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## CRITICAL APPROACHES

## CONTEXT

Another well known character from *The Canterbury Tales*, the openly sensual Wife of Bath, is good example of a character drawn from estate satire. Her character is based largely on the stereotypical image of domineering wives popular in misogynist literature dealing with the imagined miseries of marriage.

## 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.



## CHECK THE BOOK

Dramatist Cyril Tourneur (also spelt Turnour or Turner, 1575–1626) is known to have created two **revenge tragedies**, the best known of which, *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607), is a very good example of the **genre**. **Violent and gloomy, it deals with the revenge of Vendice for the murder of his mistress by a morally degenerate duke.**

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

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