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Chaucer's Message in "The Canon's Yeoman's Tale"

In "The Canterbury Tales," we are introduced to one of Chaucer's greatest concerns about the human condition, a recurring theme in many of the stories we have read. Chaucer is very concerned about a person's pureness of heart--he believes that whatever a person professes to be, that person should be, regardless if that person is a knight, peasant, or priest. In Chaucer's time, the Church served as the social, religious, and moral center of English society, employing roughly a third of all English citizens; in such a large group of people, there were bound to be a few unsaintly persons who were not the godly people they professed to be. The Canon is one of them. In "The Canon's Yeoman's Tale," we find a canon of the church who slanders the name of God by cheating a priest and many others--he does the opposite of what he is supposed to do by profession, and this clearly angers Chaucer. We also discover that the canon is an unredeemable soul; like the Pardoner, the canon knows his sin and enjoys sinning. His entire life has been consumed by alchemy, and he more greatly enjoys practicing this useless art and cheating others with it than he enjoys carrying out the godly responsibilities of a canon.

Because he wants to criticize, but not offend, the Church, Chaucer tries to hide the seriousness of the tale by having the Yeoman tell it. He chooses the lower-status Yeoman to be the narrator so the Church will hopefully laugh at the Yeoman's story before it begins to take offense by it. The Yeoman's foolish indecisiveness at the beginning of the tale really helps Chaucer to quietly criticize the Church--at first he tells the pilgrims that "my master has such subtle powers. . . That all this blessed road we ride upon / From here as far as Canterbury town, / Why, he could turn it all clean upside down / And pave it all with silver and with gold." However, after the Canon rides off, he begins to tell the pilgrims everything about the Canon's dirty character. "Ha! . . . Now we'll have a game, / Now I can talk, and I've a lot to tell. / He's gone, the foul

fiend carry him off to Hell!” This indecisiveness also helps to hide the tale’s seriousness because the Church may have doubted the validity of the Yeoman’s arguments against the Canon.

Perhaps most upsetting to Chaucer is the Canon’s poor excuse for not being the godly man he professes to be. It would be one thing if the Canon cheated his victims to belittle them or to become rich; his sins, pride and greed, would have been common and redeemable ones. However, like that of the Pardoner, the Canon’s sin is an unredeemable one. The Canon cheats others not for money or pride--he has very poor-looking clothes and lives in alleyways and streets. Instead, he takes the money to support the useless art of alchemy. At the beginning of the tale, the Host remarks on the Canon’s dilapidated clothing, saying, “That gabardine is hardly worth a mite / --Well, for a man like that; God bless my wits, / It isn’t even clean, it’s torn to bits! / Why is your lord so sluttish, may I say? / With all those magic powers can’t he pay / For better cloth, if what you say is so?” We also find out that the Canon lives in slums and suburbs; he lurks “in holes and corners and blind alleys, / Places where every thief and robber rallies.” The truth is that the Canon cannot buy himself better clothing or find a better place to live because all the money he acquires is spent on practicing alchemy. Not only is he harming others by his ungodly actions--he is also harming himself by denying himself a much more pleasant standard of living.

The worst thing Chaucer realizes about the Canon’s sin is that he rejoices in doing it. We know the Canon refuses to admit his sin-- “When the Canon realized / That all his secrets were to be surprised / He fled away in very grief and shame” from the crowd of pilgrims. If not for the Yeoman’s words then, the Canon would have tried to cheat the pilgrims as he had cheated many others before. Apparently, he is proud of the sin he commits; he sees nothing wrong with practicing an art contrary to the requirements of his godly profession, and with cheating fellow priests and others for a useless cause.

Chaucer’s belief that all people should be what they profess to be is well explained midway through the “Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale.” The Canon begins his plot to cheat an old, poor priest by asking the priest to lend him money on the condition that he repay it fully within three days. The priest consents, loans the money, and in three days he is promptly paid back. Then, Chaucer’s theme begins to emerge through the priest’s

conversation with the Canon. “Trust me, I never take offence / If someone comes to borrow a few pence / Or anything I have in my possession / When he’s an honest man of *good profession*,” the priest says. Clearly, Chaucer indicates his belief through the priest’s reply that an honest, trustworthy person can win the respect of any other by being a “man of good profession.” This impoverished priest tells the Canon that he would not mind lending him “a few pence” or “anything I have in my possession” because he believes the Canon to be a truthful, godly man; we later come to hate the Canon because of how he swindles this trusting, innocent priest. The Canon soon replies with a series of lies to the priest’s statement of good faith:

What! . . . I not pay when due? / That would be something altogether new! / My honour is a thing I hope to keep / For ever till the moment when I creep / Into my grave. *God* send I do indeed; / You can trust that as surely as the *creed*. / And I thank *God*--in good hour be it spoken-- / No one can say my word was ever broken / For any gold or silver I was lent; / I never stole a farthing with intent.

For a man of godly profession, the Canon certainly does not use God’s name and the Bible in godly ways. The last three lines of this passage are complete lies--he only acquired his gold and silver by falsely promising others that his alchemy would repay their money, and each time he stole a farthing, he did so with the intent of pursuing his useless trade.

The “Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale” is a great example of Chaucer’s concern for those who are not “honest men of good profession,” regardless of what their profession may be. Chaucer implies the question, “If a person is not true to others, then how can he be true to himself?” More importantly, how can he be true to God? Of all people, the Canon should be a Canon because he professes to be a worker of God, and by Chaucer’s rule, he has to be a godly person. However, we have found that the Canon uses God’s name to cheat innocent, faithful people who trust him because he is a canon. He is using his position falsely and sinfully, which greatly angers Chaucer. By giving such a long, detailed description of the Canon’s sin, we find that Chaucer successfully questions the sanctity of the English church without being obviously offensive, and suggests to us that we all, regardless of our status in society, need to be persons of good profession.