

Rhetoric and Hidden Criticisms in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

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The art of rhetoric relies on the strategic manipulation of language with the objective of persuading the reader to view a subject or an individual from a specific perspective. In the General Prologue to Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the narrator clearly defines some characters as scoundrels who are not worthy of praise while commending those who are genuine and sincere, but also praises other characters who, in reality, should be criticized. Through the rhetorical techniques of diction, exaggeration, and the intentional absence of critical character traits, Chaucer employs these literary devices to indicate that the reader must be constantly wary of possible bias and that we cannot rely on the narrator's opinion as fact. The techniques embedded in the descriptions of the Summoner and the Prioress and the overall absence of these techniques in the description of the Parson, together with the deliberate praising of the unworthy, imply an underlying criticism of the corruption seen in the members of the Church.

When describing an individual's physical appearance in order to reveal his or her personality, word choice is vital in influencing the reader's opinion of the character portrayed. A good example of this is the Summoner: one of the scoundrel pilgrims whom the narrator is clearly not fond of. The narrator describes the Summoner's face as "fir-reed" (626) and "saucefleem" (627). In other words, he has a fire-red face full of pimples. With such a "scale[y]" (629) and scabby face, the children are obviously "aferd" (630) of him. By using negatively regarded terms to describe the Summoner's appearance, the narrator likens him to a monster whose face is grotesque and scares children away. Alternatively, this physical "corruption" can be read as an allegorical manifestation of the Summoner's spiritual corruption, as it is revealed that the Summoner is known to turn a blind eye for those who commit spiritual crimes if they have the money to pay him. However, if we look at the word choice used in the description of the Prioress, a dramatic shift of tone is evident. By using key words like "plesant" (138) and "simple and coy" (119), the narrator prompts the reader to view the Prioress as dainty and ladylike: a polar opposite to the Summoner. We are positioned to see the Summoner as the human embodiment of bad whereas the Prioress is the good, even if that may not be the case. The narrator's description of the Prioress also

shows Chaucer's rhetorical use of exaggeration and lavish praise as a hint at the narrator's bias. The Prioress is not *just* "simple and coy," as stated previously, but she is "*ful* simple and coy" (118). In fact, she is "*ful* pleasant" (138) and "*so* charitable and *so* pitous" (143) as well. Mesmerized by the Prioress, the narrator cannot be relied on for a concrete and objective description as he is in awe of her. Alternatively, this overcompensation could also be interpreted as a distraction: perhaps the narrator is focusing on praising these traits to distract the reader from noticing what is missing from the description.

Besides analyzing the techniques embedded in the text, another powerful form of rhetoric lies in what is intentionally *left out* of a text. Firstly, it is essential that we discuss what roles the pilgrims would have filled in the Middle Ages, and then compare what we are expecting versus what is given in the text. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, a Prioress is the female counterpart of the Prior in a Priory. The Prioress is the "superior nun," otherwise known as the "Mother Superior," governing her own "religious house" ("Prioress"). This ecclesiastical role indicates that the Prioress should be a devout woman with unwavering faith in God. As Mother Superior and leader of her own convent, this requires a certain personality—the Prioress is in charge of taking care of the women in her house; therefore, she should be strong-willed and certainly well-disciplined. Yet while the text provides plenty of praise of the Prioress's etiquette and table manners as "she leet no morsel from hir lippes falle" (128) when she ate, there seems to be no evidence of her faith or love of God. She does have "a paire of bedes" (159), which would likely be her rosary beads, but they are made of "coral" (158) and "gauded all with greene" (159). The main purpose of a rosary is for nuns to pass through their daily prayers, but the Prioress uses it as a fashionable bracelet: a superior nun should not be concerned with fashion and trends. We also find out that she "wolde weepe" (144) if she saw a mouse dead in a trap—clearly not our idea of a strong-willed and well-disciplined woman. The narrator states that she is charitable, as an ideal selfless nun should be, but he only confirms her generosity through the nurturing of her lap-dogs, not of the poor. With her gaudy "brooch of gold" (160) and her spoiled "houndes" (146), she does not fit the role of a selfless Mother Superior at all. The over-the-top praise of the unworthy Prioress solidifies the sometimes unreliable nature of the narrator's opinion. This warns the reader that one should be cautious not to blindly accept the narrator's judgement as fact.

At this point in the text, the reader can no longer credit the narrator's judgement. But as the narrator reaches the character of the Parson, we will see that the Parson is one of only two pilgrims who seem sincere.

By definition, a Parson is a clergyman “within the parish” (“Parson”) responsible for handling tithes, much like a rector, but his main responsibility is the “care of souls” by looking after the spiritual well-being of his parishioners. The key aspect in regard to the description of the Parson is that there are no signs of the rhetorical techniques that are used in the descriptions of other pilgrims. There are no choice words that compare him to a monster or a saint, and, instead of lavish praise, the narrator refers to the Parson as simply “a good man” (479). However, the word “ensample” (498) is used numerous times in reference to setting a good example and perhaps to suggest that the way the Parson behaves is as all members of the clergy and the Church should behave. The Parson leads a “poore” life without material wealth or avarice (480) and follows the word of God each day—not only does he teach the parishioners “devoutly” (484) and does not act scornfully to “sinful men” (518), but he lives by the word of God himself. He observes the commandments and lives as a “good” Christian (479). By repeatedly referring to him as the prime example of a religious man, Chaucer directs his criticisms of the institution through the character of the Parson. We see the underlying criticism of the corrupt members of the Church, like the Prioress and the Summoner, peek through during the Parson’s description:

Out of the Gospel he tho words caughte,
And this figure he added eek thereto:
That is gold ruste, what shal iren do?
For a preest be foul, on whom we truste,
No wonder is a lewed man to ruste.
(500-504)

The Parson is fully aware that there are some golden members of the Church who are corrupt and “rusted”; however, this only fuels his drive to remain an honest man and pray that the people will not follow those who are tarnished and who will lead them down the path of corruption.

Through the clever use of rhetorical techniques like word choice, hyperbole, and intentional absences, Chaucer is able to position the reader to experience the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* through the biased point of view of the narrator. This enables the reader to question why crucial pieces of character development are missing, why some unnecessary traits are elaborated on, and what implications we are left with when we compare our expectations of a certain character with what is presented in the text.

Works Cited

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