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The Old Order and the “Newe World” in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*

by Elton D. Higgs

1. Background

It is a common observation that Geoffrey Chaucer showed a relative unconcern in the *Canterbury Tales* for the great upheavals of his time. As Nevill Coghill puts it: “Plague, schism, the Peasants’ Revolt, and the clashes between Richard II and his Nobility, that were to end in deposition and regicide, have no place in his poem of England. Jack Straw’s massacre of the Flemings in 1381 was poetically no more to Chaucer than the flurry in a farmyard roused by the rape of Chanticleer.”¹ Though it is true that Chaucer did not reflect the contemporary scene so explicitly as did William Langland, he nevertheless was very aware that his age was one of profound change. Even the portraits in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, genial and detached as they seem, show a sensitivity to the tensions in the late fourteenth century between the Old Order—feudalism, a static rural economy, and the united and unchallenged Church—and the forces of plague, urbanization, and entrepreneurship which were pushing toward fragmentation of the society and a greater degree of individualism.²

Alfred David puts his finger on the significance of these tensions in the General Prologue when he observes that “the *ideal* represented by the Knight, the Parson, and the Plowman [corresponding to the Three Estates of medieval society] was still potent in Chaucer’s time,” and although “Chaucer himself belongs very much to an emerging new order . . . he still loves and believes in the ideal order” represented in a timeless way by the idealized pilgrims. David outlines succinctly the social situation he sees reflected in the General Prologue:

We learn in the Prologue that the body is sick. Chaucer could not know that the disease was mortal and that the old feudal order was slowly dying through the civil wars, the corruption in Church and State, and the beginnings of capitalism in the waning Middle Ages, but he was able to portray the symptoms as they appeared in everyday life.

Ideally, the Christian community is structured so that each man performs the task to which God has assigned him to assure the physical or spiritual welfare of the whole. The order is being gradually eroded by the desire of most of its members to promote not the common profit but their own welfare and status. The Church has been infected by the commercialism of the Commons. Both Church and Commons try to emulate the pride and ostentation of the Nobles. As a result, the society is in ferment and offers a rich field for ironic observation of the gap between ideal and reality.³

Donald Howard also underlines this "gap between ideal and reality" in the General Prologue by observing that: "*The Canterbury Tales* gives us a picture of a disordered Christian society in a state of obsolescence, decline and uncertainty; we do not know where it is headed." He points out that in contrast to the very current and concrete activities spawned by the ambitions and avarice of the other pilgrims, "The true ideals of the 'ideal' pilgrims—the Knight's crusading spirit, the brotherhood of Parson and Plowman, perhaps the Clerk's selfless dedication—seem obsolescent." He thus sees an element of nostalgia in Chaucer's establishment of these four pilgrims as ideals, for "Nothing can be obsolescent until it has been institutionalized, has enjoyed some measure of stability in the life of a society." Howard is surely right in saying that Chaucer was not merely being conservative in idealizing the Old Order; rather, he "presented social-class distinctions in such a way as to point up the disparity between what people thought and what they did—between the obsolescent idea of social class which his society held and the more complicated actuality of its gradations."

Both David and Howard mention a set of idealized pilgrims in the General Prologue as being at the center of Chaucer's depiction of an Old Order that was dying. Howard goes on to show how this select group—the Knight, the Clerk (not included by David), the Parson, and the Plowman—can be seen as the major points of reference for the portraits in the General Prologue. After reminding us of Kemp Malone's observations on the grouping of some of the pilgrims according to their natural or expected relationships (such as the Knight and his son and their Yeoman, or the Prioress and her retinue),⁵ Howard notes another, more nearly schematic principle governing the order in which the pilgrims are presented:

The well-known "idealized" portraits seem thrown into this order at random. Three of them (Knight, Parson, and Plowman) correspond to the Three Estates. The portrait of the Clerk is idealized too, and perhaps he represents a style of life (that of the universities, or of humanism) which Chaucer considered separate from the usual three. But the Clerk comes for no apparent reason between the

Merchant and the Man of Law, the Parson and Plowman for no apparent reason between the Wife and Miller. I should like to offer a possible explanation for this seemingly haphazard arrangement. If we take the description of the Prioress and her followers and that of the Guildsmen and their cook as single descriptions (which they are), and if we count the description of the Host, the portraits of the General Prologue can then be seen arranged symmetrically into three groups of seven, each headed by an ideal portrait:

Knight: Squire, Yeoman, Prioress, Monk, Friar, Merchant

Clerk: Man of Law, Franklin, Guildsmen, Shipman,
Physician, Wife

Parson/

Plowman: Miller, Manciple, Reeve, Summoner, Pardoner,
Host

... The kinds of order we perceive in this complex arrangement leave some loose ends, but each detail has a rightness of its own. The Parson and Plowman are put together because they are "brothers"—which suggests an ideal relationship between clergy and commons. The idealized Clerk represents an estate other than the traditional three, but by Chaucer's time the universities *were* a world unto themselves.⁶

Howard's point is that the order of the pilgrims in the General Prologue is neither conventional nor haphazard: it has "a rightness of its own" which, he suggests, is connected with a medieval habit of mind which created emblematic signposts as an aid to memory and in this instance provides "convenient mnemonic groups which correspond to actualities and probabilities of fourteenth-century life." I would like to expand on the social implications of Howard's tripartite division of the pilgrims, and to show how each of these sections presents a particular aspect of the struggle between an idealized Old Order (represented by the Knight, the Clerk, the Parson, and the Plowman) and the representatives of the "newe world" (a phrase applied to the Monk in describing his contempt for the Old Order of monasticism).⁷

Although many of my observations on the grouping of the pilgrims and the social rationale behind it may be gleaned from Howard and other previous interpreters of the General Prologue, I have several major points of my own which I wish to develop as a detailed exposition of the structural integrity of the tripartite division of the pilgrims introduced by Howard. They are: (1) Each of the idealized pilgrims at the head of a section has a particular kind of virtue which is set against a corresponding type of vice in the pilgrims who follow in that section; (2) There are several kinds of incremental

development of themes and characters in the three sections; (3) Chaucer's idealization of the Old Order is based not so much on a desire to preserve or even to comment on the traditional "Three Estates" of medieval society as on his admiration for a degree of dedication to the "commune profit," which he considered more vital to an ordered society than the keeping of social distinctions.

To help in following the exposition, a schematic outline of the grouping of the pilgrims is given below. To Howard's listing of the pilgrims I have added the particular clash of values which I believe to be the focus of each group.

I. <i>Knight</i> Squire Yeoman Prioress Monk Friar Merchant	}	Feudal Fealty <i>vs.</i> New Mobility, Appearances	II. <i>Clerk</i> Man of Law Franklin Guildsmen Cook Shipman Physician Wife of Bath	}	Old Learning <i>vs.</i> Professions & Crafts for Personal Gain
III. <i>Parson & Plowman</i>					
Miller Manciple Reeve Summoner Pardoner	}	Old Rural Service <i>vs.</i> Unprincipled Manipulation of People			

In presenting my argument, I shall first make some general observations by way of overview, and then present an exposition of each of the three sets of pilgrims.

2. An Overview

There are several kinds of developmental movement in the three central sections of the General Prologue. The portraits of the three idealized pilgrims who head these units (counting the Parson and the Plowman as a coordinated pair) are progressively more remote from the center of society, moving from the secular, though virtuous, Knight, to the more scholarly Clerk of Oxford, to the rural and socially obscure Parson and Plowman. Correspondingly, the portraits which conclude the units present figures who are incrementally more frank and obvious about their being disruptive of the Old Order: the Merchant represents the subtle undermining of feudalism by increased trade and the accompanying rise in the influence of towns;⁸ the

Wife of Bath in her Prologue openly challenges the quiet authoritarianism and traditional learning of the Clerk; and the Pardoner, the most egregiously self-serving of all the pilgrims, traffics in sacrilege and deliberately makes shipwreck of the Faith.

The three sections, as a whole, show a shift of focus: from the concern with noble behavior and reputation (both true and false) in the first section, to the uses of learning and knowledge in the second section, to the attitudes toward being a servant in the third section. Not every pilgrim fits neatly with the emphasis in his or her section, but the overall pattern seems clear: each section of the portraits in the General Prologue is developed on a theme which is an appropriate counterpoise to the ideals represented by the virtuous person whose description begins the group. The pilgrims of the first section are overwhelmingly concerned with their appearance and their importance, as the Knight is not. Most of the pilgrims of the second section are notable for their distinctive knowledge or skills, but unlike the Clerk they see what they have learned primarily as a means of gaining advantage and precedence over others and enriching themselves. The unprincipled scoundrels in the third group manage businesses and manipulate people, in contrast to the Parson, and scorn simple rural service, in contrast to the Plowman.

These sets of opposed values do not focus narrowly on accepted social categories, even though, as has often been pointed out, the Knight, the Parson, and the Plowman represent idealizations of the "Three Estates" of medieval society: the nobility (warriors), the Church (priests), and the commons (tillers of the soil).⁹ By adding the Clerk as a fourth ideal figure and merging the portraits of the Parson and the Plowman, Chaucer chose not to emphasize the Three Estates (nor any other arbitrary system of stratification) as the core of the Old Order. The themes of the three sections of pilgrims suggest that he saw the key to the order of society in the willingness of its citizens to subordinate individual ambition to service for the good of all, according to one's calling and talents. Accordingly, in the General Prologue Chaucer emphasizes *noblesse oblige* in the Knight, the responsibilities of learning in the Clerk, the care of souls in the Parson, and the dignity of common toil in the Plowman; for together they represent faithful service—with body, mind, and soul—for the good of their society. Those who have inherited secular power must wield it without bullying; those who are responsible for the preservation, development, good use, and transmission of knowledge (whether theoretical or practical) must not be arrogant or irresponsible in the status or influence they enjoy; those who have been given spiritual charges must serve with a humility that inspires confidence.

Although there is no evidence that Chaucer relied specifically on the following words of Paul in the Epistle of First Corinthians, the passage expresses the viewpoint implicit in the General Prologue.

Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.¹⁰

The key words in this passage, "for the common good," are of course echoed several times in Chaucer's own term, "commune profit."¹¹ It is for their dedication to this ideal that the Knight, the Clerk, the Parson, and the Plowman are set forth as models by Chaucer, rather than for their membership in a particular class. Indeed, their bond of common virtue transcends any divisive barriers of class, and the gap between them and the pilgrims who reject the "commune profit" is much larger than any separation of social status.¹² The conflicts which develop among the pilgrims are based much more on lapses in personal charity than on class rivalries.

Jill Mann holds to the contrary, arguing that the "sense of 'common profit'" cannot be taken as "the social ethic implicit in the Prologue." She says further that "Chaucer has no *systematic* platform for moral values, not even an implicit one, in the *Prologue*." Although Mann is certainly correct in observing that the point of view of the *narrator* is rather relativistic and all-accepting, she makes too little of the moral backdrop which Chaucer *the author* creates for the Prologue with the portraits of his four idealized pilgrims. Chaucer is no thundering moralist like Langland, but he does indicate what kind of behavior he finds admirable and socially constructive. His geniality and his wide sympathies — either in his own person or that of his narrator — should not be mistaken for lack of concern with the moral order of society. Mann does admit that Chaucer allows the Parson to present a counter-view to the "worldly values" of the General Prologue, but she does not give due weight to Chaucer's bias toward presenting the obligation of every person to fulfill his calling to the best of his ability.¹³

It is quite remarkable that Chaucer was able to create a common context in which to describe so diverse a group of people, and that we accept the verisimilitude of their being brought together in this way.¹⁴ A great part of our willingness to give credence to such a fiction springs from the narrator's apparent serendipity in choosing the order of the pilgrims. A detailed look at the three groups in the General Prologue demonstrates that Chaucer has managed to have it both ways: he has preserved a feeling of spontaneity by avoiding any stated plan of organization; and at the same time he has provided a subtle structure by which the reader can assess each pilgrim's attitude towards his or her place in society by comparing each one with the others in the same group, and especially with the idealized pilgrim of the group. This tolerance toward individual personalities, while maintaining an inconspicuous but firm presentation of moral and social norms, is the mark of a mature and accomplished artist.

3. Group One

The first group presents seven people, all of whom, except the Knight, are very conscious of their appearance and reputation. The Squire is "embrouded," reminds one of a meadow full of flowers, and hopes by his exploits "to stonden in his lady grace";¹⁵ the Yeoman carries three weapons and is dressed in forest green; the "lady" Prioress wishes "to ben holden digne of reverence" (141); the Monk, with his ostentatious horse and rich clothing, wants to be seen as a "fair prelaat" (204); the Friar will associate only "with riche and selleres of vitaille" (248); and the Merchant is "Sownynge alwey th'encees of his wyning" (275). In contrast, the Knight wears a "gypon/al besmotered with his habergeon" and "of his port as meeke is as a mayde," even though he has more "worthynesse" than all the rest (75-76; 69; 50; 67-68).

The Squire and the Yeoman are somewhat eclipsed by the Knight. Although nothing openly negative is said about their characters, they appear rather vain. The promising young Squire, it may be hoped, will grow out of his interest in superficial "noble" behavior—the clothes, the horsemanship, the artistic refinements—and acquire some of his father's depth of character. The Yeoman represents, as the Knight's servant, an important instrument of the English military successes in the middle of the fourteenth century. But his longbow is not an unambiguous support to the Knight's way of life, for it is also the weapon that made a shambles of the flower of French knighthood on the battlefield. The Yeoman cannot be unaware of the prestige he gains by displaying such a weapon, and the rest of his attire suggests a full military parade. Thus, as much as they seem on the surface to support the Knight and the Old Order he represents, the Squire and the Yeoman show characteristics which are not entirely subordinated to the spirit of humble service embodied in the Knight.

Of the four pilgrims in the first group who are outside the Knight's party, three are members of the regular clergy and are flawed by an aspiration to upper-class status which is destructive to their vows.¹⁶ The fourth is a merchant who ignores any rules that will not add to his profits. All four offer a contrast to the integrity with which the Knight pursues his calling, and all four represent elements in late medieval society which seriously threatened that which was best in the Old Order.

The Prioress is the least offensive of the four as her major fault is her greatest attention to trivial things: courtly etiquette, lap-dogs, and elaborate religious jewelry. In aspiring to an unattainable courtly way of life, she has sacrificed the contribution she might have made to the "commune profit" and has instead adopted only the appearance of the Knight's mode of conduct. Although her charm masks the disorder of her life, she too contributes to the erosion of the order which it is the purpose of religious houses to establish

and maintain. Ironically, all three reject the opportunity to participate in the order to which they are called because they are intent on a more "genteel" standard of behavior.

The high-living Monk explicitly rejects the Old Order: he "leet olde thynges pace/And heeld after the newe world the space" (175-76). The time is past, he says, for adherence to the standards of such ancient authorities as St. Benedict and St. Augustine. There is special irony in the question, "How shal the world be served?"—that is, if the Monk and his fellow cloisterers do not contribute their secular talents to the ordering of worldly affairs. The question ignores the disorder that the Monk has brought about by his pursuit of the hounds and the hare. These "gentlemanly" activities are for him, as is the "cheere of court" for the Prioress, the baubles which obscure the essence of *noblesse oblige*.

The movement of laborers from country estates to towns after the depopulating ravages of the Black Death proved the greatest threat to the feudal system upheld by the Knight.¹⁷ Higher wages, due to the scarcity of labor, tempted many people to leave an estate on which they had grown up and search for a better way of life in town. This upheaval, which was accompanied by an increase in the sale of land and a wider circulation of money,¹⁸ provided an excellent opportunity for those tricksters and sharp dealers who depended on an unstable population and an abundant flow of money for the success of their schemes. The Friar, the Merchant, and, later in the Prologue, the Sergeant of Law, the Physician, and the Pardoner are all examples of such scoundrels. In the first section, the Friar is the most mobile and the most corrupt of the regular clergy. Chaucer reflects the common complaints against Friars, in general, when he depicts the self-serving wanderings of Huberd in the Prologue. Although the Friar's most destructive blow to the Old Order of the church was his interfering with the confessional function of parish priests by giving easy penance for money, he fits into the major theme of the first section because of his concern with appearances, especially the trappings of nobility. The Friar especially cultivates the "worthy women of the toun" (217) and concludes that it does not befit "swich a worthy man as he" to mix with lepers and the poor (243-45). All of this emphasis on the "worthy limytour" is an ironic echo of the truly worthy Knight. For all his consorting with the "right" people, Huberd has corrupted his calling and grossly violated the spirit of faithful service exemplified by the Knight. Profit alone can motivate the Friar even to pretend to be "curteis" and "lowly of servyse."

The Merchant seems an unlikely choice with which to end this section since his main concern appears to be earning money. His bragging about his ability to make money could be taken as a willingness to admit that he did not inherit wealth and is not a nobleman. But once again we have the ironic emphasis on the word "worthy":

Wel koude he in eschaunge sheeldes selle.
 This worthy man ful wel his wit bisette—
 Ther wiste no wight that he was in dette,
 So estatly was he of his governaunce
 With his bargaynes and with his chevyssaunce.
 For sooth he was a worthy man withalle. (279-83)

The Merchant is not intent, as are the other pilgrims in the first section, on imitating the style of the nobility, for he has begun to establish his own order, one where money is the basis of social standing, rather than vice versa.¹⁹ He achieves status through unscrupulous international trade, and the pomp with which he conducts his affairs conceals the uncertainty of his enterprises. He is, then, very much concerned with appearances, not in order to be seen as one of the nobility, but to justify the acquisition of wealth through large-scale entrepreneurial trade—trade that was to develop into capitalism.²⁰ The competitive and unprincipled “bargaynes and chevysaunce” of the Merchant bring us a world and an age away from the Knight’s Old Order of feudal honor and stability, for the Merchant’s dealings represent the fluid transactions of a money economy, in contrast to the simpler, narrower economy of goods in the older, agrarian society.²¹ We sense Chaucer’s hope that the best of the Old Order will be able to curb the unbridled exploitation of the New.

4. Group Two

There is some debate as to whether the single-minded Clerk is idealized, or mildly satirized. His unworldliness and intense concentration on his studies invite the suspicion that Chaucer intends us to see him as rather narrow and ingenuous, although he is a dedicated student. Certainly the lean horse and threadbare overcoat evoke the conventional image of a learned but dull scholar, preoccupied with books and content with an obscure and impecuniary life. There is more than that to the Clerk, however. We infer that he could have gotten a benefice, if he had wanted it; that he has friends who will support him, even after he has spent a number of years in school; and that he is willing to share his learning unostentatiously, which implies that there are those who are willing to listen to him. In short, he is highly respected, and his speech (“Sownynge in moral vertu”) marks him as one who honestly and gracefully makes his contribution to society by using his particular gift of intellect: “Gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche” (308).

Chaucer chose the Clerk, a devout and humble Oxford scholar, to be the exemplar of this group of pilgrims because the social order that he upholds falls between those represented by the Knight and the Parson. The Knight’s domain is the physical world, where he defends earthly political powers and

the economy that supports them; the Parson ministers to the spiritual order, seeing first of all to the welfare of people's souls and also showing compassion for their material problems; the Clerk's domain is the intellect, which enables mankind to apply the divine gift of reason to earthly experience in order to organize this experience toward the most constructive ends. All but one of the pilgrims in the second section have some specialized knowledge used in a craft or profession. The theme of the section is thus the misuse of intellect and learning for personal aggrandizement, rather than for the "commune profit."

The Sergeant of the Law (called the Man of Law later) is a very effective practitioner of his profession, largely because his "purchasyng" of land was reinforced by his ability to recite from memory "every statut" that bore on the plot in question, so that "There koude no wight pynche at his writing" (326). The break-up of many great estates because of the shortage of labor was a boon for such clever dealers as the Man of Law, who must have made a fine profit from his ability to obtain property and free it from the complicated entailments of feudal landholding ("Of fees and robes hadde he many oon" [317]). He cares nothing for either the honorable stability upheld by the Knight or the unselfish use of learning exemplified by the Clerk; though he seems to be a sterling member of society, he is contributing to the dissolution of the Old Order, entirely to his own advantage.

The Franklin has also probably profited from the recent availability of land, and now he wants respectability to go with his newly acquired property. The theme of misused knowledge applies less obviously to him than to the others in the group, but he ostentatiously uses his expertise in *haute cuisine* to impress people with his wealth and taste. Like those in the first group, he has a superficial grasp of gentility, and (as is disclosed later, in the prologue to his tale) he does not realize that mere association with the "proper" crowd cannot endow him or his son with the aura of nobility. He is one of the *nouveaux riches* who will displace many of the upper-class notables in the Old Order. Although he presides at local court sessions and serves as sheriff and member of parliament from time to time, his preoccupation with the surface of life cannot impart an ethical sense to his service to match that of the Clerk or the Knight.

The five Guildsmen, accompanied by their own Cook, are also self-conscious about their newly attained status. Since they are all of different crafts, it is obvious that their Guild is a social "fraternitee,"²² and that the specialized knowledge they have of their individual trades has been subordinated to the social aspirations cultivated by the Guild. Their "wisdom" (371) is not directed primarily—or perhaps even at all—toward the "commune profit," but rather toward political influence and personal gain. It is not good character, nor good craftsmanship, nor a spirit of public service that will advance them "to been an alderman" (372), but the possession of "catel . . .

ynough and rente" (373). As if to make clear that the desire "to sitten in a yeldehalle on a deys" (370) is to satisfy vanity rather than a sense of duty, Chaucer has the wives of the Guildsmen revel in the pomp of being called "madam" and in leading the processions to Guild affairs (374-78). Once again, these rising members of a new middle class are using their money to establish a semblance of order, but one which is shallow and lacking in the moral foundation. In particular, they have forsaken the whole-hearted pursuit of their "mysteris," or crafts. It is through these crafts that they might have shared with the Clerk the important task of acquiring and transmitting the knowledge by which a society may prosper.

The Guildsmen's Cook also knows his craft well, but the running sore on his shin puts into question the value of that skill. Both the sore and his drunkenness, seen later, may be indications of a dissolute life. In a similar way, his accompaniment of the Guildsmen may be a symbolic undercutting of their pose of civil dignity; Roger (as he is called by the Host later) represents the open sore of their ambition, which they have money enough to indulge, but not sophistication enough to try to hide.

The last three pilgrims of the second group are more demonstrably flawed than the others. Although it is the Shipman who is said not to be bothered by "nyce conscience," the statement might be applied in different degrees to the Doctor of Physic and the Wife of Bath. All three have used their knowledge to take advantage of others, and none manifest any tendency to work for the "commune profit." Later in the *Canterbury Tales* the Wife of Bath openly challenges the Clerk by using Scripture and learned treatises to support her heresies of sexual hedonism and female sovereignty in marriage. She is thus the most fitting character to conclude the section.

The Shipman is the first character in Chaucer's Prologue who does not pretend to some refinement or aspire to be "gentil," and in this respect he anticipates the group of five rascals in the last section. The Shipman and the Cook are the first of the pilgrims (except the Knight and the Clerk) who seem not to care how they look. But if anyone were disposed to laugh at the sight of the Shipman riding a horse "as he kouthe," the sight of the dagger hanging around his weathered neck would no doubt serve to keep that mirth concealed. From what Chaucer tells us, he recognizes no law and takes without compunction whatever he can get by his cleverness and strength. He makes no pretense to uphold any social order or strive for any kind of social approval. His one skill which might be a social asset is his proficiency in navigating the English Channel and its coastline; but he uses that skill only to be a more effective pirate and smuggler. He apparently lacks all conscience, let alone a "nyce" one.

The same might be said of the Physician, although he is a learned and practical man, and appears respectable. But with all his learning, "His studie was but litel on the Bible" (438)—nor, we can surmise, on moral treatises of any

kind. He has no scruples against conspiring with the apothecary at the expense of his patients, nor against enriching himself through the unfortunate victims of the Plague. His skill, like the skills of others in this section, is turned to the acquisition of gold, which "he lovede . . . in special" (444). In spite of his reputation of being a "verray, parfit praktisour" (422) of medicine, healing is not a great service to him, but only a way of gain.

Although there is much personal rebellion and disorderliness in the Wife of Bath, we tend, as with Shakespeare's Falstaff, to take her liveliness, wit, and energy as self-validating characteristics, especially as Chaucer reveals them in her great confessional prologue to her tale. Dame Alice's unabashed boast of having had five husbands, and her admission that she would welcome the sixth, however, are quite enough to elicit a response from the sober and conservative Clerk. By sharing her knowledge of the practice of sexual love ("For she koude of that art the olde daunce" [476]) and usurping the traditional place of men (not only in domestic matters, but in teaching as well), she throws into question the basic assumption of the Clerk's life: that learning and skills are most appropriately exercised with modesty and humility, in service to both God and man. The Wife of Bath is not loath to use her skills, nor to learn and to teach; but the order she supports will serve her own purposes in both affairs of the purse and affairs of the body. Delightful though she may be in some ways, she has not learned to be subordinate to anyone, not even, one suspects, to God.

The pilgrims who end the three sections of character descriptions in the General Prologue are, taken together, the most "confessional" of all the pilgrims, as the prologues to their tales show.²³ The Merchant tells of his woes with his new wife; the Wife of Bath details her experiences with five husbands; and the Pardoner describes his techniques for deceiving gullible people into giving him their money. The circumstances confessed are (in the order of the confessors' appearances in the General Prologue) each progressively more threatening to social order, culminating in the predatory coldness of the Pardoner's exploits.

5. Group Three

At a time when many country priests had taken advantage of the "market" for chantry appointments in London, brought about by deaths from the Plague, the poor Parson stayed with his parishioners, even though his learning and conscientiousness would no doubt have qualified him for a more distinguished position. It is hard to imagine a more humble and truly serviceable man than this rural priest. He is keenly aware that the welfare of his parishioners depends on his instruction, but he does not become "dispitous, / Ne of his speche dangerous ne digne" (516-17). On the other hand, if any person is deserving of rebuke, "What so he were, of heigh or lough estat, /

Hym wolde he snybben sharply for the nonys" (522-23). The Parson is not only socially and economically unambitious, but he is also free of class-consciousness. He thus avoids the source of most of the moral weaknesses of the other pilgrims: that is, a willingness to prostitute oneself for social and economic gain, and to settle for surface glitter rather than true nobility. Quite to the contrary, the Parson is willing to accept the real disadvantages of a post in a poor parish, where the economy of the Old Order was breaking up, for he "was a shepherde and nocht a mercenarie" (514). Similarly, his brother the Plowman represents the willingness to do his best wherever God has placed him, a quality as necessary to a new order as to an old one. The two brothers, in their piety and their concern for the "commune profit," stand in stark contrast to the five self-serving rascals whose portraits fill the rest of the third section, and who are, as a group, the worst of all the pilgrims.

The exaggerated animality of the Miller, his need to be loud and physically intimidating, and his unvarnished cheating at his mill indicate the extreme distance which separates these last five pilgrims from the spiritual center of order embodied in the Parson and the Plowman. It is ironic that the supposedly religious procession leaving the Tabard Inn should be led by the loud-mouthed Miller playing his bagpipes. Perhaps it is Chaucer's way of acknowledging that here in the song and dance, rather than in the idealized pilgrims — or even those who pretend to respectability — lies the fundamental motivation of this (or any) group of people. Most of the pilgrims have a kinship, admitted or not, with the spirit of Saturnalian holiday in which the Miller leaves behind the restrictions of ordinary, everyday life. It should come as no surprise that he is the first to disrupt the orderliness of Harry Bailly's game of tale-telling, for his drunkenness merely makes more palpable the inherent disorderliness of his personality.

The last four pilgrims — the Manciple, the Reeve, the Summoner, and the Pardoner — are categorized together by Ruth Nevo as having "gravitated from the ranks of the labourers to those of salaried officials, or upper servants, of an estate or institution."²⁴ Both Nevo and Reidy characterize them as "parasites"; one could say "bureaucratic parasites" or "managerial parasites." They produce nothing, and they use their positions of responsibility not to make the machinery of society run more smoothly, but to line their purses. The enormity of their violation of the "commune profit" lies in their abuse of trust;²⁵ they claim to serve their masters while in the very process of deceiving them. The opportunities for such manipulations and betrayals arose in the fourteenth century from the mobility of the population and the growth of a money economy.²⁶ The lawyers for whom the Manciple works are perhaps too busy land-grabbing, like the Sergeant of Law, to keep tabs on him; the Reeve's master evidently found the management of his estate too complicated under the new conditions; the Summoner and the Pardoner no doubt found a mobile population easier to deceive than a stable one, and in

any case their success depended on the easy flow of money. It should also be noted that all four of these pilgrims are associated with towns and that they make their money dealing in falsified commodities or documents. Their cool cleverness only makes their crimes seem the more perverse. Their portraits are a fitting climax to the increasing alienation from the Old Order which has been building throughout the General Prologue.

There is rich irony in the Manciple's being able to "settle hir aller cappe" in working as food buyer for the lawyers; with a chuckle, Chaucer the Narrator considers it "a fair ful grace / That swich a lewed mannes wit shal pace / The wisdom of an heep of lerned men" (573-75). The chicanery of the Manciple and the other scoundrels at the end of the Prologue could not be carried on without some culpable laxness on the part of their masters. The breakdown in order is thus traceable to all levels of society, and often those at the higher levels, Chaucer implies, are undermined before they realize the direct results of their own disorderly actions.

The Reeve, like the Manciple, has found it too easy to defraud his lord, and has built a power base that the other servants of the estate are afraid to challenge. The Reeve has turned the proper order upside down, so that "He koude bettre than his lord purchase" (608); he is able even to lend the lord's own money to him. Clearly, neither servant nor master has adhered to the concept of being faithful to one's calling.

The Summoner and the Pardoner obviously reinforce one another in their evil-doing. Both are physically deformed and morally depraved, and both make their living from the sins and guilt of others. The song they sing together as they ride along betokens the most tragic substitution yet of superficial satisfaction for the substance of order; "Com hider, love to me," whatever it means precisely to them, is at the farthest extreme from the love of God and man that brings order to the lives of the Parson and the Plowman.

The Summoner would seem to be an ordinary man gone wrong. None of his exploits mark him as exceptionally intelligent or talented. The comparison of his pseudo-learned snatches of Latin to the empty words of a trained jay-bird indicate that even his villainy is not particularly subtle. But even if the Summoner lacks complexity and depth, his surface is terrifying enough. He is a formidable foe when aroused, as the Friar finds out, and he thrives on the fear he inspires. His chief sacrilege lies in his evoking fear of himself rather than of the "ercedekenes curs" and the judgment of God. In thus corrupting the process of church discipline, the Summoner commits, with the Pardoner, the grievous sin of bringing disorder to the care of souls, thereby compounding their own damnation with that of others.

The Pardoner, like that other sharer of secrets, the Wife of Bath, is one of Chaucer's perpetual puzzles. As the Summoner's companion, he appears first as merely another bizarre, degenerate con-man; but as details are added to his portrait (both here and in the prologue to his tale), a complex personality

emerges. The Pardoner's deceits are so egregious and his conscience so seared that we are awestruck at his wickedness. His alienation from the Old Order, and from all order, is further intensified by his being a eunuch. Some modern readers question whether the Pardoner is to be held entirely responsible for his villainy, since from birth (according to Walter C. Curry) he was defective and was excluded from a normal life. But if Curry's analysis is right, this kind of eunuch would, in Chaucer's day, have been assumed to be an evil monster, "an outcast from human society, isolated both physically and morally, [one who] satisfies his depraved instincts by preying upon it."²⁷ Even if a more sympathetic attitude is taken toward the Pardoner (as in the recent article by Monica E. McAlpine²⁸), his pursuit of his way of life is so wholehearted that he has lost all inner moral controls, and can find satisfaction only in his ability to overcome others by his rhetoric and to enrich himself at their expense. It can be inferred that he has such contempt for himself as a man that he perceives no possibility of his functioning as a part of an ordered society.

Thus, the Pardoner is a negative summation of the theme of disorder in the General Prologue. More than any other pilgrim he manifests detachment from the Old Order. He is committed solely to himself, and, having no hope of being integrated into the normal activities of mankind, he takes joy in being slyly disruptive. He admits no order in the world except that of his own cleverness and exults in the irony of preaching against avarice while at the same time making more money in a day "Than that the person gat in monthes tweye" (704). This statement of his financial success underscores the contrast between him and the poor, virtuous Parson with whom Chaucer began the third section of pilgrims, but he contrasts equally as much with the strong, quiet Knight and the noble and learned Clerk. His greatest spiritual disability is the bitter pride which will not let him submit to being a servant: "I wol do no labour with myne handes" he says in the prologue to his tale (VI, 444). The Pardoner has become almost a symbol of the Prince of Disorder himself, refusing to serve God and substituting his own gospel for the true one.

6. Conclusion

With the Pardoner's offertory song ringing in our ears, we might feel that Chaucer has stacked the deck in the General Prologue in favor of the Rogues of Disorder. The noble representatives of the Old Order are severely outnumbered, and the prognosis for an orderly pilgrimage is not made any more favorable by Harry Bailly's custodianship of the trip to Canterbury. In fact, his lack of success in controlling the disorderly pilgrims indicates the need for the positive influence of such servants of the "commune profit" as the Knight, the Clerk, the Parson, and the Plowman. They will never be the

majority in any society, and Chaucer realized that they could not—and perhaps should not—stem all of the tide of change that was flowing around him.²⁹ But his setting them at key spots in his descriptions of the pilgrims indicates that they are to remind people of the touchstones of good order, even in the midst of those sometimes fascinating rogues who were willing to take advantage of change for their own profit.

Thus, within a seemingly arbitrary sequence of portraits, Chaucer has provided in the General Prologue a subtle principle for grouping the pilgrims. The worthy Knight, the dedicated, scholarly Clerk, and the truly pious Parson and his brother (whose positions in the sequence of the Prologue divide the portraits approximately into thirds) bring us by degrees from the virtues of the body, to the virtues of the mind, to the virtues of the soul. Their disruptive counterparts at the end of each section—the Merchant, the Wife of Bath, and the Pardoner—constitute the major gradations in a concomitant crescendo of vice in the General Prologue. The representatives of disorder are given progressively more attention in each of the three sections, until, in the last, we are presented with five unprincipled and consummate rascals, in sharp contrast to those virtuous and community-serving brethren, the Parson and the Plowman. Throughout the Prologue, the measure of each pilgrim can be taken by contrasting him or her to the standard set by the model pilgrim of the respective groups.

These patterns reflect Chaucer's concern with the possible consequences of the emerging economic and social individualism of his day. He was too much a Boethian to think anything in this world immutable, and he took great pleasure in painting the great variety of human beings around him; but he also keenly sensed the need we have for norms that let us know how far we have strayed. One of his verities is that no social order can be maintained without a moral commitment from most of its members. No system is perfect, and the Old Order in his day was on shaky ground; but, he seems to say, whatever takes its place will have to manifest the strength of character seen in the Knight, the Clerk, the Parson, and the Plowman in order to subordinate personal ambition to the "commune profit."

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NOTES

1. Nevill Coghill, *The Poet Chaucer* (London, 1949), 124.
2. See Carlo M. Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution* (New York, 1976), 190-204; Rodney H. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free* (London, 1973), 152-77; Robert E. Lerner, *The Age of Adversity: the 14th Century* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1968), 1-29; May McKisak, *The Fourteenth Century; The*

Oxford History of England 5 (Oxford, 1959), 312-423; Walter Ullmann, *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore, 1966), 49-58, 122-49.

3. Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse* (Bloomington & London, 1976), 62, 56.
4. Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley & London, 1978), 115, 113, 91, 94.
5. Kemp Malone, *Chapters on Chaucer* (Baltimore, 1951), 149-50. Malone's is the earliest of several explanations for the order and grouping of the pilgrims offered by critics over the last thirty years. Most of these critics have divided the pilgrims into anywhere from four to seven groups, and most have agreed on the Knight/Squire/Yeoman and the Prioress/Monk/Friar as the first two groups and the five rascals at the end as the last group, with those in between constituting some sort of middle class. J. Swart, "The Construction of Chaucer's General Prologue," *Neophilologica* 38 (1954): 127-36, sees two major divisions and seven subdivisions of the pilgrims, the dividing point of the two major units being the Parson and the Plowman. John Reidy, "Grouping of Pilgrims in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*," *PMASAL* 47 (1962): 595-603, believes that the Guildsmen provide the major breaking point in the portraits, forming a bridge between the socially important pilgrims and the others who follow. Harold F. Brooks, *Chaucer's Pilgrims: The Artistic Order of the Portraits in the Prologue* (London, 1962), sees five groups (the Knight's party, the regular clergy, the middle class [Merchant through Wife of Bath], the Parson/Plowman pair, and the concluding five churls and rascals) and notes that the satire grows generally harsher as the Prologue progresses. Ruth Nevo, "Chaucer: Motive and Mask in the 'General Prologue,'" *MLR* 58 (1963): 1-9, has the most provocative of the articles on the General Prologue. She sees in the arrangement of the pilgrims "a fusion of two things: an acutely original analysis of a society in which commerce is just emerging from feudalism, and the disciplined version of a tolerant but uncompromising moral sensibility" (4). She sees the pilgrims' source of income and their attitudes toward money as the principles according to which they are grouped. Phyllis Hodgson has a perceptive introduction to her edition of the *General Prologue: The Canterbury Tales* (London, 1969). Her grouping of the pilgrims is exactly like that of Brooks, but she stresses the "four ideal figures carefully placed, the Knight, the Clerk, the Parson, the Plowman, [who] in turn fix a standard by which numerous relative judgements are sparked off" (35). R. T. Lenaghan, "Chaucer's General Prologue as History and Literature," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 12 (1970): 73-82, sees Chaucer presenting his pilgrims "by occupational labels" (74), and therefore divides them into three groups according to their sources of livelihood: land, the church, and trade. Finally, Gerald Morgan, "The Design of the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*," *ES* 59 (1978): 481-98, believes that Chaucer presents us with "a coherent sequence of portraits ordered in accordance with the gradations of a fourteenth-century society" (486). There are two main classes, "gentils" and commons, with "a great gulf fixed" (491) between the Franklin (the lowest of the "gentils") and the Guildsmen (the first of the commons to be described).
6. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, 150-52.
7. *Ibid.*, 151-54.
8. See Harry A. Miskimin, *Money, Prices, and Foreign Exchange in 14th Century France* (New Haven & London, 1963), 48-50; Henri Pirenne, *Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe*, trans. I. E. Clegg (1936, rpt. New York, n.d.), 39-188; Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (1948, rpt. Ann Arbor, Mich., 1962), 14 *et passim*.
9. See Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, 53; Reidy, "Grouping of Pilgrims . . ." 603; Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge, 1973), 55.

10. Revised Standard Version, I Cor. 12: 4-7. In a similar passage in Romans 12: 3-8, Paul says, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given us, let us use them." Both passages accord with the medieval social ideal of each person's working within the circumstances into which he had been placed by birth and by chance. However, as Sylvia Thrupp says: "The emphasis of social philosophy on the structural order of medieval society, on its ranked estates, give no ground for inferring disapproval of the existing institutional means to a social mobility, in the towns, in the service of nobles and monarchs, and within the hierarchy of the Church. Although organic social theory, stressing the value of every function in society, from the humblest to the highest, carried overtones of the lesson of contentment with a given task or lot in life, it never implied that a man should not avail himself of legitimate means of improving his lot or of securing a better lot than his father's." Raymond Grew and N. Steneck, eds., *Society and History: Essays by Sylvia Thrupp*, (Ann Arbor, 1977), 26. Since Chaucer himself profited by such opportunities for mobility, we can assume that he accepted the principle of special rewards for individual talent and initiative, within the limits of propriety.

11. See, for example, the *Parliament of Fowls*, 11, 47, and 75; Clerk's Tale, lines 431, 1194; Parson's Tale, line 773.

12. Morgan places too much emphasis on social status in the Prologue when he insists that the pilgrims are strictly ordered by Chaucer "in accordance with social rank." He explicitly excludes the "moral nature" of the pilgrims as a significant organizing principle. Morgan, "The Design of the *General Prologue* . . .," 484, 485.

13. Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estate Satire*, 55, 192, 201.

14. Loy D. Martin, in "History and Form in the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*," *ELH* 45 (1978): 11, notes that "the relative accessibility of different social groups to one another was changing in fourteenth-century England, and the *Canterbury* pilgrimage posits an access which was, as yet, outside the realm of ordinary experience but which reflected some of the currents of contemporary change."

15. *General Prologue*, line 88. All quotations from the *Canterbury Tales* are from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. John H. Fisher (New York, et al, 1977). Line numbers of quotations will be given in parentheses in the text and refer to the *General Prologue* (Fragment I) unless otherwise noted.

16. Howard, in the context of his assertion that even the virtues of the Knight are obsolescent, says of the Prioress, the Monk, and the Friar: "They exemplify obsolescent styles of life based on obsolescent ideas and practices. All three reveal what was throughout the Middle Ages the fundamental flaw in the practice of the religious life, that its values and ideals were contaminated by secular — and chiefly aristocratic — ones." Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, 98.

17. See Christopher Brooke, *The Structure of Medieval Society* (New York, 1971), 82ff.; Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution*, 190-204.

18. See Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, 94; M. M. Postan, *Essays on Medieval Agriculture and General Problems of the Medieval Economy* (Cambridge, 1973), 3-40.

19. See Thrupp, *Merchant Class of Medieval London*, 14-27; 103ff.; also David, *The Strumpet Muse*, 62-63.

20. See Lerner, *The Age of Adversity*, 23.

21. See Miskimin, *Money, Price, and Foreign Exchange in 14th Century France*, 10-21.

22. This is the conclusion of Thomas Garbaty, "Chaucer's Guildsmen and their Fraternity," *JEGP* 59 (1960): 691-709.

23. Although one cannot prove whether Chaucer had planned the prologues to the tales of these three when he wrote the General Prologue, it must be admitted that the prologues of the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner, at least, are consistent extensions of their portraits in the General Prologue. There is therefore some justification for referring to the links and individual prologues when one is analyzing the initial portraits.

24. Ruth Nevo, "Motive and Mask in the 'General Prologue,'" 6.

25. Brooks, *Chaucer's Pilgrims*, 49.

26. "In the background are social and cultural changes subtly taking place in Chaucer's time—the shift from an agrarian to a mercantile society, from a simple barter and money economy to a complex commercial credit economy, from a feudal and baronial government to a centralized monarchy" Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, 103. See also Martin, "History and Form . . .," 11-12.

27. Walter Clyde Curry, *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences*, rev. ed. (New York, 1960), 59-70.

28. McAlpine stresses what she sees as the ambiguity of Chaucer's treatment of the Pardoner. I agree with her that his being a eunuch is morally neutral within itself, and perhaps the ultra-tolerant Chaucer could have brought himself to try to understand the Pardoner's homosexuality. But I do not agree with McAlpine's assessment that the Pardoner abuses the sacraments because he longs to be forgiven, and that the vernicle on his cap "reminds us that through his sexual sufferings the Pardoner participates in the crucifixion." Although the Pardoner is intelligent and sensitive, he is too proud to bow to either the laws of man or the laws of God, and if he is to be damned, it will be because he has compounded physical disability and social opprobrium with willful disorderliness. "The Pardoner's Homosexuality and How It Matters," *PMLA*, 95 (1980): 8-22, especially 19.

29. Martin, "History and Form . . .," 15-16, states Chaucer's ambivalence as follows: "The linear time of historical change suggests that no social institution is permanent, while the hierarchic structure of feudal society claims, through its analogical relation to the structure of the church, an eternal dispensation. To challenge either one of these conflicting orders in the terms provided by the other would not, for Chaucer, have been a possibility; the one was too immediate to experience, while the other was still too powerfully authoritative. What he could do was to accept the antithesis and to resolve it dialectically rather than preferentially. He is not, in this sense, displaying either conservatism or liberalism in his poetic statement. He creates an institution in which both the challenges and the changing take on new significance in relation to one another through the twin perspective of cyclic time and the possibilities of game in an unfamiliar social context."