What man artow?: An exploration of the narrator of the Canterbury tales

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WHAT MAN ARTOW?:

AN EXPLORATION OF THE NARRATOR OF THE CANTERBURY TALES

A Thesis Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Designation

University Honors with Distinction

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“Also I prey yow to foryeve it me, / Al have I nat set folk in hir degree / Here in this tale, as that they sholde stonde; / My wit is short, ye may wel understonde” (Chaucer 35). These are the words written by Geoffrey Chaucer, who is considered the father of English literature, in the prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, a work that has survived and remained relevant for over six hundred years. The juxtaposition of a man whose writing turned him into a household name begging his audience to forgive his short wit and lack of storytelling skills is striking. Ann Chalmers Watts notes this discrepancy between Chaucer and his narrator of the same name, pointing out, “This ‘I’ who mouths the first English perfection of heroic couplet and rime royale is capable only of the ‘drasty rymyng’ of the Tale of Sir Thopas” (237). This very notable absurdity of the infamous work is laughable, and if there is one thing we know that Chaucer enjoyed, it’s humor. It is a defining quality of Chaucer’s works, and his sense of humor is quite uniquely and identifiably his. Therefore, this bold, ironic statement should signal the reader, and should certainly raise some questions.

The glaring question here pertains to Chaucer’s purpose. Why would such an obviously talented writer portray himself in this way? Is it simply a self-deprecating joke, or is there something more complex at play? The function of Chaucer the pilgrim, who, for purposes of clarity, I will refer to hereafter as “Geoffrey”, is a hotly debated issue. Some scholars propose that Geoffrey is in fact meant to be interpreted quite literally as Chaucer himself, some argue that he is not meant to be Chaucer at all, and still some present theories that muddle and mix these two vastly different ideas. I argue that Geoffrey is certainly not a direct reflection of Chaucer the author; however, it is not mere coincidence that the author has decided to name this character after himself. Geoffrey is a representation of Chaucer’s comedy; he is central to the work, ever-present through his role as the narrator, and almost too noticeable, as if trying to distract the
reader. Just as Geoffrey charms the reader with his foolishness, Chaucer’s comedic side made his work engaging and playful for his contemporaries; just beneath the surface of this comedy, however, lurked a deep and informed criticism. I will further argue that the Nun’s Priest is a representation of Chaucer’s critical tone, as he is also reflective of the author in many ways, yet remains in the shadows for the majority of the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer was quite critical of the nobility in his work, however, he was able to disguise this criticism and make it more palatable to his audience through his use of comedy, just as the Nun’s Priest, despite his obvious literary talent, exists in the periphery of the epic. My arguments aim to add a different perspective to the discussion surrounding the narrator of the *Canterbury Tales*. Attempting to recognize Chaucer in his own work is a daunting task, and some may even argue that it is entirely futile, but it is nevertheless important to continue to engage with one of the most influential authors of the English language. After all, when it comes to Chaucerian literature, peeling back the many layers of complexity may just lead to new, groundbreaking discoveries.

Before exploring the role of Geoffrey the pilgrim, it is important to first understand Chaucer and the world that he lived in. As I have stated, Chaucer is infamously difficult to know; however, the few concrete details of his life that are available will become crucial in an analysis of the *Canterbury Tales* so that we may better understand some of the personal and literary decisions that went into his writing. Born to a middle class family of wine merchants, Chaucer quickly began to gain upward mobility, becoming a page for the Countess of Ulster in his early teen years. This was a highly sought after position that gave him the opportunity to work for various nobles, as well as earn an excellent education in manners (Coghill xi). Chaucer scholar Nevill Coghill explains that this would later give Chaucer an advantage in his poetry, saying, “No English poet has so mannerly an approach to his reader” (xi). Being trained in manners from
an early age required Chaucer to anticipate the needs of those he served. Therefore, it is no
wonder that his poetry was and remains to be so highly entertaining, personable, and human.
Furthermore, Chaucer’s opportunity to work for a diverse group of highly affluent individuals
from an early age would have made him quite the expert observer, a background character
overflowing with insider information.

Just ten years later, in 1367, he was promoted to a courtier and began to work for the
King directly, who referred to Chaucer as his “dearly beloved Valet” and even bestowed upon
him important trade-related responsibilities abroad (Coghill xii). Chaucer would have had the
opportunity not only to learn about poetry from various cultures on these trips, but also to meet
individuals of every background, class, and profession. It is very likely that this had a strong
effect on his writing. Indeed, Larry Benson notes that, “...Chaucer was most prolific as a writer
when he was apparently most busy with other affairs” (xxi). It seems clear that Chaucer drew
much of his poetic inspiration from his various occupations. Perhaps this is reflected by many of
the pilgrims in the *Canterbury Tales*, including Geoffrey; he may have seen himself as a humble,
lowly man in the presence of caricatured individuals, whether they were extremely noble,
extremely corrupt, or extremely laughable.

The clear parallels between Geoffrey’s situation in the *Canterbury Tales* and Chaucer’s
situation in his professional life give some traction to the theory that the two entities are one and
the same. Donald R. Howard writes, “From all the biographical facts which we know about
Chaucer, exactly two major ones emerge: that Chaucer was a bourgeois who successfully
established himself as a civil servant, and that he was a poet who wrote for the court. His
aristocratic audience, which certainly admired him, would still have looked upon him as a social
inferior” (342). This would, admittedly, be a sound explanation for the existence of the naive
Geoffrey; if the *Canterbury Tales* were meant to be read to the court, they would have gotten a great kick out of the “bourgeois dunderhead” as Howard calls him. Since it has already been established that Chaucer deeply valued comedy in his works, it is easy to imagine Geoffrey as a self-deprecating gag. However, as Chaucer’s comedy usually requires one to dig below the surface level to discover the true punchline, the gag does seem a bit too surface-level to pass by without raising an eyebrow.

Still, it can be argued that Geoffrey and Chaucer have undeniable consistencies between them. Howard goes on to argue that “…Chaucer has isolated and presented one important trait of his own personality, his interest in people and his tolerant humanity” (343). This is further consistent with an image of a wide-eyed, naive Geoffrey eating out of the laps of the other tale-tellers, which, depending on one’s interpretation, is not totally incorrect. However, to describe Chaucer as having a “tolerant humanity” is to gloss over his pervasive satire and jibing tone; even if it is not obviously present in Geoffrey, it is unarguably present in the work as a whole. Furthermore, there is one important piece of biographical information that casts more doubt onto Howard’s theory. Chaucer did not actually start writing the *Canterbury Tales* until 1386 when, after twenty years of loyal service to nobles, the Duke of Gloucester removed Chaucer from all of his offices and filled them with his own supporters (Coghill xiv). This decision by the Duke may have angered Chaucer, supplying him with the spite that he required to create such a satirical, humorous work. Chaucer was without office for three whole years-- plenty of time to dwell on the incredibly nuanced critiques of power, class, and religion that can be found in his work. This now adds a new, sarcastic layer to the function of Geoffrey; rather than the wide-eyed man in loyal servitude of his peers that Howard suggests him to be, he could represent someone who feigns naivety while secretly believing himself to be the smartest person in the group.
Because of this, I do not find it believable that Geoffrey is a direct reflection of Chaucer the author, as Howard seems to suggest.

These obvious discrepancies between the blundering pilgrim Geoffrey and the sophisticated and capable author Chaucer have driven some scholars to take an opposing view to Howard and chalk the relation between the two up to mere coincidence. One Chaucerian scholar, Ben Kimpel, cites the moment where the Man of Law references Chaucer’s work as evidence that Geoffrey and Chaucer are not related. He writes, “...there is no evidence that the Man of Law identified the poet he was discussing with his fellow pilgrim and indeed the tone of his criticism implies that he did not... neither he nor Chaucer meant the passage to be connected in any way with the narrator” (Kimpel 82). Kimpel’s argument renders unbelievable the perspective that Geoffrey and Chaucer are meant to be the same person. The Man of Law’s reference to Chaucer is a somewhat quick moment and does not rouse Geoffrey in the slightest. If it were intended that this reference be directed at Geoffrey the pilgrim, it seems like a missed comedic opportunity on Chaucer’s part not to dwell on this moment, and it seems unfathomable for Chaucer to miss a comedic opportunity.

Kimpel further argues that Chaucer and Geoffrey cannot be connected because Geoffrey is a mere literary device. He points out that “This humble and rather stupid but well-meaning narrator is not unlike the narrators in [Chaucer’s other works]” (Kimpel 84). Indeed, many of Chaucer’s works preceding the *Canterbury Tales* include narrators who are nearly indistinguishable from Geoffrey the pilgrim in their personalities and functions in the work. Chaucer was obviously fond of his bumbling, hilariously ignorant narrator, and one standout example is the narrator of *The Book of the Duchess*, written in 1368, nearly twenty years before Chaucer began writing the *Canterbury Tales*. *The Book of the Duchess* opens on the narrator who
is reading romance tales to try and fall asleep. When he finally does fall asleep with the book in his hands, he finds himself dreaming of the tale *Romance of the Rose* before soon encountering a spirit guide that leads him into a forest. Animal guides in medieval tales typically functioned as a way to lead knights to adventure in romance tales; therefore one might imagine a majestic, dignified creature. Instead, the narrator is met with a whelp, or a puppy (Chaucer 335). This comedic choice of an animal guide is a perfect representation of the narrator himself: inexperienced and clumsy, yet innocently curious, longing to be helpful.

As the narrator follows the whelp into the forest, he comes upon a knight reciting poetry about his lost love. The knight imparts this story onto the narrator, telling him about how he fell in love with, and then lost, his wife. It is obvious that the knight’s wife has died, but the narrator completely misses this point. When the knight finally exclaims that his wife is dead, which is already glaringly clear to the reader, the narrator responds, “‘Nay!... Is that your losse? Be God, hyt ys routhe.’”¹ (Chaucer 346). The contrast between the chivalrous, experienced knight and the blundering narrator whose only experience with courtly love is reading romance novels before bed is the crux of what makes *The Book of the Duchess* so hilarious. There is a noticeably similar contrast between the experienced, talented tale-tellers of the *Canterbury Tales* and the awkward Geoffrey whose tale is so terrible that he is stopped prematurely by the Host. One can almost envision the narrator of *The Book of the Duchess* as the same entity as Geoffrey, and it is worth noting that this narrator appears in other works by Chaucer as well. Clearly, Kimpel’s point stands that Geoffrey is a manifestation of a common Chaucerian literary device, and therefore should not be equated with Chaucer himself.

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¹ *Hyt ys routhe*, literally, “it is sad”, or, for a more modern interpretation, “that’s rough”.
However, there are some places where Kimpel’s arguments can be called into question. First, Geoffrey is referred to as “Chaucer” just before he is called upon to tell the Tale of Sir Thopas, meaning that the pilgrim does indeed share not just his first name, but his full name with the author. For this reason, it is unreasonable to suggest that Chaucer did not want to be associated with his narrator at all. Because both Howard and Kimpel’s theories fall short in certain places, it seems much more plausible that the truth lies somewhere in the middle; while Geoffrey is not meant to be a direct reflection of Chaucer, the reader should also not view them as entirely separate or unrelated to each other. Further backing up this idea is the fact that, according to David Benson, “...character consistency, as we understand it, like ‘rational’ perspective in painting, was not considered much of a virtue in the Middle Ages” (9). This would explain how both consistencies and inconsistencies can simultaneously coexist between Geoffrey and Chaucer. There is clearly some sort of partial connection between the author and his pilgrim counterpart, but it is likely a connection that is difficult for modern readers to fully comprehend. It is a question that does not have a clear-cut black or white answer. For this reason, I affirm my argument that while Geoffrey is not a direct reflection of Chaucer, and while the character consistency between the two is limited, there is still a purposeful connection between the two. It seems that Geoffrey functions as a means to represent Chaucer’s comedic tone, which made his work entertaining, personable, and popular.

David Benson’s comments on character consistency in the Middle Ages highlight the fact that Geoffrey and Chaucer can coexist despite their limited consistencies, and by that same logic, there is potential for consistency between Chaucer and another pilgrim. It seems likely that Geoffrey was just the tip of the iceberg, and there is another pilgrim that lurks below the surface, connected to Chaucer is some meaningful, but less obvious, way. Considering all of the pilgrims,
I argue that the Nun’s Priest is the most representative of Chaucer’s illusive criticism, which was just as important as his comedic tone, though much less overt. Criticism, particularly of the Church and the nobility, exists on nearly every page of the *Canterbury Tales*, and it appears as if Chaucer enjoyed nothing more than picking his peers apart; however, his merciless commentary was ushered in by such well-written comedy that his audience, oftentimes the very people he was chiding, still loved and respected his work. Just as Chaucer’s foolish narrator recounts the events of the pilgrimage through his naive perspective, the Nun’s Priest plays a large part in critiquing his fellow pilgrims, thus allowing both comedy and criticism to exist simultaneously, yet distinctly.

The idea that Chaucer uses the Nun’s Priest as mouthpiece for his criticism similar to how he uses Geoffrey for his humor is made believable by the many consistencies between them; indeed, Chaucer has much more in common with the Nun’s Priest than he does with his narrator. Although the two had very different professions, they both shared a similar, somewhat awkward rank that allowed them to brush shoulders with the nobility without actually being considered nobles themselves. Catherine Cox explains that “Priests were members of the ‘secular’ clergy, actively integrated into the society that they served, and, indeed, occupying a place in the ecclesiastical hierarchy wholly to serve the laity…” (56). Not unlike Chaucer’s role as the King’s “dearly beloved Valet”, the Nun’s Priest would have held a prestigious, coveted position, yet would still not have been held as high as the majority of the clergy. It is almost as if both men have one foot in and one foot out of the upper class lifestyle; they have respect, but not quite status. Interestingly, Cox also points out that the Nun’s Priest is in servitude to the Nun, and not the other way around, stating: “She is not the Priest’s Nun, but rather he is the Nun’s Priest” (63). Further underscoring the Nun’s Priest’s place in society, a nun would typically be a social
subordinate to a priest, but this Nun’s role in the clergy trumps this traditional gender dynamic. This could reflect Chaucer’s attitude towards his own position in society; perhaps he, too, feels as if he is in servitude of people whom he does not feel he should be inferior to.

Not only was the Nun’s Priest likely seen as inferior by the clergy, it seems that many of his fellow pilgrims may have also viewed him this way as well. R. M. Lumiansky points out that “Besides the patronizing tone and content of this speech, the Host six times uses a disrespectful second person singular pronoun in addressing the Nun's Priest; and further, in the phrase ‘thou sir John’ Harry does not hesitate to call him by the contemptuous group nickname for priests…” (901). While Harry Bailly, an innkeeper, would certainly not have had a higher place in society than the Nun’s Priest, his jibing comments suggest that he does not recognize the Nun’s Priest as an authority in the same way that he would the Knight, for example. He even makes a sarcastic remark concerning his profession by calling him the nickname ‘thou sir John’, further emphasizing the little respect that he has for the Nun’s Priest’s role. It seems that the Nun’s Priest’s experience is reflective of what we know of Chaucer’s experience as a diplomat within the court.

One might say that this is a mere coincidence and that Chaucer did not purposefully forge this connection between him and the Nun’s Priest, and truly, there is no way to know for sure. However, one aforementioned detail of Chaucer’s life further strengthens this speculated relationship. In 1386, just before Chaucer began writing the *Canterbury Tales*, the Duke of Gloucester removed Chaucer from all of his offices, filling them instead with his own supporters (Coghill xiv). This not only supplied Chaucer with the free time he would need to embark on a project as enormous as the *Canterbury Tales*, but also likely supplied him with the spite he needed to fuel his criticism of the nobility. How could Chaucer, who was so loved by the King,
be replaced so easily, without a second thought? Already prone to being critical of the nobility, the Duke’s decision likely left Chaucer with a serious bone to pick with his aristocratic contemporaries, and there is no better example of that attitude in the *Canterbury Tales* than the Nun’s Priest. Clearly, the consistencies between Chaucer and the Nun’s Priest run much deeper than what meets the eye.

Perhaps one of the most convincing connections between Chaucer and the Nun’s Priest is their elusiveness, both in their criticism and their presence. The Nun’s Priest tells an animal fable with arguably the highest literary merit out of all of the pilgrims, and his expert tale-telling allows him to weave harsh social commentary into his amiable, classic story. R. T. Lenaghan points out, “...the Nun’s Priest as the teller of the tale is being sly; his tone is mock-innocent” (305). In other words, the Nun’s Priest is fully aware of the metaphorical implications that come from his tale of Chauntecleer and Pertelote, but he shrouds his commentary in an innocent, unsupposing genre. Indeed, Harry Bailly is delighted by the tale of Chauntecleer, seemingly unfazed by the deeper, perhaps more personal, moral. Just as Chaucer uses comedy to make the criticism in his work more tolerable to his audience, so too does the Nun’s Priest use the popular and charming animal fable. Further confirming this striking similarity to Chaucer, Lenaghan explains that “...the value of the tale is most easily understood by listening for the shift in tone that enables the teller of the tale to step aside, just a bit, and make clear the slyly disparaging implications classic both for Chaucer and the sophisticated Aesopic fable” (307). It hardly seems coincidental that the Nun’s Priest’s tale so closely resembles a classic Chaucerian work.

It is also worth noting that Chaucer and the Nun’s Priest are also elusive in their presence, with both the author and the pilgrim puzzling even the most established and innovative scholars. As it has been stated, Chaucer’s true voice is infamously challenging, if not impossible,
to identify. Donald Howard asserts that Chaucer frequently “mask[ed] his personality” (340), which makes it very hard for scholars to deduce the author’s true opinions. Chaucer’s clever placement of Geoffrey at the forefront of the *Canterbury Tales* like a red herring, for instance, is a great example of the author’s game of literary hide and seek. Because of this, many scholars have argued that one would be smart to not waste too much of their time searching for the “true” Chaucer and to instead focus on the genius of his works. David Benson echoes a sentiment about the Nun’s Priest so similar to this that it is almost eerie, saying, “Rather than pursue the shadowy Nun’s Priest, a critic would do better to exercise his energy and wit on the tale” (10). This is the very same attitude that the majority of scholars have towards Chaucer himself, and, in truth, there is some merit to Benson’s perspective. The Nun’s Priest is absent from the work in a more literal sense than Chaucer; he is one of the few pilgrims that is completely glossed over in the General Prologue, and the reader never receives his physical description or backstory at any time in the work. The only sliver of physical detail the reader is given of the Nun’s Priest is Harry Bailly’s remarks to him directly after the tale of Chauntecleer (Chaucer 261), and even still, these are just a few short lines. Attempting to engage in discourse about the Nun’s Priest outside of the context of his tale has proven to boil down to little more than pure speculation. Both the Nun’s Priest and Chaucer pose tempting subjects for scholars, but, as many have stated, both ultimately prove exceedingly slippery. This further illustrates the very clear connection between the two, which seems just as purposeful as Chaucer’s connection to Geoffrey, if not even more personal and significant.

While Geoffrey is the ascribed narrator of the *Canterbury Tales* and connected to Chaucer in obvious, yet somewhat superficial ways, the Nun’s Priest plays an unexpectedly similar role. While Geoffrey is at the forefront of the work, one may also consider the Nun’s
Priest a “narrator” of sorts as well. Readers immediately recognize the connection between Geoffrey and Chaucer, to the extent that some even argue that the two are one and the same; however, their inconsistencies invalidate these claims. The Nun’s Priest, then, appears to fill in the important traits one would attribute to Chaucer where Geoffrey cannot; where Geoffrey is dimwitted, the Nun’s Priest is cunning, where Geoffrey is flamboyant, the Nun’s Priest is hidden, and where Geoffrey is naive in the presence of his fellow pilgrims, the Nun’s Priest is calculated and critical. They are each an isolated piece of Chaucer, though neither represent him fully. The question then remains, are Geoffrey and the Nun’s Priest two halves to a whole, or are there more missing pieces left to identify? Did Chaucer really leave pieces of himself in each pilgrim like a trail of breadcrumbs, or is this yet another one of his tricks?

One thing is clear: there is much more to the narrator of the Canterbury Tales than meets the eye. Perhaps that is the very reason why this work of literature has remained at the center of literary studies for centuries, because each time a layer is peeled back, another one presents itself. What else could be waiting to be discovered between the lines?
Works Cited


