adultery with his best friend's, his "cousin's", wife without the slightest feeling of shame or compunction. Daun John is completely trusted in the merchant's house: so much so that the merchant invites his friend to spend a few days with himself and his wife before he, the merchant, goes to "Brugges" (vii.258) on business. The monk repays this trust by returning to the merchant's home after his "cousin's" departure and committing adultery with his wife. Daun John's culpability is aggravated by the fact that there was neither love nor passion involved - it was solely a

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18. See Chapter Three above on Religious.

19. Ibid.

business arrangement - and that the merchant's money, not the monk's was paid to the lady for her favours (vii.315).

There are very definite references to the probable commission of the sin of lechery by the pilgrim Friar. He is said to be "wantowne" (l.208), and it is generally accepted that the lines:

"He hadde maad ful many a mariage  
Of yonge women at his owene cost."  
(i.212-3),

are a sly Chaucerian innuendo to the effect that the pilgrim Friar had found husbands and dowries for girls he had seduced himself.<sup>20</sup> Friar Hubert was "wel biloved and famulier" (i.215) with the "worthy women of the toun" (i.217), phrases which anticipate the suggestion of the Host to the Monk that wives were inclined to seek their pleasures outside their conjugal beds and, specifically, in the arms of monks (vii.1960) or, in this case, in the arms of friars. A further reference to lechery committed by friars is to be found, as I mentioned in Chapter Two,<sup>21</sup> in Chaucer's mention of Friar John's familiarity with Thomas's wife, in the Summoner's Tale.

Chaucer's pilgrim Pardoner is described as having eyes like a "hare" (i.684) and a voice like a "goot" (i.688). Beryl Rowland, in her book, Blind Beasts, draws attention to the fact that these animals are both used in mediaeval literature and art as symbols of lechery.<sup>22</sup> In the prologue to his Tale, the Pardoner boasts that he wants a "joly wenche in every toun" (vi.453). This seems improbable in the light of Chaucer's remarks

20. See Chapter Two above on Ecclesiastics.  
See also: F.N.Robinson, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer op. cit., p.656.

21. Ibid.

22. B.Rowland, Blind Beasts op. cit., p.p. 87 - 91

in the General Prologue (i.688-90) and of the Host's cruel jest after the Pardoner had completed his Tale, since both these remarks and the jest indicate that this pilgrim is an eunuch.<sup>23</sup> The pilgrim Parson makes it quite clear, however, that it is just as sinful to determine to sin and then fail to do so for want of a suitable opportunity as it is to actually commit a sin physically. In this connection, the poet quotes St. Augustine as saying: "In this heeste..... is forboden alle manere coveitise to doon lecherie" (x.845). The Pardoner is, therefore, guilty of the sin of lechery in thought and desire.

The Summoner is, without a doubt, the most repulsive of the pilgrims as far as the sin of lechery is concerned. His lechery is openly mentioned in the General Prologue (i.626) and even his external appearance is described in such a way that his main weakness, and the extent to which he indulges it, is emphasized. In the middle of the eleven lines which Chaucer devotes to a description of the sores and pimples on the Summoner's face, the poet says:

"As hoot he was and lecherous as a sparwe"  
(i.626).

This interruption indicates that the chronic skin disease from which this pilgrim suffers, be it leprosy or syphillitic sores,<sup>24</sup> is symbolic of the life of debauchery in which this cleric indulges.

The pilgrim Friar presents the summoner in his Tale as being somewhat more unpleasant than Chaucer shows his pilgrim Summoner to be. Not only is the Summoner in the Friar's Tale lecherous, but he also makes use of

23. See Chapter 2, note 25, p. 53.

24. See Chapter 2, note 5, p. 27.

See also: M.W.Bloomfield, The Seven Deadly Sins  
op. cit., pp. 156-91.

prostitutes in order to blackmail others for doing exactly what he does himself. Chaucer's attack on the vices of the Summoner are as direct and unequivocal as they are because he was particularly concerned that people such as this pilgrim is shown to be should have had any control over the young people<sup>25</sup> of the diocese let alone the complete control the Summoner seems to have over them:

".....(he) knew hir conseil, and was al hir reed"  
(i.665).

It is in the Summoner's portrait, too, that Chaucer demonstrates very clearly how little serious judgemental value he wishes his audience to attach to the attitude of his narrator to the various pilgrims. In the General Prologue the narrator refers to the pilgrim Summoner as "a gentil harlot and a kynde" (i.647), but Chaucer exposes this pilgrim, both in the same Prologue and in the Friar's Tale, as a lecherous, avaricious, vicious man.

The idealized Parson gives the remedy for lechery as being: "chastitee and continence, that restreyneth alle the desordeyne moevynges that comen of fleshly talentes" (x.915). Lechery is, therefore, controlled by chastity which brings about self-control as regards sexual desire. Self-control of any description is not shown to be an important feature in the lives of the unworthy religious and ecclesiastic pilgrims. Where there is no specific mention of a lack of self-control, as there is in the quarrel between the Friar and the Summoner, there is always the impression that no attempt is being made to control the desire for comfort, pleasure

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25. F.N.Robinson, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer  
op. cit., p. 667.

Professor Robinson refers to an article by M.W.Bloomfield to the effect that this reference is only to young women. In this case the control of the Summoner would be even more unacceptable.

or convenience. The high incidence of references to "luxuria" among the pilgrims is, therefore, not surprising.

A high degree of self-control is implied, on the other hand, in the portraits and Tales of the idealized pilgrims. The Parson could not be "wonder diligent" (i.483), nor could he be "ful pacient" (i.484) in adversity, nor could he visit his flock:

"Upon his feet, and in his hand a staf"  
(i.495)

had he allowed himself to become used to idleness, comfort and convenience. The Clerk, too, would have had to cultivate a high degree of self-control to devote all his time and money to his studies especially at a time when so many other clerks were enjoying life to the full. The Tales assigned to these two pilgrims: the tale of the patient, humble, self controlled Griselda and the instruction on sin and its avoidance, are also indicative of the self-control exercised by the Parson and the Clerk. Perhaps, too, the Nun's Priest's calm reaction to the Host's disrespectful tone might be seen as an example of the self-control of this cleric.

From the very clear references to the unworthy religious and clerical pilgrims the poet makes in the course of the Parson's Tale, it seems clear that Chaucer chose this particular instruction - believed to be from the pen of Peraldus or Pennaforte or, perhaps, a combination of both - with these pilgrims specifically in mind. His concern regarding religious and clerical abuse was such that he could not risk the possibility of his audience finding nothing more in his work than sparkling comedy or a broad toleration for his fellow human beings. Chaucer, therefore, set himself the task of stating finally and clearly what he thought of the faults and weaknesses of which some of his pilgrims were shown to be guilty. For this, his final statement regarding the nature of those abuses, he could not have chosen a more suitable vehicle than the "povre" Parson.

Chaucer's Retractation as a Final Affirmation of his Orthodoxy and as a Final Expression of his Interest in Religious Matters.

It seems appropriate to conclude this study with a consideration of Chaucer's so-called Retractation, his final affirmation of his orthodoxy and also the final expression he provides of his interest in religious matters. The Retractation was not solely the result of a deathbed repentance, as has been suggested,<sup>26</sup> or merely an attempt to ensure that the poet remained in full communion with the Church by rejecting his "leccherous lay(s)" (x.1087), but it was the logical outcome of a deep faith and an abiding interest in religious matters; an interest which found frequent expression in his work.

I have discussed, in the introduction to this work, the likelihood of Chaucer's having been at least as interested in religious matters as any of the other scholars and thinkers of the period and that he could, indeed, not have avoided a certain expression of this interest in his works. In this connection, I have sought to demonstrate, in the foregoing chapters, the extent to which the poet's interest in religion and, specifically, his solicitude regarding religious abuses prevalent at the time, is expressed in those of the Canterbury Tales told by or about religious and ecclesiastics. One further point

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26. F.N.Robinson, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer op. cit., p.772.

Professor Robinson cites certain critics who argue that this is an example of a typical mediaeval deathbed repentance. There is, however, no clear evidence in the passage that the poet feels his death to be imminent, in fact, the words "from hennes forth unto my lyves ende" (x.1090) give the impression that Chaucer believed he still had some time in which to do penance.

I would like to make regarding these particular Tales is that they were not written during any one period of the poet's life but at widely separated stages of his literary career. The Tale of St. Cecilia and that of Griselda, for example, are generally assigned to his earlier years (circa 1373)<sup>27</sup> and, while no definite date has been agreed upon regarding the composition of The Nun's Priest's Tale, most commentators agree that it was written late in the poet's life.<sup>28</sup> The Tales told by or about the members of the Church party are, however, not the only Tales in which Chaucer expresses an interest in religious matters, or in which he demonstrates a familiarity with the Scriptures and a sound understanding of basic Christian doctrine.

In this connection, the Tale of Melibee, for example, rivals the Parson's Tale not only in its length and the amount of doctrinal instruction it imparts, but also in the wealth of its Biblical, theological, philosophical and classical references. To the modern reader the Tale of Melibee may be intolerably tedious but Chaucer fully expected his audience to appreciate this moral treatise for he says before commencing the Tale:

"I wol yow telle a litel thyng in prose  
That oghte liken yow, as I suppose,"  
(vii.937-8).

Tales of a definite religious and moral character are also told by three of the pilgrims whom the poet satirizes: the Physician, the Franklyn and the Man of Law. The Physician tells the Tale of the young, beautiful and chaste Virginia who elects to die at her father's hand as the only alternative to her being carried away as a slave

27. F.N.Robinson, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer  
op. cit., pp.755, 710.

28. Ibid., p. 751.

to the home of the lecherous Appius. This Tale is analogous to the treatise De Virginibus of St. Ambrose and demonstrates the Christian belief that even the most cruel death is preferable to the deliberate commission of serious sin. The Franklyn tells a Tale which, though set in pagan Rome, extols, in the story of Dorigen and Arveragus, the Christian ideal of marriage and which is, therefore, a refutation of the belief of the proponents of chivalrous love that true love is destroyed by marriage. In this Tale, too, the obligation of abiding by one's word, "trouthe", the poet calls it, is discussed.

Particularly striking in the depth of the religious insight it reveals, however, is the Man of Law's Tale of Constance. The prologue of this Tale is almost a paraphrase of a section of Innocent III's De Contemptu Mundi and the Tale itself contains some of Chaucer's most deeply religious poetry such as the prayer which Constance addresses to the Cross when she is banished from Syria. She prays:

"Victorious tree, proteccioun of trewe,  
 That oonly worthy were for to bere  
 The Kyng of Hevene with his woundes newe,  
 The white Lamb, that hurt was with a spere,  
 Flemnere of feendes out of hym and here  
 On which thy lymes feithfully extenden,  
 Me kepe, and yif me myght my lyf t'amenden"  
 (ii.456-62).

In considering these Tales, the question arises as to why Chaucer assigned such deeply religious and moral Tales to pilgrims whom he has shown in the General Prologue to pay little attention to the personal practice of the virtues they extol in their Tales. We are told of the Physician, for instance, that

"His studie was but litel on the Bible."  
 (i.438),

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yet he tells a tale in which the heroine refers to Jephtha and his daughter (vi.240). The Franklyn, who is shown to be interested in little besides food, in fact, the poet says it

".....snewed in his hous of mete and drynke"  
(i.345),

is able to speak with great conviction on the relationship between married people, and the Man of Law, who is concerned only with "fees and robes" (i.317) tells a tale which is every bit as much "Sownynge in moral vertu" (i.307) as is the idealized Clerk's Tale of the patient Griselda. Of the Church party the Pardoner, for instance, tells a tale in which he attacks the very vice, avarice, which he boasts of committing himself.

I suggest that Chaucer's assignment of Tales to the various pilgrims is by no means haphazard but is motivated by his interest in religion, specifically, in the spiritual welfare of those who will listen to his Tales. A consideration of the pilgrims and the tales they tell will reveal the fact that Chaucer assigns Tales that are, at the very least, "morally acceptable" to all those pilgrims who, because of their station in life, are likely to be respected by the other pilgrims or by the ordinary people. His reason for doing so is that he is aware of the fact that the audience will listen more carefully and are, therefore, more likely to be influenced by the Tales told by these pilgrims. The Franklyn, Man of Law and Physician are respected in the community by reason of their professional status and all Christians were bound to hold the religious and ecclesiastical states in reverence therefore these pilgrims tell Tales with a religious or moral bias even though they may be rogues themselves.<sup>29</sup>

While the Tales in the Canterbury Tales are probably the chief vehicles of Chaucer's expression of his interest

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29. An exception might be the Summoner's Tale which contains much low, coarse humour which would not be in keeping with the ecclesiastical state.

in religious matters they certainly are not the only means he uses to express this interest. I have mentioned Chaucer's translation and use of Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy to this end and the manner in which he expressed his religious convictions through the medium of his shorter poems, more especially the poem Truth, but there is also much evidence of this interest to be found in another of Chaucer's major works, Troilus and Criseyde. This poem was written about 1386, halfway between the date to which Chaucer's earliest poems are assigned and the date on which he died, and is evidence, therefore, of the fact that the poet's interest in religion was not confined either to his youth or to the period immediately preceding his death but was an abiding feature of his entire life.

Troilus and Criseyde is based on Boccaccio's account of a pagan legend of the Trojan period yet it includes a long discussion on the peculiarly Christian concept of predestination and free will (v.953-1085) which is similar to that of the idealized Nun's Priest (C.T.vii.3240-50), a rejection of the pleasures of pagan love in favour of the Christian concept of this emotion (v.1835-48) and a doxology, taken from Dante's Paradiso (xiv.28-30), with which the poem is concluded. Apart from these fairly long passages, there are numerous short references and allusions to Christian faith and ethics scattered throughout the five Books of this work.<sup>30</sup>

It is interesting to note, too, that the prologue to the Legend of Good Women includes, in both the original and revised versions a reference to two Christian saints, Cecilia and Magdalene (F.426, 428 and G.416, 418) and, in the revised version only, a reference to the prose treatise of Innocent III, De Contemptu Mundi (G.415). Religious

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30. For exact line references see:  
F.N. Robinson, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer  
op. cit., pp. 814-38.

references in this particular work are especially significant of the ease with which religious themes or events sprang to his mind for this work, far from being in any way connected with religion, was expressly commissioned by the pagan god of love and consists exclusively of tales about pagan heroines.

From this consideration, then, of the frequent expression of an interest in and familiarity with religious matters which is evident in every period of Chaucer's life, it will become clear that the Retractation is no more than a further and, as it happens, a final statement of this abiding interest<sup>31</sup>. A careful reading of the passage will, indeed, reveal the fact that none of the sentiments expressed there by the poet are entirely new or unexpected but may be related to some similar expression in one or more of his works.

A notable fact regarding the Retractation in general is the evidence it provides of the same type of well-informed, balanced Christianity that Chaucer shows his idealized pilgrims and the heroines of their Tales in The Canterbury Tales to possess. In the portraits of the Parson, the Plowman, Griselda, Constance and St. Cecilia, for example, the emphasis is placed more upon the practical following of Christ than on any other consideration. Chaucer realized very clearly that the duty of giving good example is a very important feature in the life of the Christian and thus he laid a considerable amount of stress on this matter in his evaluation of his Canterbury pilgrims. In this connection,

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31. A.P. Campbell, "Chaucer's Retractation: Who retracted What?"

Humanities Association Bulletin  
xvi: 1 (Spring, 1965), 75-87.

Campbell's suggestion that the Retractation is little more than an example of Chaucer's "sly wit" is not borne out by anything in the passage itself.

the pilgrim is shown to be the sort of Christian who makes the giving of good example to his neighbour his chief "bisynesse" (i.520) and the unworthiness of those religious and clerical pilgrims who refuse to give good example by living blameless lives is strongly accentuated. Chaucer's concern regarding the obligation of the Christian to encourage his neighbour in the practice of virtue might also be cited as a reason for his having assigned "moral" tales to those who might be expected, because of their station in life, to be an example of practical Christianity to others.

Chaucer states clearly in his Retraction when he says, "that is myn entente" (x.1083), that it is his intention to write, albeit chiefly by means of comedy, those things that are for "oure doctrine" (x.1083) because, as he has shown, he is interested in religious matters and in the spiritual welfare of his fellow-Christians. It is hardly surprising, then, that the poet, himself, rejects those of his works which, he feels, might possibly give scandal to those who are less well-informed and less spiritually assured than he is. E.R.Cole accurately observes that Chaucer's Retraction is more a matter of conscience than of aesthetics<sup>32</sup> since he would have been aware of the warning of Christ in respect of the obligations of Christians towards one another: "But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt.xviii:6).

The poet commences his Retraction in a typically

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32. E.R.Cole, "Chaucer's Retraction and the Parson" op. cit, 35-41.

Christian fashion when he refers all the credit for the good he has done to Christ, "of whom procedeth al wit and al goodnesse" (x.1081). In this connection St. James says: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above....." (James. i:17). Constance, too, ascribes to Christ's grace the many conversions which have been made as a result of her hard work (ii.684-6), Virginia's beauty and virtue are referred back to God, the author of all things (vi.25-6) and dame Prudence gives "oure Lord God" thanks when her attempts to reconcile her husband, Melibee, and his enemies meet with success (vii.1764).

Having referred the good he has done to Christ, Chaucer willingly accepts the entire blame for any shortcomings in his work pleading his lack of the ability to do better rather than wilful negligence on his part. That Chaucer was aware of the spiritual dangers inherent in carelessness in the performance of the duties of one's state is clear from his pointing out, in the Parson's Tale, that want of diligence in the service of God is a branch of the sin of sloth (x.680) and by the fact that "negligence" is one of the faults of which he shows his unworthy clerical and religious pilgrims to be guilty.

In the poet's repeated expressions of gratitude for what he has been permitted to achieve (x.1081, 1089) there is evidence of something of the same kind of humility<sup>33</sup> as that revealed in the tales of Constance and Griselda. The reference to Christ's "blisful Mooder" (x.1089) calls to mind the poem, An A.B.C., with its evidence of a deep devotion to Our Lady, and, also, the moving prayers to the Virgin in the Prologues to both the

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33. P.G.Ruggiers, "The Narrator: The Pilgrim as Poet" in Critics on Chaucer (London, 1970), p. 114.

Prioress's Tale (vii.467-87) and the Second Nun's Tale (viii.29-84).

The confidence which the poet places in the efficacy of "verray penitence, confessioun and satisfaccioun" (x.1090) is an echo of the Parson's insistence on the fact that this way, the way of "Penitence" (x.81) is the surest way to heaven (x.80) and, also, a further indication of the concern he felt regarding the "esy" (i.223) confessions of many of the fourteenth-century friars.

Unlike the friars, however, and like his Plowman, Griselda and Constance, Chaucer was a layman and was, therefore, fully entitled to the enjoyment of those pleasures for the abuse of which he satirizes his religious and clerical pilgrims. That the poet did enjoy life and that it pleased him to see others doing so is evident from the bubbling vitality of his more earthy characters and from the verve and immediacy with which their actions are depicted. The Wife of Bath, Symkyn the Miller and old January, for instance, could not have been conceived of by anyone who did not understand and enjoy all the facets of life in mediaeval England.

There can be little doubt that Chaucer wrote "many a leccherous lay" (x.1087) because he enjoyed doing so and because this type of situation provided excellent material for the exercise of his gift for human comedy. The point to be remembered, however, is that Chaucer had the Christian insight to separate the important from the unimportant in life and to realize that the ultimate importance of an object, a situation or an action is measured by the contribution it makes or does not make to the spiritual welfare of the Christian. What the poet is saying, then, is that while he may have enjoyed composing his "leccherous lay(s)" they have little or no importance in

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the dimension of eternal salvation and that they must, therefore, ultimately be rejected in favour of his other more "moral" works.

In the Retractation, then, Chaucer states clearly and unequivocally that he is, as I have attempted to show in Chapter One, a well-instructed, orthodox mediaeval Christian; a man who, because of his convictions, has his eyes always fixed on what he calls his "contree" (Truth: 19) and who judges even his own achievements according to the extent to which they contribute to the salvation of his own soul or the souls of his fellow Christians.<sup>34</sup> Thus he prays at the end of the Retractation that he may be granted the only thing of any real importance to the mediaeval Christian, eternal life, and he who wrote amusingly

"Of quenes lives, and of kinges,  
And many other thinges smale."  
(B.D. 58-59),

advisedly makes use, for his final statement, of the words of the official conclusion to the prayers of the Church, the reference of all things to God through Christ:

"Qui cum patre et Spiritu Sancto vivit et  
regnat Deus per omnia secula. Amen"  
(x.1092).

34. See also: G.K.Chesterton, Chaucer  
(London, 1932), p.269.

Concerning the Retractation, Chesterton says:  
"It would not mean that they (his poems) were something specially bad on their own plane: it would mean that they were nothing on his ultimate plane: the plane of death and eternity."

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JEGP	-	Journal of English and Germanic Philology.
MLQ	-	Modern Language Quarterly
PMLA	-	Publications of the Modern Language Association.
UPortR	-	University of Portland Review.

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