CHAPTER 2

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2.1 A Brief Life-sketch of Chaucer

Geoffrey Chaucer is considered to be the Father of English poetry and Grand father of English Novel. His life appears to be shrouded in mystery. We neither have any authentic information about his life nor have we any biographical work dealing with factual records of Chaucer. Whatever facts one can gather about his life have been derived from the entries of payments made to him in Royal Accounts still extant, or from similar entries in the registers of the city of London. How far the references in these documents are exhaustive one has no evidences to tell. Much of his life sketch is based on historical inferences and likelihood. Yet there are many evidences of his diplomatic life.

Geoffrey Chaucer, the first great English poet whom Tennyson calls “the morning star of song,” was born in London in 1340. He was the son of John Chaucer, a vintner (i.e. a wine merchant). It is said that his father had become very much prosperous in his business and owned many houses and properties. Chaucer’s early boyhood was spent in London. He attended St. Paul’s school located near his house. Nothing can be said with certitude about his early education. But it is agreed upon about his ability of speaking French and English right from his early childhood. He had acquired a great deal of knowledge in classical literature. He was also well versed in Latin grammar,
logic and rhetoric, it can also be assumed from the references available from his works that he knew arithmetic, astronomy and geometry.

In 1357 that is when Chaucer was seventeen years old he was appointed as a Page to the Countess of Ulster, Elizabeth who was the daughter-in-law of Edward III. This is how his association with the Royal house began. Is it not surprising that a son of a wine seller should reach such a high post of honour! Legouis explains:

His father’s friends at court, the charm of two bright eyes in a still childish face, a precious mind and his gallantry of some early love poems – many reasons can be found to explain this presence of this vintner’s son in a Princely household. (www.ebooksread.com)

In 1374, Chaucer was appointed Controller of the Customs in the Port of London and was granted rent-free use of a house above the gate of Aldgate. During this period, he received further marks of the royal favour and became increasingly prosperous. However, in 1377, Edward III was succeeded by Richard II, then a minor, and Chaucer seems to have incurred the displeasure of the Regent, Gloucester, but when Richard attained his majority, the favour of the Lancastrians was once more made available to him. In 1385, Chaucer
became Justice of the Peace in the country of Kent, where he went to live after losing his house in London. In 1386, he sat in Parliament as Knight of the Shire for Kent. In 1389, he became Clerk of the King’s works, a post which carried the responsibility for the maintenance of such important buildings as the Tower of London and the Palace of Westminster. In the course of the frequent journeys which this work necessitated, Chaucer was robbed more than once, on one occasion with violence. His retirement from this post in 1390, gave him more time for poetry, though the precise reason for his giving up the post is not known. The following year he was appointed Deputy Forester of the Royal Forest in Somerset, but what exactly was the nature of his work is not known. This appointment may just have been a sinecure intended as a reward for his many and various services to the Crown.

Not much is known about the last ten years of Chaucer’s life. However, it is certain that King Richard continued to treat him favourably. On the accession of Henry IV in 1399, Chaucer suffered from some anxiety lest the royal favour should be withdrawn. However, the new King confirmed the various royal grants. According to some biographers, Chaucer at this time fell into difficulties and debt, and his last years were spent in poverty. He died on October 25, 1400, and was buried in Westminster Abbey.
As an individual person, Chaucer was corpulent, and like his Host of the Tabard, “a large man” and no “poppet” to embrace. His face, however, was small, fair, and intelligent, his eyes downcast and meditative, but dazed by age and study. Altogether, he had an “elvish” or weird expression of countenance, which attracted the attention of those who came into contact with him for the first time, and with whom he seems to have been reserved and reticent. He lived hermit-like but he was not naturally a recluse, and still less an ascetic; given more to observe than to talk, he loved good and pleasant society, and to sit at the festive board, for, as he himself tells us, “his abstinence was but little.” (Saunders 56)

In 1357, there occurred an event of great importance in Chaucer’s life. He was living at this time with the Countess at Hatfield in Yorkshire, when her brother-in-law John of Gaunt, Earl of Richmond paid her a visit. This young nobleman later on became the Duke of Lancaster and the most powerful man in England. Friendship between Chaucer and Duke strengthened in the course of time, which proved to be great beneficial to Chaucer’s career as poet. Within two years, Chaucer had his first foreign travel and had his first experience of the battlefield. Along with the Earl of Ulster, his patroness’s husband, he was in British army which invaded France in the Hundred Years War. This expedition proved to be a failure. The English army tried to besiege
Rheims in vain and ultimately they had to withdraw. During this unsuccessful siege, Chaucer was taken as a prisoner near Rheims in France but was released after about three months on a small ransom. He returned to England with varied experiences. Thereafter, he was made Squire and personal attendant of this king. Now fortune was favouring him. In 1366 or so, Chaucer’s father died and his mother married someone else. Chaucer himself also entered into wedlock with the sister of the future wife of John of Faunt, Duke of Lancaster. Chaucer wife’s name was Philippa.

Chaucer visited foreign countries on government’s diplomatic missions. In 1372, he visited Genoa and Florence in Italy for the negotiation of commercial treaty with Italy. During this time, he must have come into contact with Italian Literature. He seems to be considerably influenced by Italia men of letters, via Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio Chaucer’s mission to Italy began “the first literary intercourse between England and Italy…. It was the first ray of Renaissance lighting upon an English imagination.” (www.ebooksread.com)

Later on, his diplomatic missions brought him a great deal of knowledge of French culture and art. Chaucer was appointed as Controller of Customs in the Port of London. Chaucer earned a fortune during this period. The accession of Richard III in June 1377 increased Chaucer’s prosperity. He took part in
another mission to France to negotiate Richard’s marriage with the daughter of the French King in the next May, having appointed two friends, one of whom was John Gower the poet, as his agents during his absence. In October 1385, Chaucer was appointed as the Justice of the Peace for Kent and as a Knight of the Shire for the same country in the Parliament.

But this increased importance made him a mark for a bad fortune as well as good. His patron John of Gaunt was now in Spain, the chief place in this government fell to the Duke of Gloucester and with that there came a tide in the fortune of Chaucer. He became the victim of misfortune and in 1386 he fell from high prosperity. He lost his government and powers. He, though, continued receiving his pension regularly. He left for Greenwich located on the way to Canterbury. During this period, he experienced economic crisis and often complained of his empty purse.

But “if winter comes can spring be far behind?” Fortune again smiled on Chaucer in May 1389 when the rein of the English government fell into Richard II’s hands. John of Gaunt returned to England and Chaucer was appointed as a clerk of the King’s works to supervise over royal palaces. Two years later, he was appointed as Deputy Forester of the royal forest of North Petherton and held that position till his death.
Perhaps, the old age of Chaucer was not happy. His wife died much earlier, Chaucer died on 25th of October 1400 and was buried in ‘the poets’ corner’ in Westminster Abbey. In spite of his busy diplomatic life, Chaucer could remain sensitive to the public life, enriched his experience of human nature and made his observation more tenacious. These qualities perhaps have made him a humanist.

2.2 Chaucer’s Literary Career

Chaucer’s works can be divided into three major periods for the sake of convenience: (1) The French Period - from 1355 to 1370 ; (2) The Italian Period - from 1385 onwards; and (3) The English period covering the last fifteen years of Chaucer’s literary career.

(1) The French Period

Chaucer seems to have written under the influence of French literature. His major works during this period are (i) Romaunt of the Rose: Translation of French romantic and allegorical poem and (ii) The Book of the Duchess, written on the death of Blanche, the first wife of Chaucer’s patron, John of Gaunt. The other poems of this period are the Compleyent of Pite a graceful and tender love poem and ABC a translation from a French poem. It originally
is a long devotional poem composed in 1330 by the French poet Guillaume de Deguilleville. Chaucer translated only a small portion of it. It is a prayer to the blessed Virgin.

(2) The Italian Period

The Italian period appears to be more conspicuous so far as his poetic output is concerned. The chief work of this period is *Troilus and Crescyde* which is based on Boccaccio’s *Filostrato*. It is a long poem containing eight thousand lines. In this poem, Trolius, one of the younger sons of Priam, the King of Troy, falls in love with Crescyde, the daughter of Calchas, the priest. Calchas has a fore-knowledge of the victory of the Greeks in the Trojan War. Therefore, he fled Troy and joined the Greeks. Crescyde returns the love of Trolius. Cresseyde is sent to the Greeks as a prisoner where Diomedes falls in love with her. Creysede finally prefers Diomedes to Troilus. Troilus and Diomedes meet in single combat but neither is able to kill the other. Finally Troilus was killed by the Greek hero Achilles. The poem is full of human interest and pathos and full of vivid colours and the sense of beauty.

Another important work is *The Parliament of the Fowls*. It is a political allegory and satire on the parliament. The poem was composed early in Chaucer’s life.
The House of Fame is a poem of 1080 lines composed during the period when he was the controller of customs. The poet visits a temple of Venus in a dream and from there he goes to the House of Fame. Lastly, he visits the house of Rumour. It is a semi allegorical dream fantasy. The poem seems to show the influences of Ovid and Virgil and Dante. The Legend of Good Women is another dream poem in which he praises faithful and virtuous women. The poet tells the story of ten celebrated women in ancient legends. The poem was dedicated to Ann, the Queen of Richard II.

(3) The English Period

Chaucer’s work of this period appears to show the maturity of his genius. He comes out of allegorical romance and dreaminess. Chaucer’s masterpiece The Canterbury Tales is the creation of this period. The framework of these tales seems to recall Boccaccio’s Decameron and the Arabian Nights. In the Decameron, one finds ten lords and ladies who fled away from Florence during the spread of the plague and sought shelter in a garden where each of the members told stories. Chaucer’s indebtedness to these stories appears to be still a debatable point. His Tretis of the Astrolabie was written for his ten year old son. It is a discourse in simple prose explaining the structure of the instrument called an astrolabe which was used for astronomical calculations.
This treatise was written in 1391 and it appears to show the poet’s great interest in astronomy.

Thus, passing through these various periods of apprenticeship, of translation, imitation and adaptation, Chaucer attained maturity as a poet. He acquired perfection in technical skill and craftsmanship. He developed his comic genius and the art of story telling. His *Canterbury Tales* reflect the full flowering of his poetic genius. As a humanist, he appears to have got rid of the fantastic world of romance and dreams and seems to have found his feet on the reality of English society. His final work, *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* seems to display his knowledge of human nature and his genial gift of a born comedian.

### 2.3 Middle Ages

Chaucer’s works belongs to Middle Ages. Certainly the finest and most influential work of fiction to emerge in England from that period we call the Middle Ages. For most literary historians, English literature begins well before Chaucer's greatest poem, but this particular work marks the start of the tradition which is still readily accessible in the original language to the diligent reader, even though Chaucer's Middle English requires the constant help of a glossary. (Ackroyd 89)
The term Middle Ages appears to have been applied by later Renaissance writers and historians to refer to the period falling approximately between the fall of the Roman Empire in 410 AD (when Alaric sacked Rome) and the Renaissance. The arrival of the latter seems to have no clear date and tends to be dated earlier in southern Europe than in the north. A convenient (but somewhat misleadingly precise) date for the arrival of the Renaissance in England might be 1485, the date of the Battle of Bosworth Field, when Richard III, the last of the Plantaganet kings, was defeated and killed by Henry Tudor, thus initiating the reign of the Tudors, which lasted in England until the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603. (79)

The term Middle Ages, like so many historical terms applied to an earlier period, appears to have been deliberately pejorative. There had been a great Classical Period of Greece and Rome, and now there seems to have been the wonderful revival of classical learning, the Renaissance. In between was a period viewed by many Renaissance thinkers such as Luther, Petrarch, Machiavelli, Dante, Erasmus and Montaigne as a time of relatively little achievement (with some exceptions here and there), a time of ignorance, an absence of the invaluable classical inheritance, feudal oppression, and the widespread power of the church. With deliberate contempt, some writers applied the term The Dark Ages to the earlier part of this period (up to about the eleventh century).
In fact, the Middle Ages appear to have been a time of extraordinary vitality. In the first five hundred years of this period, Christianity established itself throughout Europe, developed a complex institutionalized religion capable of governing society at all levels, ministering to the sick, and dealing with judicial disputes; the Church hammering out compromises with secular rulers, an aristocracy derived from the Germanic tribal customs, and placed Europe's economy on a firm agricultural foundation (the work of the monasteries in clearing the land seems to be one of the greatest successes of western labour, an astonishing achievement of the most effective workforce our culture perhaps has ever produced). During this period there appears to have been many fierce (and often bloody) disputes about Christian doctrine, about the relative distribution of power between Church and State, and about the relationship between the Church's immense economic power and its ministry to the poor. Nevertheless, for much of the Middle Ages, life was calm, orderly, stable, and relatively prosperous. If one tends to remember the excesses, like the Black Death and the persecution of heretics and witches (which is more a Renaissance phenomenon, anyway), one should therefore remember that this period established the basis from which were to develop the institutions, customs, and power which increased the amazing expansion of Europe in the Renaissance and afterwards. (Brewer 99)

2.4 Medieval Christianity
The researcher thinks that it would be misleading to think about Middle Ages, especially about the Christiana Church in Middle Ages as something monolithic, homogenous and backward. As generalizations about the Modern Age are baseless, so are the common criticisms levelled at Chaucer. Within the Church, as within the ranks of modern liberal capitalism, there appears to be all sorts of tensions between traditional authoritarian conservatives, radical free thinkers, and communitarians insisting on limiting individual freedom, individualists insisting on more individual freedom, reformers wanting a better deal for the poor and less money for the top bureaucrats, and so on. (Brewer 47) The major work of the Church seems to maintain, in the midst of all these tensions, a workable social community in the thousands of very small agricultural communities throughout Europe, and in this attempt it appears to have been for a long time astonishingly successful. If many of the popes and bishops, like the imperial Caesars, appears to have left behind scandalous records of personal misconduct, nevertheless many seems to have been efficient and caring administrators, and the bureaucracy of the Church could often work extremely well with corruption at the top, because it was staffed by educated and diligent human beings at lower levels.

Thus, it seems to be absolutely misleading to make any sweeping generalizations about some of the aspects of the Middle Ages (as it is about any complex period), because the Middle Ages happened long ago and is always associated with Roman Catholic Christian hierarchy. It therefore, can be easily characterized and summed up with a single pithy insight or slogan.
A much better idea (and this applies to all literature from the past or from cultures different from our own) is to set all such preconceptions aside and to enter the work as if it is describing a culture that one has suddenly come across as one's travels through the forest.

2.5 The Renaissance

The term Renaissance is applied to the period of intellectual and cultural history which succeeded the Middle Ages. Literally, the term refers to the rebirth of classical learning which swept across Italy in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century as old classical manuscripts were rediscovered, edited, translated, and distributed throughout southern Europe, moving slowly northward throughout the fifteenth century. The flight of Greek scholars with the manuscripts toward the West brought into the West, and especially into Italy, what had been lost long ago, the Greek language and literature. The diffusion of such learning accelerated rapidly after the invention of printing in the 1450's.

However, there seems to have been more to the Renaissance than just this scholarly revival. There seems to have been a renewed emphasis on classical humanism, on the view that the good life should not be lived under the constant supervision of the Church within the often limited restrictions of the small community. The increasing interest in exploration, the growing wealth of the
towns, and the rising interest in speculating about the nature of the earth and
the heavens (often supported by ambitious central monarchs growing in power)
all put pressure on the static, traditional, communal model which had been the
social reality of Europe for eight centuries.

Chaucer’s poem was written late in the fourteenth century, in the late Middle
Ages or early Renaissance, depending upon one’s wishes to consider the time.
Certain things about the social conditions of the period are clear from the
picture of society he gives us there. Some important of them are presented here:

First, the Church seems to be still clearly a major part of society. About one
third of the pilgrims going to Canterbury seem to be church officials, and the
entire group is celebrating spring by taking part in a traditional Christian ritual,
the pilgrimage to an important holy shrine. In doing so, they appear to be
giving public testimony to things that are valued in their society and their lives,
just as one would reveal a great deal about one’s social and personal values.
Secondly, while none of the pilgrims comes from the top classes of society, the
aristocracy, many of them appear to be quite rich and sophisticated. In
examining them, one seems to be, for the most part, looking at members of the
middle-class (although the concept of class does not seem to have existed at the
time). Some of them have money, while a few have travelled extensively. They
know about good clothes and books and food. Some ordinary folk have horses.

Finally, there seems to be a sense of rising individualism among them. While
the ideals of the dedication to a traditional Christian communal society seems
to be still clearly there, it is equally evident that for many of these pilgrims, including the Church officials, the sense of a communal duty appears to be eroded by a personal desire for money and the fine things money can buy. In fact, there seems to be a strong sense throughout *The Canterbury Tales* that this money appears to be somehow a threat to something older and more valuable. All of these details seem to suggest a society in transition.

Chaucer, incidentally, appears to have lived before the invention of printing and the widespread diffusion of classical literature into Northern Europe. Thus, although he was well read in French and Italian literature and appears to have drawn heavily upon certain Continental works and traditions, he does not seem to have had access to Greek literature. When he wrote about Troilus and Cressida and the Trojan War, he appears to have been drawing on medieval traditions of this famous story. It appears that he did so without direct knowledge about Greek versions in Homer or the tragedians.

2.6 Medieval Humanism

In fourteenth century England, Chaucer was writing secular poetry. Chaucer’s poetry, though at times told through a Christian narrator, as in the case of *Troilus and Criseyde* (c.1382-5) and *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387), appears to have been very secular in subject matter. (Cawley 8) Secularism seems to be one of the important values of humanism. Appearance of this theme in the
Middle Ages seems to be indicative of medieval humanism, which can be described as a school of thought that placed emphasis on the importance of learning through the Greco-Roman classics. The researcher believes that according to medieval humanism, that is not to say that the presence of secularity indicates the absence of Christianity, for a Christian could adhere to the humanist philosophy without breaking with the church. It is here that the concept of secular humanism and medieval humanism appear to differ from each other. As it has already been discussed in the first chapter, humanism is a non-religious philosophy. It promotes secular values. That is why secular humanism discards religion. Religion doesn’t seem to be at all required for ethical behaviour. Humanists appear to agree with the religious tradition insofar as it supports the idea of the brotherhood of man - but not because God commands it but because moral reflection recognizes that men have responsibilities to other human beings. Each individual seems to be to count as equal in dignity and value, as an end in himself, entitled to moral consideration; that seems to be the basis of the conception of human rights.

Medieval humanism seems to have encouraged the celebration of human life and its accomplishments, as the name might imply, whereas early Christendom promoted anonymity. (Caspari, 1) "The humanists advocated a rational and largely secular education based on the study of Greek and Roman
classics, and from it they expected great benefits to the individual and to society”. (1) The decision to use ancient Rome as a backdrop for a narrative seems to have been a humanistic one in Troilus. The Roman Empire's influence seems to permeate Occidental thinking in what was maintained through them of the Greek ideals, Homer, and Plato. Mr. Hadas rightly observes this phenomenon:

What the world has admired in the Greeks is
the remarkably high level of their originality
and achievements, and this high level premises
a deeply held conviction of the importance of
individual attainment. (Hadas, 13).

The desire to study the Greco-Roman concepts seems to be, in essence, anthropocentric. In Humanism: The Greek Ideal and its Survival by Moses Hadas, it is pointed out that not long ago Abraham was seen as start of religious history and Homer the root of secular history; only now are we aware of their close proximity in the scheme of things (Hadas 15-16). That being said, one should not entirely dichotomize the influence of the two; the traditions of Abraham and Homer surely exist as two merged rivers. With the Church's control over education waning, the stage appears to have been the last frontier for worldly subject matter, a return to that thread of Homer.
The term "medieval humanism" exists, as Daniel Wakelin points out in his book *Humanism, Reading, and English Literature: 1430-1530*, because "humanism" is usually considered to be a product of the Renaissance, and there has been much debate as to whether or not the secular themes present in Chaucer and his contemporaries exhibits traits that define true humanism (Wakelin, 6). In fact, there is much debate as to where the Middle Ages end and the Renaissance begins.

Is one noble who comes from noble blood, or does one's actions decide their nobility regardless of heritage? The answer differs in the modern age from that of many of Chaucer’s contemporaries and predecessors. The growing flexibility of social status in the late Middle Ages encouraged the revival of a debate on the criteria for nobility. In Chaucer's day, with the infamous bubonic plague's damage done, and the Great Revolt of 1381 waged, the depleted population made room for upward motion for the classes. Du Boulay comments:

> The fundamental distinction in English society was between those who were gentiles and those who were not. (Du Boulay 334)

Medieval Europe's social flexibility is obviously too vast to go into here, as well as the complete history of nobleness and humanism. Wife of Bathe seems
to be able to publicly speak because men grant it. Perhaps, however, they represent a diminishment of misogyny, for when given the chance to speak they prove their quality. This diminishment appears to be tied to medieval humanism because these women are demonstrating crafted oration. Fritz Caspari maintains that, via Cicero, a Greek ideal had a powerful influence on the early English humanists, viz.; "in order to be able to take part in political affairs, a man had to be an orator, and only the philosophically educated, virtuous man could be a good orator" (Caspari, 22). What then can be said of a woman who is a good orator? One who is good enough to be a judge?

In Chaucer's *The Wife of Bathe's Tale* one receives a definition of nobility through the lips of the Wife of Bathe. Wife of Bathe said that rather than looking to those descending from wealth for example of nobleness, you should instead "[l]oke who that is most virtuous always" (Pollard 111). The Wife of Bathe points out that Dante could help her prove that nobility does not appear in the individual thanks to the family tree, that "[y]et may [our parents] nat biquethe, for no thing, / To noon of us hir virtuous living" (112). Invoking Dante, Chaucer's adroit knack for borrowing from Italy comes to mind. Both, the Wife of Bathe's heroine and Lucre, decide that blood has little to do with one's worth, which to our modern perspective probably does not sound as radical as the claim might have been in medieval Europe (Wright 13)
2.7 HUMAN EQUALITY

It appears that the term humanism did not exist at all in Chaucer’s time but in all his works many aspects of the philosophy of humanism is discernible. Like a humanist, Chaucer appears to affirm the value of human being and also seems to emphasize the dignity and equality of all human beings of the world. He advocates the supremacy of reason and logic and questions the authority of religious scriptures clergies and so on. In his *Canterbury Tales* the following three qualities are quite evident: 1) Human equality 2) Opposition to irrational conflicts and 3) Religious skepticism.

Chaucer seems to profess the mankind’s equality. In this regard, Dryden’s following remark throws much light:

> I see all the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*, their humours, their features, and their very dress as distinctly as if I had supped with them at the Tabard in Southwark. He must have been a man of a most wonderful comprehensive nature, because he has taken into the compass of his *Canterbury Tales* the very manners and humours of the whole English nation in his age. Not a single character has escaped him. (Saunders 34)
Humanist Manifesto III states that Humanists are concerned for the well being of all, are committed to diversity, and respect those of differing yet humane views. (www.americanhumanist.org) This very concept of equality begins right in the Prologue, with the three most important social classes: the feudal, religious, and rising middle class. Chaucer selected a large number of representatives of contemporary society. In his time, the clergy were relatively far more numerous that they are today. The Oxford Clerk, the Summoner, and the Pardoner would, for example, all be in minor orders. Thus, there seem to be eight representatives of the clergy and excluding Chaucer himself, nineteen laymen, seven of whom are countrymen, eleven townsmen, and a sailor. The countrymen range from the Knight and his son the Squire to the Reeve and the Plowman. Of the town-dwellers, there are five wealthy Guildsmen, a merchant, a business-woman, and two professional men, i.e. a lawyer and a doctor. Three of the pilgrims are women: The Prioress, her Nun, and the Wife of Bath, who is also something of a professional pilgrim, having visited a large number of shrines.

Hence, it appears that most of the pilgrims do not belong to the feudal class, in each class; there are an equal proportion of virtuous, in-between, and outright sinful characters. For instance, in the feudal class, the Knight is clearly the paragon of virtue. Following him are the Squire and the Yeoman, both of
whom, although flawed, are not pure evil. Then comes Franklin - a gluttonous and greedy character abundant with sin who juxtaposes very starkly with the Knight. This proportion of good to flawed to sinful personages seems to be also balanced in the church and the bourgeoisie. The bard appears to be essentially stating that every class is equal in its percentage of good and bad people, that no class is more virtuous than the other. To reinforce this notion of equality amongst the classes, no character seems to be treated differently from the other. The Knight, who is clearly the most noble and well-bred of the pilgrims, does not seem to be treated more favorably. He too has to tell a tale and is judged according to the same standards. The Miller even goes on to mock “The Knight’s Tale” instead of honoring it as it comes from a noble knight.

It seems to be inaccurate to call Chaucer a feminist, but he seems to hold a much more moderate view of women than his contemporaries. Chaucer seems heavily to mock and satirize the Wife of Bath, an ardent feminist who believes that women should control of men. Yet, at the same time, Chaucer also criticizes Griselda, a wife so faithful she would do anything her husband tells her. Following the Oxford Clerk’s Tale, Chaucer offers his own commentary: “Arch-wives... Don’t swallow insults, offer the instead...And all you slender little wives... Be fierce as Indian tigers...” (Chaucer 355). It seems a
little out of character for Chaucer to say this, since he criticizes the Wife of Bath so fiercely. But, if the bard means what he says, then he definitely seems to hold a more feminist view. In his envoy, he appears to advocate that arch-wives, who are masculine and strong like the Wife of Bath, insult their husbands. Additionally, he seems to tell the weaker and slender wives to be ferocious as tigers, which heavily juxtaposes with Griselda. This shows that although Chaucer isn’t a fervent feminist, but as a humanist he seems to feel that women should not be weak like Griselda. Through his tales and descriptions, this great storyteller upholds the Humanist belief of human equality.

2.8 Opposition to Irrational Conflicts

By upholding the human being’s dignity, humanists also seem to have pacifist tendencies. Just as it seems to be inaccurate to call Chaucer a feminist, it appears to be equally inaccurate to call Chaucer a pacifist. Some of his most positive characters, such as the Knight or Theseus, are warriors. Instead of opposing all war, Chaucer seems to oppose unnecessary conflicts. This is shown in Theseus, who, when stumbling upon the two antagonistic brothers, forbids them from fighting. Later, the king organizes a widely-praised tournament that does not involve death. Chaucer seems to insinuate that when
death is unnecessary, such as when fighting for a woman, conflict should be minimized.

Since Chaucer probably isn’t a pacifist, there seem to be cases when war or conflict is acceptable. War seems to be acceptable to Chaucer if it is fought to uphold human dignity or virtue. He illustrates this in *The Knight’s Tale* when Theseus wages war on Creon: “And swore on oath that as he was a true knight… he would take vengeance on this tyrant King.” (Robinson, 29) Theseus, the quintessential epic hero, wages war because Creon dishonors a few women. Essentially, he fights to preserve human dignity and honor, both of which are humanist value. Contemporary humanists wouldn’t approve of going to war for honor’s sake, but one should keep in mind that this is a different time period. The Knight, like the characters in his tales, also wages war for honorable causes: “When we took Alexandria, he was there… In Lithuania he had ridden… North Africa, raiding Benamarin… In Anatolia he had been as well…” (14). Alexandria. Lithuania. North Africa. Anatolia. Exactly what wars would be these? These seem to be all wars fought for religious reasons. Alexandria, Anatolia, and North Africa are all part of the Crusades, and Lithuania is an Eastern Orthodox country. Engaging in crusades seems to be considered a virtuous task and it appears that for Chaucer, it is an acceptable reason to fight.
According to humanism, arguments could be settled with educated dialogue rather than resorting to violence; the learned could use reason and virtue rather than lance and sword. Yet, Chaucer still appears to hold an overall negative view of war. His dark and scathing description of Mars, the warrior god, seems to leave little doubt about Chaucer’s general beliefs. Darkness, death, and slaughter, coupled with burning ships, leveled cities, and bloodthirsty butchers appear to decorate Mars’s palace. Although all the gods seem to have balanced negative elements, Mars seems to have the most. Chaucer approves of certain battles, but still seems to disapprove of conflict for the most part. Here it appears that Chaucer like Late-20th-century secular humanists (especially those in Humanist Manifesto II) seems to maintain an additional moral principle: our responsibility to humankind as a whole. But waging war is not the final solution. Given modern technology and intercommunication, one world is a reality for contemporary man. Thus humanists appear to seek to improve human existence, but they wish to do so by democratic methods of persuasion, tolerance, negotiation, and compromise (instead of revolutionary violence or class warfare). To a greater extent, Chaucer appears to have a humanistic standpoint in regard to irrational conflict.

Like fellow Humanists, the bard seems to be also sceptical of organized religion. Humanists seem to recognize that authority has its own agenda, and who has more authority than the church? Non-religious characters affiliated
with religion are plentiful in *The Canterbury Tales*. This only seems to be sufficient to earn the epithet “Chaucer is a humanist”. Beginning with the Nun, the researcher sees a woman more concerned with acting ladylike than pious. Following her is the Monk, who, instead of studying and praying, hunts. Yet, hunting is a rich man’s sport. Therefore, like the nun, he too is infatuated with riches. Then comes an even worse fellow, the Friar. He gives pocket knives to little girls and indulges in understated lecherous acts. Just when things can’t seem to get worse, the researcher meets the Pardoner, a most pernicious fellow:

“But let me briefly make my purpose plain/ I preach for nothing but for greed of gain” (Coghill 261). He explicitly states himself that he is filled with avarice and gluttony. He uses religion as a tool to gain money by cheating his followers. He sells false relics with only money in mind. He appears the be the exact reason why the church cannot be trusted.

In the midst of all this evil, the Parson is a beacon of light. He teaches *the Gospel* wholeheartedly and honestly, hoping only to help others reach Christ. He gives to the poor all he can and watches over them like a shepherd. He is humble and quiet and loathes swearing. Being a simple pardoner, this virtuous man has little authority. Evidently, through his wide variety of characters, Chaucer seems to teach his readers not to blindly trust authority, particularly religious authority.

Chaucer is not the first Humanist, but he is definitely one of the first. His use of varying tones from character to character and tale to tale, his in-depth
descriptions, his witty and humorous application of satire, his style of delineating characters and their development, and his experimentation with different genres appear to make him all the more prolific. At the same time, they make him all the more Humanistic, for it is through his literary voice that he makes known his Humanism. It is only during the Renaissance that Humanism becomes a concrete philosophy i.e. fully developed philosophy, but, as usual, Chaucer seems to be ahead of his time. Even without this storyteller, Humanism would still exist today. But, without doubt, it certainly wouldn’t be anything like it is.

2.9 Ecclesiastical Criticism

Humanism seems to be critical of traditional religions and religious ideologies; on the other hand, humanism is portrayed as a modern, philosophical replacement for religion. Humanists seem to critique religious dogmas, religious violence, religious history, and the belief in the supernatural common to so many religious systems. Hence, it is easy, then, to regard the relationship between religion and humanism as fundamentally antagonistic. The Canterbury Tales is a harsh critique of certain aspects of the Catholic Church. Chaucer exposed and implicitly condemned the corrupt practices of many church officials with impunity. Chaucer's work The Canterbury Tales seems to be a prime example of his close observation and subtle understanding of the institution of the Church. Chaucer appears to have been generally less polemical than Kabir and less prophetic then Langland, and his attack on vice
The idea was to keep people laughing so that they would take to the criticism more willingly. The tales that manifest Chaucer's critique the most effectively are *The Friar's Tale*, *The Summoner's Tale*, and *The Pardoner's Tale*. In all three of these stories, the characters are corrupt church officials revealing their true natures and their greed by taking advantage of the common folk they are bound to serve. These tales seem to display, “religion made a business,” (Condren 1) the distortion of the institution of the Church that Chaucer was strongly condemning. *The Friar's Tale*, told by the Friar, relates the story of a corrupt summoner, while conversely, *The Summoner's Tale*, told by the Summoner, tells the story of a corrupt friar. The Friar appears to create in his tale a summoner who seems to act with all the naked greed and hardhearted tenacity that often characterized summoners in Chaucer's day, only to be answered by the Summoner's creation of a frère who relies first on strained textual interpretations and later, in frustration, on tenacious greed, in the manner of many a late-fourteenth century friar. (113)

Chaucer uses *The Friar's Tale* and *The Summoner's Tale*, as back-to-back satirical commentary on the Church and its officials. He lightens the accusation by having the two characters insult each other's positions in the Church. By creating a rivalry between the two, he adds comic relief to a harsh
view of corrupt church authorities. In *The Friar's Tale*, a summoner is going about his religious duties which he performs in such a way as to make them nothing short of blackmail and extortion. He accuses certain people of sins they have not committed and they bribe him in order to keep him from summoning them before the ecclesiastical courts. Out on business one day, he meets a fiend from Hell who he believes is a yeoman. He describes his trade to the alleged yeoman but lies,

> Why then you are a bailiff?’ ‘Yes,’ said he. / He
did not dare, for very filth and shame, / Say

that he was a summoner (312).

He then asks the Stranger to tell him what he does for a living. The Stranger informs him that he does exactly what the Summoner does. Chaucer boldly makes a direct comparison between a church official and a fiend from Hell:

> I am a fiend, my dwelling is in Hell:

> I ride on business and have so far thriven

> By taking anything that I am given.

> That is the sum of all my revenue.

> You seem to have the same objective too,

> You're out for wealth, acquired no matter how,
And so with me. (313)

The fiend tells the summoner that he has the ability to take whatever or whoever people curse. After he relates this strange power, a woman becomes angry with the summoner for wrongly accusing her of sin and exclaims, “‘The devil,’ she said, 'can carry him away’” (318). The fiend then takes the Summoner to Hell:

And on the word this foul fiend made a swoop
And dragged him, body and soul, to join the
troupe / In Hell, where summoners have their
special shelf. (318)

Chaucer's description of this despicable character seems to be humorous but also thoroughly negative. “He was a thief, a summoner, and a pimp” (311). The Summoner is compared to the lowest members of society, and also to the lowest of the otherworldly creatures, a fiend from Hell. Chaucer's point is quite clear: this was not how a summoner was intended by the Church to act. The Summoner, not to be outdone by the Friar, in his narrative, The Summoner's Tale, tells an equally appalling story about a friar who abuses his authority over the common people. He begins in his prologue by describing the designated place for friars in Hell as Satan's “arse”:

“Satan,” the angel said, “has got a tail
As broad or broader than a carrack sail.

Hold up thy tail, thou Satan!” then said he,

“Show forth thine arse and let the friar see

The nest ordained for friars in this place!”

Ere the tail rose a furlong into space

From underneath it there began to drive,

Much as if bees were swarming from a hive,

Some twenty thousand friars in a rout

And swarmed all over Hell and round about,

And then came back as fast as they could run

And crept into his arse again, each one. (320)

This prologue, while crude in nature, is a humorous attack on the character of friars as a group. It serves to succinctly make Chaucer's point clear while keeping his readers laughing simultaneously.

As Thomas Speght, one of Chaucer's first editors and biographers puts it, the tales exemplify 'the state of the Church, the Court and the Country, with such arte and cunning, that although none could deny himself to be touched, yet
none durst complaine that he was wronged'. (Ackroyd 157) This off-color humor is one technique of Chaucer for distancing himself from his critique. It allowed Chaucer to critique friars in general without necessarily offending them personally. Ames argues:

In the story which follows, the Summoner, with the subtle cunning of Chaucer, gives friars high marks for zeal, business acumen, hypocrisy, vainglory, and manipulation of women (Ames 45).

After his brief tirade in the prologue, the Summoner launches into his longer tale in which he describes a friar in Yorkshire selling, for personal gain, trentals which were “an office of thirty masses for the souls of those in Purgatory” (Coghill 515) The Friar would give a sermon, and after he had effectively fired up the congregation, he would exploit their emotions in order to make money:

When he had preached in church, and cast his spell / With one main object, far above the rest, To fire his congregation with a zest / For buying trentals, and for Jesu's sake / To give the wherewithal for friars to make / Their holy houses. (320-321)
He would ask them for donations to save their dearly departed friends from Purgatory, and then he would pocket their money. According to Ames:

What especially irked Chaucer was that the worldly success of the friars was ensured by their hypocritical protestations of imitating the unworldliness of their founder. He portrays them preying on the gullible piety of the laity and glorying in the status which they disclaim,

(Ames 45)

Once the Friar has exploited this group of people, he then goes through the town begging for food. He writes down the names of the people who feed him promising to pray for them to thank them for their kindness, but:

Once out of doors again and business done /
He used to plane the names out, every one, /
That he had written on his ivory tables. / He'd served them all with fairy-tales and fables....

(Coghill 322)

Next, the Friar can not help attempting to take advantage of a sick man for his own monetary gain. During this part of the tale, the Friar's hypocrisy is made particularly clear to the reader:
Whoever prays must fast, he must keep clean,

Fatten his soul and make his body lean.

We follow the Apostle; clothes and food

Suffice us though they may be rough and rude,

Our purity and fasting have sufficed

To make our prayers acceptable to Christ. (325)

He has just been begging for food from the townsfolk, not fasting, and he has not yet truly prayed for anyone. The sick man, Thomas, sees through the Friar’s act and becomes angry. He tells the Friar that he does have something he can have but he must promise to share his gains with the other friars, twelve in all. The Friar agrees straightaway expecting a large sum of money. Thomas tells the Friar that he has hidden the money with him in the bed, and when the Friar reaches under him to get it the man farts in his hand:

       When the sick man could feel him here and
       there / Groping about his fundament with care,
       Into that friar's hand he blew a fart. (332)

The Friar has been characterized in such a way that the reader feels this action is warranted.
2.11 Chaucer’s Humanism- An Overview

As it was mentioned earlier, humanism seems to have been the outcome of the Renaissance. Chaucer lived in the time when the seeds of Renaissance were first sprouting in Italy. It looks that Chaucer in all his works seems to have a desire to teach man to reaffirm his faith in human life and human values. Hence, he changes the basic religious outlook of the West. Chaucer’s protagonists are revolutionary in their thinking. They instead of concentrating their attention on God and attainment of salvation, appear to have developed their interest in human values and sympathy for humankind. For Chaucer, human life and human values are greater than rigid and senseless religious and social codes. Chaucer seems to question strict religious discipline and self denial and heavenly Jerusalem. Wife of Bath appears to be a supreme of example of this. She seems to be a humanist. She seems to think that when the earth is so beautiful why bother about the hereafter. It is said, “While Italy was, on fire with the new sunrise, it was still for England merely a steak of light upon the horizon,” (337)and that light seems to flash in the works of Chaucer.

Chaucer’s visit to Italy in 1372 on a diplomatic mission seems to have given him a taste of the new outlook and the splendour of intellectual twilight in the
middle ages, The pioneers of the Renaissance were the Italian writers, Petrarch (1304-74) and Boccaccio (1313-75). It was through their works that the influence of humanism spread in England. When Chaucer visited Italy, Petrarch, the great accomplished, scholar and elegant poet, was passing his closing years at his villa of Arqua, near Padua, Boccaccio, the poet, tale writer, and pedant was spending the autumn of his life among the cypress and laurel slopes of Fiesole above Florence. The world which lay open to Chaucer’s gaze when he crossed the Alps, therefore, was calculated to fascinate and stimulate him in the highest degree.

Chaucer’s Prologue appears to reflect the influence of new learning. The inclination for new learning appears to be a typical feature of humanism. Chaucer himself is considered to be ‘the morning star’ of the Renaissance. He has represented people’s interest in the new learning through his character the Clerk of Oxford. The Clerk is a devoted student who at his bed head keeps “Twenty books, clad in black or reed of Aristotle and his philosophie.” (Pollard 5)

Chaucer seems to have been more influenced by the secular aspect of humanism than by its scholarly and stylistic aspects. That is why Kabir and Wordsworth can be compared with him. They are having the similar bents on
humanism. In all his works, it appears that Chaucer seems to be interested in human beings and human life. As a true humanist, he does not appear to care much for religious ideals. He seems to juxtapose the religious ideals with humanist values simply to highlight the futility of religiosity. Chaucer appears to highlight the importance of human tolerance. Chaucer seems to believe that good and evil co-exist in this world. Therefore he never seems to show any disdain for the evils and contempt for the rascals. He seems to have painted good, virtuous and roguish characters in the Prologue who rub shoulders in this pilgrimage. It is here one can come to know about Chaucer’s staunch humanism. All are human beings. It is human to be good or evil. Therefore Chaucer seems to have sympathy for all and hatred for none. An ideal of example of humanism in Chaucer is that his virtuous person does not seem to prefer to excommunicate the poor person who is not in a position to pay his tithes. It may look surprising to anyone that Chaucer never assaulted the corrupt clergy as Wycliff did but denounced them in a good humoured way. This does not seem only a humanistic stance but also a very effective and ideal way to enlighten the readers to make them aware about human follies. He seems to have depicted rogues and rascals like the Friar, the Pardoner, and the Summoner. He has also painted virtuous and ideal character like the Knight, the Clerk of Oxford and the Poor Parson of the town. He does not seem to have reformist’s zeal like Langland, Kabir, Taslima Nasreen and Akho. He seems to have kindly tolerance even for the wicked and the deprived. He
never seems to pose himself like Hamlet and say. “The time is out of joints, O cursed spites that ever I was born to set it right!” (Shakespeare 17) Chaucer never seems to have raised his eyebrows with indignation at the shocking state of the religious order but simply laughed at what existed then. But this humourous presentation itself seems to make him a great humanist.
References


http://www.americanhumanist.org/humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II

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