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### How Chaucer Uses Contrast to Create a Pious Parson

Throughout the “General Prologue” to *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer describes characters who are both exemplary and immoral. On the surface, the narrator seems to describe everyone on the pilgrimage in an overtly positive way. However, closer analysis of these descriptions reveals that many of them are satiric, pointing out flaws rather than ignoring (or glorifying) them. In some character descriptions, like that of the Parson, Chaucer uses a technique which genuinely seems to uplift rather than denigrate his character. Nevertheless, it is often difficult to distinguish this type of honest description from one that is satirical. By focusing on Chaucer’s use of contrast throughout his description of the Parson, and in comparison to other clergymen, one can see how the character is truly exemplary. Chaucer’s use of contrast here also provides a model for reading the “General Prologue” and a key for understanding the satire of his descriptions.

Chaucer’s depiction of the Parson is noteworthy for its indirect method. Rather than offer an unambiguously exemplary description (as he had with the Knight), Chaucer offers possible ways for the Parson to be corrupt and then contrasts this possible corruption with actual piety. For example, the reader learns of the Parson that “Wid was his parissch, and houses fer asonder” (l. 493). By letting readers know the vast expanse the Parson’s parish covers, Chaucer is offering an excuse for the Parson to neglect some members. However, readers soon learn that “he ne lafte nought for rain ne thonder, / In

siknesse nor in meschief, to visite, / The ferreste in his parisshe, muche and lite” (ll. 494-496). Chaucer shows that despite the size of his parish, the Parson visits all its members—even in thunderstorms or during a sickness. Another way Chaucer accomplishes this is by showing the Parson’s disregard of wealth. Although the Parson is poor, he does not curse his parishioners for failure to pay their tithes, “But rather would he yiven, out of doute, / Unto his poore parisshe aboute / Of his offring and eek of his substaunce” (ll. 489-491). Chaucer could use poverty as an excuse for the Parson to hoard what he has and demand a tenth of his parishioners’ income. But instead he shows the Parson to be freely giving despite his financial status. Because members of the church are expected to be both moral and giving, any deviation from these traits would show the description to be satirical. Instead, Chaucer’s use of contrasts reveals the Parson’s piousness despite his opportunities for corruption.

This series of internal contrasts encourages the reader to contrast the Parson externally with other clergy members in the “General Prologue.” For example, Chaucer depicts the Monk as riding on horseback, hunting, and adorned with gold and fur-lined clothing. The Parson, by contrast, is seen visiting his parishioners “Upon his feet, and in his hand a staf” (l. 497). This contrasting image of two clergymen allows readers to see that the Parson succeeds in the Monk’s failure. The Parson is more concerned with simple living and aiding his parishioners than personal enjoyment and appearance. Another member of the church who Chaucer contrasts with the Parson is the Friar. As shown above, the Parson cares little for money, including the tithes due to the church. The Friar, on the other hand, believes that “in stede of weeping and prayeres, / Men mote yive silver to the poore freres” (ll. 231-232). Chaucer shows that the Friar is more

concerned with getting money than hearing the problems and pain of those he hears confession from. By showing corruption evident in other members of the church and then describing the Parson, who has opportunities to be corrupt but nevertheless is not, Chaucer forces a contrasting view of the clergymen. This method encourages the reader to search for other contrasts within the “General Prologue” as a means of identifying satiric portrayals and commentary.

The genius of the “General Prologue” to *The Canterbury Tales* lies in its complex narrative structure and its sophisticated use of irony. One of these narrative strategies, Chaucer’s use of contrast, helps shed light on the Parson’s characterization. By contrasting possible avenues of corruption with the Parson’s true path, and corrupt members of the clergy with the Parson’s probity, Chaucer creates a truly exemplary Parson. Although it can be difficult to distinguish what is satire from what is straight, contrast gives us a new key that can be used to analyze character descriptions and decipher some of the satiric ambiguities in Chaucer’s “General Prologue.”