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CRITICAL APPROACHES

CHARACTERISATION

We cannot judge the characters Chaucer creates in *The Pardoner's Tale* by the same standards we would employ to assess protagonists in a modern work of fiction. In the Middle Ages the works of fiction that existed often treated characters as **allegorical** figures: they **personified** ideas such as 'Virtue' or 'Innocence'. Death personified was a major figure of this general type. These were symbolic figures, not intended to represent complex fictional human characters. Other types were derived from folk traditions or classical tales. These were often defined almost entirely by their role in a story: the revenger, the hero, the honest man, the corrupt official, for example. Other characters were the 'stock' figures from a popular type of story known as **estate satires**. These featured variations of a standard and recognised cast defined by their employment and social standing. The **genre** was **satirical** insofar as these characters always embodied failings, and estate satires were built around these.

The degree to which Chaucer depicted recognisable everyday people was unique in the literature of the Middle Ages. The vividness of his characters, especially their voices when they speak directly within the poetry of *The Canterbury Tales*, is often regarded as the work's most enduring quality. Chaucer is more than a satirist, although some of the characters in *The Canterbury Tales*, for example the Friar who loves the good life more than prayer, could be drawn from estate satires. His stories contain or imply moral dimensions, but again the range and complexity of his characterisation shows that he is much more than a moralist using allegorical figures to expound moral themes. One of Chaucer's greatest achievements is his range of characters in *The Canterbury Tales*. They show him to be a brilliant and genial observer of humanity in all its goodness and badness, glory and folly.

THE PARDONER

There is only one figure that we would regard as a fully-developed character in *The Pardoner's Tale:* the eponymous Pardoner himself. We learn a great deal about him, mostly from his own 'confessions' but also from Chaucer, standing back as an observer. He does this chiefly through his description of the Pardoner in *The General Prologue*. We also gain some understanding of the Pardoner from remarks made to him by other pilgrims. Critics regard the Pardoner as the most complex and fully realised character in all of *The Canterbury Tales* (see **Part Four: Critical perspectives**).

The voice of the Pardoner – loud, upbeat, **rhetorically** confident and unabashed – sings out from every line of his Tale. He is sure of everything he says and convinced that he has the skill to hold an audience with his personal confession, **sermonising** and storytelling. He is confident that he will always create the effect upon them that he intends (which is why he is so shocked at the Host's outburst at the end of the Tale).

The Pardoner explains to the pilgrims with brazen honesty what he does and why. He cheats simple country parsons and their congregations because he wants their money to fund a comfortable life for himself. No detailed motivation for this is provided, as we might expect from a character in a modern novel. A modern novelist might for example reveal that the Pardoner grew up in poverty next to a cathedral where clergymen lived lives of plenty and this made him angry and determined to revenge himself on religion. Background information like this might even make us feel sympathy for the Pardoner. But such detail does not fit with either the cultural context of *The Canterbury Tales* or the Pardoner's character – he does not feel the need to justify himself to the pilgrims. In contrast to medieval verse narratives and dramas, revenge tragedies, a genre of dramatic writing that reached its height in the Elizabethan theatre, operated on the notion of a wrong needing to be righted. Although these plays were written two centuries after Chaucer in a more sophisticated literary context, their protagonists were generally driven by much simpler motives than any we could imagine for the complex character of the Pardoner.

Historical Background	Chaucer's Life	Literary Background
	1343 or 4 Birth of Geoffrey Chaucer in London	**1341** Petrarch crowned as laureate poet in the Capitol, Rome
1346 French routed at Crecy by Edward III and his son the Black Prince		
1349 Black Death reaches England and kills one third of the population		
		c. 1350 *Mary Magdalen*, Saints play
1351 First Statute of Labourers regulates wages in England		
		1353 In Italy, Giovanni Boccaccio finishes his *Decameron*, a collection of a hundred tales
1356 English defeat the French at Poitiers		
	1357 Chaucer in the service of the Countess of Ulster, wife of Prince Lionel, third son of Edward III	
1359 Edward III makes unsuccessful bid for French throne	**1359** Serves in the army in France, under Prince Lionel; taken prisoner	
1360 France cedes a number of territories to England	**1360** Edward III pays ransom of £16 for Chaucer's freedom	

Historical Background	Chaucer's Life	Literary Background
1361 Black Death reappears in England		
1362 English becomes official language in Parliament and the Law Courts		
		1363 Birth of Christine de Pisan, French author of *La Cité des Dames*, listing all the heroic acts and virtues of woman
	1366 Marries Philippa Pan (or Payne) Roet; in Spain on a diplomatic mission	
	1367 Granted life pension for his services to the king; birth of his son Thomas; begins travelling abroad on the king's business	
	1368 On Prince Lionel's death, his services transferred to John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster	
	1369 In Picardy with John of Gaunt's expeditionary force; begins *The Book of the Duchess* on the death of Blanche, John of Gaunt's wife	
	1370–3 Sent on diplomatic missions to Genoa and Florence	**1370** (c.) William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (first version)
	1374 Appointed Controller of the Customs and Subsidy of Wools, Skins and Hides; receives a life pension from John of Gaunt	