

SATIRE AS AN ASPECT OF CHAUCER'S SOCIAL CRITICISM

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INTRODUCTION

Most students of English literature are familiar with the great epithet which has been placed upon Chaucer--father of English poetry. This has been meant as the greatest of compliments, but we find ourselves agreeing with Lowes¹ in that it is actually unfortunate. In a way it serves to dismiss him in a kindly fashion as the worthy but "archaic ancestor of a brilliant line." Paradoxically, he is actually the very thing that he gave birth to; "he is English poetry incarnate" and only very few of his "sons" were able to equal or outshine him.

As Chaucer himself was interested in people of all levels, so people of all levels can find in Chaucer something that will interest them. Even in the unsettled seventeenth century, Lady Anne Clifford,² "cultivated but not educated," in her later and saddened years wrote that she had been comforted by reading Chaucer: "I was in a pitiable case, having as many troubles as I have, but when I read in that (Chaucer's works), I scorn and make light of them all, and a little part of his beauteous spirit infuses itself in me."

Chaucer's subject matter and techniques work together to make his writing so readable. Chaucer astonishes us many times with his modernity in both areas.

He is so great a poet, his human sympathy is so pervasive, his knowledge of mankind so profound, his

¹J. L. Lowes, Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 1.

²J. S. P. Tatlock, The Mind and Art of Chaucer, p. 87.

personal attitude toward the reader so intimate, that one easily gets to feel that the secrets of his art may best be understood by entering into close communion with him and throwing distracting commentaries aside.¹

Yet, we realize that such impressions are gained only through a very skilled and consistent technique. Another realization must come home to us: Chaucer was not writing for an appreciative audience of the twentieth century, nor a Lady Clifford of the seventeenth, but for an audience of the later fourteenth century, who surely too were aware of his subject and methods.

Perhaps the greatest phase of his technique which has kept his works vivid through the years is that of humor. It is a sly, quiet, roguish humor; nothing that would make the reader burst into loud laughter; neither is it grotesque or exaggerated. Often it is so subtle that one needs to be on his guard lest he miss it.² This humor is interwoven with satire which he directs in variant degrees at the society and traditions of his day. Most of all, for the purpose of this thesis, are we interested in Chaucer's use of this great technique as he delineates the traditions and customs of his contemporaries of the upper classes. By examining his writings, it will be shown that Chaucer's satire is not necessarily directed at individuals in the upper classes, but at the traditions and institutions of a society which they represent. His mask is that of a "simple-minded" reporter, reporting the "news" of his day, but yet we sense that he is involved in the moral problems that confront that society. It is

¹W. W. Lawrence, Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales, p. 5.

²Edwin Greenlaw, editor, Selections from Chaucer, p. 43.

not necessarily the purpose at hand to present Chaucer as a Renaissance man, but as one who was very much aware of the decadence of many of the ideas to which the upper classes had long clung. He lived at a time when many changes were being made. By projecting what he says against the actual historical situation and Chaucer's part in that situation, we shall see the subtle irony involved in his subject matter, having already assumed a fourteenth century audience who too would be aware of the irony.

SATIRE

Since satire has been generally assumed to be one of Chaucer's tools in writing, it seems fitting to begin with a definition of satire and a comparison of Chaucer's satire with that of others who have been widely known for its use. Satire as a method of literary composition and criticism has been in evidence for many centuries. Its motives and equipment may be varied, but its presence has nonetheless been felt in the culture of mankind. Its tone may range from a mild humor to a mordant and bitter sarcasm. Fowler¹ states that the motive of satire is that of amendment; its province falls within that of morals and manners; its method is accentuation; and its audience is the self-satisfied. This definition, however, applies to satire in its more aggressive, action-seeking form. The purpose of some satirists

¹H. W. Fowler, A Dictionary of Modern English Usage, p. 241.

may only be that of holding a mirror up to the society of his day that it may see itself as it actually is and not as it conceives itself to be. Whatever the purpose may be, it is essential that the satirist use every equipment available to draw the reader into his picture in order that he may see the scene as he, the author, sees it. The main instruments¹ which the satirist finds available among his possibilities of equipment are irony, sarcasm, invective, wit, and humor.

John Bullitt² states:

In its most serious function, satire is a mediator between two perceptions--the unillusioned perception of man as he actually is, and the ideal perception, or vision, of man as he ought to be. It is often argued, therefore, that satire can become a vital form of literature only when there is a fairly widespread agreement about what man ought to be. The satirist needs the conviction that fixed intellectual ideals or norms can give him, and the assurance that he will receive understanding from his readers.

Edgar Johnson in A Treasury of Satire³ claims that satire is an unmasking criticism--a criticism which is trying to get around or overcome an obstacle, and this obstacle Johnson calls the Censor. To him it is a case of overriding or outwitting the Censor. To do this the satirist uses ironical commendations, sometimes circumlocution or insinuation; sometimes he must hide his meaning in symbolic masks; sometimes he poses as a friend or disguises himself as a mere prankster. Thackeray⁴ in speaking

¹Oliphant Smeaton, English Satires, "Introduction," p. xiii.

²John M. Bullitt, Jonathan Swift and the Anatomy of Satire, p. 1.

³Edgar Johnson, A Treasury of Satire, pp. 7-9.

⁴Smeaton, op. cit., p. xiii.

of the function of the humorist or satirist, since to him they are one, says:

He professes to awaken and direct your love, your pity, your kindness, your scorn for untruth, pretension, imposture, your tenderness for the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the unhappy. To the best of his ability he comments on all the ordinary actions and passions of life almost.

Whatever outlook may be taken in respect to the satirist, it is known fact that he has a historical as well as literary and ethical value among us. Any satirist who touches on the social aspects of life presents a vivid picture, "though not of course complete and impartial, of the age to which he belongs, of the men, their manners, fashions, tastes and prevalent opinions."¹

The credit for the origin of satire as a conscious literary style goes to the Romans.² Satura meant in its origin nothing more than a "medley or miscellany, as various in subject matter as in form or tone. No doubt it was always flavoured with 'sharp Italian wit.'" As it developed in its usage by the Romans it became most useful in their style, "for it allowed free play to the livelier side of the national genius, and yet, as a criticism of real life, had a ballast of hard utility." The first of the Roman satirists was Quintus Ennius (239-169 B.C.);³ however, the four princes of early Roman satire were Lucilius, Horace, Persius, and Juvenal. For the purpose at hand Horace and Juvenal will be the only two discussed, for these two typify the two classes into

¹Smeaton, op. cit., p. xiii.

²Cyril Bailey, editor, The Mind of Rome, p. 281.

³Loc. cit.

which Dryden divided satirists--the followers of Horace and the followers of Juvenal.

Juvenal used satire with consummate power and spirit as a great force to attack the brutalities of tyranny, crime, folly, and frenzy of a degenerate society.¹ He was as a prophet who assailed vice and crime with furious indignation and invective scorn. Edgar Johnson states:²

Juvenal looks upon this world as extravagant indulgence and corruption with the censorious eye of a Cato and portrays it with the violence and bitterness of an Isaiah. . . . Technically, Juvenal's procedure is about as complicated as knocking the reader down and burying him beneath a drayload of muck.

His instruments of satire were those of contemptuous ridicule, a sardonic irony that held nothing in reverence, a caustic sarcasm that burned like acid, and abusive invective that ransacked the language for phrases of scorn.³ His picture of evil was one that was designedly painted with exaggerated colors, so that disgust might be more readily aroused by the loathsomeness of the picture.

Horace stands in contrast to Juvenal. Horace's method is one of more subtle, indirect attack. His tone is graceful and mocking, never one of Juvenalian rage. He gives a "sly prick instead of stabbing to the heart; he is more amused than saddened."⁴ Horace's satire conforms to Addison's great rule which he

¹"Satire," *Americana*, Vol. 24, p. 311.

²Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

³Smeaton, *op. cit.*, p. xviii.

⁴Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

lays down in the Spectator, that "the satire which only seeks to wound is as dangerous as arrows that fly in the dark."¹ There is always an ethical undercurrent running beneath his polished raillery and good-natured satire. Often as not he speeds his light darts at his own weaknesses. He is a man of the world, assailing the enemies of common sense with weapons of humor and sarcasm. He does not deal with great and weighty themes, but instead turns to the everyday life around him.

Rome has foolishness enough to wink at--singers who won't sing when asked and who won't stop when started, bores who cling and can't be shaken loose, snobbery and glittering ostentation, avarice gloating on its moneybags and dead to all the other delights of life.²

Though his morality does not rise above the level of sensible moderation, he enforces it with such dramatic liveliness and gay humor that his satire is a "thing of beauty" and, as yet can be seen, will remain a "joy forever."

A Greek satirist who has much in common with Horace, as far as style is concerned, is Lucian. He has the liveliness and lightness of Horace, but a "stronger grasp in the wider philosophical universe." He is never self-righteous like Juvenal; his satire is a "quiet ripple of enjoyment, never a molten torrent of fury." In the Dialogues of the Gods he "far-ically delineates the inhabitants of Olympus."³ He reveals their all too-human frailties. He shows that the gods are too

¹Smeaton, op. cit., p. xvii.

²Johnson, op. cit. p. 60.

³Ibid., pp. 88-90.

nonexistent to be hated; their invention is another of the follies of men. Now he persuades men to laugh at their own fantastic notions about the gods. He never attacks directly; he does not preach or become wrought up.

He simply coaxes his victims into the position in which their weaknesses are most ludicrously clear, and then mischievously shows them to the world. . . . He strips men's follies down to their naked truth and persuades us to laugh at the embarrassing denudation. For eighteen centuries he has been one of the world's voices of joy and sanity.¹

Perhaps to the latter two Chaucer, with whom this study is concerned, can be compared most usefully. His satire is kindly and congenial like that of Horace, rather than biting and mordant like that of Juvenal. "He raps his age across the knuckles, it is true, for its faults and foibles, but the censor's face wears a genial smile."² He seems to look at most matters objectively; he does not wear his heart "pinned to his sleeve" as his contemporary Langland does. Chaucer's satire is genial, laughing, and good-natured in most cases, tolerant of human weaknesses, perhaps because he is so keenly aware of his own. He uses many techniques to paint his picture of satire and humor. Only a few of these will be mentioned at this time as the greater portion of this paper is concerned with illustrations and purposes of his particular technique. First of all, there is his pose of self-deprecation, the "my wit is short"³ pose. This prevails throughout his

¹Loc. cit.

²Smeaton, *op. cit.*, p. xxii.

³Prologue to Canterbury Tales, line 746. (All line references to poems by Chaucer will be according to F. N. Robinson's edition, The Poetical Works of Chaucer.)

writings, from the Book of the Duchess to the Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse. His naivete is very ely; it serves to arouse the unwary reader to a more lively attention. His humor ranges from the low-brow type of the fabliau of the Miller's Tale to the courtly wit of Pandarus. Perhaps his greatest technique of satirical humor is that of characterization. No class escapes his genial probe of satire--nobility, clergy, middle class, the poor. In the Canterbury Tales Chaucer's satire glimmere constantly both through the description of the pilgrims and the tales they tell; his mastery is eupreme and his humor displays all its freedom and range.

Chaucer, from the mental watchtower whence he surveys the world of his time, has taken in all the varieties and the absurdities; he has noted the discrepancies of characters, the perverse individualities of creatures, the shifting of principle and conduct, the clash of reality and appearance.¹

We read Chaucer because he enlivens those matchless pictures of his age. Even though it has been suggested² that since Chaucer wrote for the court circles he dared not write bitterly, it seems more likely that his method of subtle satire was much more useful in what he wished to accomplish. Chaucer is not crusading for any great changes--those changes are there and he sees more to come. Chaucer is very much aware of this and he thinks his audience should be also.

Skeat,³ in comparing the satire of Chaucer with that of his

¹Louis Cazamian, The Development of English Humor, p. 64.

²Smeaton, op. cit., p. xxiii.

³W. W. Skeat, editor, Piers the Plowman, p. xxviii.

contemporary Langland, states:

Chaucer describes the rich more fully than the poor, and shows us the holiday-making, cheerful, genial phase of English life; but William pictures the homely poor in their ill-fed, hard-working condition, battling against hunger, famine, injustice, oppression, and all the stern realities and hardships that tried them as gold is tried in fire. Chaucer's satire often raises a good-humoured laugh; but William's is that of a man who is constrained to speak out all the bitter truth, and it is as earnest as is the cry of an injured man who appeals to Heaven for vengeance. Each, in his own way, is equally admirable, and worthy to be honoured by all who prize highly the English character and our land.

Langland is a medieval Juvenal.¹ He is a rather sad-countenanced dreamer of the Malvern hills, sorrowing over the vices, abuses, and social misery of his day. He finds no comfort in the established institutions of his day because he finds them filled with fraud and falsehood. He is a pathetic figure etand-ing out against pestilences, hasty and ill-advised marriages, lazy workmen, sham beggars, corruption, and bribery in the law-courts. He is not quite so fiery as Juvenal, and, unlike Juvenal, he does place in his somber picture a ray of hope in the person of the reformer, Piers the Plowman, who typifies the Christ. Thus he satirizes evil by exposing it and contrasting it with good.

Jonathan Swift, one of the greatest of the satirists, comes to mind in this consideration of Chaucer. There are times when he uses both trends of satire which have been thus far analyzed. Swift states in an article² written soon after the publication of Gulliver's Travels that good humor is the best ingredient

¹Smeaton, op. cit., pp. xxi-xxii.

²Bullitt, op. cit., p. 7.

toward that kind of satire, which is the most useful and gives the least offense, and is the character which gives Horace the preference to Juvenal. Swift's reaction to life varies from time to time, depending on his feeling about the matter at hand. Sometimes he sees life as a comedy, sometimes as a lamentable tragedy, and often as a source of angry frustration; and sometimes he acted in all ways at once. Swift utilizes nearly all the recognized methods of satiric composition throughout the range of his long list of works.¹ In A Tale of a Tub he uses the satiric tale to lash Dissenters, the Papists, and even the Church of England. In The Battle of the Books the parody or travesty of the Romances of Chivalry is used to ridicule the controversy raging among Temple, Wotton, Boyle, and Bentley, regarding the comparative merits of ancient and modern writers. In Gulliver's Travels the fictitious narrative or mock journal is used, consisting of adopting an absurd supposition at the outset and then gravely deducing the logical effects which follow.

Even though Swift may have felt that the way of Horace would be preferred, as he grew older he followed more the method of Juvenal as he "concentrated increasingly upon the agony of life" in his humor.² He once said after the death of a friend that he hated life when he saw how many wretches burdened the earth with life when such as his friend had to die. He concluded that God probably never intended life for a blessing.³ Even in

¹Smeaton, op. cit., p. xli.

²Bullitt, op. cit., p. 8.

³Ibid., p. 9

the year before the publication of *Gulliver's Travels* he wrote to his dear friend Pope as follows:

All my love is toward individuals. . . . I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth . . . (but) I hate and detest that animal called man. . . . Upon this great foundation of misanthropy. . . the whole building of my *Travels* is erected.¹

We find in Swift an urgent need to speak out, an impelling drive to express his own dissatisfaction. He expressed this quite fully in another portion of his letter to Pope: "I never will have peace of mind till all honest men are of my opinion."²

Of the present time, there is one satirist who is comparable to Chaucer in many aspects and that is James Thurber. In many respects he is a twentieth century Chaucer in his psychological, humorous probing into the nature and attitudes of his fellow man. Ambivalent, however, has been the word applied at times to Thurber's own attitude.³ Although he believes he is optimistic about the human species, he tends to nurse doubt when he rolls the subject around in his mind:

The human species is both horrible and wonderful. Occasionally I get very mad at human beings, but there's nothing you can do about it. I like people and hate them at the same time. I wouldn't draw them in cartoons, if I didn't think they were horrible; and I wouldn't write about them, if I didn't think they were wonderful.⁴

Edgar Johnson⁵ has called Thurber the "sanest zany in contemporary

¹Paul Robert Lieder, Robert Lovett, Robert Root, editors, *British Poetry and Prose*, p. 725.

²Bullitt, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

³"Priceless Gift of Laughter," *Time*, 58:88-95, July 9, 1951.

⁴*Loc. cit.*

⁵Johnson, *op. cit.*, pp. 733-734.

satire." Thurber can be aroused to a burning heat, however. Johnson continues that no comic satirist writing today has a more lethal touch. By the time his heat has arisen from plain-tiveness to indignation he can be fatal. There is not much left to pick up after The Male Animal has done its work on "the brainless cult of decadent athleticism in American colleges and on the bullying of intellectual workers by business interests." Let Your Mind Alone is directed against all the "psychological analyze-yourself literature, from the writers of inspirational slop to the high-toned psychoanalytical racketeers and their exploitation of pseudo-scientific jargon." Johnson concludes that the very essence of Thurber's satire is his "unpretentious sanity confronting a crazy world." The president of Williams College, bestowing upon Thurber the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters, praised him for having brought to troubled America the priceless gift of laughter.¹ Eliot² commented in 1950 upon Thurber's humor as follows:

It is a form of humor which is also a way of saying something serious. There is criticism of life at the bottom of it. It is serious and even somber. Unlike so much humor, it is not merely a criticism of manners--that is, of the superficial aspects of society at a given moment--but something more profound. His writings and also his illustrations are capable of surviving the immediate environment and time out of which they spring. To some extent, they will be a document of the age they belong to.

With a brief survey of the above satirists we have been able to delineate Chaucer's methods and uses of satire more fully.

¹Loc. cit.

²Loc. cit.

We have found that he follows more the tradition of Horace than that of Juvenal. We have seen him as having a genial and courtly air, but at the same time as having a clear-sighted view of the people, as well as the traditions, of his day. He has a way of opening a "window upon life" and letting the reader see the persons and events of his own vision.

And this is the reason his satire is so convincing. He does not argue and there is no temptation to refute him. He does not declaim, and there is no opportunity for reply. He merely lets us see his fools and rascals in their native foolishness and rascality, and we necessarily think of them as he would have us think.

This of course is the triumph of the creative imagination and constructive art. And it is in these qualities that Chaucer is supreme. All other satirists of the fourteenth century give us the materials from which imagination may, if it can, reconstruct the life of the time. Chaucer displays that life with all the solidity and colors of reality and the men and women of his world are as vivid and familiar as those whom we see daily with our own eyes.¹

CHAUCER'S POSE OF SELF-DEPRECATON

Chaucer's consciously developed pose of comic self-deprecation can be traced from The Book of the Duchess, which was written about 1369, to The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse, written in 1399. It serves a very definite purpose in that it wins and enlivens the reader's attention and interest. The pose of humility, the portraying of the author's own weakness, helps the reader to see that here is a man who does not mind admitting his inability to grasp all that life holds and does not dare set himself up as an authority on any subject.

¹John Matthews Manly, Some New Light on Chaucer, pp. 294-295.

Before the reader realizes it, he is very cleverly drawn into an admiration of the author's techniques as well as his subtle purpose in using such a pose. Then what seems at first an artlessness has become an art within itself.

The Book of the Duchess

*this page is nearly
verbatim from
Robinson - are all
the others like this?*

The Book of the Duchess is not only the earliest, but almost the only work of Chaucer that can be fixed with confidence to any actual occurrence. According to tradition recorded by John Stow and still accepted by most critics, the poem was written in commemoration of the death of Blanche, duchess of Lancaster and first wife of John of Gaunt.¹ Chaucer himself speaks of the poem as the Deeth of Blauncho the Duchesse in The Legend of Good Women. The duchess died in September, 1369, and it is likely that the poem was composed within the next few months.

In The Book of the Duchess the comic pose is one of the elements which carries the story along and helps in its unfolding. As the dream unfolds, the poet becomes aware of a "man in bla^{ck}" who does not join in the hunting party, but seems in great sorrow as he leans against a huge oak. The poet seemingly does not understand the somber attire and mournful song of this man:

¹F. N. Robinson, editor, The Poetical Works of Chaucer, p. 314.

I have of sorwe so gret won
 That joye gete I never non,
 Now that I see my lady bryght,
 Which I have love with al my myght,
 Is fro me ded and ys agoon.¹

The poet apologizes for disturbing him and asks him to tell him of his "sorwes smerte." Then begins the procees of the "man in blak," who evidently is John of Gaunt, telling of his great love for his "lady bryght," who is Blanche. He uses the extended metaphor of the chess game to reveal how Fortune has treated him so badly. He concludes this portion of his story by saying:

"Thou wost ful lytel what thow meneest;
 I have lost more than thow wenest."²

Again the poet does not catch the point and says:

"Loo, (eey) how that may be?
 Good eir, telle me al hooly
 In what wyse, how, why, and wherfore
 That ye have thus youre blysse lore."³

The "man in blak" bids him to sit down, then he says:

"I telle the upon a condicioun
 That thou shalt hooly, with all thy wyt,
 Doo thyn entent to herkene hit."⁴

After another portion of the story is revealed, the "stupid" poet again speaks:

"What los ys that?" (quod I theoo)
 "Nyl she not love you? ys hyt soo?
 Or have ye oght doon amye,
 That she hath left you? ye hyt this?
 For Goddes love, telle me all."⁵

¹Geoffrey Chaucer, The Book of the Duchess, lines 475-81.

²Ibid., lines 743, 744.

³Ibid., lines 745-748.

⁴Ibid., line 750-752.

⁵Ibid., lines 1139-1143.

After more eulogy of Blanche, the poet interrupts:

"Sir," (quod I), "where is she now?"¹

The mourner replies:

"That was the los that here-before
I told the that I hadde lorn
Bethenke how I seyde here-beorn,
Thou wost ful lytel what thou menest;
I have lost more than thou wenest."²

Still the poet does not get the point:

"Allas, sir, how? what may that be?"³

The "man in blak" tells him forcefully:

"She ys ded!"⁴

At last the poet understands, and the poem is concluded with several puns, another tool of Chaucer's humor:

A long castel with walles white,
Be seynt Johan! on a ryche hil
As me mette; but thus hyt fil.⁵

The "ryche hil" was probably Richmond in Yorkshire, which became a possession of John of Gaunt when he was only two, at which time he was made Earl of Richmond, and belonged to him until his second marriage in 1372. The "long castel" is probably a reference to Lancaster, and there may be further reference in the "walles white" and "seynt Johan" to the names of Blanche and John of Gaunt.⁶

As we compare The Book of the Duchess to the other poems

¹Ibid., line 1298.

²Ibid., lines 1302-1306.

³Ibid., line 1308.

⁴Ibid., line 1309.

⁵Ibid., lines 1318-1320

⁶Robinson, op. cit., p. 886.

which follow, we will note that in comparison the pose in this poem is very awkward and at times we think the poet appears to be too stupid for the effect desired. In fact, the poem in many other phases--characterization, conversation, proportion, meter, style--shows all indication that it stands at the beginning of Chaucer's development.

The House of Fame

The next poem in which the reticent pose of the poet will be considered is The House of Fame. There was probably a considerable interval between the composition of The Book of the Duchess and The House of Fame. The usual opinion has been to place The House of Fame among the minor poems, after Troilus and not long before The Legend of Good Women; however, there are no decisive considerations in its support.¹ The reference to Chaucer's "rekenynges"² would at least fix the limits between 1374 and 1385. Therefore, for our chronological study of the development of this particular comic pose of Chaucer we shall consider it next.

The pose and the structure of the poem as a whole shows much improvement over The Book of the Duchess. Again it is of the love-vision convention and even though the theme is supposed to be that the poet may receive "tydings of Love's folks,"³ the interest shifts from the affairs of love to the uncertainty

¹Ibid., p. 330.

²Geoffrey Chaucer, The House of Fame, line 653.

³Ibid., line 645.

and changoableness of the Goddess of Fame. However, the comedy of the long-winded eagle, the reticent mask of the poet, and the mockery in the dispensing of fame, all add up to better reading than that found in The Book of the Duchess.

Book I deals mainly with the story of Aeneas and Dido from Virgil's Aeneid. Book II gives a very lively picture of the eagle "that shon with fethres as of gold."¹ The eagle is never presented as a fearsome creature, but as good-natured, jolly, and very talkative. As he is conveying the poet to the House of Fame, he says:

Seynte Marye!
Thou art noyous for to carye,
And nothyng nedeth it, pardee!²

A little later he states the purpose of his conveying of

"Geffrey."³ His tone and phrasing are humorously satirical:

That thou so longe trewely
Hast served so ententyfly
His blynde newew Cupido,
And faire Venus also,
Withoute geurdon ever yit,
And never-the-lesse hast set thy wit--
Although that in thy hed ful lyte is
To make bookys, songes, dytees,
.....
Jupiter considereth this.
And also, beau, sir, other thynges
Of Loves folk yf they be glade
Ne of noght elles that God made;
And noght oonly from fer contree
That ther no tydyng cometh thee.⁴

The eagle accuses the poet of going home after all his

¹Ibid., line 530.

²Ibid., lines 573-575.

³Ibid., line 729.

⁴Ibid., lines 615-657.

"rekenynges" to sit "domb as any stoon" at another book until his appearance becomes "fully dawsed."¹ The poet's "recompensation" then for such "devocion" is to be a trip to the House of Fame. During the remainder of the trip the eagle expostulates at great length upon such subjects as everything has its own natural place to which it has a tendency to return. Sound, which is broken air, has its own particular place of reception, and this is the place for which they are headed, the House of Fame. Finally when the much-talked-about place is close by, the eagle says:

Now up the hed, for al ys wel;
Seynt Julyan, loo bon hostell!²

In the Invocation to Book III Chaucer pleads with the "God of science and of lyght" to help his "lytel" book, for even though the "rym ys lyght and lewed,"³ he would like for Apollo to make "hyt sunwhat agreeable." Another item of humorous satire in this portion of The House of Fame comes during the time when Chaucer is describing the gold plating on the House of Fame:

As fyn as ducat in Venyse,
Of which to lite in my pouche is.⁴

Another incident of the same import comes when an attendant asks Chaucer, after the varied bestowals of fame upon people have been noted, if he had come to this place for fame.

¹Ibid., lines 653-660.

²Ibid., lines 1023, 1024.

³Ibid., lines 1091-1109.

⁴Ibid., lines 1348, 1349.

Chaucer says:

"Nay, for sothe, fren, . . .
 I can noight hyder, graunt mercy,
 For no such cause, by my hed!
 Sufficeth me as I were ded,
 That no wight have my name in honde
 I wot myself best how y stonde;
 For what I drye, or what I thynke,
 I wil myselven al hyt drynke,
 Certeyn, for the more part
 As fer forth as I kon myn art."¹

After a trip through the revolving House of Rumor, adjacent to the House of Fame, we find the poem unfinished, ourselves curious about what the "tydyngs of Loves folk" were to be and who the "man of gret auctorite"² might be, but with a feeling that Chaucer has given his opinion in a very subtle way of fickle Fame and that our reading has not been in vain.

The Parliament of Fowls

In the Parliament of Fowls Chaucer returned to the love-vision. Features made familiar by the Book of the Duchess and the House of Fame--the preliminary reading of a book, the ensuing sleep and dream, the supernatural guide, the vision itself, the allegorical abstractions--reappear in a somewhat different setting, adapted to a new purpose.³

Robert Root⁴ states very plainly that Chaucer's power as a humorist springs into sudden maturity in the Parliament of Fowls. However, he concludes that it is not until Chaucer has finished his introduction and has left his authors well behind

¹Ibid., lines 1873-1882.

²Ibid., line 2157.

³Robinson, op. cit., p. 361.

⁴Robert Root, The Poetry of Chaucer, p. 18.

him that "the conventional gives place to the natural, and the poet's genius plays freely."¹ Nevill Coghill² comments particularly on the improvement in Chaucer's skill in conversation. "The eagle in The House of Fame talked better than the Man in Black, and now in The Parliament of Fowls, the very ducks talk better than the eagle."

Chaucer's own presence in the poem is felt only very briefly at the beginning, but again it helps set the tone for the entire poem.

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lern,
Th'assay so hard, so sharp the conquerynge,
The dredful joye, alwey that slit so yerne:
Al this mene I by Love, that my felynge
Astonyeth, with his wondorful werkynge
So sore iwys, that whan I on hym thynke,
Nat wot I wel wher that I flete or synke.³

Then comes the pretense that all he knows about Love is what he reads in his books:

For al be that I knowe nat Love in dede,
Ne wot how that he quiteth folk here hyre,
Yit happeth me ful ofte in bokes reede
Of his myrakles and his crewel yre.
There rede I wel he wol be lord and syre;
I dar nat seyn, his strokes been so so sore,
But "God save swich a lord"--I can na moore.⁴

As has already been indicated, the mask only sets the tone. The real satire appears later in the conversation of the birds. This part of the discussion will be reserved for a later portion of this thesis.

¹Ibid., p. 66.

²Nevill Coghill, The Poet Chaucer, p. 62.

³Chaucer, The Parliament of Fowls, lines 1-7.

⁴Ibid., lines 8-14.

The Legend of Good Women

Another love-vision poem in which the vehicle of self-deprecation must be considered is The Legend of Good Women. According to the central theme in the Prologue to The Legend, Chaucer is being condemned for having implied in the conduct of Criseyde and his translation of the Roman de la Rose that women are inconstant and their love untrustworthy. As a penalty for his misbehavior he is commanded by the Queen Alceste to write a legendary of Cupid's saints--that is, of women who were good according to the standard of the religion of Love. Nevill Coghill¹ finds in the recantation a bit of irony:

A flatter soul than Chaucer's might submissively
have toed the party line and undertaken his recantation
seriously; but,

Forced to recant our cant, if we have wit,
Our recantation will have cant in it.
Chaucer, with all appearance of innocence, decided to
toe it to an inward and ironical tune of his own.
High seriousness was laid aside; allegorical fancy-
dress was put on (for the last time) and he entered upon
the exquisite performance of a solemn badinerie. Just
as ballet written and danced in a spirit of graceful
comedy may have moments of serious tenderness and other
moments of burlesque, so The Legend of Good Women has
a variety of mood, sentiment, description, comedy, and
light irony to give colour to his monotonous task.

If we agree with Coghill on this particular point it would be on the mask of "Chaucer the Simpleton."² There have been those who would find the satire in Chaucer's choice of women who are to pose as the Saints of Cupid.³ Among the selection of women

¹Coghill, op. cit., p. 88.

²Ibid., p. 102.

³Robinson, op. cit., p. 567.

were those guilty of murder and other serious crimes. By his choice the burlesque would become even more noticeable. However, this assumption is perhaps the viewpoint of a twentieth century reader and not of a fourteenth century audience. To Chaucer's contemporaries the catalog of women would serve adequately as examples of feminine fidelity.

Then again we find Chaucer's stock pose of his dependence upon books for his delight, yet with the added suggestion that there might be something which could make him put the books aside:

And as for me, though I konne but lyte,
On bokes for to rede I me delyte
And to hem yive I feyth and ful credence,
And in myn herte have hem in reverence.
So hertely, that ther is game noon
That fro my bokes maketh me to goon,
But yt be seldom on the holyday,
Save, certeynly, whan that the month of May
Is comen, and that I here the foules synge,
And that the floures gynnen for to sprynge,
Farewel my bok, and my devocioun.¹

Then he proceeds with praise for the daisy and displays again his feeling of inadequacy:

Allas, that I ne had Englyssh, ryme, or prose,
Suffisant this flour to preye a ryght.²

Chaucer manages to celebrate only nine and a half ladies out of the nineteen he had proposed as examples of female faithfulness. He started with Cleopatra and, going on to Thisbe, Dido, Hypsipyle, Medea, Lucrece, Ariadne, Philomela, and Phillis,

¹The Legend of Good Women, Text F, lines 28-39.

²Ibid., lines 66, 67.

he seems finally to have given up in the middle of *Hypermnestra*. Throughout the poem he shows signs of boredom with his task. Cazamian¹ suggests that the demands of the theme of solemnity has become so exacting that The Legend of Good Women is left unfinished, "because its subject and a humorous disposition agree too ill together."

The Canterbury Tales

My wit is short, ye may well understonde.²

We are not disappointed; again our naive, humble reporter puts in his appearance in Chaucer's most noteworthy work, The Canterbury Tales. The wide range of Chaucer's satire and humor are fully displayed in this great work, but the pose of self-deprecation is there again to intrigue us. By this time in our chronological examination of Chaucer's works we would have missed the mask of reticence if it had not been present. Now we are becoming aware of the fact that it serves the author's purpose quite well. Cazamian³ remarks about Chaucer's mask:

He went even beyond that degree of self-consciousness; he grasped the nature and the meaning of the mask which the humorist must wear, and let us see that he saw through it by now and then peeping from under it.

There are hints of Chaucer's assumed naivete in his comments relating to some of the pilgrims whom he describes. For instance, when the Summoner says,

¹Cazamian, op. cit. p. 63.

²Chaucer, Prologue to The Canterbury Tales, line 746.

³Cazamian, op. cit. p. 67.

Purs is the ercedekenes helle,¹

Chaucer comments,

But wel I woot he lyed right in dede;
Of cursyng oghte ech gulty man him dred,
For curs wol slee right as assoillyng savith,
And also war hym of a Significavit.²

Earlier when the monk is being described as one who "heeled after the newe world the space" and as one who did not hold to the theory that a monk should stay in his "cloystre," again Chaucer gives us a little ironical aside:

And I sede his opinion was good.
Why sholde he studie and make hymselfen wood,
Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure,
As Austyn bit? How shall the world be served?
Lat Austyn have his swynk to him reserved!³

Let us listen to the words of "Oure Hoost" as he speaks to Chaucer:

. . . "What man artow?" quod he;
"Thou lookest as thow woldest fynde an hare,
For evere upon the ground I se thee stare.

"Approche neer, and looke up murily.
Now war yow, sires, and lat this man have place!
He in the waast is shape as wel as I;
This were a popet in an arm t'embrace.⁴
For any womman, smal and fair of face.
He semeth elvyssh by his contenance,
For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce.

¹Prologue to The Canterbury Tales, line 655.

²Ibid., lines 659-661.

³Ibid., lines 183-188.

⁴Another phase of Chaucer's self-minimizing pose, though minor perhaps, is this reference to his plumpness. Perhaps this explains why Chaucer could never conceive of himself as a lover, but one who must spend his time reading about love. The fact of his plumpness seems to be confirmed in line 31 of Lenvoy a Scogan.

"Sei now somewhat, syn oother folk han sayd;
Telle us a tale of murthe, and that anon."¹

In the words of the Host we have noted Chaucer's downcast look. Some would say that this only indicates his sadness after having heard the Prioress' very touching tale, but the word "evere" in the line "for evere upon the ground"² seems to indicate that it is a characteristic of the poet which has been with him all during the journey. Anyway, the "creator of all the pilgrims," when asked to tell a tale, protests that all he knows is an old rime which he "lernerd longe agoon." After the Host has given his assent, Chaucer launches out into the "doggerel jog-trot" of the stanzas of Sir Thopas. He is allowed to finish only one "fit" and begin another until the Host declares he can stand no more of it.³ Could it be that "mine host" has mistaken the "mask" for the "face" and accepted Sir Thopas as a serious romance?⁴

In reference to Sir Thopas as a parody, Nevill Coghill comments:

But the kind of parody brought off by Chaucer in Sir Thopas is a piece of cunning literary mockery of current popular taste, even to the variations in the verse-forms sprinkled through the first 'fit,' scrupulously copied in derision from current models. As for the matter, the inane tedium of such tales, apart from their doggerel dance of syllables and rhyme, is faithfully mocked, as anyone who can bring himself to read such romances as Sir Isumbras, Sir Eglamour, or Sir Percival, in the collection known as The Thornton Romances, can perceive.

¹Chaucer, Prologue to Sir Thopas, lines 695-706.

²Ibid., line 697.

³Robinson, op. cit., p. 12.

⁴Coghill, op. cit., p. 151.

Is this tale then to be taken as an exemplification of "my wit is short" pose? Then what shall we do with the Tale of Melibee, which Chaucer tells when he is not allowed to finish Sir Thopas? One critic¹ has observed that it would appear to the modern reader that Chaucer, cut off in the midst of Sir Thopas, revenges himself by telling the dull tale of Melibee. Yet it is possible to argue that this type of moralizing was very common at the time and would have seemed neither funny nor tedious to anyone, even to Chaucer. Anyway, it was received with great enthusiasm by "Oure Hoost" who says:

. . . "As I am feithful man,
And by that precious corpus Madrian,
I hadde levere than a barel ale
That Goodelief, my wyf, hadde herd this tale!²

We may have to conclude with Coghill³ that it is an "enigma." Or with Root⁴ we may decide that this is a good opportunity to take Chaucer at his word when he says of another tale:

And therefore, whoso list it not yhere,
Turne over the leef, and chese another tale.

The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse

The Envoy to The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse may be precisely dated. It must have been written between September 30, 1399, when Henry was received as king by the parliament, and October 3, 1399, when Chaucer received the royal grant of an

¹Root, op. cit., p. 203.

²Chaucer, Prologue to the Monk's Tale, lines 1891-1894.

³Coghill, op. cit., p. 153.

⁴Root, op. cit., p. 203.

additional stipend of forty marks. It has been suggested that the poem, with the envoy, was written earlier and may have been originally intended for Richard II.¹

Chaucer's complaint in the conventional language of the amorous appeal of a lover to his mistress is certainly a happy variation on a well-worn theme:

To yow, my purse, and to noon other wight
Complayne I, for ye be my lady dere!
I am so sory, now that ye been lyght;
For certes, but ye make me hevy chere,
Me were as leef be layd upon my bere;
For which unto your mercy thus I crye:
Beth hevy ageyn, or elles mot I dye!

Now voucheth sauf this day, or yt be nyght,
That I of yow the blisful soun may here,
Or see your colour lyk the sonne bryght,
That of yelownesse hadde never pere.
Ye be my lyf, ye be myn hertes stere,
Quene of comfort and of good compagne:
Beth hevy ageyn, or elles moote I dye!

Now purse, that ben to me my lyves lyght
And saveour, as doun in this world here,
Out of this tounne helpe me through your myght,
Syn that ye wole nat ben my tresorere;
For I am shave as nye as any frere.
But yet I pray unto your curtesye:
Beth hevy agen, or elles moote I dye!

Envoy de Chaucer

O conquerour of Brutes Albyon,
Which that by lyne and free eleccion
Been verray kyng, this song to yow I sende;
And ye, that mowen alle oure harmes amende,
Have mynde upon my supplicacion!²

As we have already noted, this happy little appeal was not only skillful but effective; Chaucer received a grant from Henry IV

¹Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 616.

²Chaucer, The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse.

on October 3, 1399. This was perhaps one of his last poems as the last recorded payment of his pension was June 5, 1400, and according to the generally accepted date inscribed on his tomb in Westminster Abbey, he died October 25, 1400.

Thus through a period of thirty years the development of Chaucer's pose of naivete has been traced and examined. Its consistent development has been noted, as well as its purpose in the author's writing. We have seen it from its awkward beginning in The Book of the Duchess to its effective conclusion in The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse.

THE TEMPER OF THE TIMES

Since it is the supposition of this thesis that Chaucer dealt in a genial, but nonetheless satirical, fashion with the society of his day, it seems appropriate to give a brief survey of the historical events and social situations of his time. Only through allusions here and there in his works can we say that Chaucer was actually conscious of the great events of his day, yet we know from certain events of his own life and background that he was very much a part of the life and activity of his country. Actually we can say that his works were consciously untropical in nature. We can detect many subtle probes at the institutions and traditions of his day, but the important events of his day, such as the war between France and England, the Peasants' Revolt, the Black Death, were almost never written about directly.

It is certainly true that Chaucer lived in an "epoch-making

age."¹ England's claim to the lordship of the seas was at least a century old; but Sluys,² her first decisive maritime victory, was won in the same year in which Chaucer was probably born; six years later, Calais became in a sense England's first colony.³ During the first thirty years of Chaucer's life, England's armies had never been so frequently and so uniformly victorious.

Chivalry, a dying institution of the nobility, flared up in a kind of "autumnal splendor" during this period.⁴ The essence of vassalage which had consisted of a personal loyalty to a single lord was a thing of the past, as a man might now collect a dozen fiefs with as many lords. Carl Stephenson⁵ states that under such conditions chivalry became more and more an aristocratic affectation, overlaid with the courtoisie of the fashionable romance. By the end of the thirteenth century chivalry had been made into an elaborate ceremony--half mystic sacrament to conform to the ideals of the church, and half courtly pageant to delight the eyes of the high-born ladies. In the fourteenth century the lower the noble sank in importance, the more extravagantly he flaunted his pride of birth and his

¹Coulton, Chaucer and His England, p. 10.

²See Froissart (Thomas Johnes, editor), pp. 72, 73, for a very interesting account of the battle of Sluys. In fact no better account of the Hundred Years' War could be found than that of Froissart. However, we do find his accounts slanted toward the upper classes rather than the yeomen, peasants and others of the lower classes who both kept the war going and suffered its aftermath.

³Coulton, Chaucer and His England, p. 10.

⁴Johnson, op. cit., p. 108.

⁵Carl Stephenson, Mediaeval History, p. 444.

feudal tradition. Even in the case of Philip VI and Edward III, Stephenson¹ remarks that their chivalrous ostentation ill concealed their actual worthlessness. But in the practical sense chivalry was dying; the longbow had already destroyed the military value of the mounted knight: Crecy was actually won by the arrows of the massed yeomen.

Even though it was just another chapter in an old, old story, during the time of Chaucer there were rustles of anti-clerical dissatisfaction, which reached a head in the last years of Edward III and under Richard II. Ever since the Conquest there had been a tendency to resent papal interference in English affairs. While thus distrusting many actions of the papacy, many Englishmen were also becoming at this time antagonistic to their clergy, with their vast lands and increasing wealth.² Economic discontent and religious dissatisfaction were closely interwoven, and both are evident in the teaching and influence of England's great contemporary religious leader, John Wyclif.

Along with decadent chivalry and dissatisfaction with the clergy, the years of Chaucer's life saw also the social and economic discontent of the dying days of serfdom. In the fourteenth century, there were three great risings for which the peasants were at least in part responsible: the insurrection of 1323-1328 in West Flanders, the Jacquerie of 1357 in northern

¹Loc. cit.

²W. P. Hall and R. G. Albion, A History of England and the British Empire, pp. 189, 190.

France, and the Great Revolt in 1381.¹ As far as the Revolt of 1381 is concerned, the social questions involved cannot be understood unless we remember that in 1381 more than half the people of England did not have the privileges which Magna Charta promised each "freeman."² At the same time, England had been unable to adjust herself to the tremendous dislocation of labor caused by the Black Death during the middle of the fourteenth century. Consequently, laborers were growing more and more conscious of their importance and at the same time their lack of privileges.

During this period of disintegration of the forces of the Middle Ages, new forces, new factors were at work producing what we like to think of as the modern world.³ In fact, the England of Edward III already contained the main national factors which we find in the England of today. One factor which gave a fresh direction to society was the rise of the middle class. In the Middle Ages, society, as we have already noted, was divided into three main elements: the clergy, the nobility, and the third estate; but by the time of Chaucer, we have already seen that the clergy was losing much of its influence, the power of the nobility was waning, and a new social class was rising to importance. Since the class developed between the titled nobility on the one hand and the peasantry and small artisans on the other, it is called the middle class, or the bourgeoisie. This

¹Stephenson, *op. cit.*, p. 441.

²G. M. Trevelyan, Chaucer and the Age of Wycliffe, p. 195.

³Robert Ergang, Europe from the Renaissance to Waterloo, p. 3.

new class had originally been composed of those who made the most of the opportunities offered by the revival of commerce during the Crusades. Along with the progress of this class came many other things, such as the growth of new urban centers, craft guilds, capitalistic enterprises, and development of banking. Hence, the entire economic expansion of the early modern period is in a way an expression of the middle class.

With the change in the class relations came the rise of the national states in western Europe. On the one hand the national idea was beginning to break up the theoretical unity of Christendom, the Holy Roman Empire, and, on the other hand, the disjointed political fragments were being fused more or less into homogeneous states.¹ In these new national states the king was the focus of power. The national governments under strong monarchs were absorbing the old feudal states both as to territory and as to function. In this process of unification the monarch was enabled to overcome the power of the remaining feudal nobles only with the financial support of the rising middle class. A good example of imperialism which Chaucer himself witnessed was Edward's armed claim to the throne of France and another in the attempt of John of Gaunt to seize the kingdom of Castile.²

Another great item which displayed Chaucer's age as one of transition was the new emphasis upon learning in many different facets. Learning and art had long ceased to be predominately

¹Coulton, Chaucer and His England, p. 9.

²Johnson, op. cit., p. 108.

monastic. True monasticism was mainly puritan, and therefore unfavorable to free development in any way except that of mystic contemplation. It is notable, also, that our universities rose on the ruins of monastic learning. Before the end of Edward III's reign, the English universities had become far more truly national than at any previous time; their training less definitely ecclesiastical¹ and their culture overflowed to laymen like Chaucer and Gower.² Moreover, the Inns of Court had become practically lay universities of law. It is very likely that Chaucer had his training, which equipped him for the diplomatic business, at one of the Inns of Court, the Inner Temple.³

Another phase of learning and study during this period, which had a great deal of influence on Chaucer's own writing, was that of humanism. The credit for the revival of interest in humanistic study goes to Petrarch. Even before his time the humanist had existed, but the earlier humanist was essentially one who remained loyal to the ideal of the ancient grammarians or the secular literature of pagan antiquity.⁴ It is inevitable that the weakening of ecclesiastical influence should produce a sharp reaction towards secular ideals in education. Now the tendency in Italy was the emphasis upon the aesthetic--to study

¹Interesting are the collections on the university life of Chaucer's day by Edith Rickert in her Chaucer's England, pp. 128-138. She includes such excerpts as: Law Students in a Fray, Requirements for the Bachelor's Degree (1340), and Blacklisted Books (among which are Ovid's Art of Love and any other book which might lure or provoke the scholars to think of that which is forbidden!)

²Coulton, Chaucer and His England, pp. 8, 9.

³John L. Lowes, Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 41.

⁴Stephenson, op. cit., p. 403.

literature for its own sake. Even though Petrarch may have been largely responsible for the revival of the new interest in the classics, it was also "Boccaccio's practice to direct men to the artistic purpose of the writers of antiquity, who portrayed life realistically."¹ All the literature of the past was quite different from the mysticism and allegory that shadowed the Middle Ages. Chaucer's pathway to realism was much more difficult than that of Boccaccio, because the entire atmosphere in Italy was more sympathetic to art. One hundred and fifty years later England was ready for what Chaucer had discovered. Sir Philip Sidney's² tribute to Chaucer in this respect follows:

Chaucer, undoubtedly did excellently well in his *Troilus and Criseyde*: of whom, truly, I know not whether to marvel more, either that he in that misty time could see so clearly, or that we in this clear age go so stumblingly after him.

Chaucer lived in the very flood tide of all the changes which have been noted above and, indeed, was very much a part of them. He was born of a middle class London family. He had court connections that brought him into public employment all his life. He served in the English army in France as early as 1359, at which time he was taken prisoner near Rheims. The next year he was released on ransom, to which Edward III contributed. He was an ambassador on diplomatic and secret missions to France, Italy, and Flanders. In March of 1381 he even helped negotiate a marriage between Richard II and a daughter of the

¹E. F. Shannon, Chaucer and the Roman Poets, pp. 377, 378.
²Ibid., p. 382.

King of France. In 1384, after his return from his mission to Italy, he was appointed Comptroller in the port of London of the customs and subsidy of wools, hides, and wine. This office he probably held until 1386. In 1385 he had become one of the sixteen justices of peace for Kent. The following year he was chosen as Knight of the Shire (not in chivalric sense) for Kent. One of his most responsible positions, which he held under royal appointment, was the office of Clerk of the King's Works. In 1390-1391 and again in 1397-1398, he was appointed one of two deputy-keepers of the small royal forest of North Petherton. Tatlock¹ states that it is probably during these North Petherton years that Chaucer formed his valuable relation with Henry Bolingbroke. "Thus from the beginning of his life to the end, as a man in this world his life was contingent on the reigning sovereign and his family."² Not only was there this important court connection, but his work brought him into contact with all types of people, whom we shall next study as he so delightfully and subtly depicted them.

CHIVALRY AND THE UPPER CLASSES

Thus far in this thesis the point has been established that satire was a common instrument in the writing of Chaucer. This satire has been defined as being the kind after the "order of Horace," that it is not necessarily malicious and offensive,

¹J. S. P. Tatlock, The Mind and Art of Chaucer, p. 14.

²Ibid., p. 15.

but usually genial and "smiling." It has been shown wherein he has used satire in self-deprecation. The purpose of this explanation has been to show how this technique set the tone and led the way to the study of his method of criticism of his contemporaries and their traditions. The temper of the times has been shown in order to give a historical background against which Chaucer's portraits may more graphically be seen. It is, however, with his criticism of the upper classes that this thesis is ultimately concerned. Examples from the portrayal of other classes will only be shown to contrast with and to serve as highlighting for the upper groups.

Especially through the framework of The Canterbury Tales are we allowed to visualize examples of a whole society. We find various ideas and pictures reemphasized in other writings, but it is in The Tales that we get the fullest view. Only on a religious pilgrimage could such a heterogeneous group be found. Indeed, it proves a normal way to bring all kinds of people together. The circle of the royalty and the higher nobility is not directly represented, to be sure. Men of such rank could hardly have been included in the company. But the vivid life and manners of a courtly society are well expressed by Knight, the Squire, and even the Prioress. A lesser gentry is found in the land-owning Franklin. The Sergeant at Law and the Physician illustrate the learned professions. We have the Merchant to represent the upper reaches of commerce--the new class of wool exporters, exchange-manipulators, beginners in capitalism. The Wife of Bath, a cloth-maker, is also representative of the newest

and most important of England's industries at the time. Next below this group are the "churl-folk," of whom the Miller is probably the grandest. Next come the servant class, with the Manciple and the Reve in the upper brackets and the Yeoman and the Cook below them. At the lowest of the whole scale, yet treated kindly by Chaucer, his creator, is the country Ploughman. The Church is rather well represented, too, and at least one representative, the Prioress, probably possesses "noble blood" such as that of the Knight. At the other end of the clergy scale is the village Parson, brother of the Ploughman, and in like manner treated kindly. Then somewhere between the ecclesiastics and the laymen comes the representative of the university, the Clerk of Oxford. At a moral and social level below all of these come the Pardoner and the Summoner. "Both were laymen, hangers-on of the Church, and hated."¹

The Knight and the Squire

As representative of both chivalry and the upper classes Chaucer has given us the Knight and his son, the Squire, in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. The Knight is portrayed as one who loves "chivalrie, trouthe and honour, freedom and curteisie."² Considering the places he had been in wars and crusades, he could very well be a Teutonic Knight.

¹Coghill, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

²General Prologue, lines 45, 46.

Manly¹ sorts the campaigns of the Knight into three groups, arranged in probable order of time. The first group, he says, represents events in "a long struggle to drive the Moors out of Spain and to punish their piratical raids from Northern Africa upon Christians and Christian commerce."

In Gernade at the seege eek hadde he be
Of Algezir, and riden in Belmarye
.....
And foughten for oure felth at Tramysse
In lystes thries, and ay slayne his foo.²

The second group which Manly suggests, and the most important, is referred to in the following lines:

At Alisaundre he was whan it was wonne
.....
At Lyey was he and at Satalye
Whan they were wonne; and in the Grete See
At many a noble armee hadde he be.
.....
This ilke worthy knyght hadde been also
Somtyme with the lord of Palatye
Agayn another bethen in Turkye.³

The third chronological group Manly says is suggested in the following lines:

Ful ofte tyme he hadde the bord bigonne
Aboven alle nacions in Pruce;
In Lettow hadde he reysed and in Ruce,
No Christen man so ofte of his degree.⁴

Even with all this "military glory"

..... he was wys,
And of his port as meeke as is a mayde.
He never yet no vileynye ne sayde
In al his lyf unto no manner wight

¹Manly, op. cit., pp. 52ff.

²General Prologue, lines 56, 57; 62, 63.

³Ibid., lines 51; 58-60; 64-66.

⁴Ibid., lines 52-55.

He was a verray, parfit gentil knight.¹

If we are looking for "richness of color" in Chaucer's Knight, we will have to be content with his many expeditions, for we will not find it in his present array.

His hors were goode, but he was nat gay.
Of fustian he wered a gypon
Al bismotered with his habergeon,²

This, however, only adds to the picture of the knight of honor and service, for the lines which follow these indicate that he had just returned from a "viage" and has been anxious to go on the pilgrimage to pay homage to Saint Thomas, the patron of the wounded and the ill.

If, however, we are looking for a representative of knight-hood who is gay, romantic, and vivid, let us take a look at the Squire, the Knight's son. After all, he is a product of his father's training, so it is not too much to assume that he is a younger "version" of our "worthy Knight" and even as the Knight may become after he returns to his home from the pilgrimage.

A lovyere and a lusty bachelor,
With lokkes crulles as they were leyd in presse.
.....

Embrouded was he, as it were a meede
Al ful of freshe floures, whyte and reede.
Syngynge he was, or floytynge, at the day;
He was as fressh as is the month of May.
.....

Wel koude he sitte on hors and faire ryde.
He koude songes make and wel endite;
Juste and eek daunce, and weel purtreye and write.
So hoote he lovede that by nyghtertale
He sleep namore than dooth a nyghtyngale

¹Ibid., lines 68-72.

²Ibid., lines 74-76.

Curteis he was, lowely, and servysable,¹
And carf biforn his fader at the table.¹

The tale which the Knight tells is certainly an indication of his courtly love tendencies. It is the story of Palamon and Arcite and their courtly love affair with Emily. For our purpose at this point we are only interested in the tales insofar as they help reveal to us the nature in which Chaucer characterizes the teller. Root says concerning the nature of this tale:

If we are to read the Knight's Tale in the spirit in which Chaucer conceived it, we must give ourselves up to the spirit of romance; we must not look for subtle characterization, nor for strict probability of action; we must delight in the fair shows of things, and not ask too many questions. Chaucer can be realistic enough when he so elects; but here he has chosen otherwise.² . . .

It is not in the characterization, but in the description that the greatness of the Knight's Tale resides. . . . The Knight's Tale is preeminently a web of splendidly pictured tapestry, in which the eye may take delight, and on which the memory may fondly linger.³

So we may conclude that the Knight tells a story of the straight courtly love theme such as we would expect him to tell from the idea which Chaucer emphasizes in him--the personification of idealism in chivalry.

The Squire is permitted to tell a story of pure romance, full of adventure and enchantment, laid in the distant land of Cambyuskan.⁴ His tale conforms with his character as shown in

¹Ibid., lines 80, 81; 89-92; 94-100.

²Root, op. cit., p. 169.

³Ibid., pp. 171, 172.

⁴Robinson, op. cit., p. 9.

The General Prologue. It has features of all the romance of the courtly code. The main part of his story is that of a falcon deserted and betrayed by her tercelet lover. It is filled with wonders, horses of brass, magic mirrors, rings, and swords.

"There is no knowing how long he would have wandered among such age-old, ever fresh imaginings, had he not been interrupted by the Franklin."¹ Root² compares the tales of the Knight and the Squire by saying that the Knight has "lived his life and worked his work," and that his tale is of deeds already accomplished. The Squire, though he has been "somtyme in chivachye" is living mainly in the infinite future, where all things are possible.

To most people the portraiture and the tales of the Knight and the Squire are simply ideal examples of Medieval noble society. But we must remember that these two were contemporaries of Chaucer and when held up against the actual circumstances of the day they are anachronistic. The satire is very subtle, but it is there, nonetheless, contrasting Chaucer's noble society as it actually was and how it sometimes pretended to be.

Let us take another look at chivalry and knighthood, before and at the time of Chaucer, in order that we may more vividly see that Chaucer, as well as his audience, knew that in the portrayal of the Knight and the Squire there was irony. Chivalry, a feature of feudalism, was the code of behavior of the ideal knight. Primitive chivalry³ was originally non-Christian and

¹Coghill, op. cit., p. 167.

²Root, op. cit., pp. 269, 270.

³Stephenson, op. cit., p. 187.

carried strictly masculine implications. It was simply the standards of behavior adopted by those of the warrior class to govern their relations with one another. The knight was to fight bravely and according to certain accepted rules, scorning tricks and strategy that might be considered cowardly. He must be loyal to his friends, treat a conquered foe with gallantry, yet toward the baseborn he felt no such obligation. It was as Salzman¹ states:

"Chivalry, indeed, was a class conception, an elaborate and ornate code of courtssy toward equals and superiors, which concerned itself little with the existence of inferiors."

By the thirteenth century the old masculine chivalry was beginning to be subordinated to the glorification of women. A type of sentimental vassalage now became the order of the day; each knight must be in "spiritual vassalage" to a lady and each lady must have her courtly lover. Now the knight must joust for the favor of proud ladies and seek opportunities to rescue damsels in distress. The songs of courtly love began to create a world of unreality. The rough fighting men, in outward form at least, took on more polished manners under the influence of courtoisie.

Muriel Bowden² reminds us that before the eleventh century chivalry as we understand it today did not exist as an institution.

¹J. F. Salzman, English Life in the Middle Ages, p. 191.

²Muriel Bowden, A Commentary on the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales, p. 45.

It was not until 1095, when Urban II in proclaiming the First Crusade, welded together the Cross and the sword, that the Christian ideal of the Order of Knighthood was created and took such high position in man's aspirations. . . . It was inevitable, of course, that few would ever attain, either then or in the centuries to follow, the exalted standard set by Urban II. As Professor Hearnshaw points out, "the decadence of chivalry can be discovered in its very idea;" "medieval religion was too irrational, medieval warfare too cruel," for the institution of chivalry ever to have realized its ideal "even approximately."

Certainly by the fourteenth century the real Crusades as first instituted and conceived were at an end. Now many of the so-called Crusades were no more than piratical raids. A couple of generations before Chaucer's birth Etienne de Bourbon stated that the upper classes "not only did not take the cross, but scoffed at the lower orders when they did so."¹

Besides the contributing factor of the waning of the original zeal and purpose of the Crusades to the decaying of chivalry and feudalism, there are several other factors that should be reviewed. We have pointed out earlier that the essence of feudalism, the loyalty of one vassal to one lord, had ended with the possibility that a vassal now might have several fiefs with as many lords. Another "fatal cause of the decay of chivalry, perhaps, lay in the growing prosperity of the merchant class."² There came a slow but sure intermingling between the two classes, and it was not long before the rich plebeian could buy for himself the sacred rank of Knighthood. There were now

¹Coulton, Chaucer and His England, p. 191.

²Loc. cit.

ways of raising oneself to the "upper ranks" without having been born there. Even Chaucer's most "worthy Knight" has something to say about rising to a higher "estaat":

As whan a man hath been in povre estaat
And clymbeth up and wexeth fortunat
And there abideth in prosperitee
Swich thyng is gladsom, as it thynketh me
And of swich thyng were goodly for to telle.¹

Another contributing factor to the falling away of chivalry was the war between France and England. It would only take Froissart's² account of the battle of Crecy to show how the knight with all his panoply was actually put in a secondary position by the yeomen with the longbow and the Cornish and Welshmen on foot, armed with large knives, "falling upon earls, barons, knights, and squires." Edward III tried conscription to fill the ranks of his army.³ Then as the source of conscription began to dry up, the King had to hire troops. It was also through the necessity of using every possible means to raise an army that we find at a very early stage in the war important commands given to knights and squires who had fought themselves up from the ranks. Coulton⁴ cites the example of Sir John Hawkwood, the most renowned of all these soldiers of fortune, who had begun as a common archer.

Projected against all of this, it is not hard for us to see that Chaucer's Knight is out-of-date. Let us take for example

¹Prologue to Nun's Priest's Tale, lines 2775-2779.

²Froissart, op. cit., pp. 164-168.

³Coulton, Chaucer and His England, pp. 232-244.

⁴Ibid., p. 242.

his campaigns. These have a bearing upon Chaucer's portrayal of the Knight. Let us consider the "sacking" of Alexandria in 1365, which might to some go under the heading of a crusade, and in which our Knight supposedly participated. Steven Runciman¹ is very vivid in his description of this piratical attack on Alexandria, which was supposed to become a base for a later attack upon Jerusalem. The victory of Alexandria was celebrated by unparalleled savagery. The two and a half centuries of Holy Warfare had taught the crusaders nothing of humanity. "The whole city stank with the odour of human and animal corpses." All was a sad disappointment to Peter I of Cyprus who was the instigator and leader of the expedition, but who did not favor the pillaging which went on. "The holocaust of Alexandria marks the end of those Crusades whose direct object was the recovery of the Holy Land." Another thing which takes away from our romantic conception of the Knight is what Huizinga² tells about the Teutonic Knights, one of whom we have assumed our Knight to be. Though the order was "born of mutual penetration of monastic and feudal ideas," it quite early took on the "character of great political and economic institutions." The primary aim was no longer the practice of chivalry; "that element, as well as their spiritual aspirations, had been more or less effaced by their political and financial importance."

¹Steven Runciman, The History of the Crusades, 3:441-448.

²Johan Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages, p. 74.

Thus we may conclude this section by saying that the Knight and Squire, as well as their tales, are pictures of romantic idealism. However, we do not laugh at the "parfit gentil" Knight and his son, only do we "smile" with Chaucer at a society that pretends to be what it is not.

The Franklin

The purpose in choosing the Franklin to be discussed at this time is to show his connection in the pilgrimage with the Squire and consequently with the society which the Squire represents.

The imaginative story of the Squire is either left unfinished or interrupted gently by the Franklin. At least the Franklin is the next to speak:

"In feith, Squier, Thow has thee wel yquit
And gentilly, I preise wel thy wit,"
Quod the Frankeleyn, "considerynge thy yowthe,
So feelyngly thou spekest, sire, I allow the!
As to my doom, ther is noon that is heere
Of eloquence that shal be thy peere,
If that thou lyve; God yeve thee good chaunce,
And in verty send thee continuance!
For of thy speche I have greet deyntee.
I have a sone, and by the Trinitee,
I hadde levere than twenty pound worth lond,
Though it right now were fallen myn hond,
He were a man of swich discrecioun
As that ye been! Fy on possession,
But if a man be vertuous withal!
I have my sone snybbed, and yet shal,
For he to vertu listeth nat entende;
But for to pleye at dees, and to despende
And lese al that he hath, is his usage.
And he hath lever talken with a page
Than to comune with any gentil wight
Where he myghte lerne gentillesse aright."¹

¹The Squire's Tale, lines 673-694.

The Host interrupts the Franklin with: ¹

"Straw for youre gentillesee!" . . .
 "What, Frankeleyn! pardes, sire, wel thou woost
 That ech of yow moot tellen atte leste
 A tale or two, or breken his biheste."¹

The Franklin does not take offence at the Host's rude interruption, but politely answers:

"That knowe I wel, sire," . . .
 "I prey yow, haveth me nat in desdeyn,
 Though to this man I speke a word or two."²

Even when the Host again speaks rather harshly:

"Telle on thy tale withouten wordes mo,"³

the Franklin replies with the same good manners:

"Gladly, sire Hoost," . . . "I wole obeye
 Unto your wyl; now herkneth what I seye.
 I wol yow nat contrarien in no wyse
 As fer as that my wittes wol suffyse.
 I prey to God that it may plesen yow;
 Thanne woot I wel that it is good ynow."⁴

As he begins his tale we note the same self-deprecatory tone that we have seen in Chaucer. He calls himself a "burel" man and says that he never slept on Parnassus, learned Cicero, or acquainted himself with the colors of rhetoric.⁵ "These are the half-humorous deprecations of a person who made no pretence of clerkly lore, though he showed sufficient learning in his tale."⁶

Our attention has been aroused. Who is this man that could

¹Ibid., lines 695-698.

²Ibid., lines 699-701.

³Ibid., line 702.

⁴Ibid., lines 703-708.

⁵Franklin's Prologue, lines 716-726.

⁶Gordon H. Gerould, Chaucerian Essays, p. 35.

interrupt the Squire, yet praise him and wish his own son were like him? Who is he that could answer the brusque words of the Host with a demonstration of "a soft answer turneth away wrath"? As we look at his portrait in The General Prologue,¹ we find that Chaucer has presented him in a complimentary light. He is presented as one who is very hospitable; in fact, Chaucer calls him "Saint Julian . . . in his country." He likes good food and likes to share it with others.

His table dormant in his halle alway
Stood redy covered al the longe day.²

Added to all this hospitability and good living were the many positions held by him. At the time of the pilgrimage he was in the company of a Sergeant of the Law who had a notable position in the society of that day. The Franklin was "lord and sire" at "sessiouns," which means that he sat importantly as justice in petty session. He had been a sheriff and a "contour," one who probably audited the accounts of the sheriff. He was a worthy "vavasour." Manly⁴ says that the etymology of the word "vavasour" indicates that the word originally designated "a tenant who holds his land not immediately from the king, but immediately as a subordinate of some direct holder." Both Manly and Gerould believe that "franklin" and "vavasour" were words used interchangeably and that a vavasour, or franklin,

¹The General Prologue, lines 331-360.

²Ibid., lines 353, 354.

³Gerould, op. cit., p. 35.

⁴Manly, op. cit., p. 165.

⁵Gerould, op. cit., pp. 50, 51.

was a magnate and a person of dignity, often indicated as only a little lower than a baron.

According to Manly, Gerould, and Bowden¹ the main trouble relating to the disagreement concerning the Franklin's social position goes back to J. J. Todd's interpretation of Sir John Fortescue as saying that franklins did not belong to the gentry. Gerould especially condemns Henry Bradley, Root, and Kittredge for having been misled by this interpretation. Gerould² and Bowden³ both refer to John Russell's book of etiquette, Book of Nurture, of about the same time as the writings of Fortescue, as placing the franklin at the table of the squire. It is indicated that franklins were not only associated with knights, but had considerable estate and wealth.

Bowden⁴ would add to the proof that the Franklin was of the gentry the fact that he was wearing both "anlaas" and "gipser." She states that "only wealthy civilians and distinguished men of law are shown wearing both dagger and purse in the monumental brasses of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries."

The Franklin's tale is the story of Dorigen and Arveragus. It has much of the courtly love theme in it, but at the same time it has the reconciliation of that love in faithful Christian marriage. "How to be happy though married is not its true theme,"⁵

¹Bowden, op. cit., p. 176.

²Gerould, op. cit., p. 42.

³Bowden, loc. cit.

⁴Loc. cit.

⁵Coghill, op. cit., p. 171.

however. The main theme is that of noble behavior and generosity. It is a story of promises kept and fidelity rewarded. It is a story that leaves a good taste, a feeling that the policy of "good for evil" is a rewarding one. *✓ appearance*

There are the possibilities of two kinds of satire in the portrait of the Franklin. One is a looking down upon him for his uncomfortable consciousness of a certain lack of gentility.¹ But since we have concluded that the Franklin, even though not of the nobility, had a social position and advantage very near that of the Knight and Squire, it is hard to believe that he felt inferior to them. "That the Franklin was both proud and sure of himself is shown by his good-natured acquiescence at Harry Bailly's interruption."² If the breaking off of the Squire's tale was due to an interruption by the Franklin, it would not be an unnatural thing to have happen. In fact, Coghill³ goes so far as to say that the Franklin was the only person present, except the proud Knight, fit to interrupt the Squire. Also, many have been concerned that the Franklin wishes that his son were like the Squire. Can we say that he is necessarily envious of the Squire, or is it not rather the natural tendency of a father to wish that his own son had turned out better? Then we might say that the satire is the type at which Mark Twain was very adept--that is, burlesque of such nature that in

¹Root, op. cit., p. 27.

²Gerould, op. cit., p. 54.

³Coghill, op. cit., p. 123.

actuality it is directed against the nobility itself. Again let us make haste to say that the satire is not directly against our anachronistic Knight and Squire, but against a pretentious contemporary English society that would still cling, in theory at least, to feudalistic chivalry that is decadent. Chaucer is conscious that the "jig is up," and knows that his contemporaries are too, if they would only admit it.

The Prioress

In our survey of the upper classes as depicted by Chaucer, the portrait of the Prioress follows naturally those of the Knight and the Squire, for "nuns in Chaucer's day were almost always drawn from the upper classes."¹ Coulton in his Medieval Panorama remarks concerning this matter:

The large majority of nuns were of the upper or upper middle classes--younger daughters lacking the necessary dowry for marriage--and, in the cloister promotion naturally went very often by good birth and good connections; it may well have been that Madame Eglantyne was of nobler lineage than the Knight himself.

Other evidences of upper class background and manners will be shown as we later discuss her description as it is given in the General Prologue.

Even without a thorough knowledge of convent life of the day of our poet and as it was originally designed to be, one cannot read the description of Chaucer's Prioress without feeling

¹Bowden, op. cit., p. 92.

²G. G. Coulton, Medieval Panorama, p. 276.

the "rippling undercurrent" of his humor and satire. It is ✓
 "Chaucer's own peculiar satire--mellow, amused, uncondemning,
 the most subtle kind of satire, which does not depend upon ex-
 aggeration."¹ Then after we have read Miss Power's Medieval
English Nunneries as she shows us the conditions of the nunner-
 ies of that time, we stand even more in awe of Chaucer's ability
 in portraiture. At times we may feel ourselves drawn closely
 to his Prioress and in the next moment repelled--not by her lack
 of standard morals--but by her lack of imagination and sensi-
 tivity. Even though she may have carried over some of her out-
 ward ornateness from her noble family, as a person she lacks
 color and vividness. This again seems to be what the poet
 wishes us to see and feel.

Our Prioress is of the Benedictine nunnery of St. Leonard,
 Stratford at Bow, Bromley of Middlesex County.² About four miles
 east of Stratford at Barking was another Benedictine nunnery,
 much richer than St. Leonard's. Elizabeth Chaucy, supposedly a
 sister or daughter of Chaucer, became a nun at Barking in 1391.³
 Elizabeth of Hainaut, sister of Queen Philippa, was a nun at
 St. Leonard's for many years and died there in 1375. This Eliza-
 beth was also a sister-in-law of the Countess of Ulster whom
 Chaucer served as a page and in whose company he probably travel-
 ed to St. Leonard's in 1356. Manly⁴ thinks that the fact that

¹Eileen Power, Medieval People, p. 74.

²See F. A. Gasquet, English Monastic Life, pp. 251-318, for
 a listing of all English religious houses.

³Robinson, op. cit., p. 756.

⁴Manly, op. cit., pp. 206ff.

Elizabeth of Hainaut lived at St. Leonard's throws light on several problems relating to the identity of Chaucer's Prioress. First, there is the mentioning in her will of Madame Argentyn as one of the benefactors. Manly considers it very likely that this could have been "Madame Eglentyne." Another is the fact that the presence of Elizabeth in the convent may have kept alive the desires for the niceties of life which the Prioress had. Bowden,¹ too, would say that Elizabeth of Hainaut was responsible for the type of French spoken at Stratford-Bow, since it is said about our Prioress that "Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe."² Bowden remarks: "Undoubtedly Elizabeth of Hainaut spoke French with an accent, and her sister nuns, drawn from the gentry and well-to-do merchant class, would have been content to copy the great lady." Robinson³ mentions this point, but first he says:

The Prioress's French was only such as could be heard in an English nunnery. The comparison with the "Frenssh of Parys" is disparaging, for the latter was standard and had long been recognized as such. Chaucer can hardly mean that she spoke a dialect that was just as good.

One of the first points of satire in describing the Prioress is that she was with the group that made the journey to Canterbury. Such a motley crowd was hardly the place for a prioress. Too, it had often been decreed that nuns should not make pilgrimages at all. In 1195 the Council of York decreed:

¹Bowden, op. cit., p. 101.

²General Prologue, op. cit., line 126.

³Robinson, op. cit., pp. 754-756.

"In order that the opportunity for wandering about may be taken from them (the nuns) we forbid them to take the road of pilgrimage."¹ There were many bishops' decrees revealed containing similar injunctions. In 1318 Archbishop Melton decreed that the nuns of Nunappleton should not leave their house because of any vow of pilgrimage which they might have taken. For such a vow taken each nun was to say a psalter for each day that the pilgrimage would have taken.² The bishops' registers have revealed many such things about the nuns that we did not know before. A prioress with her attendants was allowed to go on excursions on convent business or was allowed trips in order to attend ecclesiastical ceremonies, however. This strictness will perhaps make the modern reader pity the nuns, but no one ever succeeded in putting into full force all the many regulations placed upon the nuns, "though the bishops spent over two centuries in trying to do so and were still trying in vain when King Henry VIII dissolved the nunneries and turned all the nuns out into the world forever, whether they liked it or not."³

The Prioress's manners indicate her good breeding and training, but in the following lines we note a few satirical probes as well:

At mete wel ytaught was she with alle:
 She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,
 Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe;
 Wel koude she carle a morsel and wel kepe

¹Eileen Power, Medieval English Nunneries, p. 373.

²Ibid., pp. 373, 374.

³Power, Medieval People, p. 94.

That no drope ne fille upon hire brest.
 In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest.
 Hir over-lippe wyped she so clene
 That in hir coppe ther was no ferthyng sene
 Of grece, whan she dronken hadde hir draughte.
 Ful semely after hir mete she raughte.
 And sikerly she was greet desport;
 And ful plesaunt, and amyable of port,
 And peyned hire to contrefete cheere
 Of court, and to been estatlich of manere,
 And to ben holden digne of reverence.¹

The lines concerned with table manners are borrowed directly from the Roman de la Rose. However, the satire is not so much the borrowing from the romance, for the manners are those of polite society, but from the particular setting from which they are taken. "For this is part of the account given by the Beldam, La Vieille, of the wiles a woman uses to attract and hold a lover."²

Coupled with her bearing and manners are her physical characteristics, which are also points stressed about "my lady" of the romances.

Hir nose tretys, hir eyen greye as glas,
 Hir mouth ful smal, and therto softe and reed;
 And sikerly she hadde a fair forheed;
 It was almoost a spanne brood, I trowe.
 For hardily, she was nat undergrowe.³

Lowes notes that this is the description of every heroine of romance.⁴ "The Prioress's nose and eyes and lips are as attractive as our favorite partner of the dance."⁵ Then, her forehead,

¹General Prologue, lines 127-141.

²Bowden, op. cit., pp. 96, 97.

³General Prologue, lines 152-156.

⁴Bowden, op. cit., pp. 94, 95.

⁵Coulton, Panorama, p. 276.

which should have been covered in the presence of the company, is beautifully broad. "Medieval standards of beauty called for large, broad, and unwrinkled foreheads."¹ In light of all the evidence and further description of the Prioress it does not seem likely that Chaucer intended to mean, as Coulton² indicates: "'But sikerly she had a fair forheed'; there comes the crowning glory of her features, and it lifts us to a higher plane; she has charmed us as a woman, and now she impresses us with her intellect." Miss Power's³ explanation seems to be more what Chaucer intends:

The nuns were supposed to wear their veils pinned tightly down to their eyebrows, so that their foreheads were completely hidden; but high foreheads happened to be fashionable among worldly ladies, who even shaved theirs to make them higher, and the result was that the nuns could not resist lifting up and spreading out their veils, for how otherwise did Chaucer know that Madame Eglentyne had such a fair forehead ("almost a spanne brood, I trowe")? If she had been wearing her veil properly, it would have been invisible, and the father of English poetry may be observed discreetly but plainly winking the other eye when he puts in that little touch; his contemporaries would see the point very quickly.

The main factor of the satire lies in endowing a nun with the physical characteristics of the "fascinating worldly heroine." The satire here might, however, be double-edged; there could also be an "implied satiric comment on the romances."⁴ Anyway Chaucer uses some restraint in listing the physical attributes of the Prioress. It was customary among the conventions of the

¹Bowden, loc. cit.

²Coulton, loc. cit.

³Power, Medieval People, p. 90.

⁴Bowden, op. cit., p. 95.

romance to give a full "anatomical catalogue" of the lady's charms. Chaucer contents himself with "she was nat undergrowe."

Certainly the wearing apparel of the Prioress is worthy of notice also.

Ful semyly her wympul pynched was;

 Ful fetys was her cloke, as I was war,
 Of smal coral about hire arm she bar
 A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene,
 And thereon heng a brooch of gold ful sheene,
 On which ther was first write a crowned A,
 And after Amor vincit omnia.¹

Her wimple is well-pleated; her cloak is well-made and handsome.² About her arm she wears a rosary of coral, containing also the larger beads of green for the Paternosters.³ From this rosary hangs a brooch of shining gold which is inscribed with a crowned A and the words "Amor vincit omnia." The question which immediately is posed concerns the meaning of the word "amor." Is it the profane love which was originally meant in Virgil's Eclogues? Or is it the meaning of sacred love which the Church adopted? The ambiguity of the meanings only adds to the satire of the entire picture of the Prioress. Lowes⁴ answers the question as follows:

Now it is earthly love which conquers all, now heavenly; the phrase plays back and forth between the two. And it is precisely that happy ambiguity of the convention--itself the result of an earlier transfer--which makes Chaucer's use of it here. . . a master stroke. Which of the two loves does "amor" mean to the Prioress? I do

¹General Prologue, lines 151, 157-162.

²Robinson, op. cit., p. 1073.

³Ibid., p. 756.

⁴Bowden, op. cit., p. 97.

not know; but I think she thought she meant love celestial.

For more than six tiresome centuries, according to Miss Power,¹ the registers of the bishops show the waging of "a holy war against fashion in the cloister," but it was in vain, for the "nuns mingled freely with secular women" and it was impossible to prevent them from adopting their secular habits.

Another phase of this "holy war" against the fashion of the nuns were the attempts of the bishops to dislodge the regiments of dogs--and sometimes the monkeys--which the ladies used to solace their long leisure.² Chaucer's Prioress was no exception.

Of smale houndes hadde that she fedde
With rosted flessh, or milk or wastet-breed.
But soore wepte she if oon of hem were deed
Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte.³

Manly⁴ points out that dispensations might be obtained for the keeping of dogs by prioresses who were fond of hunting, but the "smale houndes" which Chaucer's Prioress kept were more likely just lap-dogs. The Prioress not only kept the dogs, but she fed them the very best of food. Wastel-breed was a fine wheat bread, second only to "demeine," the lord's bread.⁵ It probably would never be found on the tables of anyone except the well-to-do. The roast meat would also be "judged an extravagance by even the

¹Power, *People*, pp. 90ff.

²G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History*, pp. 72, 73.

³*General Prologue*, lines 146-150.

⁴Manly, *op. cit.*, pp. 215, 216.

⁵Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 756.

most lenient of fourteenth-century standards."¹

Now let us turn to a consideration of the Prioress's moral and spiritual character as it is revealed in her portrait as well as in the tale which she tells. Still is seen this paradoxical nature which has already been discussed in her outward appearances and habits. There has been much discussion on "hire gretteste oath. . . by Seinte Loy."² Kittredge³ poses the following question about the oath: "Could there be a sweeter and more lady-like expletive?" He further adds: "It is soft and liquid, and above all, it does not distort the lips." Manly,⁴ following Lowes and Rickert, suggests that the Prioress swore not only by one who was patron of travelers, but who was also the most courtly and elegant saint in the calendar, "one thoroughly representative of the feminine tastes which she preserved in spite of her devotion to religion." Manly also tells that the Countess of Pembroke, one of the great ladies of the day, gave an image of St. Loy to one of the most fashionable churches of the day. He concludes: "There may, therefore, be a larger element of fashion in swearing by St. Loy than we have suspected." Again we have found that that which should have been a spiritual concern to the Prioress has been turned into a matter of outward appearance.

Then what has Chaucer said about her that might pertain

¹Bowden, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

²General Prologue, line 120.

³George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry*, p. 177.

⁴Manly, *op. cit.*, pp. 213ff.

to her character as a spiritual leader? For whom was her greatest concern in her ministering? Upon a first reading one thinks he has found something substantial concerning this point as he reads:

But, for to speken of hire conscience,
She was so charitable and so pitous
She wold wepe, . . .¹

But what a disappointment at the remainder of the passage:

. . . if that she saugh a mous
Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.²

Then as we remember her devotion to her dogs, we realize for one of her position such "tendre herte" should primarily be directed toward her less fortunate fellow-men.

This implication is later strengthened by her own Tale in which she tells with perfect blandness of the tortures visited upon the Jews; and by the fact that when Chaucer writes of the charity of his Parson, he is explicit and clear in pointing out that here is a man who follows truly all the teachings of Christianity in loving his neighbour as himself. For Madame Eglentyne, then, the poet's "but" indicates a reservation. Despite her charm and dignity, she possesses a real imperfection not unmarked by the poet who had created her.³

Can we say then that the Prioress was religious? "Religious? perhaps; but save for her singing the divine service 'entuned in her nose ful semely' and for her lovely address to the Virgin at the beginning of her tale, Chaucer can find but little to say on the point."⁴

This brings us then to the Prioress's tale and what may

¹General Prologue, lines 142-144a.

²Ibid., lines 144b, 145.

³Bowden, *op. cit.*, pp. 99, 100.

⁴Power, *Nunneries*, p. 95.

be said about it to characterize her. Since the Prioress refers to Hugh of Lincoln in her tale,¹ we have assumed that this story was at least a foundation for the tale which she tells. Francis Child,² who has collected many English and Scottish ballads, remarks that "the exquisite tale which Chaucer puts into the mouth of the Prioress exhibits nearly the same incidents as the ballads" about Sir Hugh which he has placed in his collection.

Following is a brief summary by Carleton Brown³ of the basic versions which form the theme of the Prioress's Tale:

Group A

1. The boy sings the responsorium "Guade Maria" as he passes daily along a street in which the Jews dwell and thereby provokes their resentment.
2. He is slain and his body is buried.
3. The boy's mother, in her search for him, passing by the Jew's door, hears the voice of her child and, with the assistance of friends and a crowd of citizens, forces an entrance.
4. The boy is dug up from the earth alive and unharmed.
5. In consequence of this miracle, the Jew (or Jews) according to most versions, is converted.

Group B

1. The boy is made a chorister and sings his song in the regular services of the church.
2. The boy's mother drops out of the story.
3. The guilty Jew (or Jews) after the murder hears the boy singing as before.
4. The Jew (or Jews) thereupon confesses the crime before the Christians have learned of it and in most versions is converted and baptized.

¹The Prioress's Tale, lines 684-694.

²Francis Child, English and Scottish Ballads, pp. 136ff.

³Carleton Brown, "The Prioress's Tale," Sources and Analogues of Canterbury Tales, pp. 447-451.

Group C

1. The song which the boy sings through the Jewry is the antiphon "Alma redemptoris mater" according to seven versions.

2. The body of the murdered boy is thrown into a "jakes."

3. The miracle does not end, as in Group A, with the recovery of the boy's body, but an elaborate funeral scene follows, during which the corpse continues to sing, for in Group C, unlike the others, the story ends tragically.

The Prioress's version is placed in Group C, the most tragic of the three. Let us conclude our comments on the tale by saying that this is a rather bloody, tragic tale for one who "wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous kaught in a trappe if it were deed or bledde" or one who "sore wepte she if oon of hem (smale houndes) were deed, or if men smoot it with yerde smerte."

As we began this section on the Prioress, let us conclude it by saying that there is little doubt that Chaucer intended his readers and audience to see the irony and ambiguity in the portrait of the Prioress. However, his satire does not come in direct, harsh condemnation, but in genial suggestiveness. We have seen at least three major phases of his satire in this case. As Chaucer revealed the Prioress as a person we felt the lack of warmth that would actually attract us. There is also the probe at the laxness found among the clergy of the day. Then, lastly, we have seen again the pretensions and ostentations of the upper classes to which they yet insist on clinging.

COURTLY LOVE

A subject which has already been mentioned many times in

relation to the upper classes, but never fully described, is that of the courtoisie or courtly love. We have become quite aware of the fact that the principles of courtly love pervade much of the writing of Chaucer, but can we actually say what his opinion of it is? By further examination of courtly love and by presenting illustrations from some of his writing we may be able to see his attitude toward the subject more clearly.

We have already noted how interwoven with chivalry was this formalization of love. This theory of love was first seen in the south of France as early as the eleventh century. It was the part of a brilliant society with woman at a supreme place, with great importance attached to social etiquette and decorum. To this society belonged the troubadours who expressed in their poems this theory of courtly love.¹ The subject of their poems was universally love and Womankind, and a reverence for the latter, which, though not of a religious character, has still something in it of the mystic worship of the Virgin. According to the troubadour, love was the ground of all goodness, of all excellence in the world. Man without such love was worth no more than "corn without grain."² The courtly love of the Middle Ages saw love transformed into the woman and man, saw it make up their will as well as their passion. If the lover could not resist it, it was because it was "his mightiest self, and not because it was a compulsion from without; it was his nature, not his disease."³

¹Dodd, op. cit., p. 1.

²Thomas Wright, Womankind in Western Europe, pp. 133, 134.

³Henry Osborn Taylor, The Medieval Mind, 1:591.

From the south of France the expression of courtly love spread into northern France, largely through the influence of Eleanor of Aquitaine, who took a lively interest in the doctrines as well as the practices of courtly love. It reached England with her chivalrous son, Richard Cœur de Lion.¹ Her daughter, Marie de Champagne, continued and extended the interest of her mother. Marie, in turn, impressed the system on Chretien de Troies, and he introduced it into the romances of the Round Table. As the system was left by Chretien, so it was to remain. Since the lover's concern was to abide by the "rules and regulations" set up by the system, the courtly love literature actually became "devoid of spontaneity and real feeling. Even emotional experience became stereotyped."² It is the supposition of this thesis that it is the artificiality that Chaucer was beginning to grow weary of, even though he, in many cases, seemed to be "playing the game."

For the "rules and regulations" of this so-called formalized love, we look to Andreas Capellanus and Guillaume de Lorris for help. Andreas Capellanus worked out quite fully the jurisprudence of that courtly system which is shown in the romance of the Round Table. What is love? What are its effects? Between whom can it exist? How is it acquired, retained, augmented, diminished, terminated?³ The aim of love, for Andreas, is actual fruition, and rules out at once the kind of love that might be called

¹Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

²Dodd, *op. cit.*, pp. 2,3.

³*Ibid.*, p. 4.

Platonic. The lover must be truthful and modest, a good Catholic, clean in his speech, hospitable, and ready to return good for evil. He must be courageous in war and free with his gifts. He must at all times be courteous.¹

Out of the new doctrines and system which were formed in regard to love and the relations between the sexes, came a book which "inaugurated a novel phase of erotic thought."² This work, begun before 1240 by Guillaume de Lorris, was finished before 1280 by Jean de Meun. The first part of Roman de la Rose by de Lorris, which is an allegory of courtly love, is of the more importance at this point.

The Roman de la Rose, by combining the passionate character of its sensuous central theme with all the elaborate fancy of the system of courtly love, satisfied the needs of erotic expression of a whole age.

Here, then, in the Roman de la Rose, the sexual motif is again placed in the centre of erotic poetry, but enveloped by symbolism and mystery and presented in the guise of saintliness. It is impossible to imagine a more deliberate defiance of the Christian ideal. . . . The profusion of allegory satisfied all the requirements of medieval imagination.

Now whatever influence the Roman de la Rose may have exercised on the minds of men, it did not succeed in completely destroying the older conception of love. Side by side with the glorification of seduction professed by the Rose, the glorification of the pure and faithful love of the knight maintained its ground, both in lyrical poetry and in the romance of chivalry, not to speak of the fantasy of tournaments and passages of arms.³

Another phase of the procedure of courtly love was the "courts of love." Since the "act of fealty" between lovers was

¹C. S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love, pp. 33, 34.

²Huizinga, op. cit., p. 95.

³Ibid., pp. 100, 101.

not looked upon lightly, but as a binding law, then there must have been frequent cases in which "love's law" was called into question. Thomas Wright¹ clings to the supposition that the courts were not mere amusement but were the strictest order of the day. In the courts, he relates, the decision was always referred to the woman. On one occasion Queen Eleanor judged that according to the law of love, love was incompatible with marriage. Eleanor also decided upon another occasion that a woman must "either refuse presents offered her in the name of love, or reward them, or be degraded in her rank among Womankind." It seems that men were later allowed to hold offices in the court and even Richard Coeur de Lion is said to have held the office of Prince of Love at one time.

Just how seriously did the people of Chaucer's day take courtly love and the courts of love? Huizinga² says: "It is very difficult to pierce the clouds of poetry and to penetrate to the real life of the epoch." Even when attempts were made to describe an actual love affair with all accuracy, the author could not "free himself from the accepted style and technical conceptions." It has been suggested that the courts of love were real, but the degree of their seriousness is questionable. Huizinga tells about one court which was petitioned from the king "to furnish some distraction during an epidemic of the plague which raged in Paris, 'to spend part of the time more

¹Wright, op. cit., pp. 137-141.

²Huizinga, op. cit., p. 109.

graciously and in order to find awakening of new joy.'" We might conclude that the courts of love seem to be a part of that "flare of autumnal splendor" of chivalry mentioned earlier.

In commenting upon Chaucer's portrait of the upper classes in the case of the Knight, Squire, and the Prioress, we have seen courtly love exemplified in many instances. We have also detected a subtle note of satire as we have examined the separate pictures and tales. It would be impossible in the limited scope of this thesis to examine each work of Chaucer to determine his attitude toward the problem at hand. Other than what has already been said, let it suffice to comment upon the conclusion of the Troilus and the Parliament of Fowls.

The Troilus is begun with the very familiar mask of our poet in his dedication to the God of Love, to sing His praises and to celebrate His wondrous powers. He does not claim the God of Love as related to his own affairs, but rather that he, the poet, may be of assistance to those who are Love's servants.

For I, that God of Loves servantz serve,
Ne dar to Love, for myn unliklyness,
Preyen for speed, al sholde I therfore sterve,
So fer am I from his help in derknesse.
But natheles, if this may don gladnesse
To any lovere, and his cause availle,
Have he my thonk, and myn this travaille.¹

The direct purpose of the poem is "the double sorwe of Troilus to tellen. . . in lovyng, how his aventures fellen from wo to wele, and after out of joie." At first Troilus is shown as a

¹Troilus and Criseyde, Book I, lines 15-21.

scoffer at love. Later he becomes its most exemplary servant.

He plays the game of courtly love to the death.

The faithful devotion of Troilus is represented as the highest of virtues, and the treason of Cressida as the most heinous of crimes, still from the point of view of the chivalric code. Yet we come more and more to suspect that Troilus was right in his first opinion; that the principles of the code are somehow unsound; that the god of love is not a master whom his servants can trust. And then, suddenly, at the end of the poem, when the death of Troilus has been chronicled, and his soul has taken flight to the seventh sphere, the great sympathetic ironist drops his mask, and we find that he has once more been studying human life from the point of view of a ruling passion, and that he has no solution except to repudiate the unmoral and unsocial system which he has pretended to uphold.¹

At first the criticism of the system is shown as Troilus himself laughs in contempt at the world and its frailty.

And down from thennes faste he gan avyse
This litel spot of erthe, that with the ee
Embraced is, and fully gan despise
This wrecched world, and held al vanite
To respect of the pleyn felcrite
That is in hevne above; and at the laste,
Ther he was slayn, his lokyng down he caste.

And in hymself he lough right at the wo
Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste,
And dampned al oure werk that foloweth so
The blynde lust, the which that may nat laste,
And sholden al oure herte on heven caste.
And forth he wente, shortly for to telle,
Ther as Mercurye sorted hym to dwelle.²

Chaucer's final Christian counsel to "yonge, fresshe folkes" leaves no doubt in one's mind where Chaucer believes the real emphasis in life should be placed.

O yonge, fresshe folkes, he or she,

¹Kittredge, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

²Troilus, Book V, lines 1814-1827.

In which that love up groweth with youre age,
 Repeyareth hom fro worldly vanyte,
 And of youre herte up casteth the visage
 To thilke God that after his ymage
 You made, and thynketh al nys but a faire
 This world, that passeth soone as floures faire.

And loveth hym, the which that right for love
 Upon a crois, oure soules for to beye,
 First starf, and roos, and sit in hevене above;
 For nyl falsen no wight, dar I seye,
 That wol his herte al holly on hym leye.
 And syn he best to love is, and most meke,
 What nedeth feynde loves for to seke?!

"Yet, even after this parting, moving as it is, and sincerely expressive of the poet's nature, Chaucer cannot say farewell without turning his irony upon himself."²

Lo here, of payens corsed olde rites
 Lo here, what alle hire goddes may availle;
 Lo here, thise wrecched worldes appetites;
 Lo here, the fyn and guerdon for travaille
 Of Jove, Appollo, of Mars, of swich rascaille!
 Lo here, the forme of olde clerkis speche
 In poetrie, if ye hire bokes seche.³

Kittredge's⁴ interpretation of these lines will serve as a very adequate conclusion for this section.

Who am I, that I should exhort you to turn aside from the follies of love and the vanities of human endeavor? A mere student, poring over my ancient books and repeating, as so many have done before me, the wonderful and transitory things that they record; a versifier, humbly tracing the footsteps of Virgil, and Ovid, and Homer, and Lucan, and Statius:-

Lo here, the forme of olde clerkes speche
 In poetrye, if ye hir bokes seche!

As another illustration of Chaucer's criticisms of the

¹Troilus, op. cit., lines 1835-1848.

²Kittredge, op. cit., pp. 144, 145.

³Troilus, op. cit., lines 1849-1855.

⁴Kittredge, op. cit., p. 145.

courtly love code and practices of his day, the Parliament of Fowls has been chosen for discussion. It is well known as a love-vision convention, but this time the poet uses it to serve another purpose. He uses a council of birds to discuss this very outstanding "issue" of his day--the courtly love tradition. We have earlier noted the lack of the presence of the poet to any great extent in the poem. Of course, he is there again to assure his audience that all he knows about love is what he reads in his "bokkes." His absence may be part of the device; perhaps he has decided that the issue is one for the "birds to decide"!

The Parliament of Fowls has been known as one of the most charming of the occasional poems in the language.¹ The question arises: What occasion? There is little doubt about the allegorical abstractions in the poem, but can there be an intended personal allegory in the formel and her three suitors? At least it has given the scholars something to delve into and consider through these many years. The suggestion which has found the most favor and over the longest period of time is the marriage of King Richard II (as the tercel) and Anne of Bohemia (as the formel) which took place in 1382. Tatlock² in commenting upon this as a possible solution states:

Not two but three princes have been found who might correspond to the two rivals of the noble tercel, but not suitors simultaneously nor with certainty. It has also been remarked that it would not be flattering to Chaucer's sovereign to show him as waiting a year for

¹Robinson, op. cit., p. 361.

²Tatlock, op. cit., p. 70.

a lady to decide between him and another, of lower rank at that. There is little force in the suitors in the poem and in history numbering three; three competitors or what not are the usual number in story, from the Three Bears back and forward. All one can say of this interpretation is that some of these people might have casually strayed into Chaucer's mind as he wrote, but there is no proving of it.

Many other suggestions have been offered, some of which will be listed here, but with the same conclusion that Tatlock came to, that "there is no proving it." Lancaster's plans for the marriage of his daughter Philippa, or even Chaucer's own marriage as early as 1374, have been suggested as applications.¹ Another theory is that the Parliament represents negotiations, conducted in 1376 and 1377, for the marriage of Richard to the princess Marie of France, but Marie died suddenly in May, 1377, and the marriage was never consummated. Certainly the Parliament of Fowls seems very much an occasional piece, but since the application of personal allegory cannot be settled, let the occasion mentioned in the poem itself suffice.

For this was on seynt Valentynes day,
Whan every foul cometh there to chese his make,
Of every kynde that men thynke may,
And that so huge a noyse gan they make
That erthe, and eyr, and tre, and every lake
So ful was, that unethe was there space
For me to stonde, so ful was al the place.

And right as Aleyn, in the Pleynt of Kynde,
Devyseth Nature of aray and face,
In swich aray men myghte hire there fynde.
This noble emperesse, ful of grace,
Bad every foul to take his owne place,
As they were woned alwey fro yer to yeere,
Seynt Valentynes day, to stonden there.²

¹Robinson, loc. cit.

²Parliament of Fowls, lines 309-322.

After the poet has made it clear that he knows not love at first hand, he then tells how he had a dream after having read Somnium Scipionis. In the dream Scipio conducts the poet to a walled garden. After reading the inscription at the gate which warns about the grief and joys of love, the poet hesitates to enter, but Scipio leads him in. In this garden of Love are found trees, flowers, fountains, singing birds, and instruments of music. The poet sees Cupid, Venus, and Priapus, as well as many abstract personifications fitting to such a garden. It is not until about three hundred lines of introduction have rolled along that Chaucer comes into the part of the poem which is more truly Chaucer and with which we are more vitally concerned at this point. It is St. Valentine's day and the hierarchy of birds have met to choose their mates.

This is to seyn, the foules of ravyne
 Weere hyst set, and thanne the foules smale
 That eten, as hem Nature wolde enclyne,
 As worm or thyng of which I telle no tale;
 And water-foul sat lowest in the dale;
 But foul that lyveth by sed sat on the grene,
 And that so fele that wonder was to sene.¹

Over this congregation of birds reigns the goddess Nature, who "held on hire hond a formel egle."² The formel eagle is endowed with all the characteristics that the lady of the courtoisie should have--"Shap, the gentilleste," "The most benygne and goodliest," and such "vertu" that Nature "ofte hire bek to kysse." Nature makes it clear who is to have first choice of mates.

¹Parliament, lines 323-329.

²Ibid., line 372.

The tercel egle, as that ye knowe wel,
 The foul royal, above you in degre.

He shall first chese and spoken in his gyse.¹

Of course, we have already known that the formel eagle would be his choice. The tercel, too, is the conventional lover -- "wyse," "worthi," "secre, trewe as stel." His plea also is that of the conventional plea of the courtly lover. He chooses the formel eagle, not as his mate, but as his "soverayn lady," whom he will always serve. He beseeches her for mercy and grace, for he will die if she does not accept him soon. If he ever is found to be unfaithful, he is willing to submit himself to be torn to pieces by all the other fowls. He is sure that none loves her as well as he; therefore, she should have mercy on him.

Before the formel eagle has time to recover from her abashment, "another tersel spak anon of lower kynde." In the proposal of this eagle is noted a great contrast to that of the first tercel. There is not the extreme courtliness, yet his plea is not without courtly sentiment. He is sure that he loves her as much as the first tercel does, and he has served her longer. He feels that the reward should go to him on this merit. This eagle is willing to submit to hanging if he should be found false.

It is not enough to have a "Palamon" and an "Arcite" in this plea for the lady's love; there is yet a third lover. This one is even more business-like and to the point than the second. He does not boast of long servitude to the lady, but he feels that

¹Ibid., lines 393, 394, 399.

he has done more loving in six months "than some man doth that hath served ful yoore." He feels that his greatest qualification is that he is "hire treweste man."

"Having thus set forth the question in the elegant and graceful plea of the royal tercel and the mingled courtly and practical observation," Chaucer goes ahead to give the views of the lower order of society who have by this time become weary of the long debate.¹ It is actually at this point that we begin to feel very strongly his criticism of the courtly love practices, yet it is through the lower order of the birds that we feel this; the poet is yet too subtle to commit himself so openly.

The noyse of foules for to ben delyvered
So loud rong, "Have don, and lat us wende!"
That wel wende I the wodde hadde al toshyvered.
Whan shal youre cursede pleytynge have an ende?
For ye or nay, withouten any preve?"

.....
The goos seyde, "Al this nys nat worth a flye!"²

Nature's next decision was that each order of fowls should choose a spokesman to discuss the problem at hand. The "foules of ravyne," who had first choice, chose the "tercelet of the falcoun to diffyne al here sentence." His judgment is such as would be expected from the "nobility."

"Me wolde thynke how that the worthileste
Of knyghthod, and lengest had used it,
Most of estat, of blod the gentilleste
Were sittyngest for hire, if that hir leste;
And of these three she sot hireself, I trowe,
Which that he be, for it is light to knowe!"³

¹Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

²*Parliament*, lines 491-497, 501.

³*Ibid.*, lines 448-453.

He has previously suggested that argument would do no good and that the best solution would be battle. The water-fowls are represented by the goose, who unsentimentally says:

"But she wol love hym, lat hym love another."¹

This point of view is certainly opposed to the code of courtly love! The representative of the worm-eating group, the cuckoo, goes even further:

"So I," quod he, "may have my make in pes,
I rech nat how longe that ye stryve.
Lat each of hem be soleyn al here lyve!"²

Yet there has been one dissenting voice among the "lower classes." The turtle-dove, representing the seed-eating group, says:

"Yit lat hym serve hire, til he be ded."³

But the duck considers this a good jest:

"That men shulde loven alwey causeles,
Who can a resoun fynde or wit in that?
Daunseth he myrre that is myrtheles?
Who shulde recche of that is recheles?
.....
There been no sterres, God wot, than a payre!"⁴

This gets a rebuff from the "gentil tercelet":

"Out of the dunghil cam that word ful right!"⁵

"It is clear, then, that with the scoffing of the duck at the idea of constancy in love, and the contemptuous retort of the tercelet, the debate reaches its climax."⁶

¹Ibid., lines 491-497, 501

²Ibid., lines 605-607.

³Ibid., line 585.

⁴Ibid., lines 590-593, 595.

⁵Ibid., line 597.

⁶Dodd, op. cit., p. 127.

After the debate has gone on long enough, Nature leaves the decision up to the formel. The formel asks for a year in which to make her decision. With this, Nature gives the other fowls their mates and they go on their way with much joy and bliss. We are left to wonder what the formel's decision will be in another year.

Even though there is disagreement as to what extent Chaucer has intended his social criticism in the Parliament of Fowls, there is little doubt in the minds of most that he has used once again the instrument of satire to comment on an institution of his day. Perhaps this is the reasoning of a "modern" mind, but it seems from Chaucer's habit of using humor to highlight his major points, that the birds of the "bourgeoisie" and "villein" classes certainly receive the more favorable light. Somehow we think of them as feathered versions of the Miller and the Wife of Bath.

THE CLERGY

We have already seen that the clergy of the Middle Ages was generally placed in the upper reaches of society and, therefore, will be due for consideration in this phase of Chaucer's social criticism. We have noted that the Prioress may very likely have been of the nobility. It has certainly been evidenced from her manners and habits that she followed the way of this class. There were other members of Chaucer's category of clergy that could have been of "noble blood." Certainly the Monk may well have been.

Chaucer presents his sampling of the clergy in the Canterbury Tales with graduated probes of satire. The Prioress with gentle satire directed at her affectations and laxness in "primary devotion" has been presented earlier. Next we find the Monk who "heeld after the newe world," yet basically nothing negative is said relating to his morals. The Friar is presented as being much more doubtful in character. The Clerk of Oxford, though not of the preaching clergy, still is responsible to the church for his "lerynge." He is treated by Chaucer in a kindly light. Then comes the very friendly sketch of the poor Parson. These two serve as a relief between Chaucer's more harsh portrayals of the other four male members of the clergy. Chaucer paints his picture of the clergy rather clearly, and there is not much question as to how he felt. He says so rather vividly, not in moralizing denunciation, but by drawing the lines sharp and clear. Since his opinion on this group is rather plain and since critics are fairly well agreed as to his basic assumptions, there is no need of going into each presentation as fully as has been done with some of the other members of the upper classes. However, it is felt that without a summary of his criticism of this group the subject at hand would be incomplete.

In order to have a background for the situation from which Chaucer's Monk came, let us take a look at Trevelyan's¹ graphic illustration of a monastery of that period. It is false to suppose that even if religious houses did distribute alms rather

¹Trevelyan, op. cit., pp. 161, 162.

liberally that they were popular with their neighbors and tenants. "Monasteries, being corporate bodies, were more conservative and more tenacious of old rights than ordinary landlords, lay and clerical." The old manor system, of which the religious houses were a part, lasted longer on estates belonging to the religious houses than on those managed by private persons. In the Peasants' Rising many great abbeys were attacked by their serfs. The incident which Trevelyan describes at St. Albans serves as a good illustration of this point. The serfs of the abbey, acting on the success of the rebels in London, had their friends in the capital to extort from the King a letter to the Abbot ordering him to grant charters to the "burgesses and good men" of St. Albans. The Abbot was forced to grant to them what they wanted, but when the King was relieved of the Kentish rebels he went about with his army and his chief justice to make bloody restitution. All the old privileges were restored to the monks, and the tenants were forced to render service as before. Fifteen of the leaders were hanged in the sight of those whom they had wished to liberate. The bodies were not allowed to be removed. In the monastery there was pious satisfaction. "This," says the monk, "was deservedly the foul office of men who usurped the name of 'citizens' less justly than that of 'hangmen,' as they were called and became, by this deed incurring eternal ignominy." The monks of St. Albans, judged out of their own mouths, knew nothing of Christian love, or even of common humanity, towards their neighbors.

According to Chaucer's description, his own Monk is a very

"manly man" who will probably someday make an Abbot. It is his duty to look after the estates of his monastery. He has many horses in his stables and the one upon which he now rides is a "sleek and shining palfrey, as brown as a berry, and probably one of his hunters,"¹ for we have been told that he loves hunting. To the horse's bridle are attached "Canterbury bells" which ring as loud "as dooth the chapel belle," and we suspect that to the Monk they sound just as sweet. We rapidly see that the Monk does not care for the old ways, but "heeld after the newe world the space." One of the "old rules" which he certainly breaks is that of claustration.² He thought the text which says the monk out of his cloister is like a fish out of water was "nat worth an oystre." Why should he study and drive himself mad or "swynken with handes as Austyn bit". Let "Austyn" do it himself!

When it comes to Chaucer's satire on the dress of the Monk, Jusserand says that it is well justified. The Council of London in 1342, Jusserand says, reproaches the religious with wearing clothing "fit rather for knights than for the clerks." Then we automatically turn to look at our Knight who is so plainly dressed at this time. The Monk's sleeves were edged with fur, the "fyneste of a lond," and to fasten his hood under his chin he has chosen a beautiful love-knot of gold. "The Monk's boots are highly inappropriate to his calling and are a sign of sinful worldliness; soft, unwrinkled ("souple") boots were expensive

¹Bowden, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

²Coulton, *Panorama*, p. 269.

and only for the gentlemen at court."¹

We are not astonished to find that the Monk is "a lord ful fat and in good point," that his large rolling eyes glitter like a flaming furnace, for he indeed is a "fair prelaat." He certainly does not fit our customary picture of a gaunt ascetic ("not pale as a forpyned goost"), for he loves good eating, especially a roasted fat swan.

The Monk is called upon to tell his tale following the Knight, but the drunken Miller rudely interrupts, but "this worthy Monk took al in pacience." When he does get around to telling his tale, he tells several "in the manner of tragedie, the harm of hem that stode in heigh degree, and fellen so that ther nas no remedie to brynge hem out of hir adversitee."² The likewise "worthy" Knight finally calls a halt to so much "hevynesse" thus leaving with us a picture of a very worldly Monk, but yet at "the bottom he seems to have been a good fellow enough, with a certain real dignity of character."³

Projected against the ideals of the great St. Francis, Chaucer's Friar falls far short of his original calling. The earliest Rule of St. Francis was encompassed in three brief sentences.⁴ "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell all that thou hast and give to the poor"; "Take nothing for your journey"; and "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his

¹Bowden, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

²Monk's Tale, lines 1991-1994.

³Coulton, *Chaucer and His England*, p. 148.

⁴Bowden, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

cross and follow me." Let us see how well Chaucer's Friar followed these principles.

"Sell all that thou hast and give to the poor." Rather, our Friar took from the poor and did all he could to win the favor of the wealthier people.

Ful wel biloved and famulier was he
 With Frankeleyns over al in his countree.
 And eek with worthy women of the toun;

 He knew the tavernes wel in every toun
 And everich hostiler and tappestere
 Bet than a lazare or a beggestere
 For unto swich a worthy man as he
 Accorded nat, as by his facultie
 To have with sike lazars aqueyntaunce.
 It is nat honest, it may not avaunce,
 For to deelen with no swich poraille
 But al with riche and selleres of vitaille

 For thogh a wydwe hadde noght a sho
 So plesaunt was his "In principio,"
 Yet wolde he have a ferthyng, er he wente.¹

"Take nothing for your journey." When we consider this commandment in relation to the Friar, we see ironical satire in fullness, for

His typet was ay farsed ful of knyves
 And pynnees, for yeven faire wyves.²

His apparel is hardly what should be worn by a friar:

For ther he was nat lyk a cloysterer
 With a thredbare cope, as is a povre scoler,
 But he was lyk a maister or a pope
 Of double worstede was his semycope,
 That rounded as a belle out of the presse.³

"Let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."

¹General Prologue, lines 215-217; 240-243; 253-255.

²Ibid., lines 233, 234.

³Ibid., lines 259-263.

Even though this commandment may have several interpretations, at least all would agree on its general meaning of self-denial and devotion to Christ. This would certainly include the emphasis upon the spiritual rather than the worldly, but we previously have seen how grasping the Friar is. Another area in which the Friar has not denied himself is that of sex.

He hadde maad ful many a mariage
Of yonge women at his owene cost.¹

Robinson reads this thus:² "He found husbands, and perhaps dowries, for women whom he had himself seduced." Already we have mentioned the gifts which he has for the wives whom he visited. "Simple country women were easily bemused by these glittering gifts from friars, especially if the giver possessed such fascinating accomplishments as did Brother Hubert."³ Some of these accomplishments may be seen in the following lines:

And certainly he hadde a muryo note.
Wel koude he synge and pleyen on a rote
Of yeddynges he baar outrely the pris
His nekke whit was as tho flour-de-lys:
Therte he strong was as a champioun.
.
Curteis he was and lowely of servyse.
Ther nas no man nowher so vertuous.
.
Somwhat he lipped, for his wantownosse
To make his Englyssh sweete upon his tonge;
And in his harpyng, when that he hadde songe,
His eyen twynkled in his heed aryght,
As doon the sterres in the frosty nyght.⁴

Another detail which gives us insight into the character of

¹Ibid., lines 212, 213.

²Robinson, op. cit., p. 758.

³Bowden, op. cit., p. 126.

⁴General Prologue, lines 235-239; 251, 252; 264-268.

the Friar is his relations with the Summoner on the pilgrimage. The Friar and the Summoner are old enemies; "their quarrel is the quarrel of their profession."¹ Since the Summoner belonged to the organization of the secular clergy, including parish priests, archdeacons, and bishops, and since the Friar of a mendicant order belonged to a religious clergy of a world-wide organization holding direct authority from the Pope, their jurisdiction often conflicted. Since we have been told in the case of the Friar that "rage he could, as it were right a whelp," and since the "fyr-reed cherubines face" of the Summoner indicated a "warm" disposition, we certainly are not surprised to find trouble flaring up between them. At the end of the Wife of Bath's long preamble, when the Friar laughs rather rudely at her, the quarrel between the Summoner and the Friar breaks out again. Each promised to tell a tale that will be deprecatory to the other's profession. When the Wife of Bath completes her tale, the Friar is quick to begin his tale against the Summoner, which, as we can guess, certainly is not complimentary. All in all, we are left feeling that there has been nothing in the tale of the Friar to redeem his character from what has already been said about him in the General Prologue.

One of the most favorable sketches which Chaucer gives us from his pilgrims to Canterbury is the Clerk of Oxford. Robinson¹ says that the term clerk could be applied to any ecclesiastical student as well as to a man in holy orders. He is still

1

Robinson, op. cit., p. 759.

studying, perhaps in preparation for his Master's degree. "He hadde gotten hym yet no benefice." He must be at least in a minor order to be a candidate for the benefice he had not yet obtained.¹

He evidently is a tutor for some of the other students at school, since we are told that he also "gladly teche." Rashdall² says that this was a common practice for older students to do tutoring, receiving some money from the students as well as an additional allowance from the college funds. We are told specifically that

Al that he myghte of his freendes hente,
On bookes and on lernynge he it spente,
And bisily gan for the soules preye
On hem that yaf hym wherwith to scolewe.³

Nothing derogatory is said concerning the clerk. He is shown clearly as one who "gladly wolde lerne" and

For hym was levere have at his beddes heed
Twenty bookes, clad in blak or reed
Of Aristotle and his philosophie
Than robes wiche, or fithels, or gay sautrie.⁴

In fact, his appearance, too, is about what we would expect.

As leene was his hors as is a rake,
And he was nat right fat, I undertake,
But looked holwe, and thereto sobrelly,
Ful thredbare was his overeste courtepy.⁵

His speech is also in character.

Noght o word spak he moore than was neede,

¹Bowden, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

²*Ibid.*, p. 156.

³General Prologue, lines 299-302.

⁴*Ibid.*, lines 293-296.

⁵*Ibid.*, lines 287-290.

And that was seyð in forme and revsrence,
 And short and quyk and ful of hy sentence
 Sownyng in moral vertu was his speche.¹

Another interesting revelation concerning the Clerk comes in his relation with the Wife of Bath and the tale which he later tells. The Wife insults the Clerk when she says:

Therefore no women of no clerk is preysed.²

Furthermore, she has already related in her prologue how she has married a clerk from Oxford and had finally reduced him to "shameful subjection." From many of the Pilgrims on Canterbury road she would have received an immediate rebuke, but not from our Clerk: he rides quietly along and bides his time. He even allows others to tell their tales and waits until the following day when the Host prevails upon him to tell a tale "eo pleyne. . . that we may understande what ye eeye." He tells one that they can well underetand, and before long they realize that it has a double purpose, for he tells about the patient Griselda, whose steadfast devotion to her husband stands every trial. In his own way he is answering the Wife of Bath; he is not only presenting a sketch of an ideal wife, which the Wife of Bath is not, but at the same time he is saying that clerks can say something good about women. Then, finally, by giving it Petrarch's interpretation, from whom he claims to have received the tale in Padua, he makes a rebuttal from the Wife a near impossibility. He states that the story is not necessarily meant for wives to be "Griseldas,"

¹Ibid., lines 304-307.

²The Wife of Bath's Prologue, line 706.

but it teaches that all, both men and women, are to subject themselves to God. By the time he has given his envoy, which is perhaps "a mock encomium," "a masterpiece of sustained and mordant irony," there is nothing left for the Wife to say; she must be thrown completely off her guard.¹

A most ideal example of the clergy is presented in the Parson. No better summary of a portrait of this idealization could be offered than

But Cristes loore and his apostles twelve
He taaghte, but first he folwed it hymselfe.²

Chaucer makes it quite clear that he was a brother of the Plowman, which indicates that he has come from a very low estate. He may have come from one of the lower classes, yet our poet has let his audience know from the beginning of the description that the Parson is a "lerned man, a clerk." This indicates that probably through great efforts on his own part the Parson has studied and prepared himself mentally, as well as spiritually, for his ministry.

He was to be respected in every area into which his ministry might extend. He always put his "folde" first. He had no part with absenteeism, which was one of the curses of the English church of this period.

He sette nat his benefice to hyre
And leet his sheep encombred in the myre
And ran to Londoun unto Seinte Poules
To seken hym a Chaunterie for soules,

¹Kittredge, *op. cit.*, pp. 253-262.

²General Prologue, lines 527, 528.

Or with a bretherhed to been withholde;
 But dwelte at hoom, and kepte wel his folde,
 So that the wolf ne made it nat myscarie;¹
 He was a shepherde and noht a mercenarie.¹

The character of the Parson is consistent throughout the journey whenever he is mentioned as well as in the sermon which he gives. Two references² are made to the Parson as a Lollard, but these are more than likely in fun-poking rather than in seriousness. When the Host calls upon him to tell a tale "for Goddes bones," the Parson answers: "What eyleth the man, so synfully to swere?" This is when the Host says: "I smelle a Lollere in the wynd." Most authorities now follow Robinson³ in saying that the Parson was not intended to mean Wyclif or one of his followers.

To be sure, it (the sketch) praises the virtues on which the Wycliffites laid emphasis and condemns certain abuses which they were always attacking. . . . Probably Chaucer would not have described him in just the terms he uses if reform had not been in the air. The poet himself was in intimate relations, it should also be remembered, with some of the most influential patrons of the Lollards. But the Parson is not represented as holding some of the most distinguishing beliefs of the Lollard party. Moreover, Wyclif, who died in 1384, presumably three or four years before the Prologue was written, was repudiated as a heretic in his last days.

Root⁴ proposes that in respect to the Host's charges, "one may readily enough answer that it is quite in accord with Chaucer's characteristic humor to have it suggested that the one thoroughly worthy ecclesiastic in the company is a heretic." Even when the

¹General Prologue, lines 507-514.

²Epilogue of the Man of Law's Tale, lines 1165, 1177.

³Robinson, op. cit., p. 765.

⁴Root, op. cit., pp. 287, 288.

Shipman interrupts the first attempt of the Parson to tell a tale "it is not Lollardy that he is in a panic about, but a sermon. He is eager for mirth and desperately afraid of being bored."¹

To a modern audience, at least, the Parson's "predicacioun" turns out to be long and dull. It is a prose sermon on Repentance and the Seven Deadly Sins. However, it is a very appropriate ending to the pilgrimage before the reaching of Canterbury and, most of all, maybe it would be an aid

To shewe you the way, in this viage
Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrimage
That highte Jerusalem celestial.²

The next two portraits show Chaucer's satire at its bitterest, yet we are left with the impression that as a "faithful reporter" he is giving us the story straight and only at one time is he guilty of becoming the "commentator."

"Pure is the ercedekenes helle," seyde he (the Summoner)
But wel I woot he lyed right in dede;
Of cursyng oghte ech gilty man him drede
For curs wol slee right as assoilyng eavith,
And also war hym of a Significavit.³

The Summoner, or Apparitor, was an officer that cited delinquents to appear before ecclesiastical courts.⁴ In the portrait of Chaucer's Summoner there is not much to redeem him from detestation. His very physical appearance is repulsive.

That hadde a fyr-reed cherubynnee face,
For saucefleem he was, with eyen narwe.
As hoot he was and lecherous as a sparwe,

¹Kittredge, op. cit., p. 169.

²Parson's Prologue, lines 49-51.

³General Prologue, lines 659-662.

⁴Robinson, op. cit., p. 768.

With scalled browes blake and piled berd.
 Of his visage children were aferd.
 Ther nas quyk-silver lytarge, ne brymstoon,
 Boras, ceruce, ne oille of tartre noon;
 Ne oynement that wolde clense and byte,
 That hym myghte helpen of his wheelkes white,
 Nor of the knobbes sittynge on his chekes,
 Wel loved he garleek, oynons, and eke lekes,
 And for to drynken strong wyn, reed as blood;
 Thanne wolde he speke and orie as he were wood.¹

His moral character was no better. Chaucer minces no words when he delineates this part of the sketch.

He was a gentil harlot and a kynde;
 A bettre felawe sholde men nocht fynde.
 He wolde suffre for a quart of wyn
 A good felawe to have his concubyn
 A twelf month, and excuse hym atte fulle;
 Ful prively a fynch eek koude he pulle.

 In daunger hadde he at his owene gise
 The yonge girles of the diocise,
 And knew hir counseil, and was al hir reed.²

The Summoner has picked up a few Latin terms out of some decree ("No wonder is, he herde it al the day") which he liked to show off when he "wel dronken hadde the wyne." He had learned these words as a jay was taught to say Walter ("Watte") or a parrot Poll, and "if anyone should question him further, then his philosophy was all spent."³ "To complete the picture of a debased and loud-mouthed Bacchus, the Summoner is crowned with a garland of flowers and leaves similar to the sign on the end of an 'ale-stake.'⁴ He carries a cake for a "bokeleer." This he will probably consume later with his "garleek, onions, and also lekes"

¹General Prologue, lines 624-636.

²Ibid., pp. 647-652.

³Robinson, loc. cit.

⁴Bowden, op. cit., p. 265.

with his "strong wyn, reed as blood."

The tale told by the Summoner may be as repulsive to many people as was his appearance and character. As has previously been indicated it was intended as a jibe at the Summoner's enemy, the Friar. It is the story of a friar who is trying to trick an ailing man out of a contribution. The actual bequest proved to be an insult to the friar. The sermon which the friar has preached to the ailing Thomas may be considered fair reading, but as a reply to the Friar's sermon it lacks "finesse and bull's eye aim." However, the Summoner's lack of skill may be a sign of skill in Chaucer, "for it is fitting that a Summoner should be less intelligent than such a Friar as Hubert was." Yet it may be that the Summoner was trying to put in the mouth of a friar a sermon "deliberately ill-constructed." "It may be a part of the Summoner's satiric intention to satirize the preaching of Friars as well as the Friars themselves."¹

It is in the portrait of the Pardoner that Chaucer "shows himself the first and subtlest ironist in English, for there are ironies within irony."² By this is meant that the basic meaning is opposite to that expressed in the words used. We find irony in the actual portrait of the Pardoner and in the tale which he tells. His so-called sermon is ironical when projected against that which has been revealed about him in the Prologue. There is irony within the tale which illustrates his sermon. All in all,

¹Coghill, op. cit., pp. 164, 165.

²Ibid., p. 160.

as we study the Pardoner we shall find many paradoxes, complexities, and ambiguities which have kept the critics busy through these many years. At least nearly all are convinced that though the Summoner is repulsive and despicable, the Pardoner is "vicious" and was much more to be feared and therefore more to be hated. A vain hypocrite, he had a "wider field of operation within the Church and a still deadlier technique."¹

The pardoners were called such because of what they gave, or quaestores because of what they asked.² Jusserand³ has the following to say about them:

These quaestores. . . as they are officially called, were, says Boniface IX, speaking at the very time that the poet wrote his tales, sometimes secular clerics and sometimes friars, most of them extremely impudent. They dispensed with ecclesiastical licences, and went from place to place delivering speeches, showing their relics and selling their pardons. It was a lucrative trade and the competition was great; the success of the authorized pardoners had caused a crowd of self-appointed ones to issue from the school or the priory, or from mere nothingness, greedy, with glittering eyes, as in the 'Canterbury Tales': 'suche glaryng eyghen hadde he as an hare'; true vagabonds, infesters of the highroads, who having, as they thought, nothing to fear, boldly carried on their imposter's traffic. They overawed their listeners, spoke loud, and unbound upon earth without scruple all that might be bound in heaven. Much profit arose therefrom; Chaucer's pardoner got a hundred marks a year, which was easy enough for him, since, having received no authority from anyone, to no one did he render any accounts, but kept all gains for himself. In his measured language the Pope tells us as much as the poet, and it seems as though he would duplicate, line by line, the portrait drawn by the story-teller, his contemporary.

This well sums up what we are to expect from Chaucer's sketch of

¹Loc. cit.

²Bowden, op. cit., p. 277.

³Jusserand, op. cit., p. 178.

the Pardoner. However, there have been many speculations over various points about him which are not brought out in this summary. For instance, his effeminate appearance has caused varied opinions.

This Pardoner hadde heer as yelow as wex,
 But smothe it heeng as dooth a strike of flex;
 By ounces henge his lokkes that he hadde,
 And therwith he his shuldres overspradde;
 But thynne it law, by colpons oon and oon.

 A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot.
 No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;
 As smothe it was it were late shave.
 I trowe he were geldyng or a mare.¹

The opinions have varied from the suggestion that he was simply a fashionable, fastidious man to the idea that he was a natural eunuch, castrate, or homosexual. In the light of his own statement:² "And have a joly wenche in every toun," and others made relating to his masculinity, it is hard to decide what Chaucer meant to say about him. Anyway, there is plenty of indication that a "voys as smal as hath a goot" could not have been used to make his eloquent sermons; in fact, the Pardoner himself says:

"Lordyngs," quod he, "in chirches when I preche,
 I payne me to han an hauteyn speche,
 And ryng it out as round as gooth a belle,
 For I kan al but rote that I telle."³

About all we can conclude is that he was sexually abnormal, but one cannot be specific in delineating that abnormality.

Another problem is concerning the extent of the wickedness

¹General Prologue, lines 675-679; 689-691.

²Prologue to the Pardoner's Tale, line 453.

³Pardoner's Prologue, lines 329-332.

of the Pardoner. Why does he reveal himself so completely to the Pilgrims? Is he human, or is he devil? Opinions here have been varied too. Gerould¹ gives credit for his behavior to "ale, histrionism, and somnambulism." Most of all does he place the blame upon drunkenness, for a "man so depraved and so intent on getting for himself every possible creature comfort would not, unless his natural inhibitions were suspended, have stripped himself naked in mixed company."

The extent of his hypocrisy will always be a shock even to the less orthodox mind. Some of the more startling illustrations appear in the following lines:

A vernycle hadde he sowed upon his cappe
 His walet lay biforn hym in his lappe
 Bretful of pardoun, comen from Rome al hoot.

 For in his male he hadde a pilwe-beer,
 Which that he seyde was Oure Lady veyl:
 He seyde he hadde a gobet of the seyl
 That Saint Peter hadde, whan that he wente
 Upon the see, til Jhesu Crist hym hente.
 He hadde a croys of latoun ful of stones,
 And in a glas he hadde pigges bones.
 But with thise relikes, whan that he fond
 A povre person dwellynge upon lond,
 Upon a day he gat hym moore moneye
 Than that the person gat in monthes tweye;
 And thus, with feyned flaterye and japes
 He made the person and the peples his apes.²

Chaucer's description of him is verified in the Pardoner's own Prologue. He tells all his tricks and then starts preaching to those on Canterbury road. He even has the audacity after his so-called sermon to try to sell the "relikes" and "pardoun" to

¹Gerould, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

²General Prologue, lines 685-687; 694-706.

them. Most of all does he needle the Host.

"I rede that oure Hoost here shal bigynne,
For he is moost enveloped in synne.
Com forth, sire Hoost, and offre first anon,
And thou shalt kisee the relike everychon,
Ye, for a grote! Unbokele anon thy purs."¹

The burning reply of the Host left the Pardoner so "wrooth" that he "answerde nat a word." Who but our "worthy Knyght" could have estraightened things out so happily?

"Namore of this, for it is right ynough!
Sire Pardoner, be glad and myrie of cheere;
And ye, eire Hoost, that been to me so deere,
I prey yow that ye kiese the Pardoner
And Pardoner, I preye thee, drawe thee near,
And, as we diden, lat us loughen and pleye."
Anon they kiete, and ryden for hir weyl.²

It is in the tale itself that we find the greatest irony. It tells of the fate of the three revellers who sally forth to kill Death, but find death themselves in a heap of gold. The text of the sermon is Radix malorum est Cupitas, and the Pardoner considers it an illustration of the type of thing which he preaches from the pulpit. The tale is a double irony or an "irony within an irony." First, there is the irony of the three rioters, seeking Death in order to kill him, who find him unknowingly, and are themselves killed by their own native principle, cupidity. Then the fact that the Pardoner tells such a tale about his own "favorite" sin is equally ironical.

It has often been said that he (the Pardoner) is a lost soul, but he is more; he is a lost soul peddling a fake salvation for other souls, as if all salvation were

¹Pardoner's Tale, lines 941-945.

²Ibid., lines 962-963.

a fake. Like Iago he knows all the right things to say, and says them for his private ends. The irony is that they are true while he supposes them a mockery:-

For myn entente is nat but for to wynne,
And nothyng for correccioun of synne.
Though that hir eoulee goon a-blakeberyed!¹

CONCLUSION

With this illustration of Chaucer's satire at work in the presentation of the Pardoner, we bring to a close this attempt to show Chaucer's use of satire for social criticism. In the panel of portraite which has been painted of the clergy we have noted a graduated line of satire as it started very subtly with the Prioress and the Monk and proceeded to become more pronounced, with the exception of the Clerk and the Parson, until it reached its highest point in the sketch of the Pardoner. All the time, however, we are aware that Chaucer does not say, "I condemn these people," but rather, "You have seen them. What do you think?"

Thus it can be said of all Chaucer's criticism. He forces upon us no conclusion; he only leads us on to form our own opinions, yet he is there offering suggestions and pointing the way. He does not sound a trumpet; things are spoken quietly and without fanfare. It is not until we have been taken in completely by what he has revealed that we realize that we have become a party to what he is doing.

We have found that his comic method has worked. We first

¹Coghill, op. cit., pp. 160-161.

saw it turned inward upon himself and outward upon the society of his day. The same measure by which he measures society, he has dared use to measure himself. We have become aware, too, of the consistent development of his technique. From his earliest works to his last we have noted no serious let-down. Characterization, conversational technique, dramatic and narrative quality, description, humor--all have improved with writing.

We have found that Chaucer has measured the upper classes with the yardstick of satire; they were tried and found wanting. Projected against the transitions of his day they could not stand the test. Chivalry, with courtly love and all its other facets, is becoming a thing of the past. The pomp and ostentation of this institution, to which the upper classes are so tenaciously clinging must go. It must make way for a more vigorous, practical way of life and type of individual. The clergy, also, with all its degradation and laxness, is becoming in many ways a hindrance to the people rather than the help it was originally designed to be. Chaucer is aware of it all. He has not viciously condemned, but he has painted society in "full-length portraits" with a "discreet lambent flame of irony through the smiling light." Yet after the display is ended, the fun is over, we feel that his admonition to the "yonge, fresshe folkes" is what actually counts with Chaucer.

¹Cazamian, op. cit., p. 69.



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SATIRE AS AN ASPECT OF CHAUCER'S SOCIAL CRITICISM

by

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Chaucer's ability to depict a wide range of Medieval society has long been recognized. His subject matter is concerned with the institutions, traditions, ideals, and the everyday realities of this society. The vividness of portrayal is a result of a very skilled and consistent technique. The modernity of his technique in revealing society astonishes us.

Perhaps the greatest phase of his technique is that of humor. It is a sly, quiet, roguish humor; nothing that would make the reader burst into loud laughter; neither is it grotesque or exaggerated. Often it is so subtle that one needs to be on his guard lest he miss it. The humor is interwoven with satire which he directs in variant degrees at the society and traditions of his day. The basic purpose of this thesis is to show that Chaucer used this instrument of satire to show his awareness of the decadence of the institutions and traditions of the upper classes.

A definition of Chaucer's satire has been made by comparing it with the satire of a few other leading satirists--some before Chaucer, some contemporary with him, and others subsequent to him. It has been shown that two Roman satirists, Juvenal and Horace, typify the two classes into which satirists have been generally placed. Juvenal's style was abusive invective that ransacked the language for phrases of scorn. Horace's satire was more subtle and indirect, graceful and mocking, but never one of Juvenalian rage. Chaucer followed more closely the tradition of Horace, while his contemporary, Langland, was a medieval Juvenal. Others studied in this comparison were Lucian, Swift, and Thurber.

The method used in determining the idea that Chaucer used satire to criticize the upper classes was to examine the poems, being careful to examine them in the light of the times in which they were written. The works of Chaucer's which were investigated were The Book of the Duchess, The House of Fame, The Parliament of Fowls, The Legend of Good Women, Troilus and Criseyde, The Canterbury Tales, and The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse. First, we saw how Chaucer turned his humor in upon himself in a pose of self-deprecation. This mask proved to be a consistent tool from The Book of the Duchess, written about 1369, to The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse, written in 1399 shortly before his death. The method proved not only to be consistent but it showed improvement as it progressed. It served to enliven the reader's attention, and somehow it seemed natural for the poet next to turn the same subtle humor outward upon his contemporaries.

Chaucer lived in an age of great changes and transitions. He was very much aware of the decadence of some of the outstanding institutions of the Middle Ages and he used the instrument of satire to delineate this decadence and transition. His range of satire is from the most subtle irony to near invective, but never does he force upon his reader a conclusion. As a "simple-minded" reporter he presents the "news" and allows his audience to formulate their own opinions. However, his presence is sensed, offering suggestions and pointing the way.

One of the institutions examined in this study was that of chivalry and its facet courtly love. Even though Chaucer painted

the Knight and the Squire in The Canterbury Tales as ideal portraits of knighthood when we consider them as Chaucer's own contemporaries, we find that they are anachronistic. Chivalry and courtly love, even though they had both "flared up in autumnal splendor," were matters of pomp and ostentation only. Chivalry was decadent; it had to make way for a more vigorous, practical way of life and type of individual. Perhaps the greatest satiric portrayal of chivalry and courtly love was found in The Parliament of Fowls. As the fowls discussed this courtly matter, the impression was left that the fowls of the lower estates fared much better in the controversy than those of the upper classes.

Since the clergy has generally been placed in the upper reaches of society, it too was examined for possible satire. The source for this investigation was The Canterbury Tales. In the panel of portraits which was painted of the clergy we noted a graduated line of satire as it started very subtly with the Prioress and proceeded to become more pronounced, with the exception of the Clerk and the Parson, until it reached its highest point in the sketch of the Pardoner. Chaucer painted the picture of the clergy, not by moralizing denunciation, but by drawing the lines sharp and clear.

Thus it was with all Chaucer's social criticism. He does not cause us to laugh at any particular individual, but rather to "smile" at a society that will not face up to conditions as they are. We have seen him as having a genial and courtly air, but at the same time as having a clear-sighted view of the people, as well as the traditions of his day. He has a way of opening

a "window upon life" and letting the reader see the person and events of his own vision.

