

CHANGING SOCIAL ORDER IN THE CANTERBURY TALES: A STUDY OF THE GENERAL PROLOGUE

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Abstract

General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1387-1400) is one of the most complex literary efforts in late medieval English literature to chart the discontinuities and metamorphoses of the fourteenth-century English society. Composed in the context of the Black Death, the Peasants Revolt of 1381, the Lollard religious reform movement, the rise of a mercantile class, the text inscribed in the gallery of portraits a methodical questioning of the three-estate model, those who pray, those who fight, and those who work. This essay discusses how Chaucer uses narrative voice, irony, characterisation by satire, and the pilgrimage frame to express, challenge and finally disrupt, the social hierarchy of late medieval England. Based on New Historicist, materialist, and Bakhtinian theories, the paper examines the characters of the Knight, the Prioress, the Merchant, the Plowman, the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner as characters whose depiction reveals the collapse of the ideology of the estates, the emergence of proto-capitalist individualism, and the mutability of gender and religious power. The thesis of the paper is that Chaucer is not only a mirror of social change but he is also a co-creator of this change in the discursive process of the Prologue via the polyphonic construction. The results prove that the General Prologue is a heteroglossic cultural document, whose formal strategies are the very social mobility and transgression, which are described in the contents. Conclusions on the interpretation of literature as social change in late medieval England are drawn.

Keywords: Canterbury tales; General prologue; social order; medieval estates; Chaucer; New Historicism; social change; late medieval England.

1. Introduction

The Canterbury Tales, written by Geoffrey Chaucer around 1387-1400, enjoys a unique status in the canon of Middle English literature not only due to its aestheticism but also due to the remarkable responsiveness which it displays to the social upheavals of the Ricardian age. The General Prologue, which serves as a narrative threshold and a sociological panorama, introduces a company of thirty pilgrims whose variety in terms of vocational, moral, economic and gendered makes up the entire spectrum of the fourteenth-century English society. The three-estate structure that had been long used to justify socio-economic stratification ideologically was exposed to greater than ever before in a time that was characterized by disastrous demographic decline after the Black Death (1348-1351), the radical social protest of the Peasants Revolt (1381), the theological undermining of the Lollardy, and the commercial supremacy of a mercant

It has long been acknowledged by scholars that the General Prologue is not just a literary procession of social types but is highly ideological, in the sense that it reflects as well as challenges the categories by which medieval society would have defined itself. The narrator of Chaucer, the ironically self-deprecating 'Geoffrey', assumes the stance of a naive documentary fidelity - 'Me thynketh it acordant to resoun / To telle yow al the condicioun / Of ech of hem' (GP, ll. 3739)--and in its practice a very sophisticated irony, which reveals the disjuncture between the ideology of the estate and the reality of its living. The pilgrimage frame, with its expressly religious aim of travelling to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury, offers a liminal social space where the hierarchies of the feudal English society are both invoked and suspended (Doğan, 2013).

This essay questions how the General Prologue by Chaucer articulates, subverts and re-imagines the social hierarchy of late medieval England. It is based on the assumption that the text is not a passive product of social conditions but is instead an agent in the discursive negotiation of social meaning- an assumption that is compatible with New Historicist methods of seeing literary texts as embedded within the power relations of their historical era. The analysis examines exemplary pilgrims of all the estates and of the more and more important groups not fitting well into the tripartite schema: the Knight and the Plowman as idealised representatives of the estates whose very idealisation indicates ideological tension; the Prioress and the Pardoner as those whose description betrays the corruption of ecclesiastical order; the Merchant as a symbol of new mercantile capitalism.

2. Literature Review

The critical discussion of social order in Chaucer has emerged within a number of overlapping critical cultures. The genre of estates satire was defined in the foundational work of Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* which gave the genre of estates satire the status as the main literary context in which to interpret the General Prologue. Mann showed how Chaucer has created pilgrims who are social-estate saturated with a long tradition of satirical writing of the moral lapses of each social-estate, clerics who exploit their flocks, knights who have abandoned chivalric ideals, merchants who lie. Nonetheless, Mann also demonstrated that Chaucer changes the genre by making the pilgrims psychologically specific, and thus, forming characters that transcend and complicate their satirical archetypes (Albrecht Classen, 2026).

A materialist approach was pioneered by Paul Strohm in *Social Chaucer*, which placed the *Canterbury Tales* in the context of the particular social structures of late fourteenth-century London - a world of guild merchants, royal bureaucrats and professional ambitions, into which Chaucer himself had entered. According to Strohm, the social status of Chaucer as a bourgeois intellectual, whose life links him with the court, gave him the opportunity to view social mobility in a variety of perspectives, making his writings truly ambivalent regarding the social processes that they document. This ambivalence, proposed by Strohm, is not evasiveness but a formal characteristic of the social vision that Chaucer had.

Chaucer and the Subject of History by Lee Patterson continued the historicist line, claiming that texts by Chaucer are constitutively involved in political and ideological crises of the Ricardian moment, the crisis of feudal authority, the trauma of the Peasants Revolt and the invention of subjectivity as a literary and political concept. The politically charged reading of the *Knight Tale* by Patterson as a reaction to the political threat of the 1380s has provided a new avenue to politically interested Chaucer studies (Dimonye, 2024).

The critical horizon has been broadened in feminist medievalism. In the article, Carolyn Dinshaw examined the gendering of the literary power structures of the *Canterbury Tales* by suggesting that Chaucer projects his own relationship to sources in terms of masculine mastery and feminine subjection. The more sceptical approach of *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* to challenge the topic of how such sympathetic portrayals by Chaucer of women characters actually reinscribe the patriarchal order they seem to criticize. Alcuin Blamires more recently in *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* has attempted to differentiate between the cultural limitation of Chaucer and his ethical obligations and advocate a more subtle evaluation of his gender politics.

H. Marshall Leicester Jr. has been most successful in applying the Bakhtinian theory to Chaucer, with *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* suggesting that the *Canterbury Tales* is an inherently dialogic text in which no single voice can attain a form of authoritative closure. Leicester calls this Bakhtinian reading, and maintains that the polyphonic form of the text, with its multiple voices, multiple genres, multiple social registers, formally performs the social heterogeneity it expresses thematically. The given theoretical framework gives the present study its interpretation of the General Prologue as the heteroglossic cultural document (Kareem, 2025).

Community, Gender, and Individual Identity by David Aers introduced a materialist-feminist angle of attack to the social conflicts inherent in how Chaucer represents the community and individual identity, and said that the *Canterbury Tales* dramatises real social antagonisms rather than dissolving them into aesthetic harmony. Postcolonial and race-critical medievalism has also emerged more recently as an attempt to investigate the ethnic and religious othering that organises the social world of Chaucer, introducing a new dimension of social order analysis that the previous

scholarship had been largely uninterested in. Table 1: Selected Critical Approaches to Social Order in the General Prologue

Scholar (Year)	Theoretical Framework	Key Argument	Pilgrims / Focus	Limitation / Gap
Mann (1973)	Estates Satire	Chaucer individualises satirical types	All estates	Limited socioeconomic analysis
Strohman (1989)	Materialism	Chaucer's bourgeois position shapes ambivalence	Merchant, Knight	Underweights gender
Patterson (1991)	New Historicism	Texts engage political crisis of Ricardianism	Knight, general	Less focus on Prologue itself
Leicester (1990)	Bakhtinian dialogism	CT is polyphonic; no authoritative voice	All pilgrims	Minimal historical grounding
Dinshaw (1989)	Feminist / psychoanalytic	Gendering of authorial authority	Wife of Bath	Focuses more on Tales than Prologue
Aers (1988)	Materialist feminism	CT dramatises unresolved social antagonisms	Community, gender	Less attention to irony

The current research develops and generalises these traditions of critique and adds a long-standing close-read intervention of formal strategies of the General Prologue in connection with social change—an integration that has not been done comprehensively in any one study.

3. The Three-Estate Model and Its Discontents.

3.1 Ideology of the Three Estates.

The tripartite social model of medieval European culture: those who pray (oratores), those who fight (bellatores), and those who work (laboratores) gave medieval European culture its main architectural frame of reference in the formulation and justification of social order. The three-estate schema, developed in the Carolingian era and given its canonical English articulation in works like the homilies of Aelfric, had it that a divinely appointed social structure existed, with each of these groups playing a complementary role critical to the body politic. The model idealised inequality as the necessity dictated by providence, and justified the expropriation of peasants and artisans as the economic precondition of the prayer of the church and the military service of the knights (Doğan, 2013).

But towards the end of the fourteenth century the three-estate model was overstretched. Between one-third and one-half of the population of England had been killed by the Black Death, so changing the labour market and giving the surviving peasants more bargaining power as they could now insist on higher wages and increased freedom of movement. The Statute of Labourers (1351) tried to peg wages at the pre-plague rates, but it was not enforced and the resentment was strong, culminating in the Peasants Revolt of 1381 when rebels led by Wat Tyler marched on London and, briefly, seized the Tower and executed the Archbishop of Canterbury. The uprising revealed just how much the willingness of peasant to subscribe to the ideology of the estate was conditional and not inherent (Doğan, 2013).

At the same time the expansion of urban trade and the production of crafts was producing a large middling group - merchants, lawyers, physicians, master craftsmen- whose wealth and social status were surpassing what the three-estate model could represent. This mercantile group boasted of social status by spending money on conspicuous consumption, education and even civic government, yet it lacked ideological legitimacy that the estate schema offered

to the clergy and nobility. Chaucer was born to this kind: the son of a vintner; who, in the end, became a member of Parliament.

3.2 Knight: Ideal or Anachronism?

The Knight is placed in the honourable seat of head of the pilgrim group of Chaucer--'A KNYGht ther was, and that a worthy man, / That fro the tyme that he first bigan / To ride out, he loved chivalric, / Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie' (GP, ll. 43–46). The portrait, on a first glance, seems simply effusive: the Knight has fought in the honour of an admirable list of crusading expeditions, both Prussian and Egyptian; and his own looks are humble and unobtrusive (Anachronism , 2019).

But Terry Jones provocative revisionist reading though controversial, attracted attention to the possibilities of reading the record of the Knight campaign in an ironic way. A lot of the campaigns that Chaucer enumerates such as the battle of Algeciras and the service with the King of Morocco have little to do with the idealistic Christian chivalry and more to do with the mercenary business. The Knight is thus worthy-in-a-knighthood which can be encoded into a distance between the ideological rhetoric of the chivalric service and the reality of organised military violence as a hireling- a distance that the late fourteenth century had made all the more visible. Although we might resist the incredibly ironic interpretation of Jones, the sheer repetition of knightly virtues that the portrait insists on repeating--its rehearsal of chivalric traits--is carrying out an ideological work of asserting an estate paradigm that overt social experience was producing as invalid (Anachronism , 2019).

The son of the Knight, the Squire, is the representative of the following generation of nobility and, ironically, a set of values that is different. Where the portrait of the father is pointed to the military service, the portrait of the son is pointed to the courtly achievement, to singing, and jousting and drawing and carrying out a love affair. The Squire is a lovyere and lusty bachelor., whose social identity is performed and displayed as opposed to the performance of the estate duty. The opposition between father and son marks the shift of crusading ideology to the culture of courtly spectacle which defined the Ricardian court.

3.3 The Plowman: Lacking Ideal and Ideological Compensation.

The portrait of the Plowman stands out in the General Prologue by its pure idealism, and also by its relative succinctness. The Plowman is a swynkere trewe (GP, l. 531) who perform his duties of agricultural labour as an estate member with a Christian charity: Lyving in pees and parfit charitee', giving his tithes on time and assisting his neighbours with no compensation. The Plowman is no longer given ironic qualification as are all other pilgrims in the company.

It has been suggested by some researchers that the portrait of the Plowman is actually an ideological reparation of the social fact of the Peasants Revolt (Plowman Writings, 2026). Creating an idyllicised image of a labourer who joyfully performs his duties to the estate and will not interfere with societal peace, Chaucer creates an opposite image to the rebelling peasants who had stormed London. The Plowman portrait ideologically succeeds in making labour grievances invisible and making natural peasant virtue submissive, not rebellious. The interesting omission of the Plowman in the story-telling competition supports this reading, since he has no story to relate, no voice in the polyphonic parliament of the pilgrimage, and a silence that eloquently expresses the fact of social silence of peasant experience in literary culture (Plowman Writings, 2026).

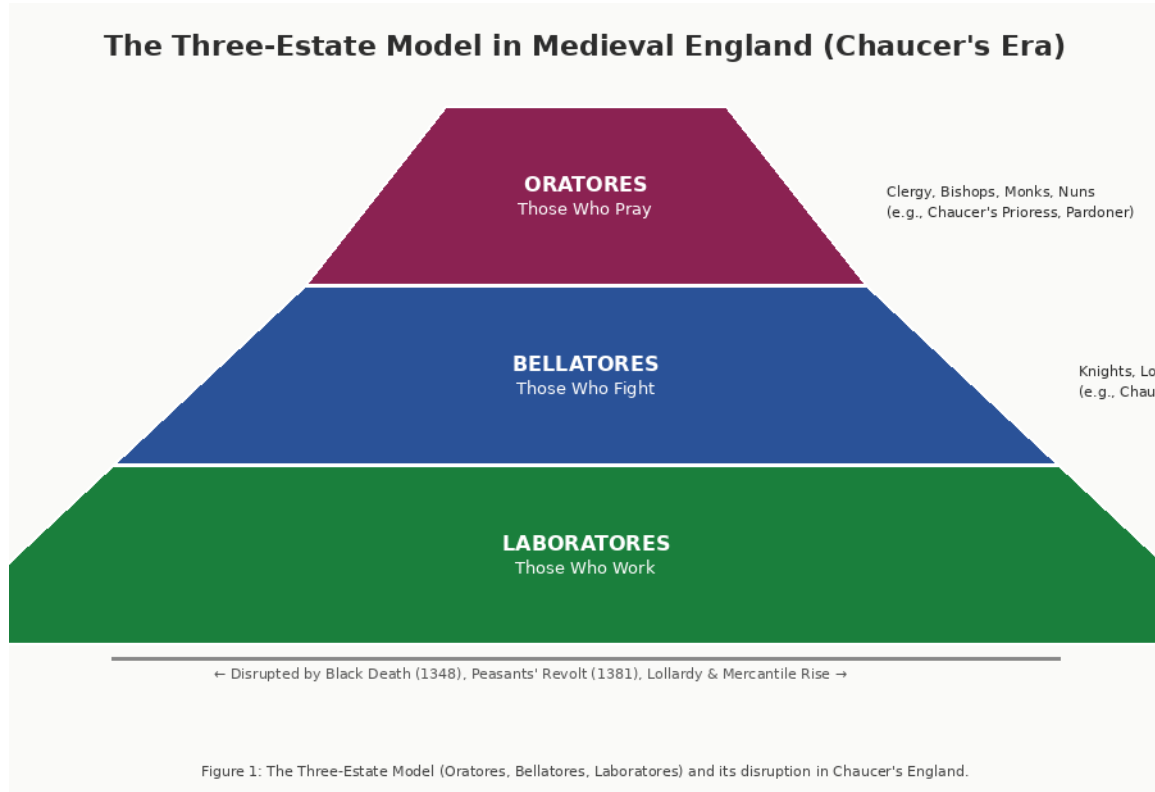


Figure 1: The Three-Estate Model (Oratores, Bellatores, Laboratores) and its disruption in Chaucer's England. Source: Adapted from Doğan (2013); Mann (1973); Strohm (1989). Three-estate ideology in medieval England.

4. Ecclesiastical Disruption and Crisis of Religious Authority

4.1 The Prioress: Courtly Religion and Institutional Contradiction

The irony surrounding the introduction of the Prioress, Madame Eglantine is so much over the board that readers have long argued over whether Chaucer aims to sympathize or criticize. The portrait of the narrator gives excessive due to her table etiquette, the touching pity of her towards mice in traps, her exquisite grey eyes and the brooch she wears with the unclear motto *Amor vincit omnia* (GP, l. 162)—a motto which applies to divine and erotic love alike. What is particularly lacking in the portrait is any lengthening of focus to her religious calling, her spiritual control, or her pastoral nurture (Gather, 2022).

The portrait of the Prioress represents a kind of piety, the so-called courtly religion of the late medieval era, by which aristocratic aesthetic values (fine manners, elegant dress, soft speech) were projected onto a religious identity. The conflict between her monastic pledge of poverty and her coral beads and gold brooch, between her religious duty to retire out of the world and her eagerness to join a worldly pilgrimage, places the Prioress on the frontiers of two social worlds, which are not meant to come into contact with each other. Her portrait thereby marks the permeability of the boundary between ecclesiastical and secular statuses— a porosity which had been a chief complaint of the institutional church as criticized by Lollard (Gather, 2022).

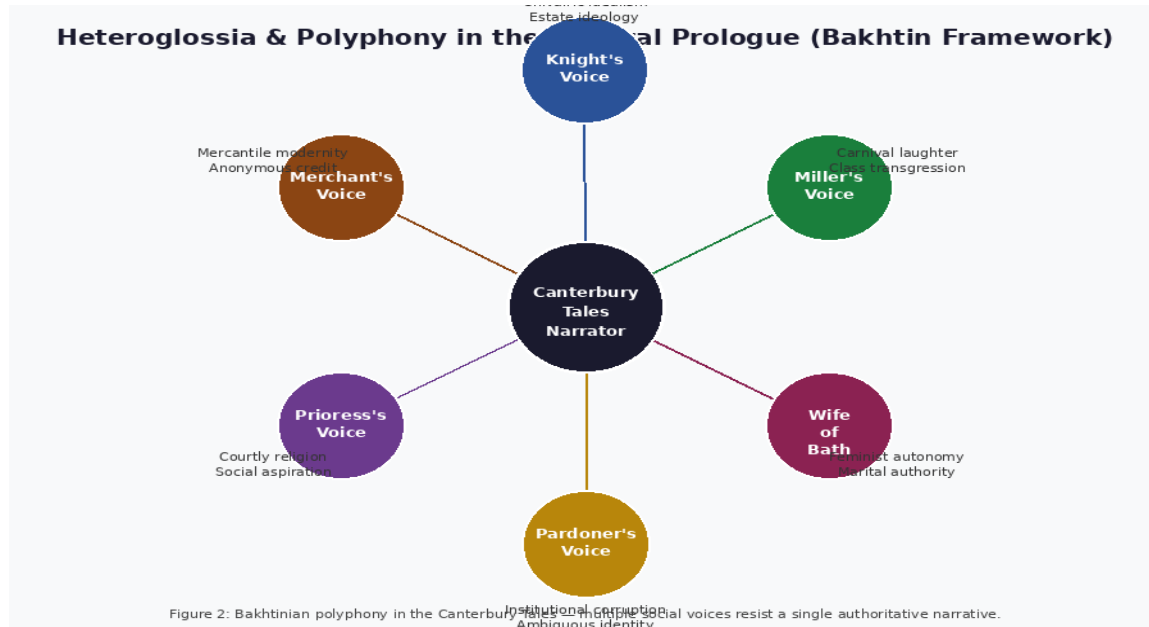


Figure 2: Bakhtinian polyphony in the Canterbury Tales — multiple social voices resist a single authoritative narrative.

Source: Adapted from Leicester (1990); Bakhtin (1984); Abdullah (2023). Dialogic structure of the General Prologue.

4.2 The Pardoner: Forgery, Sexuality and Corruption of the Institution

When the Prioress is the symbol of ecclesiastical disturbance in the form of genteel compact with the secular principles, the Pardoner is the symbol of the same in the form of express venality and bodily uncertainty. At the end of the portrait is one of the most daring physical descriptions in the General Prologue: I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare (GP, l.). 691)--a sexual ambiguities statement that has spawned colossal critical discourse concerning the gender identity, sexuality and bodily integrity of the Pardoner (Forattini, 2024).

The Pardoner, whose business is the sale of fake relics, a bone belonging to a pig that is relic of a saint, a pillowcase that is relic of Our Lady, is a representative of the institutional corruption of the spiritual economy of the church. His relics are counterfeit, his pardons might be beyond his power to confer, and all his career is stage acting of religious prowess which he might not literally have. The narrator writes that he has stolen more cash out of poor parishioners 'in oon day / Than that the subject haas in monthes twye' (GP, ll.). 703704), which indicates that the activity of the Pardoner is a parasitic extraction that compromises the legal spiritual economy of the parish (Forattini, 2024).

The queerness of the Pardoner, in the two senses, prolongs the social commentary on the ecclesiastical portraits because it implies that the corruption of the institutional body of the church is reflected in the suspicious physical body of the Pardoner. Influentially, Dinshaw postulated that the hermaphroditism of the Pardoner represents the unnatural confusion of the categories that institutional corruption generates: of authentic and counterfeit, sacred and profane, male and female. The portrait therefore does not simply attack a particular corrupt cleric but it implicates the institutional order that creates and facilitates this corruption.

5. Economic Modernity and the Mercantile Class.

5.1 The Discourse of Credit/The Merchant

The Merchant portrait is deliberately blurred in such a manner that critics have suggested it reflects the new economic murkiness of mercantile capitalism. The Merchant sits Hye on his hors, says the narrator. 271), says of his gains, alwey wib me, and would fain that the sea betwix Middelburgh and Orwell should remain open so that I may trade there--but are we never told his name, nor what his trade was. Above all, the narrator notes: 'Ther wiste no wight that he was in dette' nobody knew he was in debt. Credit in the two senses of the economic credit of debt, and the social credit of reputation, forms the social identity of the Merchant (Dimonye, 2024).

There is something vital about the development of mercantile capitalism in late medieval England in this portrait. In the estate model, in which social identity is based on inherited status and the role of the estate, where you are what God made you, the mercantile world based identity on performance, trade, and information management. The social being of the Merchant is his commercial one, which can be neither distinguished nor supported but by his commercial activity. The failure (or unwillingness) of the narrator to inform us of the name of the Merchant, performs the anonymity of market relations whereby individuals are increasingly formed by exchange instead of by blood or calling (Dimonye, 2024).

5.2 The Franklin, the Guildsmen and the Aspiring Social Groups.

The portrait of the Franklin captures the social ambitions of the affluent rural property-owning group that stood between the yeomanry and the gentry. The narrator lingers too long on the incredible hospitality of the Franklin-- it snewed in his hous of mete and drynke his emphasis on his lavish table, as a social virtue and as a performance statement of quasi-aristocratic rank. His career as sheriff and MP puts Franklin in the administrative group that literally ruled late medieval England, with the functions that the estate model ascribed to nobility but with a social identity based on land ownership and not hereditary ancestry (Plowman Writings, 2026).

The portrait of the five Guildsmen is memorable by the group character of its description--five craftsmen are described as a homogeneous group, each 'fressh and newe' (GP, l.). 365) in the same livery, all seemingly destined to hold civic office: 'Everich, was wysdom he kan, / Shaply to be an alderman' (GP, ll. 372-373). The Guildsmen symbolize the guild economy of late medieval English towns, where craft regulation established forms of collective economic power that rivaled both aristocratic patronage and individualistic mercantile capital. Their portrait implies social ambition without individuation--they are not individuals but groups of individuals--a formal decision that can indicate the conflict between the guild system, with its combination of solidarity and individual progress, and individual achievement (Plowman Writings, 2026).

6. Sex, Agency and Social Transgression

6.1 Wife of Bath and Feminist Contestation of Feminine Authority

The portrait of the Wife of Bath is the longest, the most psychologically nuanced, and the most talked about of the portraits of characters in the General Prologue. Alisoun of Bath is presented by a sequence of geographical, social and physical descriptions which cumulatively create an image of unusual power and agency: she is a weaver, who travelled hem of Ypres and of Gaunt' (GP, l.). 448), a common pilgrim, who was married five times, and who had the physiognomy of the gat-toothed, which, by the physiognomy of the middle ages, meant an audacious and wanton character. She is 'boold' (GP, l. 458), 'fair' (GP, l. 474), and rides 'esily' (GP, l. 469) on her ambler, her hat As brood as is a bokeler or targ (Medievalists.net, 2012).

The portrait of The Wife of Bath enlists the misogynist discourse of feminine garrulity, sexual appetite, and marital dominance which pervades medieval antifeminist literature, but does so in such a manner that it endows the character of such qualities with a sort of vitality that disrupts the critical distance which it is intended to generate. Alisoun is not merely a type of satire, but a type of social activity--a woman who works and is economically independent, who possesses experience, and whose relationship to her own wants is assured. Her deafness, an accident caused by the strike of her fifth husband, is used as a physical aspect of the gender conflict her character symbolizes and is unwilling to overcome.

The social transgression of The Wife of Bath is not a personal one, but structural: she is consumed by productive labour (weaving), sexual relations (marriage), and spiritual pilgrimage all at the same time, rejecting the ideological division of these spheres of which estate thinking demanded. Her five marriages are serial, contractual and economically negotiated unions as opposed to sacramental and patriarchally subordinate unions that canon law supported. The portrait of the Wife of Bath in this sense captures the development of a more contractual and less hierarchical form of gender relations, which urban economic conditions were starting to open up, although it was opposed by ecclesiastical and legal norms (Medievalists.net, 2012).

6.2 The Narrator's Complicity: Gender and the Gaze

The narrator of the General Prologue is himself a gendered subject whose gaze makes up the female pilgrims in certain respects. His appreciation of the Prioress with her seemly nose and faire forehead, of the Wife of Bath with her hosen and shoes, creates femininity as spectacle to a presumptively masculine audience. The praise that the narrator pays is

always positioned in the context of the looks of the women, and not the ideational or professional abilities of the women. This gendered gaze is in itself a social practice which is deployed within the text and, in the ironic distance, is challenged thereof (Male Gaze, 2018).

It is in the portrait of the Prioress, where the painstaking care of physical person--her forehead 'fair of sprede' (GP, l.)--and the admiration which the narrator seems to give her is most evident, that the tension between the admiration and the irony with which it is admired comes into most obvious view. 155), her 'smylere' (GP, l. 119)--joins the courtly dialogue of feminine beauty yet at the same time notes its unsuitable use in a character who has embraced vows of poverty, chastity. The gaze of the narrator, that is, is not a naive documentary practice but a socially situated action which has ideological consequences (Male Gaze, 2018).

7. The Social Architecture of the Prologue, Heteroglossia, and Polyphony

7.1 The Pilgrim Company as Social Utterance

The innovative idea of heteroglossia suggested by the author Mikhail Bakhtin, i.e. the co-existence of various social voices, registers and ideological orientations in a single discourse, offers a fruitful theoretical approach toward the analysis of the formal strategies of the General Prologue. The novel (and subsequently, the narrative poem) attains its unique ability to represent in a social way, and do so exactly, by arranging the confrontation and interaction of various social languages, none of which attains an authoritative resolution. The Canterbury Tales, with its multiplicity of narrators, multiplicity of tales and multiplicity of social registers is a classic heteroglossic text (Tara Prasad Adhikari, 2025).

The characterisation in the portrait gallery of the General Prologue performs heteroglossia on the plane of characterisation: the portraits are not only written in the social language of the subject but through it. The vocabulary of chivalric romance is used in the portrait of the Knight, including such words as worthy, honoured, trouthe, honour. The language of commercial calculation is the language of the Merchants portrait--goot his bigynnyng, in dette, bargaynes. The portrait of the Wife of Bath is based on the discourse of antifeminist satire, of physiognomy, of commercial weaving, and of laws of marriage. It is the language of the ecclesiastical office, of market hawking, of sexual innuendo that the Pardoner, in his portrait, uses. The social language of the portrait, in both instances, is not merely description of its object and is a performance of the ideological world that the subject is constructed out of (Tara Prasad Adhikari, 2025).

7.2 The voice of the Narrator and the boundaries of the irony

The Canterbury Tales narrator is not a single consciousness but a locus of so-called disenchanting subjectivity - a voice that is aware too much of the ideological constructions it uses to use them without ironic self-consciousness, but not enough to evade them altogether. The implications this reading would have on the analysis of the treatment of social order in the General Prologue are significant. The recurrent emphasis of the narrator that he is only telling what he heard, - 'Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun / To telle yow al the condicioun' (GP, ll. 3738)--is itself an ideological performance: the gesture of the candid reportage that masks the discriminatory, value-infused, and even satirical creation of the portraits (R.M. Lumiansky, 2018).

The irony of the General Prologue works mostly through the disjunction between what the narrator tells us, and what we can make out in the text. The narrator continues by telling us that the Monk was glorifying the fact that he did not bother to read a text which had beckoned monks to physical toil- when the narrator lauds him, saying- And I seyde his opinion was good. / What sholde he studie and make hymselfen wood, / Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure? (GP, ll. 183185)--the rhetorical questions are a collaboration with the self-serving rationalisation that the Monk indulges in, and which the reader is encouraged to view as such. This two-voiced discourse, the voice of the narrator and the voice of the critical reader, is a Bakhtinian device of distributing social criticism throughout the text and not in one authoritative voice (Plowman Writings, 2026).

7.3 The Pilgrimage as a Carnavalesque Space

The carnival as a festive, temporary suspension of hierarchical norms that allow the space of social inversion and transgression described by Bakhtin is also applicable to the pilgrimage frame in the Canterbury Tales. The pilgrimage, as the carnival, displaces participants of their usual social places and puts them in a transitional place where normal hierarchies are (temporarily and partially) suspended. The Host, Harry Bailly, has a kind of power over the pilgrim company--the suggestion of the tale-telling game, the evaluation of the tales, the threat of punishment, the failure to

obey,--which in normal social life would be unattainable, a tavern-keeper would not venture to instruct a knight or a prioress (Nicolas Restrepo Ochoa, 2024).

This carnivalesque aspect of the pilgrimage frame permits social experimentation which can be embodied in the General Prologue without sanctification: the Plowman rides next to the Knight; the Wife of Bath questions the authority of the clergy on gender; the fake relics of the Pardoner momentarily captivate the critical reason of advanced pilgrims. The pilgrimage space is not a social revolution that is here to stay but a disciplined event of the enactment of the social alternatives- what Strohm terms a temporary community of unequals. The fact that these options are provisional and fall within a religious context matters socially, in itself: Chaucer is able to exemplify a social form of transgression as long as it is framed by the religious intent of the pilgrimage (Nicolas Restrepo Ochoa, 2024).

8. Discussion and Synthesis

The above discussion shows that the image of social order in the General Prologue is marked by three overlapping formal tactics: systematic irony which opens up the disjuncture between the ideology of estates and their social practice; heteroglossic portraiture that inscribes every pilgrim within the social discourse of his or her status; and a narrative frame that provides a liminal zone within which social alternatives are to be practised. All these measures make up what we may well call Chaucer social semiotics a systematized act of reading social signs both symptomatic of and involved in the ideological remodelling of the late fourteenth century.

The analysis presented in the paper validates and adds to the results of the current literature but makes some specific contributions. First, the treatment of the three-estate portraits (Knight, Plowman), the ecclesiastical portraits (Prioress, Pardoner), the mercantile portraits (Merchant, Franklin, Guildsmen) and the gender-transgressive portraits (Wife of Bath) as one analysis shows that the social vision practiced in the General Prologue is more extensive and more neatly (Gather, 2022).

Second, the use of Bakhtinian heteroglossia as a formal category--not just a thematic observation--is evidence that the social representation employed in the text is performed through its formal strategies and not merely, as in its content. Chaucer is not merely writing about social change; the formal structure of the Prologue does the social heterogeneity and contestation it entails. This observation should point to the fact that studies on social order in medieval literature should be as mindful of formal strategies as historical background (Forattini, 2024).

Third, the approaches of the New Historicist, materialist, feminist, and Bakhtinian approaches to the text, which the study integrates, illustrate the methodological complement of these approaches in working with a text as formally and historically rich as the General Prologue. All the frameworks shed light on what the others either hide or underscore: New Historicism offers historical particularity; materialism helps place the textual analysis into economic and class relations; feminism previews the gendering of social categories; Bakhtinian theory is mindful of the formal organisation of social voices. A combination of them yields a more comprehensive account than either structure can provide.

Table 2: Social Groups in the General Prologue and Their Ideological Functions

Pilgrim	Estate	Estate Function (Ideal)	Actual Representation	Ideological Effect
Knight	Bellatores	Military defence of Christendom	Mercenary campaigns, anachronistic chivalry	Affirms estate ideology under stress
Plowman	Laboratores	Agricultural labour	Idealised, silent, absent from tales	Counter-image to Peasants' Revolt
Prioress	Oratores	Prayer, spiritual authority	Courtly manners, sentimental piety	Exposes secular contamination of church
Pardoner	Oratores	Spiritual mediation, salvation economy	Counterfeit relics, sexual ambiguity	Institutional corruption made visible

Pilgrim	Estate	Estate (Ideal)	Function	Actual Representation	Ideological Effect
Merchant	Outside schema	N/A (new class)		Anonymous, credit-based identity	Emblematises mercantile modernity
Wife of Bath	Laboratores (artisan)	Domestic/productive labour		Economic independence, marital authority	Contests patriarchal gender order

9. Conclusion

This paper has contended that the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer is a refined literary reaction to the social changes that were occurring in late fourteenth century England--changes that were subverting the three-estate paradigm of social order and creating new social identities, new economic relations, and new struggles over religious and gender authority. The discussion of representative pilgrims on both ends of the social spectrum, the Knight, the Plowman, the Prioress, the Pardoner, the Merchant, and the Wife of Bath, has shown that the portraits in the General Prologue are not mere descriptions, but are ideologically productive: affirmative, subversive, compensatory, and problematic of the social types they seem to record.

The New Historicist, materialist, feminist, and Bakhtinian theoretical approaches to the study have resulted in a reading that is not only sensitive to the historical specificity of the social world that Chaucer inhabits but also to the formal means by which the General Prologue performs, and not only represents, social heterogeneity and contestation. The heteroglossic form of the portrait gallery, its staging of multi-social voices, all of them speaking out of their respective ideological positions, is the General Prologue as we have described it a heteroglossic cultural document: a text in which the formal organisation of the text serves as a kind of social analysis.

These findings are of importance to the study of Chaucer, as well as the wider issue of the role of literary texts in the discursive formation of social change. The General Prologue illustrates that a literary representation is not a kind of passive reflection of social affairs but rather a practice that influences the possibilities of comprehending and challenging those affairs. The social tension that the text of Chaucer embodies, the three-estate system is not defended or abdicated, the mercantile order is not glorified or repudiated, gender transgression is represented and framed, but it opens up a cultural space in which that tension can be expressed, debated, and redefined.

The current analysis could be fruitfully extended into future research in a number of ways: a comparison of social representation of the General Prologue with social representations in modern estates satire in both French and Latin; a computational stylistic analysis of the social language of the individual portraits; or the transmission of the text in the manuscript could be studied as evidence of how the text was perceived by various social groups. The heteroglossia of the General Prologue is hardly exhausted as a subject of scholarly study, and its applicability to the questions of literature, society and social change is not diminished.

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