

## The Devil is in the Details

“In all literature there is nothing that touches or resembles the *Prologue*. It is the concise portrait of an entire nation, high and low, old and young, male and female, lay and clerical, learned and ignorant, rogue and righteous, land and sea, town and country, but without extremes.” Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is a Rashomon satire presumably written in 1000; its main purpose was to expose the Catholic church for its unrestrained and unnecessary power. Chaucer concerns himself not with the extremes of social classes, but with those of the high nobility and the lowest “surf” groups between the second and third estates. However, among these estates he emphasizes how unique any particular representative can be using comparison and contrast across these estates to prove that general standards are often unfitting.

In his tales, Chaucer begins with his second highest social ranking representatives, the Knight and his son, the Squire, and emphasizes that despite being in the same class, they differ considerably. The Knight is extremely modest and devoted to courage and posture, and this is shown when Chaucer writes “The *Knight* is a most distinguished man ... to ride abroad had followed chivalry, truth, honor, generousness, and courtesy. ... in all his life to any, come what might / he was a true perfect gentle-knight” (Chaucer 4-5). The Knight is described as honorable, courteous, etc., essentially a “perfect gentle-knight.” His son, perhaps partly because of his youth, is more devoted to the courtier aspects often associated with chivalry, but the Knight is extremely modest in appearance and devotes himself to courage and justice; furthermore, in appearance he was modest, for his tunic was “stained and dark / with smudges where his armor

had left marks.” Its commonly expected that a parent and child to be rather alike, but in this situation, it’s the opposite, and this proves that familial environment might not retain a significant impact on a person. The Squire, on the other hand, is quite different despite being in the same social class. He is young, of course, but described by Chaucer as “A lover ... a lad of fire ... his locks [are] as curly as if they had been pressed ... he was embroidered like a meadow bright” (Chaucer 5). The squire is thus described as less modest than his father in his appearance. He is more concerned with display of courtly/chivalrous qualities; his concerns with songs, poetry, drawing, and writing show him to be far less concerned with warfare, modesty, and courage in battle than his father is. So, though he has been in a few battles and is courteous, many of his primary interests and his appearances are unique in contrast to his father. This proves that a parent and their child do not have to be similar, and this standard that people commonly place on parents and their children is unnecessary. On a completely different spectrum, two presumably unrelated women have more in common than one would expect, especially compared to the Knight and the Squire.

Despite their differences, both the Nun and the Wife of Bath are characters Chaucer criticizes with great humor to suggest that the standard they “met” is insincere. The Nun/Prioress is described as an overly sentimental and concerned only with polite manners and outward appearance; Chaucer’s satirizes her nature by writing “At meat her manners were well taught withal; no morsel from her lips did she let fall, ... as for her sympathies and tender feelings, / She used to weep if she but saw a mouse dead... and she had little dogs she would be feeding with roasted flesh, ... she was all sentiment and tender heart” (Chaucer 6-7). The Nun is described with great irony as sentimental and sympathetic with animals in particular but not with

people as one should be able to expect of a nun. Throughout this quote, Chaucer is showing the ironic and self-centered nature of the Nun, and how the Nun cares only for outward appearance of sympathy and concern and the impression she leaves on others. Outward appearance is a common similarity between the Wife of Bath and the Nun, they care only about how they appear, and this, unfortunately, was (and still is) an ordinary occurrence. Chaucer is suggesting that these people are too focused on their exterior; they don't realize how vile their personality is becoming, and although not stressed, this is a matter that needs to be resolved. The Wife of Bath is being described as proud and extravagant person, including her lavish appearance. "In all the parish not a dame dared stir ... her kerchiefs were finely woven ground;/ I dared have sworn they weighed a good ten pound ... and gartered tight; her shoes were soft and new" (Chaucer 15). The Wife of Bath is described as a particularly influential figure, a superior status, and a person who seems to be primarily concerned with exterior appearance. Even though the Wife of Bath is a commoner, she has multiple people under her influence, and if she doesn't follow a rule, she is not confronted about this, proving that she is treated above her actual status, and through her outward appearance, she can control others. The Nun and the Wife of Bath clearly only care for their looks, and don't bother with concern for their fellow human beings. Chaucer suggests through his humorous criticisms that one shouldn't focus on appearance exclusively or they could find themselves in the same situation that the Nun and Wife of Bath are in. While the Nun, Wife of Bath, and Friar may be similar in their nature of manipulating and misusing, the Parson is the polar opposite of the three characters.

Among the characters who represent the clergy, the reader finds both praise and criticism in Chaucer's contrast of the parson and the friar; though both belong to this class, they both are

dramatically different, and through this, Chaucer suggests that the friar has disingenuously met his standard, and he emphasizes this fact through the parson. Chaucer describes the Friar as materialistic and unscrupulous by writing “And pocket-knives, to give to pretty girls ... better than lepers, beggars and that crew, ... it was not fitting ... of his position, dealing with scum / of wretched lepers; nothing good can come ... qualified to hear confessions, / or so he said” (Chaucer 9). Chaucer writes in a way that the Friar might describe himself – better than others who don’t have money or status, and “qualified to hear confessions.” It is evident that the Friar is exceptionally materialistic, and it is very likely that he’s only a Friar because of the wealth earned from his duty knowing that being a friar means to devote one’s life to poverty, which the Friar clearly did not. The Friar is convinced that he’s better than everyone else simply because he has wealth and a high rank, but it is quite obvious that he isn’t; instead of telling oneself that they’re better than the people of the lowest status, a friar is told to place themselves on the same level as the beggar, and the Friar did the exact opposite of this, therefore proving his feigned standard. Chaucer proves the Friar’s undeniable immorality and offensive misuse of the church and Chaucer uses the Friar as a representative for other corrupt figures of the church, and he exposes the untrustworthy nature of these figures. Moreover, Chaucer describes the Parson as the complete opposite, writing “There was [a] poor Parson / yet he was rich in holy thought and work ... who truly knew Christ’s gospel and would preach it ... giving to poor parishioners round about ... yet he neglected not in rain or thunder ... the true example that a priest should give / is one of cleanliness, how the sheep should live” (Chaucer 16). Chaucer describes the Parson as living discreetly and humbly, and his giving and supportive nature. Unlike the Friar, the Parson lives his life simply devoted to teaching, and he’d rather give his money away,

whether the weather or conditions around him are convenient or not, and he'd give it away to people for truly need it, thus proving that unlike the aforementioned figures, the standard set on the Parson is genuinely met. Through these two characters, Chaucer shows what he expects from people of the church, and contrasts what he expects with what is common in the church through satire.

Whether they are fulfilled or unfulfilled, standards placed on these especially influential would often disappoint the person who placed these expectations because their expectation either wasn't met, or the person who had "met" had done it in a disingenuous manner, and this was an especially popular theme in Chaucer's time. This made the *Canterbury Tales* a revolutionary book because nobody had dared to rebel against the church through a book and it changed the perspective people on the church. This forced people to recognize the church's excessive power, hence it being called revolutionary. Chaucer's overall goal was to show the ignorant population how different people are from what they had realized to save the people from further manipulation.