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## The Three Estates Model: Represented and Satirised in Chaucer's *General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales*

Sadenur DOĞAN\*

### Abstract

This paper presents an investigation of the 'Three Estates Model' of the English medieval society in Chaucer's General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. Based upon the descriptions and illustrations of the characters, it aims to explore the hierarchal structure of the medieval society which is divided into three main groups or 'estates': the ones who pray, the ones who rule and govern, and the ones who work. In the General Prologue, Chaucer gives a series of sketches of the characters that are the representatives of the three estates, and through these depictions he investigates the social characteristics and roles of the medieval people who are expected to speak and behave in accordance with what their social group requires. While presenting Three Estates Model, he employs the tradition of 'estates satire' by criticising the social vices resulting from the corruption in this model. Through the characteristics and virtues of the 'Knight', the 'Parson', and the 'Plowman', he demonstrates the perfect integration of the people who belong to chivalry, clergy and the commoners in the medieval English society. Also, by offering contrasting views to these positive traits in the portrayal of almost all of the other characters, as illustrated in the portrayal of the 'Monk', the 'Reeve', and the 'Wife of Bath' in this paper, he criticises the vices and sins (that are mainly resulted from the religious, financial and moral corruption) of the people belonging to the social classes of the Middle Ages.

**Key Words:** General Prologue, Three Estates Model, estates satire, medieval society, social classes.

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\* Middle East Technical University, Faculty of Education, Department of Foreign Language Education.

## Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer, regarded as the greatest poet of Middle Ages, holds an unrivalled place in English Literature with his magnum opus *The Canterbury Tales* which is one of the most influential and appreciated literary works of Medieval Literature. This significance is mainly due to Chaucer's mastery in using frame tale narrative technique skilfully and representing the social structures of the English Medieval Era in a descriptive way. In this respect, *General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales* bears much importance as it not only sets the framework of Chaucer's narrative but also presents a series of sketches of the characters who are the representatives of the three estates of the Middle Ages. Referring to the hierarchal structure of the medieval society, the Three Estates Model establishes the shape of the society by dividing it into three main groups: the ones who pray, the ones who rule and fight, and the ones who labour. This model is used by Chaucer in his masterpiece to put forward his arguments about the social characteristics and roles of the medieval people who are expected to talk, behave, wear and live in accordance with what their social group requires. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate how Chaucer employs the Three Estates Model through descriptions in *General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales* and to what extent his characters, belonging to chivalry, clergy and the commoners, carry the features of the their social class.

How and to what extent Chaucer represents the three estates of the medieval society in *General Prologue* is a much debated issue among the critics. The diversity and variety of the traits, ranks and occupations of Chaucer's characters brings forth the evaluation of the prologue in terms of the Three Estates Model. Indeed, his grouping of different kinds of people according to their ranks and occupations is rooted in the medieval tradition of estates satire. Estates satire, as explained by Phillips, is a term for

a broad range of medieval writings describing representative members of different 'estates' (ranks or professions) and the sins to which each social rank was prone. ... The range of professions varies from text to text but most estates satire began with clerics (for example, popes, cardinals, bishops, priests, monks, nuns, and sometimes other educated professions like lawyers and doctors), moved on to those who rule and govern (kings, barons, knights, etc.), and then those who work (merchant, burgesses, peasants, etc.). (23)

Estates satire, then, both relies on and exploits the medieval social and hierarchal stereotypes. Chaucer's categorisation of the pilgrims in relation to their social positions and duties can be examined with regard to this tradition as he not only puts his characters in an hierarchal order -beginning with the portrayal of the "Knight" and ending with the one of the "Pardoner"- but also implies specific sins for each rank of the medieval society for which Chaucer's pilgrims form a microcosm. In other words, the idealised account of the virtues that

are required of the estates and actual account of the vices that are experienced are juxtaposed in *General Prologue*.

In order to present the qualities of the three estates of the medieval society and achieve the purpose of estates satire, Chaucer tries to reveal the character of each social type by offering a thorough example. While he presents the expected order of the society, Chaucer, at the same time, uncovers the malpractices and frauds that lead to moral and spiritual corruption through different character depictions. For the examination of the character portrayals, Chaucer's three ideal pilgrims who complete the Three Estates Model in *General Prologue* should firstly be mentioned. These three pilgrims are the "Knight", the "Parson", and the "Plowman", and through the descriptions of Chaucer, they represent the perfect integration of the three estates, clergy, nobility, and peasantry for continuation of the social organisations. The "Knight" stands for the chivalry and chivalric values that give him the right to govern and responsibility to protect the community, which is explained with the following lines:

A Knight there was, and he a worthy man,  
Who from the time that he first began  
To ride out, he loved chivalry,  
Truth and honor, freedom and courtesy.  
He fought bravely in his lords wars,  
And in them had he ridden, no other man so far,  
As well in Christendom as in heathen places,  
And ever honored for his worthiness. (*GP* 43-50)

The positive characteristics that are attributed to him depict the "Knight" the perfect representative of the chivalry. His devotion to chivalric values such as truth, honour, freedom and courtesy, his loyalty to his lord, his defence of Christendom prove his worth as the ideal chivalric knight.

The "Parson", who stands for the clergy with his responsibility for spiritual advancement of man, is also described in a positive way with the emphasis on his individual, social and religious characteristics that are worthy of praise. Chaucer presents him as such:

A good man was there of religion,  
And he was a poor Parson of a town,  
But rich he was in holy thought and work.  
He was also a learned man, a scholar

Who Christ's gospel truly would preach,  
His parishioners devotedly would he teach.  
...  
This noble example to his sheep he gave,  
That first he wrought, and afterward he taught.  
From the gospel he these words took,  
And this metaphor he added thereto:  
That if gold rusts, what should iron do? (*GP* 479-502)

The "Parson" serves God flawlessly by both teaching people the Christian gospel and being a good example for them to lead a proper religious life. Although he is poor in his private life, he is rich in "holy thought and work". He believes in the importance of the clergy in shaping the social and individual traits of people, which illustrates his praiseworthy characteristics.

The "Plowman" is the third ideal pilgrim who completes the Three Estates Model in *General Prologue*. He belongs to the social class that supplies the labouring force and the material substance of the medieval society. He is also depicted in positive terms as he works hard for the sake of the Church and the society. He is represented by Chaucer in this way:

An honest worker, and a good one was he,  
Living in peace and perfect charity.  
God loved he best with his whole heart  
At all times, both happy and tough,  
And his neighbor much as himself.  
He would thresh and ditch and shovel,  
For Christ's sake, for every poor soul,  
Without payment, if it lay in his power.  
His tithes he paid full fair and well,  
Both of his work and his property. (*GP* 533-542)

In his illustrative portrayal, many praiseworthy characteristics are ascribed to the "Plowman" as he works hard and diligently for his neighbours, especially the ones who are in need, and the Church. Thus, he represents his social class, the commoners in the medieval

context, perfectly. These portrayals of the “Knight”, the “Parson”, and the “Plowman” prove that these three pilgrims serve the community excellently in the ways they are expected to do, and as a result they represent the Three Estates Model in a highly effective manner. Apart from that, they appear “uncontaminated by commerce, personal greed or the worlds of towns and trade” in the medieval English society. (Phillips 27). Phillips elaborates on this issue by touching upon the medieval social and religious constructs and says:

Chaucer’s choice of a poor peasant parson –rather than a virtuous bishop, monk or friar– for his ideal cleric in the trio reflects an ideal gospel simplicity, and perhaps also contemporary disapproval of the wealth and power of the Church hierarchy and the well-endowed religious orders. The Parson’s and Plowman’s brotherhood itself symbolises the Three Estates’ model of mutual service between fellow-Christians. (27)

The portraits of these ideal chivalric, religious and the labourer figures in Chaucer’s *General Prologue*, then, fits into the tradition of the Three Estates Model in terms of the representation of social, moral and spiritual values through their ranks and roles in the society.

However, it would be wrong to deduce that all of the characters in Chaucer’s *General Prologue* are presented in accordance with tradition of the Three Estates Model. Apart from the “Knight”, the “Parson”, and the “Plowman”, almost all of the other pilgrims have individual and social traits which are not expected of their ranks and duties. At this point, Chaucer’s satire is at work for the presentation of the malfunctioning of the social constructs. He employs the tradition of the estates satire, as stated above, to illustrate the people who do not fulfil the duties that fall upon them for the perfect continuation of the social services. Furthermore, he specifies some particular sins to these people, who belong to different groupings of the society, in relation to their neglect, and even abuse, of the social positions and roles. One of the best examples for the negligence of the social duties can be found in the portrayal of the “Monk”. Chaucer’s portrait of the “Monk” clearly demonstrates how some clerical figures ignore their social roles and even perform deeds that are unexpected of a cleric. In this respect, Chaucer presents the “Monk” as such:

A Monk there was, and a good one too,

An estate manager, who also loved to hunt:

A manly man, and an abbot able.

Full many a fine horse had he in stable,

And when he rode men might his bridle hear

Jingling in a whistling wind as clear

And loud as doth the chapel bell,  
There where this lord ran a priory.  
...  
Why should he study, and make himself a nut,  
Upon a book in cloister always to pore,  
Or work with his hands and labor,  
As Augustine bid? How shall the world be served?  
Let Augustine have his work for him reserved! (*GP* 165-188)

This presentation of “the worldly, self indulgent, corpulent monk” (Hodgson 17) not only goes against the moral issues of the clergy but also criticises such clerical figures as Chaucer’s “Monk” for fulfilling exactly the traditional definitions of the bad monks who diverge from the ideal monasticism. As a cleric who is supposed to lead a humble and studious life for the advancement of the religious values, the “Monk” has a lifestyle including hunting and riding, which is more suitable for a lord.

The estates satire in Chaucer’s *General Prologue* takes a harsher tone with the portrayal of the “Reeve”. The “Reeve”, who belongs to the social group of the commoners in the medieval society, is described by Chaucer in this way:

His lord’s sheep, his cattle, his dairy herd,  
His swine, his horses, his livestock, and his poultry,  
Were wholly in this reeve’s governing,  
And by his contract he kept the reckoning,  
Since his lord was in age but twenty years.  
There could no man bring him in arrears.  
There was no bailiff, nor herdsman, nor other servant,  
But that he knew their tricks and their deceit;  
They were afraid of him as of the Death.  
His dwelling was full fair upon a heath;  
With green trees shadowed was his place.  
Better than his lord he could his goods increase.

Full rich he was with private stock. (*GP* 599-611)

As it is seen in the lines above, the “Reeve” is a “badly infected money-grubber” (Hodgson 22). He is a low-born commoner in the employment of a socially superior master; however, he manages to acquire wealth by stealing his lord’s properties with his cunning tricks. As a result of this, the death-like manner of his dealing with other people implies that “obsessive private storing of wealth is both a social wrong, because unfruitful to the community, and a spiritual wrong, leading to death of the soul” (Phillips 37).

The other example of the looseness in the social norms and values in both religious and moral terms is presented in the portrait of the “Good-Wife of Bathe”. Chaucer presents his employment of the estates satire tradition in her portrayal by referring to two different vices of the medieval society. He accordingly explains the “Wife”’s characteristics with these words:

In all the parish a wife was there none  
Who gave more at the church offering;  
And if they did, certain so angry was she,  
That she was all out of charity.  
Her Sunday shawls were of full fine hand;  
I daresay that they weighed ten pounds  
That on a Sunday were upon her head.  
...  
She was a worthy woman all her life:  
Husbands at church door she’d had five,  
Not counting other company in youth. (*GP* 451-464)

The representation of the “Wife” in such way sheds light on some major arguments put forward by Chaucer in his estates satire. In the above quotation, the depiction of the “Wife” brings out “the coarse sensuality of the habitual gadder indulgent in freshly delights” (Hodgson 36) as she has had extramarital affairs apart from her five marriages that are approved by the Church. In addition to this criticism on loose manners about sexuality, Chaucer also touches upon the financial issues of the medieval society through the portrait of the “Wife”. Being a rich widow, the “Wife” has a flourishing cloth business. The mention of trade and material possession in this way reflects the social and economic reality of the medieval England. The rise of the merchant class due to the trading developments of the era is referred here by Chaucer. He not only criticises the importance given to material issues but

also satirises the behaviour of the people leading a materialistic life through the portrait of the “Wife” who tries to dominate other people with her economic power. Consequently, the portraits of these spiritually, morally, sexually and financially corrupted figures in Chaucer’s *General Prologue* directly contrast with the ideal portraits of virtue through the Three Estates Model of the Middle Ages, and thus become the subject of Chaucer’s estates satire in terms of the representation of their vices and sins in the medieval society.

In conclusion, Chaucer has employed the tradition of the Three Estates Model skilfully in *General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales* by both presenting the ideal trio of the estates and satirising the social vices resulting from the corruption in this model. Through the characteristics and virtues of the “Knyght”, the “Persoun”, and the “Plowman”, he demonstrates the perfect integration of the people who belong to chivalry, clergy and the commoners in the medieval English society. Also, by offering contrasting views to these positive traits in the portrayal of almost all of the other characters, as illustrated in the portrayal of the “Monk”, the “Reeve”, and the “Wife of Bathe” in this paper, he criticises the vices and sins of the people belonging to these three main social classes of the Middle Ages that are mainly resulted from the religious, financial and moral corruption. As a consequence of this representation of the virtue together with the vice, Chaucer portrays his pilgrims in relation to how they should be and what they should do in order to be approved and appreciated by the medieval English society which is strictly divided to social classes and which imposes specific roles and duties on the people.

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