

CHAUCER'S CRITICISM OF THE CHURCH
in
THE CANTERBURY TALES

By

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Abstract

Much research and critical analyses have been done concerning Geoffrey Chaucer's poem, *The Canterbury Tales*. The various characters in this work have been examined thoroughly and the mechanics of the poem have been scrutinized and dissected mercilessly over the centuries. My interest has been to discover how and why Chaucer used so many Scriptural verses and Biblical references in the stories, most of which were adapted versions of familiar folktales and stories by contemporary writers, such as, Boccaccio and Petrarch. After a review of historical events occurring during that tumultuous 14th century, particularly those related to the religious unrest of the time, it became apparent that Chaucer was, in a very subtle way, using the characters and their stories as a veiled criticism of the Catholic Church. The prologues and stories told by The Wife of Bath, The Summoner, and The Pardoner illustrate how and why Chaucer used these characters as that criticism.

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INTRODUCTION

The wise man Solomon is reputed to have said, “There is no new thing under the sun.” (Eccl. 1.9) In his assemblage of stories in *The Canterbury Tales* Geoffrey Chaucer gives credence to that statement. He utilized familiar plots and stories of mythological gods, astrological pronouncements, and characters from writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Chaucer also borrowed plots and characters from contemporary writers like Boccaccio and Petrarch interspersed with Biblical characters and pseudo-moralizing as each character recites his/her own tale to entertain the group during the pilgrimage from London to the Shrine of Saint Thomas à Beckett at Canterbury Cathedral. “Any baptized Christian could undertake the way of penance at any time in their lives, even up to the end and penitence and the purification of minor and serious sins was the official purpose of the pilgrimage” (Watson 103). The members of the pilgrimage represent the whole of sinful humankind as it journeys through life sharing stories and relationships, revealing human foibles, freely confessing sinful failures, performing acts of penitence and seeking absolution at the end of the journey.

Chaucer’s genius in his construction of the *Tales* was to borrow familiar stories and then adapt them into characters using the Middle English vernacular that would be familiar to the English people, thereby creating the beautiful English poetry we can enjoy to this day. Charles Koban stated: “The flesh and blood of Chaucer’s poetry consists of proverbial love, witticism, philosophical epitome, caricature and parody, irony, satire, symbolism, allegory, apostrophe. . .to hold and enlighten an audience” (226). Chaucer was highly successful in utilizing these poetic constructs in his stories that are often bawdy, filled with irony and slapstick comedy and an occasional pun along with tongue-in-cheek moralizing. As a result, the mellifluous cadence of his poetry has endured for centuries and continues to enchant and inspire scholars and readers.

When Chaucer developed his characters within each *Tale* it quickly becomes apparent that he intended to use humor, wit, and pathos along with a strong dose of morality in each episode. He also used regional dialects where needed to provide local color in the speech of the characters. Voluminous research articles have been written in an attempt to understand the depth and breadth of Chaucer's characters. But, I argue that Chaucer developed these characters and their stories as caricatures and criticism of the Catholic Church to expose the hypocrisy and corruption that existed within the ecclesiastical structure in England during his time. However, in addition to the criticism and quite possibly to avoid dire retribution from the Church and the State, his characters and stories in these *Tales* also pointed out the need for morality in the service of God and strict adherence to the Word of God.

Given the social, political, and religious turmoil of Chaucer's England it seems that he designed the pilgrims in such a way that would create a solid criticism of the practices of the Catholic Church that were unchecked by either Church or State. These criticisms will be examined in a review of the Prologue and three of the characters including their Prologues: The Wife of Bath, The Summoner, and The Pardoner and some brief comments about Chaucer's *Retraction*. In order to more fully understand the political, social, and religious upheavals taking place in England during his time and how these events might have influenced Chaucer, an overview of the major events is also presented.

Mention the name Geoffrey Chaucer and for many people his poem, *The Canterbury Tales*, immediately comes to mind. Despite the fact that Chaucer failed to complete his original intention of having each of the 29 pilgrims tell two tales each; one on the way to Canterbury and one on the return trip, the twenty-four extant tales are beautiful examples of Middle English poetry. Chaucer wrote in the London dialect of Middle English in the latter half of the 14th

century and has been labeled the father of English literature by none other than John Dryden. Fortunately for the scholar of today, there are many existing manuscripts of Chaucer's work available in several different locations. The most beautiful of all the known 83 existing manuscripts of the *Tales* is the *Ellesmere Manuscript*. This early 15th century illuminated manuscript can be found in the Huntington Library at San Marino, California. It is considered to be one of the most significant texts of the *Tales* and many editors have followed the textual order of the *Ellesmere* over the centuries, even down to the present day.

As a well-educated man, Chaucer would have had an excellent knowledge of the Bible. In his *Tales* he quotes, refers to, or alludes to 48 of the 74 books of the Vulgate Bible and he does far more than repeat the most common passages. There were many copies of Jerome's Vulgate translation available during his time, in addition to Gregory's translation along with various sermon manuscripts. "There are at present about 5,000 Thirteenth Century Vulgates. The British Museum alone has 300" (Landrum 23). The Vulgate translation includes the apocryphal books of First Hadrass, Tobit, Judith, Wisdom Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, First and Second Maccabees plus addition to some books of the Authorized Version. In addition to his use of the Vulgate, there is evidence that he also used the Wycliffe version as well as other sources of Biblical information such as, the letters of St. Jerome (Landrum 79).

Few people in Chaucer's time were able to read and oral presentation in the form of storytelling was the prevalent method of transmitting information. The printing press was not introduced into England until after Chaucer's death and the first version of *The Canterbury Tales* to be published in print was William Caxton's 1478 edition currently held in the British Library. The reproduction of any type of literature before that time was scribed by hand on parchment paper or animal skin and in much earlier times was scribed on clay or rocks. The process of

hand-copying was laborious, time-consuming, and very expensive, making printed matter available only to the Church and to the very wealthy. Information provided to the masses came from the pulpit where the priests relayed Biblical doctrines as determined by the Church, in many instances using verse format which is easier to remember.

ENGLAND DURING THE 14TH CENTURY

The England of Chaucer's time was a nation in transition. The Hundred Years War between France and England had created monetary problems for the royalty of both countries resulting from the need to maintain standing armies drawn from the peasant population of both countries. The feudal system had required knights to provide the king with soldiers when the king demanded them. Under the feudal system this drawing of men from the estates had been a relatively simple process but times were changing. The feudal structure of hereditary vassalage was breaking down as the inroads of social, political, and religious unrest were deepening and this made it more difficult and more expensive to obtain soldiers.

Armies were very expensive and fighting abroad made them even more expensive to maintain. Perhaps the most lasting impact of the war, especially in England, was the emergence of a much greater sense of patriotism and national identity. This was due, in part, to the publicity circulated to gather tax for the fighting, and partly due to generations of people, both English and French, who knew no situation other than the war in France. For the English people of all classes this meant an increasing demand to break free of French domination, to use the English language and to resist the use of French as the dominant language.

Outbreaks of the plague, the Black Death, also hastened cultural changes and contributed to a growing social upheaval. When the Black Death reached England around 1348, the disease spread throughout England with dizzying speed and had fatal consequences. The effect was at its worst in cities, where overcrowding and primitive sanitation aided its spread. Over the next two years the disease killed between 30-40% of the entire population. Peasants fled their fields. Livestock were left to fend for themselves, and crops were left in the fields to rot. By the end of

1350 the Black Death had subsided, but it never really died out in England for the next several hundred years. It was not until the late 17th century that England became largely free of serious plague epidemics. It is impossible to overstate the terrible effects of the Black Death on England. With the population so low, there were not enough workers to work the land. As a result, wages and prices rose and the nature of the economy changed to meet the changing social conditions. Land that had once been farmed was now given over to pasturing, which was much less labor-intensive. With the fall in population most landowners were not getting the rental income they needed and were forced to lease their land. (Hatcher 3-35)

In addition to the effects of the Black Death on the general populace, it has been estimated that almost half of England's priests died in the epidemic. The loss of so many priests accelerated the decline in church power and influence that culminated in the English Reformation during the 16th century when the Church of England broke from the authority of the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church during the reign of Henry VIII. For most levels of English society the Black Death represented a massive upheaval, one which changed the face of English society in a profound way.

In May of 1381 a violent revolt of the peasants shook England after King Richard II had levied an onerous Poll Tax on the populace. His heavy-handed attempts to enforce collection of that tax fostered a rebellion among the people who had reached the end of their patience with a constant levy of taxation that left them depleted of money and goods. The peasants rebelled throughout the county by marching on London destroying tax records and tax registers as they marched. When the leaders of the peasants, Wat Tyler and the spokesman Priest, John Ball, were both killed by the supporters of the King and the King promised to pardon the marchers if they returned to their homes the rebellion ceased. Although the revolt did not succeed in its

stated aims, it did succeed in showing the nobles that the peasants were dissatisfied and that they were capable of wreaking havoc. The only real concession achieved by the rebellion was their release from the Poll Tax but the peasants achieved a remarkable psychological success knowing they could band together and obtain concessions from the authority of the King. After the revolt, the term *poll tax* was no longer used, although English governments continued to collect similar taxes until the 17th century. (Aston 3-47)

However, the passing of the feudal system brought a sense of insecurity to those who no longer had a firm place in society. The practices of enclosure, whereby the manor lord could enclose land and raise rent, spelled disaster for many peasants who had survived by the use of communal pasturages. This new aspect of land revolution heralded the start of massive peasant evictions from the land and introduced what men fear most—change. The static timelessness of feudal village life was past and the ancient equilibrium of the medieval manor was collapsing. The very languages and dialects used by the inhabitants of England were also undergoing changes. The French language was spoken by the nobility and upper classes and for official documents while Latin was the written and official language of the Church. Both of these languages were giving way to the common vernacular of the English people.

In order to communicate orally, use of the English language had to change when even the powerful were swept away by the Black Death forcing both peasants and nobles to converse in English. As the inhabitants of rural England with many different dialects began to move about and relocate to the cities, the London dialect as the standard of written and spoken English began to emerge. This became the basis of the English language that was quickly augmented by French, German, and Scandinavian words added to the vocabulary.

It is worth noting that Chaucer chose to write in the Middle English vernacular rather than the romantic French language thus enabling more of the common folk to understand what he had written and perhaps as Drennan pointed out; “Chaucer’s use of “*opin*” translation theory, developed by the Wycliffites, in order to produce works in vernacular English.. .” (8, 15) was Chaucer’s way of promoting Church reform in a way that would be painless to him. The *opin* translation values content over syntax and it is through understanding how this method works that scholars have been able to clearly demonstrate Chaucer’s use of the Wycliffe Bible translation in some of his Biblical quotes.

The Lollard or Wycliffite Movement in the late 1300’s was the forerunner of the Reformation mentioned previously that took place later under the reign of Henry VIII. There is every reason to believe that Chaucer knew of the controversy surrounding the Lollard movement which questioned the power and authority of the Roman Catholic Church over that of the King of England. Chaucer was apparently in agreement with John Wycliffe and the Lollards who called for the Bible to be translated into the vernacular of the English so they could read it for themselves. Drennan pointed out in her essay that:

Wycliffe believed that ‘the word of God should be open to the people at large’ (Workman 157). He put this concept into practice as he preached. With his Latin Vulgate Bible open, Wycliffe extemporaneously translated scripture into English for his listeners. For Wycliffe, translating the Bible was not his primary purpose but a consequence of his mission to bring biblical truth to the common people. (Drennan 4-5)

Wycliffe openly challenged the Church to renounce its temporal domination of the Church and to surrender its power to the government. “He was a champion of the state against the church, of the people against those who preyed on them, of the secular clergy who were doing (well or ill) the essential work of the church against those who interfered with them” (Tatlock 66). This stance by Wycliffe was initially pleasing to John of Gaunt when he served as clerical advisor to him from 1376 – 1378 during the same timeframe that Chaucer was also in the service of John of Gaunt. However, when Wycliffe began to lose his support among the nobility with his condemned views on the Eucharist, even the powerful John of Gaunt did not wish to breach a possible excommunication by the Catholic Church and withdrew his support of Wycliffe.

The primary work of John Wycliffe was one of positive division as well as destruction when he set Church against State influencing many to begin thinking about what he was saying. He emphasized that religion should be simple, not the complex mechanism of Church hierarchy that existed to prey upon the very people it purported to serve. He believed that the Pope and the authority of the Church were themselves under the authority of the Scripture. Most of all he believed that the Word of God in the Bible should be available to everyone to read for themselves in the common vernacular of the English people. The fear among many in the religious establishment was of putting the Bible in the hands of the people—and horror of horrors—in the hands of women! It would also break the monopoly of the clerics who had been able to gloss over and hoodwink the people free from recrimination. (McGrath 21) Wycliffe was successful in avoiding persecution, unlike his followers, and he died peacefully; but only for a short time. His body was dug up by officials 43 years after his death, his remains were burned,

and the ashes were thrown into the river Swift. His followers later claimed that this action only succeeded in dispersing his ashes, like his teachings, all over the world.

It is more than likely that his views about religion appealed to Chaucer who was also, "a man interested in the essence of religion, a servant of the state, and deeply sympathetic with humanity, with a keen eye for inconsistency and sham" (Tatlock 67). Since both Wycliffe and Chaucer served the royal household during much of the same timeframe, they must have had frequent contact with each other and it is evident when reading *The Canterbury Tales* that Chaucer was influenced by and obviously agreed with Wycliffe's viewpoints about religion.

Anger and pessimism accompanied a powerful surge of social protest against the structure and substance of the Church while strident outcries against the wealth and spiritual hollowness of the clergy increased. As a result, the gulf between the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the individual widened. The Church and the pulpit had been the primary sources of education in medieval England and the Church administered monastic and parish schools and universities for those privileged few who belonged to the upper class and the ranks of the clergy. However, for the majority of the people, their only source of learning came from the sermons preached from the pulpits.

Foremost among the themes of pulpit exposition was the rebuke for the vices of women (Owst 118). "The willfulness of women, as seen from the jaundiced point of view of medieval antifeminists" was preached regularly from the pulpits. (Koban 232). Clerical crimes were denounced by some priests who were appalled at the corruption of their fellow clergymen and extant sermons give evidence that fierce denunciation of oppressors of the poor was preached

with regularity. There were frequent pulpit attacks on the misspent patrimony of the Church, the avarice, negligence, and worldly pomp of ecclesiastics and monks (Koban 290).

The emptiness of human boasting and the descent of all men from one father, Adam, emphasized that, “True glory does not depend upon the origin or beginning from which anything proceeds, but upon its own condition” (Koban 292). The English Dominican Friar, John Bromyard, in his preaching and in his massive *Summa Predicantium*, ran the gamut of indictment of sins committed by the wealthy, including the fact that their dogs ate better than poor peasants did. Condemnation of the Seven Deadly Sins, gluttony, and oath-taking were popular homiletic subjects: “No offence or type of offender—high or low—seems to be omitted from its list” (Owst 224).

The recent scholarly study by Dale Drennan presented specific comparisons and solid evidence that Chaucer also used the Wycliffe translation in some of his many Biblical quotations. Drennan makes the claim that while there is no evidence that Chaucer was an active part of the Lollard movement, it is evident that he was challenging medieval Christian doctrine through his characterizations of the members of the pilgrimage to Canterbury.

The Lollard movement was underway in the latter half of the 14th century and given the fact that Chaucer was a well-educated man, versed in languages with an excellent understanding of the Bible, along with an interest in science and mathematics, it is not far-fetched to assume that he had a good grasp of the Lollard doctrines particularly those pertaining to the desire to have the Bible translated into the vernacular of the English people, a trend toward simplicity and the inclusion of lay people as preachers of the word. In addition, the concern about corruption

within the members of the clerical community and the controversy surrounding the Eucharist bread and the body of Christ were widely known. (Blamires)

He and John Wycliffe were both in the service of John of Gaunt who had originally championed Wycliffe's desire for the Bible to be translated into the language of the common English inhabitant. (Blamires 225) Another scholar writes: "Wycliffe argued extensively—in both English and Latin—for the translation of the Bible into his native English. The English people had a right to read the Bible in their own language, rather than be forced to listen to what their clergy wished them to hear." (McGrath 19). Wycliffe fervently believed that the people should be able to read the Bible where they could see for themselves the differences between clerical pronouncements and lifestyles as opposed to the Biblical simplicity of Christ and his followers. (McGrath 19)

Even though Chaucer was not a member of royalty, he served members of royalty from an early age onward throughout his life. He served King Edward III as an envoy traveling to Italy and France for which he received monetary recompense in the form of lifelong pensions. He and his wife also served in the house of the powerful Duke, John of Gaunt, who was the fourth son of Edward III. Both John Wycliffe and Geoffrey Chaucer served the Duke during the same period of time and Drennan observed that: "These facts point to both the temporal and spatial overlap in their service to John of Gaunt"(3). During his lifetime, Chaucer held several positions of responsibility for the crown and there is no doubt that he moved in royal circles as well as in the prestigious circles of academia. As such, he would have been careful not to openly offend the King or the Church and in fact, he includes penitent remorse for any words that may have offended God and man in his *Retraction* wherein he requests forgiveness for the vulgar and unworthy parts of the Tales and other past works and seeks absolution for his sins

Chaucer, in all probability, could have owned a Bible or at the very least had access to one at a monastery. Then too, as a good Catholic, he would have attended Church with regularity and would have been thoroughly familiar with the sermon exhortations preached to all classes of folk. That he was aware of the social and religious problems of his day becomes apparent when reading *The Canterbury Tales*. In his *Tales* he discloses the growing hostility toward the ecclesiastical order which had done nothing to alleviate the plight of the peasant. To the contrary, ecclesiastical excesses contributed to their burden in spite of pulpit recognition of the problems.

Chaucer uses scriptural references freely in his *Tales*. Some of the different ways in which Biblical passages are quoted or alluded to in the several prologues and the *Tales* will be examined. These references will serve to demonstrate the subtle and not so subtle criticism leveled at the Church and at its hierarchy as the characters tell their own stories using Scripture to bolster or, in some cases, condemn even their own practices.

Chaucer utilized the familiar format of oral storytelling to craft this delightful assortment of tales and storytelling which has been part of the human experience since the earliest record dating back to the saga of Gilgamesh. That was how information was transmitted from one generation or one tribe to another as a way of relating events that had occurred in the past to ensure a remembrance of them as well as providing an enjoyable form of entertainment. Most people have enjoyed the experience of storytelling and can appreciate how skillfully Chaucer utilized this genre to develop a poetic work of art that has endured for centuries.

In all probability, Chaucer read or recited his own poetry to his friends and associates and his poetry would have been shared orally among the general population. Charles Koban states: "Chaucer saw in oral delivery the opportunity to create a context for reflection on human

problems, in which he could exert an educative influence among his contemporaries” (225). It is entirely possible that Chaucer used oral delivery as an opportunity to create an atmosphere that would arouse his audience to reflect on the social and religious problems of the day since everyone was affected, regardless of their station in life. And indeed, by choosing to write his poetry in the spoken English of his day rather than the formal, sophisticated French or the Latin language of the Church, he took the path of bringing information to more people in a language they could understand and relate to.

Chaucer used Scriptural references and allusions in his stories along with the mythological and ancient plots and some of the many quotes used by the characters will be cited to illustrate the different ways in which these Biblical passages are used. All of the line quotes in this paper are taken from either Baugh’s *Chaucer’s Major Poetry* or the Benson Edition of *The Canterbury Tales* and the Scriptural references are taken from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.

THE WIFE OF BATH – HER PROLOGUE AND HER TALE

There are several ways in which Scriptural references are used by the Wife. She refers to specific Scriptures and simply alludes to others in her Prologue. She refers to them as supporting her viewpoint of women's rights and obligations in marriage and her character has been heralded by the feminist movement as an example of an emancipated, liberated woman. Some references are those she uses as coming from her husbands, particularly husband number five. However, in the *Tale* itself there are no direct quotations, only a few instances where she refers to Jesus directly or indirectly as she acknowledges accepted principles of the Christian ethic and the meaning of true nobility or *gentillesse*.¹

It is interesting to observe that in his characterization of the Wife, Chaucer has woven her penchant for name-dropping and her show of pseudo-intellectual knowledge into her usage of Scriptural references. As Koban noted, "Chaucer blended plot, exemplary materials, and thought to make the tales into organic units of persuasion" (229). The Church emphasized over and over again that willfulness was mankind's first disobedience that resulted in punishment for that sin for all of mankind and the woman was especially responsible for that first willful disobedience. Koban continues on to assert that, "It is willfulness as a psychological and ethical problem that Chaucer develops in this Tale. He focuses, that is, on willfulness as a form of servitude to the ego and a source of strife, in contrast with self-restraint, self-abnegation, and humility as forms of personal freedom and sources of harmony" (229).

The Wife appeals directly to the Bible for her authority and uses Scriptural references to prove her point, seemingly unaware that the masculine viewpoint could just as easily refute her ideas by the use of the same Scripture or others that would be more devastating to her point of

¹ Now archaic and rarely used: "The quality of being gentle, courtesy, politeness, good breeding; an instance of courtesy." Oxford English Dictionary.

view. The result is that the reader is left with a feeling that she had not really read those passages for herself but either heard them preached from the pulpit or learned them from conversations with her husband(s).

In her Prologue she seeks to establish the fact that women can be happy only when they have achieved mastery over their husbands. She is arguing against Church, State, and accepted customs of the time and Chaucer would have been well aware of them. He could not have the Wife preaching in a logical, coherent way since the Church and Pauline theology prohibited women from preaching (I Tim 2:12). Her argumentation is emotional and she freely admits that she bases her claims on experience rather than scholarly logic as evidenced in the following quote:

Experience, though noon auctoritee
Were in this world, is right ynogh for me
To speke of wo that is in marriage;
(1-3)

The Wife freely admits that she is imperfect and uses all manner of specious arguments and scriptural quotes. She claims not to be seeking perfection like Christ but only has a desire to live and be happy in the world just as she is:

Virginitee is greet perfeccioun,
And continence eek with devocioun,
But Crist, that of perfeccioun is welle,
Bad nat every wight he sholde go selle
Al that he hadde, and gyve it to the poore
And in swich wise folwe hum and his fore,
He spak to hem that lyve parfitly;
And lordynges, by yore leve, that am nat I.
(105-112) (Watson 109)

She then claims that Jesus taught her that she should only marry once. However, that wedding story in the Book of John has no reference to a command to marry just once, but only

informs the reader that this was the first of the miracles performed by Jesus when he turned water into wine:

That sith that Crist ne wente nevere but onis
 To weddyng, in the Cane of Galilee,
 That by the same ensample taughte he me
 That I ne sholde wedded be but ones.
 (10-13) (John 2:1-11)

The Wife continues on with her suppositions and faulty conclusions about multiple marriages:

Biside a welle, Jhesus, God and man,
 Spak in repreeve of the Samaritan:
 “Thou hast yhad fyve housbondes,” quod he,
 “And that ilke man that now hath thee
 Is noght thyn housbonde,” thus seyde he certeyn.
 (15-19) (John 4:7-19)

That reference in John reminds the reader that in Jerusalem Jesus gave a drink of water to a Samaritan woman who then perceived Jesus to be a prophet because he knew she was not married to the man with whom she was currently living. Jesus did not reprove her as the Wife says or even pass judgment on her. To the contrary, she went on to become a follower of Jesus and a witness for him. Chaucer had the Wife use that quote quite possibly as another example of misinterpreting Scripture in much the same way as the Friar bragged about glossing over the passages referred to during his sermons.

The Wife did use the quote from Genesis 1:28 quite accurately. “And God blessed them and God said unto them, ‘Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth,’” when she said:

Men may devyne and glosen, up and doun,
 But wel I woot, expres, withoute lye,
 God bad us for the wexe and multiplye;
 That gentil text kan I wel undersonde.
 (26-29)

But, her use of the quote from Genesis is really ironic since there is no reference to any children conceived by her despite her many marriages. She then launches into a tirade about multiple marriages and bigamy referencing the Biblical figures Solomon, Lamech, Abraham, and Jacob seeking to justify her own many dalliances and marriages. It is true that each of them had multiple wives and concubines. However, she does not seem to be aware that all of these holy men of the Old Testament were not under Christian laws which evolved only after Christ's death and sacrifice had set aside the Mosaic Law (Romans 10:4):

Lo, here the wise kyng, daun Salomon;
I trowe he hadde wyves mo than oon.
(35-36) (I Kings 11:3-8)

What rekketh me, thogh folk seye vileynye
Of shrewed Lameth and his bigamy?
(53-54) (Gen 3:19)

I woot wel Abraham was an hooly man,
And Jacob eek, as ferforth as I kan;
And ech of hem hadde wyves mo than two,
And many another holy man also.
(55-58) Gen, 15-35)

A glaring example where the Wife definitely misquoted the Scriptures is the following one where she was attempting to show a distinction between virginal purity and those who choose to marry according to the Apostle Mark but only someone who actually read the Bible would know the difference between the bread types:

I nyl envye no virginitee.
Lat hem be breed of pured whete-seed,
And lat us wyves hoten barly-breed;
And yet with barly-breed, Mark telle kan,
Oure Lord Jhesu refreshed many a man.
(142-146) (Mark 6:41)

While that account in Mark does describe the miracle of Jesus feeding the multitudes it only mentions loaves of bread in general. However, in John 6:9 the event is related again and it

is in this account that the loaves are specified as being made of barley bread. What is the distinction to be made and why is this important? Even in Chaucer's day, few were served white bread while the poor ate bread made from barley, an inferior grain so even wives who were considered inferior, like barley-bread, can be used by Jesus in his ministry. Chaucer may have been obliquely referencing Lollard philosophy that did not exclude women from openly serving God. "Lollards. . .gave preaching a special priority, and argued that any lay Christian had the power to preach" (Blamires 230).

The Wife seems to be quite familiar with I Corinthians, Chapter Seven indicating that this passage must have been preached often from the pulpit repeating the Apostle Paul's counseling about celibacy and the meaning of marriage. The Wife referred to the Apostle Paul and his exhortation as follows:

I have the power duryng al my lyf
 Upon his propre body, and nocht he.
 Right thus the Apostel tolde it unto me,
 And bad oure housbondes for to love us weel.
 Al this sentence me liketh every deel"—
 (158-162) (1Cor. 7:4)

But the beginning of verse 4 is where Paul also reminds the wife: "The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband:" and the Wife does not refer to that at all but selectively picks and chooses only the portion that seems to back her assertion that mastery over her husband(s) is within God's commands.

I woot wel that th' apostel was a mayde;
 But natheless, thogh that he wroot and sayde
 He wolde that every wight were swich as he,
 Al nys but conseil to virginitee.
 (79-82) (I Cor. 7:7)

For thane th' apostle seith that I am free
 To wedde, a Goddes half, where it liketh me.
 He seith that to be wedded is no synne;

Bet it is to be wedded than to brynne.
(49-52) (I Cor.7: 8-9)

And for to been a wyf he yaf me leve
Of indulgence; so nys it no repreve,
To wedde me, if that my make dye,
Withouten excepcion of bigamye.
(83-86) (I Cor. 7:39)

In his letters to the Corinthian congregation, Paul was exhorting them to come to a better understanding of Christian precepts. There were divisions and diverse opinions about all aspects of Christianity in the time following the ascent of Jesus and Paul was trying to lay the groundwork to establish order, harmony, and love among the congregation. His advice about marriage showed that marriage is a two-way street, with both parties having duties and obligations toward each other as well as in the service of God. But the husband was very definitely the head of the household and the wife must be in submission according to Pauline theology. The Wife's use of these passages in I Corinthians is really comedic since her behavior and demeanor is so far from the image of the good wife that Paul describes. Chaucer was definitely having a good time using this outspoken, boisterous female as an arbiter and preacher of Pauline theology!

Chaucer aptly then provides the man's point of view in the next group of quotes as the Wife tells of Scriptures her husband(s) quoted to her and she became furious when night after night her husband Jankyn would read and relate to her what he believed the Biblical role of a proper wife should be: obedient, chaste, and pure; qualities the Wife lacked. It was this unrelenting tirade by her husband that caused her to finally snap and tear three pages from "this book of wikked wyves" (WB 685). This book or possibly a pamphlet contained no references to any good women in the Bible. She does refer to him also seeking information from the Bible itself in line 650 but referring only to those passages that were unflattering to women:

Thow seyst that droppynge houses, and eek smoke,
 And chidyng wyves maken men to flee
 Out of hir owene houses; a, benedicitee!
 (278–280) (Proverbs 21: 9, 10)

And seye thise wordes in the Apostles name:
 “In habit maad with chastitee and shame
 Ye wommen shul apparaille yow,” quod he,
 “And noght in tressed heer and gay perree,
 As perles, ne with gold, ne clothes riche.”
 (341-345) (I Tim. 2:9)

Ye sholde been al pacient and meke,
 And han a sweete spiced conscience,
 Sith ye so preche of Jobes pacience.
 (434-436) (The Book of Job)

And thane wolde he upon his Bible seke
 That ilke proverbe of Ecclesiaste
 Where he comandeth and forbedeth faste
 Man shal nat suffre his wyf go roule aboute.
 Thanne wolde he seye right thus, withouten doute:
 ‘Whoso that buyldeth his hous al of salwes
 And priketh his blynde hors over the falwes,
 And suffreth his wyf to go seken halwes
 Is worthy to been hanged on the galwes!’
 (650-653) (1769 Oxford King James
 Bible Authorized Version)

And eek the Parables of Salomon, (679) (The Proverbs)

Tho redde he me how Sampson loste his heres:
 Slepynge, his lemman kitte it with hir sheres;
 Thurgh which treson loste he bothe his eyen.
 (721-723) (Judges 16: 15-21)

It should be noted that Solomon in all his glory and wisdom (and vain foolishness) preached about the virtue of keeping pure and away from prostitutes and adulterous women. Ironically, it was his own entanglement with women which led to his falling away from God’s favor when these women turned his heart away from God and persuaded him to do evil by

following after their gods and Sampson was betrayed by Delilah after he foolishly confided in her the source of his strength.

Of latter date, of wyves hath he red
That somme han slayn hir housbondes in hir bed,
And lete hir lecchour dighte hire al the nyght,
Whan that the corps lay in the floor upright,
And somme han dryve nayles in hir brayn,
Whil that they slepte, and thus they had hem slayn.
(764-770) (Judges Ch. 4)

The account in Judges is not about a wife killing her husband, but tells the story of Sisera, the Canaanite captain who fought against Israel. He sought refuge in the tent of Heber the Kenite, whose wife was Jael. Jael brought Sisera into the tent and told him to fear not. After he fell asleep she took a tent stake and drove it through his temple. This action was recorded as a victory of God over the Canaanite king and his army. It is a commendation of Jael for the action she took in behalf of God.

The next passage from Genesis was frequently used by the clergy to place the guilt upon Eve, but in Paul's letter to Timothy he places the greater sin on Adam because his act was deliberate disobedience, not based on any kind of deception: "For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression" (I Tim. 2: 13-14). When Jankyn read this passage and then continued on and on and on, the Wife became furious and in a frenzied rage took action by tearing three pages from his "cursed book" (WB 789).

Of Eva first, that for hir wikkednesse
Was al mankynde broght to wrecchednesse,
For which that Jhesu Crist hymself was slayn,
That boghte us with his herte blood agayn.
Lo, heere expres of womman may ye fynde,
That womman was the los of al mankynde.
(715-720) (Gen. 3:6, 16)

And when I saugh he wolde nevere fine
 To redden on this cursed book al nyght,
 Al sodeynly thre leves have I plyght'
 Out of his book . . .
 (788-791)

After all of the braggadocio and fierce action on the part of this willful and unruly wife, and a real battle between them when the husband hit her resulting in deafness in one ear, Chaucer ironically has the couple resolving their differences and restoring her mastery over the house and all the land that she had previously given to him. They mutually agree and the Wife then submits to her husband as a good, God-fearing wife should (*after she had achieved mastery over him through trickery.*)

Turning now to *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, the Scriptural allusions in her actual story are rather oblique; possibly because the *Tale* deals with a pre-Christian era when the land was supposedly inhabited by elves and fairies. Those supernatural forces were not compatible with Christianity since they would be considered forces of the Devil and were driven out by the arrival of Christian representatives as stated early in the *Tale*:

But now kan no man se none elves mo,
 For now the grete charitee and prayeres
 Of lymtours and othere hooly freres,
 That serchen every lond and every stream,
 A thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,
 (864-868)

This maketh that ther ben no fayeryes. (872)

These same Christian representatives would then prove to be worse than those elves and fairies that had preyed upon the women in days of old. The begging Friars often dishonored, in a sexual way, the women in their territory and there is a definite undertone of distaste for certain church practices throughout Chaucer's work. This next passage is one instance referring to those mendicant friars:

Wommen may go saufly up and doun.
 In every bussh or under every tree
 Ther is noon oother incubus but he,
 And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.
 (878-881)

And it is in her Tale that Chaucer subtly presents his lengthy treatise on the concept that nobility does not equate with status, wealth, or heredity as the “ugly old woman” lectures the unnamed knight in a lesson on the meaning of true nobility. Even though Chaucer moved in royal circles he would have been well aware that being born into nobility did not automatically confer morality and Chaucer would certainly have observed aberrant behavior on the part of those born to privilege:

“And ther as ye of poverte me repreeve,
 And the hye God, on whom that we bileeve,
 In wilful poverte chees to lyve his lyf.
 And certes every man, mayden, or wyf
 May understonde that Jhesus, hevene kyng,
 Ne wolde nat chese a vicious lyvyng.
 Glad poverte is an honest thyng certeyn;
 This wole Senec and othere clerkes seyn.
 Whoso that halt hym payd of his poverte,
 I holde hym riche, al hadde he nat a sherte.
 He that coveiteth is a povre wight,
 For he wolde han that is nat in his myght;
 But he that noght hath, ne coveiteth have,
 Is riche, although ye holde hym but a knave.
 (1177-1190)

The wayward Knight who is beholden to the Queen for his life is confronted with several dilemmas. He had committed a heinous and willful act by raping a virgin and his life was saved by the Queen but only if he could find the answer to what it is that women most desire. At that point his freedom and his very life were in the hands of women. And finally, the Knight has to submit to his fate and submit himself to the mastery of the ugly old woman. He was in a real

predicament that ultimately was resolved when he promised obedience and fidelity to the old hag who promised the same to him in turn.

By interjecting the important subject of nobility and mutual obedience by the man and the woman, the story is elevated far beyond the theme of feminine mastery that had been expressed by the Wife. Koban believes that, "Chaucer does nothing deliberate to suppress this question (*by the queen*). . .but contrasts the ironic view of feminine nature as essentially willful, with the elevated, courtly view of womanly benigne² which is so important for the resolution of the action" (233). And Koban also cites a quote from Paul Ruggiers who summed up his idea about the Tale when he said: ". . .the story is a gem of a special sort. In it sexuality plays a piquant counterpoint against a serious didacticism; both of these harmonize in the end in a view of marital bliss, which, if we may judge from the hag's sermon, is founded on spiritual values" (233).

Chaucer fashioned a unique character in Alison, The Wife of Bath. She is first introduced in the General Prologue as a flamboyant and outrageous woman--a well-traveled career woman³ (445-476). Her character embodies a woman who is the antithesis of everything preached by the Church hierarchy as the prerequisites of a God-fearing woman. The Wife is willful, brash and outspoken, and must always have the last word. She is anything but demure, patient, loving, and obedient to her husband(s).

She is overtly sexual, reveling in her sexuality and exalting in the knowledge that she has gained mastery over each husband through whatever means worked for her; sex, nagging, manipulation, and false accusations along with physical or mental abuse. She presents an

² Kindly feeling and its manifestation; kindness of disposition, or of manner. Oxford English Dictionary.

³ As a clothmaker or clothier, the Wife is an entrepreneur who presides over the production of cloth by many cottage workers, then collects and sells the finished product to merchants who will market it in England or abroad. Endnotes.

outward appearance of being a happy, jolly woman in complete control of her life but the fact that she has been so openly promiscuous before and during her marriages is an indication that her willfulness is “a form of servitude to the ego and a source of strife, in contrast with self-restraint, self-abnegation, and humility as forms of personal freedom and sources of harmony” (Koban 229).

The tactics she bragged about enabled her to gain mastery over the husbands and their wealth. Her story emphasizes ironically that she believes what women want most of all is just that; mastery over their husband(s) and/or lover(s) but then Chaucer skillfully and persuasively interjects a positive message that nobility comes from the true value of a person and not from heredity or status. Koban reminds us that: “the theme of feminine dominance in the plot does make the Tale more lively and appealing if only because we are reminded thereby of just how forceful and extravagant a feminist the Wife is” (230).

How then does the Prologue and the Wife’s Tale lend credence to the claim that Chaucer was speaking out against the hypocrisy and corruption in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and the commonly accepted notion of nobility? In the Prologue Chaucer has the Wife using and misusing Scriptures to prove her point while the Tale points out the true role of women in marriage as well as the false assumptions about the role of nobility in a Christian society. The irony here is that Chaucer has written this poem with a wink and a nod at her choice of Scriptures since the true meaning is so often misquoted or misapplied (Parker 93). Chaucer has it both ways: A subtle poke at the rigidity and misogyny of Church teachings by often corrupt, celibate clergy who intentionally glossed over the Scriptural words to further their own purposes juxtaposed against a foolish argument by a ribald woman who claims to have authoritative knowledge of what sex and marriage should be based on her own experience.

In a clear example of Chaucer's literary skill, the story then provides not only a clear treatise on the true meaning of nobility but, in harmony with the Scriptures provides the true meaning of submission in marriage as respect and obedience to each other in service to God is what women really desire. Chaucer was a skilled diplomat, as evidenced by his envoy services for the King, and would have been careful to avoid open disagreement with the nobility or with the Church. Through his skillful use of satire, irony, and comedy he disguised any personal opinions that could be reasons for Church or State to take drastic action against him for heresy or daring to speak out against their authority.

THE SUMMONER

Moving on to *The Summoner's Tale*, in Chaucer's time, a Summoner was an individual whose duty was to deliver the summons for a person or persons to appear before the ecclesiastical courts to answer to charges of alleged immorality. The summoner was not a member of any religious order but was essentially a civilian employee of the church with the power to order folk to appear before the priest who could then pass sentence on the severity of the offense up to and including ex-communication from the Church which essentially consigned them to Hell.

Chaucer displayed his personal anger against these ecclesiastical agents for their utter hypocrisy and greed. However, the Summoner portrayed in the *Tale* is not just a flawed character, he is a despicable human being described in the *Prologue* as a thoroughly detestable man in appearance with a florid face covered with pimples and lumps that no type of salve or ointment could cure. He had such a hideous face that he frightened children.

A Somonour was ther with us in that place,
That hadde a fyr-reed cherubynnes face,
For saucefleem he was, with eyen narwe.
As hoot he was and lecherous as a sparwe,
With scalled browes blake and piled berd.
Of his visage children were aferd .(623-628)

He was a lecherous drunkard who seduced the young women and allowed men to have concubines in exchange for bribery of wine or money. He was an ignorant man given to uttering Latin phrases he probably picked up from the court without knowing the meaning of them. Out of all the characters in the *Tales*, he seems to be the most odious without any redeeming features. Even his story is coarse and scatological without comic humor and Chaucer undoubtedly used this character to point out the corruption and depravity carried out by these people under the auspices of the Church while they were engaging in bribery and extortion to enrich their own

purse and to satisfy their own lusts. Chaucer's Summoner used his power of subpoena as a method of extortion from the parishioners who feared retribution from the Church and would rather pay the ransom. The general populace would be very familiar with this type of person.

When the Summoner and the Friar have an argument it is evident that Chaucer then uses the *Summoner's Tale* about a lazy, gluttonous Friar to get even with the Friar in addition to exposing the deplorable state of vernacular mendicant preaching that neither the Church or the State attempted to rein in to prevent the abuse of the very people they were sworn to serve. The Mendicant Friars were an Order of Carmelite Friars appointed by the Church in Rome and there were bitter feelings among the poor against these itinerant preachers who preyed upon them. These Friars were supposed to follow the example of Elijah who was kind and generous to the poor and they were supposed to be examples of purity and good works. But remember the word of the Wife who said these preachers were far worse than the elves and fairies of old who had preyed upon the people and misused the women?

The early preaching Orders had initially been a positive force for good as they traveled throughout the countryside offering prayers and hope to the poor believing that God would provide for their needs. Originally they preached and begged in territories assigned to them but as time went by and the Orders became more affluent, the Friars strayed from their original territories seeking out those who would provide the most money and goods. Their preaching became more and more duplicitous and made a mockery of the original purpose of the Order. The Friar of Chaucer's Tale is in love with the sound of his own words. He is self-glorifying even while portraying himself as a humble servant of God.

Chaucer employs considerable irony, humor, scatological hypocrisy, and even includes a smattering of scientific logic as the Summoner's Friar sermonizes endlessly about the sin of

gluttony, only to reveal himself as a glutton. He moralizes about anger but becomes very angry himself. He speaks about ministering to the “poor in spirit” but insists that money be given to him by a sick man who had been more than generous before. And finally, he takes liberties with Thomas’s comely wife, which no humble preaching Friar should ever do.

Chaucer had the Summoner’s Friar quote freely and quite skillfully from Scriptures to prove his point and to hoodwink his parishioners with such quotes as these:

Glosyne is a glorious thing, certeyn,
For letter sleeth, so as we clerkes seyn.
(1793-94) (2 Cor. 3:6)

And studie in Petres words and in Poules
I walke, and fische Cristen mennes soules
(1818-20) (Matt.4:19)

My spirit hath his fostryning in the Bible.
(1845) (Matt. 4:4)

In those lines, the Friar has portrayed himself as a humble follower of Christ who brings spiritual food to his parishioners. All the while, this Friar would wheedle them out of money and food in return for his prayers on their behalf. He would tell them he wrote their name in his book of prayer implying that he would pray for them regularly. But he promptly erased their name as soon as he departed their home laden with the supplies given by these good folk. The Friar extolled the virtues of fasting but this is hypocrisy at its worst since he had just ordered a gluttonous meal from Thomas’s wife whom he had greeted with a very hearty embrace and sweet kisses all the while proclaiming that he was a man of sparse appetite like the prophets of old, living on the Word of the Bible as his sustenance.

This was the same Thomas whom the Friar had visited often and received more money and refreshments than from a hundred other homes. But Thomas was now bedridden, very ill, and quite often angry. The Friar sees this as a perfect opportunity to enrich his coffers by

stressing the needs of the Church and lecturing Thomas about the sins of anger and excessive wealth urging him to donate everything to the friars. After Thomas' wife tells the Friar they had just lost a child within the last ten days or so right after the Friar had visited, the Friar offers a brief word of comfort telling her that he and the other Friars had seen the child taken to Heaven within a half-hour of his death but without further words of comfort for the grieving parents. He then launches into his litany about the virtues of pure living and the virtue of fasting and the sin of gluttony while seeking a huge meal from the wife.

The Friar quotes at length about God's servants, Moses, Aaron, Elijah, Adam, and Jesus, all of whom abstained from food and drink in order to render pure service to God, with the exception of Adam. The inclusion of Adam as a glutton is an excellent case of glossing since Adam was expelled for the sin of disobedience not gluttony when he ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which the Devil said would make them like gods:

We fare as seith th'apostle; clooth and foode
Suffisen us, though they be nat ful goode
The clenness and the fastynge of us frères
Maketh that Crist accepteth oure preyers.
(1881-84) (ITim. 6:8)

Lo, Moyses fourty dayues and fourty nyght
Fasted, er that the heighe of God of might
Spak with him in the mountain of Synay.
With empty wombe, fastynge many a day,
Receyved he the lawe that was written
With Goddes fynger;
(1885-90) (Ex. 34:28)

And Elye, wel ye witen,
In mount Oreb, er he hadde any spece
He fasted longe, and was in contemplaunce.
(1890-92) (I Kings 19:8)

Aaron, that hadde the temple in governaunce,
And eek the othere preestes everichon,
Into the temple whan they sholde gon

To prey for the peple, and do servyse,
 No drynke which that myghte hem dronke make,
 But there in abstinence prey and wake,
 Lest that they dyden.
 (1894-1901) (Lev. 10:8-11)

Oure Lord Jhesu, as hooly writ devyseth,
 Yaf us ensample of fastynge and preyeres.
 (1904-5) (Matt. 4:1-11)

Fro Paradys first, if I shal nat lye,
 Was man out chaced for his glotonye:
 And chaast was man in Pardys, certeyn.
 (1915-17) (Gen. 3:17)

In each of those examples listed above, the Friar has made the point that in order to be a true servant of God, it is necessary to lead a clean and pure life of fasting and prayer. According to the scriptures, Moses, Elijah, and Jesus each spent forty days in the wilderness fasting and deeply in prayer and Matthew advises Christian followers that the life of Jesus was meant to be an example of how a servant of God should live, fasting and praying often in order to be in communication with the Lord. What a hypocrite this Friar is as he glibly spouts Biblical passage after Biblical passage warning his listeners that excesses in eating and drinking put them in jeopardy with God! All the while, this Friar is reveling in the very sins he is warning against.

The Friar has no shame as he holds himself up as an active worker on Christ's behalf ministering to the poor in spirit, continuing with his sermonizing. He admonishes Thomas for giving gold to other friars in an attempt to get well and tells him that he should not be dividing his money among other friars. He stresses that it is the poor in spirit who are pleasing to God and rambles on with other Scriptural passages warning against anger. These references would sound impressive to the listener as he moves from Book to Book issuing dire warnings and urging them to lead a pure life:

‘Blessed be they that povers in spirit been.

(1923) (Matt. 5:3)

When they for soules seye the psalm of Davit;
Lo, 'buf!' they seye, 'cor meym eructavit!'
(1933-34) (Ps. 45:1)

Who folweth Cristes gospel and his fore,
But we that humble been, and chaast, and poore,
Werkers of Goddes word, nat auditours?
(1935-37) (James 1:22)

Touchynge swich thing, lo, what the wise seith:
'Withinne thyn hous ne be thou no leoun;
To thy subgitz do noon oppressioun,
(1988-91) (Ecclesiasticus 4:35)

Be war from hire that in thy bosom slepeth:
War fro they serpent that so slily crepeth
Under the gras, and styngeth subtilly.
(1993-35) (Gen. 3:1-5)

Beth war, therefore, with Lordes how ye pleye,
Syngeth Placebo, and 'I shal, if I kan,'
But if it be unto a pvre man,
(2074-76) (Ps. 114-9 Vulgate)

Lo, what seyde he that so wel teche kan?
(2085) (Solomon)

Ne be no falawe to an irous man,
Ne with no wood man walke by the weye,
Lest thee repente; 'I wol no ferther seye.'
(2086-88) (Prov. 22:24-5)

"But syn Ely was, or Elise,
Han frères been, that fynde I of record,
In charitee, ythanked be oure Lord!"
(2116-18) (I Kings 18:19-42)

In that last quote, the Friar was referring to the way in which Elijah, with the help of the Almighty, gathered almost a thousand priests and prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel and called upon the name of the Lord to light the fire of the water-soaked sacrifice after the priests of Baal had been unable to call down fire. The fire that Elijah called down utterly destroyed the

sacrifice and he ordered the followers of Baal to be destroyed. Even then, Elijah did not eat but fell on his knees in prayer rather than joining in with the rest of the people as they ate and drank and rejoiced in the victory.

This hypocritical Friar is glossing over the Scriptures in such a way that virtually everything he says and does is an indictment of his own flawed and sinful self and points out the failure of Church and State to curb the excesses of these fraudulent preachers who preyed upon the fears of the poor to enrich their own coffers.

After the Friar has exhausted himself and angered Thomas with his endless chiding and sermonizing, he got down on bended knee to beseech Thomas to contribute money to the Order. Thomas finally relents and promises to give the Friar a gift but only if he will divide it with the other Friars equally. When the Friar swears he will do that, Thomas tells him to feel beneath his backside for the gift and with the Friar's hand searching right at the orifice, Thomas loudly breaks wind right in the Friar's hand, louder than any cart-drawing horse could:

“Now wel,” quod he, “and somewhat shal I yive
 Unto youre hooly covent whil I lyve:
 And in thyn hand thou shalt it have anon,
 On this condicion, and oother noon,
 That thud parte it so, my deere brother,
 That every frère have also mucche as oother.
 This shaltou swere on they professioun,
 Withouten fraude or cavillacioun.”

“I swere it,” quod this frere, “by my faith!”
 And therwithal his hand in his he leith,
 “Lo, heer my feith; in me shal be no lak.”

“Now thane, put in thyn hand down by my bak,”
 Seyde this man, “and grope wel bihynde.
 Bynethe my buttoke ther shaltow fynde
 A thing that I have hyd in pryvetee.”

“A!” thoghte this frère, “that shal go with me!”
 And doun his hand he launcheth to the clifte,
 In hope for to fynde there a yifte.
 And whan this sike man felte this frère
 Aboute his towel grope there and here,

Amydde his hand he leet the frère a fart,
 Ther nys no capul, drawyng in a cart,
 That myghte hav lete a fart of swich a soun.
 (2128 – 2152)

This breaking wind really angers the Friar who departs frantically, like a wild boar, grinding his teeth. He was so enraged that he went to get the lord of the manor to take revenge on Thomas. After the story is related to the lord, there is a huge discussion about how a poor man like Thomas could have devised such a thought-provoking problem. The problem being: how to divide what cannot be divided. The manor lord told the Friar the devil must surely be in control of Thomas. But the lord had an intelligent squire, Jankin, who launched into a scientific discussion and provided a solution about how to divide this fart equally among twelve kneeling friars. The friars would press their noses against the spokes of a wheel to equally share as the fart is deposited in the center of the wheel. The smell of the fart would then be disseminated equally to each one as the wheel revolved and the odor was carried along on the rim. Consider the irony of this story when a simple squire could resolve such a problem that none of the learned individuals in the household could solve.

The entire, unrelenting episode of this *Tale* surely points out that the Friar is much more interested in worldly life and goods rather than in carrying out the spiritual duties of the Order which is to preach the word of God and save souls. The breaking wind is seen by some scholars as a satiric image of the mighty wind accompanying the descent of the Holy Spirit during Pentecost in Acts 2:1-4 (Olson 414). “Thomas’ fart-problem and Jankin’s solution evoke not only Pentecost but also the fourteenth-century fashion of importing mathematical measurement and geometrical demonstration into discussions of both physical and metaphysical realities” (Olson 420). The entire *Tale* is full of satire and irony as it depicts a glaring contrast between the Friar’s actions and what he preaches. It may also reveal Chaucer’s own interest in new sciences

and act as a comedic questioning of how far any of these new principles and measurements can be taken when applied to metaphysical problems.

THE PARDONER

During Chaucer's time, Pardoners were also known as 'questors' and most of them had an unsavory reputation because of their fraudulent activities. They had letters of authority from the church and were supposed to collect money on behalf of the Church or an affiliated religious group. But all too often, they collected money to line their own pockets. These pardoners were usually lay people acting under the auspices of the Church and they were not preachers although some of them may have been monks or priests who were easily controlled by the Church. On the other hand, the tricksters and fraudulent con men were not so easily controlled and apparently there were large numbers of these imposters throughout the English countryside.

The indulgences proffered by a legitimate pardoner were not in themselves vehicles of confession to forgive the sins of the penitent but were issued by the pardoner with the understanding that the penitents would then go to church and a priest would hear their confession. The pardoner, a lay person, was not authorized to hear their confessions or to offer forgiveness for their sins. Although Chaucer's Pardoner is not an ordained priest, he pretends to be capable of absolving people from their sins.

The character of Chaucer's Pardoner is presented as a totally corrupt and greedy person who lines his pocket with money from the sale of "sacred relics" that are totally false without any authenticity. The Virgin Mary's veil is nothing more than a pillow case and the supposed bones of the saints are nothing more than the bones of pigs. It is the pardoner's possession of relics that is of paramount importance because the purpose of the entire pilgrimage to Canterbury was to view the relics of the Holy Martyr, St. Thomas a Becket. A Pardoner held a special position as a custodian of sacred relics and the corruption of this position by some was well

known particularly by those who went on pilgrimages to the cathedrals only to be denied access to view the relics.

Chaucer has used this unsavory pardoner as a satiric parody of the ecclesiastical custodians who were charged with guarding and protecting the “real” holy objects in the various shrines. These custodians decided how, when, and if parishioners could be admitted to view these holy relics that were “rarely exposed to the public-at-large. Relics themselves were similarly diverse and difficult to monitor, “they came in different sizes and types, and not even body-part relics were all considered to be equal” (Malo 84).

Chaucer’s pardoner is an illegitimate, immoral custodian of fake relics who preyed upon those wealthy who would gladly give money for these indulgences. He claimed they were pardons for sins committed by them rather than actual penance ordained by a priest hearing their confession. They also purchased the so called “sacred relics” from him as feel-good donations to the church. The pardoner took advantage of innocent people who loved God by appealing to their feelings of guilt and their fear of a judgment that could consign them to hell for sins they may have committed. His use of the sheep shoulder-bone as a type of sheep-dip healing cure for all types of ailments for animals and humans is a potent example of the way his rhetoric was used to persuade the gullible of the miraculous powers of his relics.

Notwithstanding the unsavory description of the character as having long yellow hair not covered with the usual priestly hood and with rabbit-like, staring eyes, and a small goat-like voice, *The Pardoner’s Tale* is among the most popular of all the Canterbury Tales. This character is one of the most self-conscious in the entire group. He knows he is a sham and openly acknowledges that his claims will deny salvation to him. Chaucer has woven this story

with artistic economy and its powerful simplicity reveals the depths of irony. Parker stated: “For irony to be effective, it is necessary that the reader see the figure against whom it is directed as an individual, if only fleetingly, in order that the incipient craving for vengeance in our desire for justice be gratified. You can’t be revenged on an abstraction” (93). There is also a strong psychological conflict in the complex personality of the Pardoner but the bottom line is that this man is a corrupt and greedy fraud and Chaucer very clearly shows the deplorable state of this once honorable profession.

The Pardoner has a specific order in the way he carefully describes his relics to the audience in such a way that they will believe them to be actual sacred objects. He first establishes his orthodoxy by showing the letters of papal authority. He tells some stories about his relationship with Bishops and other Church patriarchs. Then he speaks a few words in Latin which are not understood by him or his audience before he shows them the relics. By this time, he has persuaded the audience that he is legitimate and the relics are real.

First I pronounce whennes that I come,
And thane my bulles shewe I, alle and some.
(335-336)

And after that thane telle I forth my tales;
Bulles of popes and of cardynales,
Of patriarkes and bisshopes I shewe,
And in Laltyn I speke a words fewe,
To saffron with my predicacioun,
And for to stire hem to devocioun.
Thanne shewe I forth my longe cristal stones,
Ycrammed ful of clooutes and of bones,
Relikes been they, as wenen they echoon.
Thanne have I in latoun a sholder-boon
Which that was of an hooly Jewes sheep,
(341-351)

As thilke hooly Jew oure elders taught,
His beestes and his stoor shal multiplie.
(364-365) (Gen 30:32-43)

The reference in Genesis is to Jacob's sheep that were genetically influenced by the trees in the water so that Jacob's cattle were stronger and more fertile enabling Jacob to amass more cattle than Laban and thus began his inheritance.

Chaucer used the Pardoner's Prologue as a confessional vehicle for him and established a logical basis for his preaching methods. He is honest about his hypocritical preaching and openly admits to his love of power and money. In his own way perhaps he acts as a force for some good because his splendid oratory causes people to repent of their sins. Charles Koban has summed it up beautifully:

The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale gives us a representative description and illustration of medieval preaching. The Pardoner very skillfully weaves moral commentary and exemplary materials into his fabulous plot in order to impress upon his audience the truth of St. Paul's teaching, 'radix malorum est cupiditas.'⁴ His method of composing narrative and didactic materials so as to render a significant biblical text more persuasive was common practice in the middle ages (228).

Therefore my theme is yet, and evere was,
Radix malorum est Cupiditas.
(425-426) (I Tim. 6:10)

The Pardoner's Tale abounds in scriptural references. Chaucer wrote this story in exemplum format and weaves both the Prologue and the story around the entire verse from I Timothy 6:10: "For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows." Other scriptures used by the Pardoner provide a sermon digression directed against drinking, gambling,

⁴ The love of money is the root of all evil. I Tim.6:10 KJB

oath-swearing, and gluttony. The Pardoner first establishes a basis for his preaching stressing that, like Jacob, adherence to the instructions of God's Word is necessary for prosperity and wealth but then he immediately claims that the love of wealth is the source of all evil:

As thilke hooly Jew oure elders taughte,
His beestes and his stoor shal multiplie.
(364-365) (Gen. 30:37-43)

Radix malorum est Cupiditas.
(426) (I Tim. 6:10)

He quoted many scriptures warning against the sin of gluttony beginning with the sin of Adam attributed once more to the sin of eating from the tree of Knowledge rather than the sin of disobedience:

The hooly writ take I to my witesse
(483) (Eph. 5:20)

O glotony, ful of cursednesse!
O cause first of oure confusion!
O original of our dampnacioun,
Til Crist hadde boght us with is blood again!
Lo, how deere, shortly for to sayne
Aboght was thilke cursed vileynye!
Corrupt was al this world for glotonye.
(505 – 512) (Acts 20:28)

Adam oure fader, and his wyf also,
Fro Paradys to laboour and to wo
Were driven for that vice, it is no drede,
For whil that Adam fasted, as I rede,
He was in Paradys; and whan that he
Eet of the fruyt deffended on the tree,
Anon he was out cast to wo and peyne,
O glotonye, on thee wel oghte us pleyne!
(505 – 512) (Gen. 3:17-19)

Of this matiere, O Paul, we kanstow trete:
“mete unto wombe, and wombe eek unto mete,
Shal God destroyen bothe,” as Paulus seith.
(521-23) (I Cor. 6:13)

The apostel wepyng seith ful pitosly,
 “Ther walken maye of whiche yow toold have I –
 I seye it now wepyng, with pitous voys--
 That they been enemys of Cristes croys,
 Of which the end is deeth: wombe is hir god!”
 (529 -33) (Phil. 3:18, 19)

In his Prologue, the Pardoner warned the pilgrims that as custodian of the relics it is his duty to warn them that they must have submitted to confession before they can have access to the relics. No matter that he, himself, is in a state of sin, but he can restrict their access to the relics. Consider Chaucer’s mastery of satire as this corrupt and self-serving individual is set up as the controller of access to sacred relics when ecclesiastical custodians were required to be chaste and pure and this pardoner has openly admitted to drinking and wenching in every town. Yet, he proceeds to warn against the folly of drunkenness bragging of his escapades but warning others to abstain from drunkenness:

Nay, I wol drynke licour of the vyne,
 And have a joly wenche in every toun.
 (452-453)

Lo, how that drunken Looth unkyndely,
 Lay by his dogtres two, unwityngly;
 So dronke he was, he nyste what he wroghte.
 (485-487) (Gen 19:30-38)

What was comaunded unto Lamuel –
 Nat Samuel, but Lamuel, seye I:
 Redeth the Bible and fynde it expressly
 Of wyn-yevyng to hem that han justice.
 (584-587) (Prov 31:4-5)

The Pardoner seems to be particularly angered by the swearing of oaths, quoting from both the Old Testament, including the apocryphal Book of Ecclesiasticus, and the New Testament to underscore his point that it did not matter if the person was cursing, swearing or false swearing; God did not allow any type of swearing and forbade oath swearing in His name explicitly in the Second of the Ten Commandments:

Gret sweryng is a thing abhominable,
 And fals sweryng is yet moore reparable.
 The heighe God forbad sweryng at al –
 Witnesse on Mathew;
 (631-634) (Matt. 5:34-37)

But in special
 Of sweryng seith the hooly Jeremye,
 “Thou shalt swere sooth thyne othes, and nat lye,
 And were in doom, and eek in rightwisnesse;;
 But ydel sweryng is a cursednesse.
 (634-638) (Jer. 4:2)

Bihoold and se that in the firste table
 Of heighe Goddes heestes honorable,
 Hou that the seconde heeste of hum is this:
 “Tak nat my name in ydel or amys.”
 Lo, rather he forbedeth swich sweryng
 Than homicide or many a cursed thing:
 I seye that, as by ordre, thus it stondesth;
 This knoweth, that his heestes understondesth,
 How that the seconde heeste of God is that.
 (639-647) (Ex. 20:7)

And forther over, I wol thee telle al plat,
 That vengeance shal nat parten from his hous
 That of his othes is to outrageous.
 (648-650) (Ecclesiasticus 23:11)

After the Pardoner has related his story of greed, betrayal, and murder he then proceeds to offer his relics and pardons, supposedly given to him personally by the Pope, in exchange for goods and money. He insists that they are fortunate to have him available to offer such relics for them to actually touch and kiss. But the Host responds with a bawdy joke about kissing the Pardoner’s dirty breeches that he insists the Pardoner could claim were relics. The Pardoner became irate and the Knight finally had to intervene so they could move along on the journey and in the story.

By choosing a character that is traditionally corrupt, Chaucer was able to introduce one of the most urgent theological arguments of the day put forth by the Lollards: the abuse of religious

positions used for personal profit. “The Pardoner, through his central theme of religious hypocrisy, has become inextricable from the religious hypocrites who inhabit the world of contemporary religious polemic” (Fletcher 121). By choosing a character like the pardoner to purvey his message, Chaucer showed his literary skill as well as his political skill because he was not attacking the issue of indulgences and relics, but he was attacking the hypocrisy of the Church as it failed to stop such practices by this type of person.

The Tale as told by the Pardoner was based on contemporary knowledge about the plague that the pilgrims would have been all too familiar with. The story paints a vivid portrait of the depths of the Pardoner’s depravity in his quest for riches when he diabolically plays on the fears of his listeners as he relates the episode about Death in the town:

Ther cam a privee theef men clepeth Deeth ,
 . . .He hath a thousand slayn this pestilence.
 (675, 679),

He would have been well aware that his audience would have knowledge of the plague and how silently and how viciously it rampaged through the countryside, sparing few except the elderly and the feeble. The Pardoner clearly has extortive motives as the story unfolds by illustrating that the sinful rioters are motivated by the Devil to commit their heinous crimes and warning his listeners that if they are sinful, Death will take them also unless – and it is here the cleverness of the Pardoner becomes clear – they give him gold in exchange for a pardon that would cleanse their sins and save them from everlasting death in Hell. (Beidler)

Chaucer was able to avoid charges of heresy⁵ unlike Wycliffe who was brought up before the ecclesiastical courts on two occasions but was not convicted either time because of support from members of the royal family and from the support of the populace that protested on his

⁵ Theological or religious opinion or doctrine maintained in opposition, or held to be contrary, to the ‘catholic’ or orthodox doctrine of the Christian Church, or, by extension, to that of any church, creed, or religious system, considered as orthodox. Oxford English Dictionary.

behalf. Chaucer's literary skill coupled with his diplomatic abilities and political connections evidently enabled him to astutely evade prosecution as a heretic despite the fact that many, many passages in *The Canterbury Tales* could easily have identified him as a quasi-Lollard. For example; the glossing of Scriptural passages to pervert the meaning as demonstrated by the Wife, the Summoner, and the Pardoner in their choices of Scriptures was a charge leveled at the clergy by the Lollards (Fletcher 71). There are also lines in the Prologue naming the source of the Pardoner's wallet full of pardons that played upon the nationalist resentment identified by the Lollards who resented the transfer of funds from England to the coffers of Rome:

His wallet lay biforn hym in his lappe,
 Bretful of pardoun, comen from Rome al hoot.
 (686-687) (Fletcher 81)

I am certain that many incidents in the *Tales* could either be read as supporting John Wycliffe and the Lollard doctrine or as merely relating a perception of the characters based on contemporary figures that would have been familiar to the people. Chaucer would have relied upon his reputation and favorable status by the nobility to present his characters and his stories as double-entendres leaving the interpretation and the decision up to the hearer or the reader, thereby avoiding any retribution from either Church or State. In this manner he was able to render subtle criticism of both Church and State while maintaining his elevated popularity as a writer thereby avoiding the powerful ecclesiastical authorities who were all too eager to level charges of heresy and to effect ex-communication on those who spoke out against Church doctrine and ecclesiastical abuses.

However, given the distinct anti-clerical message rendered in the *Tales*, it should be noted that by the time Chaucer became an old man, the transformation and the chaos in English society at all levels had reached a point where even Chaucer would have begun to feel squeamish

about his favorable role among the nobles and would have perhaps been worrying about his own standing as a Christian about to meet his Maker. It was during his final days he is alleged to have penned his *Retraction*. “Times had changed already before Chaucer’s death in a way that would reveal much of the anticlericalism in *The Canterbury Tales* as something that. . . would have been wanting” (Fletcher 120). Surely Chaucer, as a Christian, would have gone “to mass at least on Sundays and holy days, and to confession and communion at least once a year; and that at the hour of death he would have been disturbed if he had missed absolution, unction, and the viaticum” (Tatlock 76). He would have believed that life itself was a struggle against sin and every Christian would have to follow God’s law under the auspices of the Church which meant confessing their sins and seeking absolution to enter into Heaven upon their death.

There are different viewpoints set forth by scholars regarding Chaucer’s reasoning for penning the *Retraction*. The pilgrimage of participants in *The Canterbury Tales* was a masterpiece of literary achievement so why would Chaucer feel the need to apologize for it or any of the other works he named in his retraction? I do not assign any cynical judgments about his reasoning as others have. Instead, my point of view is that, as a religious man who more than likely observed the tenets of the church that called for repentance of sins, particularly at the end of one’s life, he would have felt compelled to atone for any real or imagined sins committed in the development of his life’s literary work

The Canterbury Tales is obviously written about a religious pilgrimage intended to allow the participants to view or otherwise have some contact with the holy relics at the Cathedral where they could do penance and seek absolution for their sins. Some of those sins identified in the stories were deliberate, while others were those committed out of ignorance or from just being part of the original sin inherited by all humans from Adam. It is possible that Chaucer’s

intent to apologize for unintended offenses he may have committed in his writing evolved from his conception of the need to ask forgiveness for any sins of word or deed that he may have committed.

He most certainly would not have wanted to be found guilty then or at some future time, even after his death, of heresy that could lead to excommunication, even post-mortem. It could also be possible that by describing these characters in all of their sinful flaws he was somehow admitting to his own sinful character by being able to identify those sins that were certainly contrary to Christian precepts. Chaucer must have believed that a good Christian would set a good example for others to observe and so he would want to set an example for others how to avoid the eternal agony of Hell by properly confessing sins, whether real, imagined, or somehow attributed to him through his writing.

CONCLUSION

As a way of summation and evidence of Chaucer's intent to criticize the Church and obliquely criticize the concept of *noblisse oblige*⁶ it is fitting to revisit the characters previously discussed. What significant role or roles did the Wife play in Chaucer's plan of attack? The Wife was a hypocrite in every sense of the word and some might claim that her arguments are more physical than spiritual. She claimed to be a happy, jolly woman who had achieved mastery over each husband she had even the last one after their very physical fight. Yet, her very vocal, boisterous outbursts indicated that she was over-reaching in that area. Yes, she may have nagged some of the poor men to their death receiving their riches as a result. And yes, through her own efforts as an entrepreneur cloth-maker and generous contributor to the church, she achieved certain recognition—but—the fact that she resented it if anyone contributed more than she did indicated a flaw in her own assessment of self-worth, devoid of humility. She bragged about her sexual prowess all the while quoting scriptural passages defining biblical concepts of good women who were obedient to both God and man—a far cry from her own behavior. Chaucer used her to perform a type of preaching by women that was not acceptable to the church at that time but this was a doctrine the Lollards were promoting. (Blamires)

In her Tale, it is evident that the question of noble birth was under scrutiny by Chaucer as the Knight in her story shows his lack of honor and nobility by his behavior until the old woman corrects his thinking and he acquiesces to her wisdom:

Of thyne auncestres, for hire heigh bountee,
Which is a strange thing to thy persone,
Thy gentillesse cometh fro God alone.
Thanne comth oure verray gentillesse of grace;
It was no thyng biquethe us with oure place.
(1160-1164)

⁶ Noble ancestry constrains one (to honourable behaviour); privilege entails responsibility. Obligation as a function of (high) social standing. Oxford English Dictionary.

“My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
 I put me in youre wise governance;
 Cheseth yourself which may be moost pleasance,
 And moost honour to yow and me also,
 I do no fors the wheither of the two;
 For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me.”
 (1230-1235)

and so they lived happily ever after in joy and obedience to each other. Of course, in the Wife's eyes the story proved that women want mastery over their men but the actual story proved that women desire respect for who they are as an equal partner in all things, regardless of external appearances or lineage of birth. So that story was Chaucer's way of resolving two dilemmas. He got to examine the plight of women as inferior in the eyes of the church and he also got to comment on the foolishness of the belief that some are born more noble and deserving than others because nobility comes from God alone not some long ago ancestral lineage.

The Summoner is a despicable human with no discernible saving graces and his story is a blasphemous parody as the flatulent wind of old Thomas, given as a sacred gift to the friar, becomes a satirical version of the outpouring breath of the Holy Spirit given to and divided among the twelve disciples during Pentecost. “And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting” (Acts 2:1-2).

This story of the flatulent gift could very well have meant the end of a lesser poet than Chaucer since it would have been obvious to the pilgrims exactly what the story referenced while it also highlighted the absolute greed and hypocrisy of the friar. In this *Tale* Chaucer castigates the office of a summoner and exposes the devious behavior of mendicant friars for the decadent pit into which most of them had fallen. A writer without protection from a noble like John of

Gaunt could very well have been brought before the courts on charges of heresy and very probably would have been excommunicated for such writing.

The Pardoner's story is also one of utter and uncompromising hypocrisy as he describes his how and why manner of preaching under the guise of holiness for the express purpose of accumulating personal wealth:

Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe
Of hoolynesse, to semen hooly and trewe.
But shortly myn entente I wol devyse;
I preche of no thing but for coveityse.
(421-424)

It was precisely this type of stated agenda that the Lollards railed against and undoubtedly Chaucer was in agreement with the well-known Lollard doctrine of the day regardless of whether or not he was aligned with the movement. This false shepherd indicts himself and his motives as he continues:

For certes, many a predicacioun
Comth ofte tyme of yvel entencioun;
Som for pleasance of folk and flaterye,
To been avaunced by ypocrisye,
And som for veyne glorie, and som for hate.
(407-411)

It would not be possible for Chaucer as a man of the world to be unaware of that issue--religious hypocrisy--as both the church and the Lollards hurled accusations of false preaching at each other. The Pardoner's behavior gives rise to the question of exactly who was a heretic during that time. Certainly the Pardoner was dissenting from all established beliefs and behaviors expected of a man of God. In his essay on *The Topical Hypocrisy of Chaucer's Pardoner*, Alan Fletcher examines the differences between moral consideration versus a psychological personality of the character commenting that:

It is well known that ill fame clung to pardoners which, when Chaucer was writing, was as much traditional as it may have been warranted in reality. Certainly, their scandalous reputation would have suggested them to Chaucer as likely candidates for any study in religious hypocrisy. . .and the association of false relics with pardoners (118).

Fletcher continues with the observation that, “Chaucer’s choice of a pardoner can be interpreted as a strategy of political and literary tact. . .because it lets Chaucer hide behind a character traditionally corrupt yet into whom he can safely introduce the resonance of the most urgent and topical theological argument of his day” (119).

Clearly, each of the characters examined have a common theme relating to hypocrisy in different forms but each as distasteful as the other. Yet, each of them supports my contention that Chaucer specifically designed his characters as a definite criticism of the Catholic Church of his day particularly as it related to the abuse by those in positions of ecclesiastical and administrative power. The Wife herself was not specifically a member holding an ecclesiastical or administrative position but she clearly depicted the juxtaposition of the church against women. I contend that Chaucer was able to subtly criticize the idea of noble birth as delineated in *The Wife’s Tale* itself without suffering any consequences from it because, after all, it was just a story, a fairy-tale! Likewise, the other stories were based on familiar tales told by others that he embellished for the enjoyment of his English audiences and, even if they were critical in nature, he was protected by his own reputation as a writer and the protective umbrella of the royal households he served.

Each of the characters used Biblical passages to further their own distorted point of view underlying their own hypocrisy and flawed humanity. The Wife attempted to use those Scriptures that would further her own prejudices about the role of women without a true understanding of what she was doing. Her quasi-preaching role was definitely a criticism of the Church and the inferior role it assigned to women. Even though her “preaching” was ineffective and contradictory, it did illustrate that women should have a more active role in the hierarchy of the Church.

The Wife is the antithesis of all that is expected of a proper Christian woman in her person, in her speech, and her overall manner. Her sole purpose in life seems to be one of gaining mastery over every man in her life and she mistakenly and often comically recites Bible verses that she believes establishes her authority in this matter based on her life experiences. The effect is that her character comes off as a type of female buffoon at worst, or a foolish woman, at best. Despite her bravado she fails to prove her assertion but I believe that Chaucer uses the Wife as a criticism of the Church to show that women do have a place in espousing their religious viewpoints because she can preach, manipulating the Scriptures, as well as any man and Chaucer would have been aware of the current controversy surrounding this Lollard challenge to the licensing restriction of the Church. (Blamires 230)

The Summoner's Tale is a prime example of how Chaucer was able to subtly criticize the Church and its administrative oversight since the office of a summoner was not one held in high repute and the summoner's position itself was not part of a religious order. Therefore, Chaucer could double-down on this character and the story he told of a greedy and salacious friar that would serve as a criticism of the deplorable state the wandering friars had fallen into. It was a

criticism of the Church's failure to discipline any of them and to restore the proper role of the religious orders as ministering to the poor.

It was also a criticism of the failure by the ecclesiastical administrators to properly oversee the position of summoner that had become corrupt and abusive. The Summoner himself did not use any Scriptural passages but glibly told the story of a hypocritical and decadent friar who fraudulently abused the Scriptures for his own purposes while failing miserably to live up to any of his exhortations to others. It was by using this method of a story told by an already despised character that Chaucer could openly criticize the actions of those Orders of friars that had become decadent and sinful without indicting himself as critical of the Church in his writing.

The Summoner seems to be the best support for criticism leveled at the Church for its failure to halt the onslaught of corruption by their representatives that so damaged the populace in the name of the Church. These representatives not only failed to nurture the flock as was their charge but they fleeced them in every possible way through fear and intimidation in a physical as well as a spiritual sense. Neither the summoner nor his story friar depicted anything favorable to the Church and Chaucer used both characters to demonstrate the level of corruption and extortion that plagued the people in the name of religion.

The Pardoner reveals himself as a prideful hypocrite who clearly understood his own failure to adhere to the Biblical examples of a faithful shepherd. Even while he was warning others in the story that greed and the love of riches is the way to death, he was selling fake relics to openly enrich himself and issuing illegal pardons to the ignorant flock he was supposed to lead. He used Scriptural passages in a meaningful way but these very Scriptures served to indict him for his own greed and lasciviousness. In this way, Chaucer's Pardoner was an example of

the fraudulent practices wielded by these pardoners and not reigned in or controlled by the Church that were well-known and resented by the people. By using the character of a corrupt pardoner in a story designed to illustrate the wages of sin and death, I contend that Chaucer was able to expose the hypocrisy and corruption of these positions within the Church without fear of reprisal.

The Pardoner may have some redeeming features. He is corrupt but honest about his own failures and acknowledges that he is on shaky ground when it comes to his own salvation. Chaucer uses this character to highlight the depths of degradation that seemed to be the norm among the mendicant friars during that time. The abysmal failure of the Church to chastise these monks to get their priorities and duties in line with the original calling of their Order was apparent in this *Tale*. These monks took cruel advantage of the trusting folk who looked to them for wisdom and spiritual guidance. I believe that Chaucer used this character successfully in his criticism of the Church because the friar did provide some good moral guidance through his scriptural references and his story even though he was anything but a shining example of a good shepherd in his quest for personal wealth. It would have been left up to the reader or the listener to assess the responsibility of the Church as it pertained to this friar.

Each of the three characters provides a study of how Chaucer criticized the Church in different areas. He has each of them quote liberally from the Bible using quotes that can be glossed over and used persuasively to suit their own purposes and each *Tale* serves as a caricature or parody that Chaucer could safely use for his criticism of the Church within the bounds of fictive poetry.

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Personal Information

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Education

B.A. English, 1972, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA

M.A. English, Anticipated 2013, California State University, Bakersfield, CA

Business Management Seminars and Courses completed during 1966 - 1989:

Duke University,
SUNY at Buffalo,
Darden School of Business UVA,
Bolger Management Academy, DC
CSUB Bakersfield CA– 1966 – 1989

Honors and Awards

2012 Betty Creative Writing Award, CSU, Bakersfield, CA

Association Memberships

Phi Kappa Phi honor society

Sigma Tau Delta honor society

Professional Experience

Thirty plus years of government and contractor work advancing through the ranks culminating in several executive positions in various locations throughout the U.S:

Intermetrics Incorporated,
Sr. Software Test Engineer, Vienna, VA

10/97 – 12/99

- Micro temps Systems and Programming
Software Test Engineer, Greenbelt MD 09/95 – 09/97
- Microtemps Systems and Programming
Quality Analysis Specialist, Greenbelt MD 09/94 – 09/95
- Retired from USPS 01/91 – 08/94
Unemployed – Bakersfield, CA
- United States Postal Service (USPS) 01/66 – 12/90
California, Arizona, New York City, Washington DC, Maine and Alabama
- Window and Distribution Clerk duties – 1966 – 1973
 - Station accounting, supervision of window clerks and carriers – 1973 – 1975
 - Postmaster responsibilities for post offices 1975 – 1981
 - USPS Headquarters 1981-1985
 - Participation in the development of the LLPV
 - Environmental and Fuel Conservation Presentations for APMG,
 - Participation in development of the window automation systems
 - Executive responsibilities for all operational, administrative, and accounting functions of two management sectional centers with annual budgets up to \$7 million. Administration, coordination, and oversight of more than 250 associate post offices and more than 2000 employees. 1985-1990

Current Research

Currently in the process of a thesis submission based on my contention that Geoffrey Chaucer developed many of his characters and their stories in *The Canterbury Tales* as a direct criticism of the failure by the Catholic Church in his day to protect the parishioners from the corruption and abuse heaped upon them by stewards of the Church. The characters used as examples in this paper are The Wife of Bath, The Summoner, and The Pardoner.

References

Dr. Kim Flachmann, Professor English, CSUB Faculty

Dr. Andrew Troup, Professor of English, CSUB Faculty

Dr. Emerson Case, Professor of English, CSUB Faculty