

EXPLORING SOCIAL HIERARCHY IN THE CANTERBURY TALES: A STUDY OF SELECTED CHARACTERS

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Abstract

The Canterbury Tales (c. 1387-1400) by Geoffrey Chaucer is one of the most sophisticated literary portrayals of medieval English society, providing an unmatched panoramic of social types by way of the popular literary convention of the pilgrimage. This paper conducts a close textual and social-literary reading of a number of characters from the General Prologue and the Tales themselves, exploring how Chaucer employs characterisation, irony, satire and narrative point of view to expose, entrench and destabilise the social hierarchy of fourteenth-century England. Through an analysis grounded in the Estates tradition, Bakhtinian carnival theory, and Marxist literary analysis, the paper concludes that Chaucer does not uncritically endorse or reject the tripartite structure of the Estates, but instead positions himself in an in-between critical position, highlighting tensions of late medieval social organisation. Five exemplars-the Knight, the Prioress, the Miller, the Wife of Bath, and the Pardoner-are considered here to exemplify the estates of nobility, clergy and commons, with attention being paid to issues of gender and transgressive subjectivity. The paper argues that Chaucer's social world is doubly understood as naturalised and inverted, allowing the text to be a double reflection and critique of the world it represents.

Key words: Canterbury Tales, Chaucer, social hierarchy, medieval estates, satire, Bakhtinian carnival, feminist criticism, representation, characterisation, literature.

1. Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales is the most extensive depiction of medieval English society in literature. Originally written in the last decade of the 14th century, the poem brings together an eclectic collection of pilgrims journeying from the Tabard Inn in Southwark to the tomb of Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral. In this narrative framework, Chaucer presents a compelling portrait of medieval society, from the knightly elite at the head and tail of the social hierarchy to working people, merchants and churchmen whose social standing was much more tenuous.

The social order underlying The Canterbury Tales is primarily that of the three-estate model, a schema that conceived of medieval Christian society in terms of those who pray (oratores), those who fight (bellatores) and those who work (laboratores). This three-fold division, most famously

articulated by Adalberon of Laon in the eleventh century and repeated - often in more polemical contexts - in later estates satire, offered a ready-made rhetorical repertoire to expose social abuses. But Chaucer inherits this tradition on the eve of the most disruptive social crisis in Europe's history: the aftermath of the Black Death (1348-1350), the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, the Lollard challenge to the Church's primacy, and the rise of a merchant class all combine to make the three-estate model less and less useful as a social rubric.

The study of social hierarchy in Chaucer has a rich tradition. Jill Mann's pioneering work *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* set the terms for approaching the General Prologue in light of the traditions of estates literature, analysing how Chaucer both uses and subverts the conventions of that genre. Paul Strohm's book *Social Chaucer* added to Mann's literary historical study an emphasis on Chaucer's social location as a bureaucrat and courtier, highlighting the roles that Chaucer's ambivalent social status plays in his ambivalent presentation of social hierarchy. In more recent years, feminist scholars like Elaine Tuttle Hansen, Carolyn Dinshaw and Susan Crane have explored the intersections of gender and class in the Tales, tracing the contradictions that women introducing into the estates system (britlit, 2022).

The current paper builds on this tradition, but also expands its focus to include narrative voice and the dynamics of dialogue as sites for both the enactment and interrogation of social hierarchy. This paper suggests that Chaucer's characters are not merely social types but agents whose narratives highlight tensions within the hierarchical order. The paper explores the various ways in which *The Canterbury Tales* approaches social hierarchy, power, and contestation through an analysis of five specific characters: the Knight, the Prioress, the Miller, the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on a three-fold theoretical approach. First, the Estates tradition offers a historical and generic frame of reference for understanding Chaucer's characterisation as a sort of social classification. The character portraits of the General Prologue have a consistent relationship with the traditional traits assigned to each social type in estates satire, both re-enacting and subverting these traits in ironically complex ways (Annika Farber, 2021).

Second, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival and the carnivalesque provides a valuable framework for analysing the comic and subversive elements of the Tales. For Bakhtin, carnival is a temporary suspension of hierarchical norms and relations, in which the low is raised and the high degraded, and a dialogic encounter between official and popular culture takes place. *The Canterbury Tales*, in its polyphonic gathering of diverse voices from various social stations, has often been subject to Bakhtinian analysis, and this book makes use of this approach to consider the ways in which characters such as the Miller and the Wife of Bath pose carnivalesque challenges to the status quo. Third, Marxist literary analysis, as set out by Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson, offers a materialist framework for the analysis of social hierarchy which attends to the economic relations of production that inform ideological characterisations of social order. This approach is particularly relevant to an analysis of the Pardoner, whose links to the market for indulgences constitute a particularly forcible example of the monetisation of spiritual power that Chaucer mockingly examines (Doğan, 2013).

3. The Knight: Ideals and the Ideal of Social Order

The Knight is placed first in the General Prologue: an explicit choice that places the image of chivalric virtue in the lead of the pilgrim company, but which also implicitly highlights its prescriptive function in the conventions of estates literature. Chaucer's Knight is a positive portrait by contrast with many of the pilgrims to follow: he is a "verray, parfit gentil knyght" (l. 72), a man of "worthynesse" (l. 67) and has fought in many crusades in the Mediterranean.

But the portrait also has an ironic dimension. The Knight's impressive list of military campaigns, from Prussia to Morocco, has been the focus of ongoing critical debate. The controversial interpretation of Terry Jones in Chaucer's Knight: the Knight's battles are not those of the crusading knight but of a mercenary fighting for morally dubious causes. Despite the challenges to Jones's thesis, it reminds us that the seemingly unproblematised portrait of the paragon of chivalric virtue may be qualified by historical circumstance (Patrick & Jung, 1986).

More relevant here, the Knight's portrait sets up the paradigm of ideological indoctrination that is countered by the more ironic portraits of the Prologue. The Knight embodies the aspirational ideal of social hierarchy: he possesses a social status, military role and moral character that are ideally converged. His narrative, the romance of Palamon and Arcite based on Boccaccio's *Teseida*, reinforces this paradigm of a cosmos in which knightly love and competition are ultimately harmonised by providence. The Knight thus presents the norm around which the departures and sinfulness of the other characters are satirically dramatised (Patrick & Jung, 1986).

4. The Prioress: Church Authority and Social Mobility

Whereas the Knight stands for the aspirational nobility of the world, the Prioress - Madame Eglentyne - stands for the social placing of women in religious life in England in the fourteenth century. As the head of a Benedictine or Augustinian convent, the Prioress is a figure of significant authority; in the General Prologue, however, the Prioress's portrait is one of the most richly ironic descriptions, as it undermines her religious vocation through its detailed listing of her courtoisie and its hyper-embellished concern with worldly fashion (Nazan Yıldız, 2026).

The portrait begins with an account of the Prioress's dining table etiquette - language drawn from the manual of courtliness in the *Roman de la Rose*. She ensures that no scrap of food falls from her lip; she does not dip her fingers too far into the sauce; she wipes her upper lip so that there is no grease left on her cup. This focus on aristocratic delicacy rather than spiritual humility introduces the Prioress's primary orientation towards aristocratic rather than conventual cultures.

Her brooch, with its obscure motto, *Amor vincit omnia* - love conquers all - epitomises the portrait's irony: the motto can be applied to both secular and sacred love, and Chaucer's restraint in clarifying it leaves it open to question whether the Prioress's amorous affections are directed at the secular or the sacred. This uncertainty is useful for the purposes of the current analysis in that it illustrates the crossing of hierarchical boundaries (between lay and clerical, aristocratic and conventual) that characterises this portrait (Nazan Yıldız, 2026).

The Prioress's Tale, with its strident antisemitism and its tearjerking infantilisation of martyred youth, has been the subject of much critical debate. For the current analysis, the tale is important

as a gauge of the Prioress's social and ideological training: the extent to which she feels for the little clergyman's martyrdom, a feeling expressed with what Chaucer describes as a tearful and tender devotion, demonstrates the way her sensibility has been shaped by aristocratic conventions of romance, rather than the theological rigour that would characterise her clerical position.

5. The Miller: Carnival and the Voice of the Workers

The Miller comes to represent the voice of the third estate on the Canterbury pilgrimage, and he does so in a highly theatrical fashion. The portrait of the Miller in the General Prologue emphasises his corporeality - his great stature, his red beard, his huge nostrils, his mouth that is likened to a "fordon" - in terms that recall the grotesque body of Bakhtinian carnival. His persistence in breaking the social order of story-telling determined by the Host enacts, at the level of the narrative, the carnivalesque deflation of hierarchy that his tale will illustrate, at the level of content (JOHN MYLES, 2026).

The Miller's Tale is a fabliau, a genre that originates in the lower social orders, and it works by means of a comic reversal of the values of the social orders superior to the Miller. The plot device of the tale, the cuckolding of a carpenter by a clerk, facilitated by elaborate subterfuge, and culminating in a comic assault, is an example of what Bakhtin describes as the carnivalesque upside-downness of hierarchy: the lower classes defeat the higher through the cleverness and sexual and physical energy of their characters. In addition, the tale is a parody of the Knight's Tale, in which the chivalric ideals of the Knight's Tale (Palamon and Arcite) are replaced by the comic Miller's Tale characters (Nicholas and Absolon), and the providential denouement of chivalric romance by the bathetic ending of the misdirected hot iron.

The Miller's usurpation of narrative authority is therefore two-fold: he asserts his right to tell a story when it is not his turn, and he tells a story whose generic conventions are out of step with the aristocratic world-view evident in the Knight's tale. As such, he reveals the arbitrariness of the social order that confers on the Knight narrative authority by virtue of his social status rather than his natural superiority (JOHN MYLES, 2026).

The Miller, from a Marxist point of view, also embodies the negative potential of working-class subjects to refuse their interpellation. His tale does not just affirm the carnivalesque overthrow of hierarchy; it also highlights the economic underpinning to social relations by referencing the carpenter's estate, his predations and concerns about the tenure of his tenants, and the way his class status renders him susceptible to the complicated intrigue of more socially agile types like the clerk Nicholas. The Miller's laughter is therefore not only subversive, but also diagnostic.

6. The Wife of Bath: Sex, Power, and Hierarchy

The Wife of Bath, Alisoun of Bath, is probably the most-vastly discussed character in the Canterbury Tales, and for good reason: she offers a fascinatingly complex example of social identification, blending elements of the merchant class (she is a renowned cloth-maker), the institutional body politic (she has been married five times, according to the sanction of the church), and the vernacular religious tradition (her prologue offers a sustained polemical defence of female sexual autonomy against the Pauline condemnation of women) (Doğan, 2013).

The Wife of Bath's Prologue is a highly accomplished rhetorical act: a five-hundred-line history of her life that affirms the authority of experience over the authority of text, the autonomy of women over the patriarchy of the church hierarchy, and the power differentials that lurk inside the institution of marriage. Her insistence that experience is a truer source of knowledge than auctoritee is not only a defence of her own marriage, but an attack on the authority of the male cleric over the authority of the female experience (Lipton, 2017).

Her tale of the loathly lady, an Arthurian romance, presents a fantasy of female sovereignty that seems to solve the problems of the prologue by granting women sovereignty within the context of heterosexual marriage. But as feminist scholars such as Carolyn Dinshaw and Elaine Tuttle Hansen have suggested, the tale's resolution is equivocal: the knight's conferral of sovereignty is conditioned on his acknowledgement of female power, but the tale treats the knight's acknowledgement as a gift from a male subject rather than a claim from a female one, leaving the hierarchical structure of masculine authority formally intact even as it is ideologically challenged (JILL MANN, 2005).

For the study of social hierarchy, the Wife of Bath is important because she defiantly rejects the passive femininity that the patriarchal social order confers on women of the three estates, whether as the chaste noblewomen of romance literature, the cloistered nuns of convent literature, or the obedient wives of household management texts. Her active and assertive claims on female economic and sexual agency situate her as a figure of social transgression, whose presence suggests the contingency of the hierarchical social order she transgresses (Lipton, 2017).

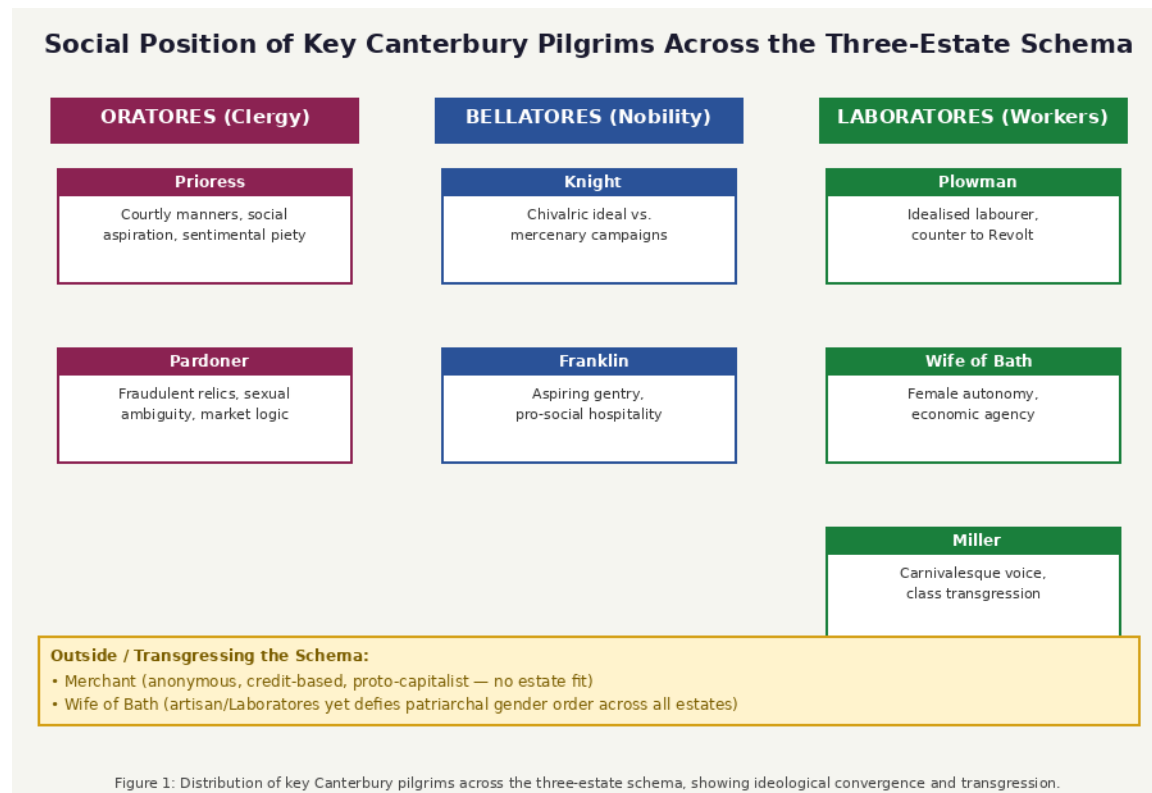


Figure 1: Distribution of key Canterbury pilgrims across the three-estate schema, showing ideological convergence and transgression.

Source: Adapted from Mann (1973/2005); Doğan (2013); Kareem (2025). Social mapping of Canterbury pilgrims.

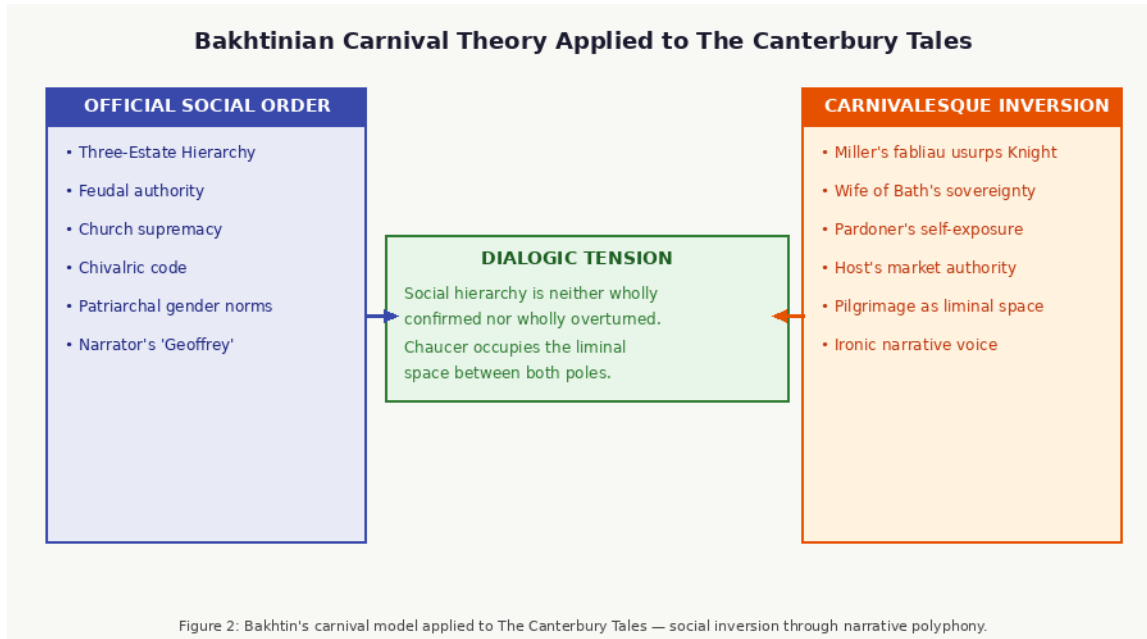


Figure 2: Bakhtin's carnival model applied to *The Canterbury Tales* — social inversion through narrative polyphony.

Source: Adapted from Bakhtin (1984) *Rabelais and His World*; Mikes-Liu (2025); JOHN MYLES (2026). *Carnavalesque theory in Chaucer*.

7. The Pardoner: Corrupted Clergy, the Marketplace of Power

The Pardoner is Chaucer's most extensive exploration of the corruption of church authority, and the portrait of the Pardoner in the General Prologue is one of the collection's most troubling. The Pardoner is a peddler of pardons and relics for a hospital who has a voice as small as a goat, long, greasy hair, and "glitreyng" eyes - a set of symptoms that suggested early on that he could be a eunuch, or a figure of ambiguous gender, and therefore not a member of the typical estates-of-the-realm triad.

In the Pardoner's Prologue, he delivers a remarkable self disclosure: speaking directly to his fellow pilgrims, he admits to his audiences the strategies by which he defrauds them with phoney relics, emotionally charged sermons, and monetary exactions from the indigent and gullible. His root text, *radix malorum est Cupiditas* - greed is the root of all evil - is a tour-de-force performance, given that the Pardoner is the most acquisitive character in the pilgrim band. His artful self-revelation to the pilgrims, while also continuing to practice deceit, illustrates his ambivalence towards authority: he knows the scriptural economy to be a hoax, but he plays the game with supreme facility (Geoffrey Chaucer's Pardoner's, 2025).

From a Marxist point of view, the Pardoner is the character most spectacularly complicit in the commodification of spiritual power in late medieval Christianity. The pardon, like the indulgence more generally, is the commodification of the spiritual sphere, turning spiritual goods into saleable

commodities which could be bought by those who could afford to do so. The Pardoner's frankly mercenary approach to his churchly office is not an exception in the system, but rather the realisation of a potential already present in it.

The Pardoner's sexuality also complicates his social relationships. Whether he is understood as a eunuch, as a homosexual, or as a more complicated gender transvestite, his body cuts him off from the reproductive cycle upon which the organisation of patriarchal society is based. His difference within the gender order makes him different within the social order, and so he is not able to be accommodated within the three-estate schema, nor can the three-estate schema explain him (Geoffrey Chaucer's Pardoner's , 2025).

8. Discussion: Hierarchy, Irony, and Social Vision in The Canterbury Tales

The profiles of the five figures examined suggest a central feature of Chaucer's thinking about social hierarchy: namely, that the social role of the figure is not presented as an inherent or unchangeable identity but as a performance whose norms are identified, explored, and often undermined by the discrepancy between idealistic prescription and the reality of social practice. The Knight performs chivalric virtue with an almost too-consistent consistency; the Prioress performs religious vocation while enacting the values of courtly culture; the Miller performs social transgression in a theatrical way that suggests a sense of his own role as the King of the Carnival; the Wife of Bath performs female subservience to male authority while undermining it at every step; and the Pardoner performs ecclesiastical authority as he exposes it as fraudulent (Mikes-Liu, 2025).

It is this theatrical aspect of social identity that is at the forefront of Chaucer's social analysis. Instead of social hierarchy as a natural or given order of things, as a natural expression of divine will or congenital difference, for instance, *The Canterbury Tales* enacts it as a series of practices sustained through social performance and ideological delusion. The pilgrimage to Canterbury supports this revelation: journeying to Canterbury places the pilgrims outside of their normal social surroundings and in a liminal context where the usual rules or social conduct are suspended, allowing Chaucer to highlight the conventionality of those rules through their transgression.

The Host, Harry Bailly, is a key figure in this respect: a tavern-keeper who takes on the role of social judge and tournament referee, he embodies the mode of market capitalism, the logic of buying and selling, of entertainment and hospitality, that enters the realm of the hieratically organised pilgrimage. He does not exercise power on the basis of social status, but rather on practical knowledge and the group's consent, anticipating a more contractual social order that would come to prominence in the centuries after Chaucer's lifetime (Patrick & Jung, 1986). The interactive form of the Tales, with each tale speaking in response to its surrounds, is a formal representation of Chaucer's social ideal. No one tale, no one voice, speaks with authority; all are relativised by references to one another. The Knight's idealism is satirised by the Miller; the Miller's carnivalistic humour is reproved (albeit unsuccessfully) by the Reeve; the Wife of Bath's feminist polemic is refuted by the Clerk; and so on. This polyvocalism enacts on the formal level Chaucer's characters' social heteroglossia: a world in which differing social positions produce differing, irreducibly different, worldviews (Lipton, 2017).

9. Conclusion

In this analysis, *The Canterbury Tales* has been shown to engage the social hierarchy of late medieval England in a nuanced and multifaceted way, neither confirming the three-estate hierarchy nor simply inverting it, but rather placing itself in a marginal critical role in which the tensions and instabilities of the hierarchical order are methodically laid bare. In their readings of the Knight, the Prioress, the Miller, the Wife of Bath, and the Pardoner, this paper has shown how Chaucer's characters are complex and contradictory individuals rather than coherent social types, and how the tales they relate are in conversation with one another and the ideological constraints of their respective genres.

The theoretical paradigms of Bakhtinian carnival, Marxist literary analysis, and the Estates tradition work hand in hand: they allow us to read Chaucer's social vision in terms of its generic, ideological and materialist dimensions. The carnivalistic disruptions of the Miller and the Wife of Bath, the monetisation of church authority exemplified by the Pardoner, the ideological naturalisation of chivalric hierarchy by the Knight's tale all contribute to a polyphonic vision of social life for which no perspective is authoritative.

The significance of *The Canterbury Tales* for critical analysis is precisely to this realism. By depicting a cast of pilgrims that encompasses the full range of medieval social life and by speaking through their voices - even if ironically and through the mediation of genre - Chaucer invites us to inhabit a literary world in which social hierarchy is both natural and produced, necessary and contingent, objective and performative. It is this tension that accounts for its remarkable endurance across the last 600 years of readers and critics, and that makes it crucial to the study of literature and social power.

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