

# The Three Estates



## *The Canterbury Tales* as Estates Satire

When a text is geared toward a particular class of people, it is said to be written *ad status*, Latin for “to the estate,” that is, to everyone in a particular social category (or “estate”). The idea of the “estates” is important to the social structure of the Middle Ages.

Feudal society was traditionally divided into three “**estates**” (roughly equivalent to social classes). The **first estate** was the **Church** (clergy = those who prayed). The **second estate** was the **nobility** (those who fought = knights). It was common for aristocrats to enter the Church and thus shift from the second to the first estate. The **third estate** was the **peasantry** (everyone else, at least under feudalism: those who produced the food which supported those who prayed and those who fought, the members of the first and second estates). Note that the categories defined by these traditional estates are gender specific: they are defined by what a man *does for a living* as much as by the social class into which he was born.

**Women** were classified differently. Like men, medieval women were born into the second or third estate, and might eventually become members of the first (by entering the Church, willingly or not). But women were also categorized according to three specifically “feminine estates”: virgin, wife, and widow. It is interesting to note that a woman’s estate was determined not by her profession but by her sexual activity: she is defined in relationship to the men with whom she sleeps, used to sleep, or never has slept.

The rigid division of society into the three traditional estates begins to break down in the later Middle Ages. By the time of Chaucer (mid-fourteenth century), we see the rise of a **mercantile class** (*mercantile* = merchants) in the cities (i.e., an urban middle-class), as well as a new subdivision of the clergy: **intellectuals** trained in literature and writing (and thus “clerics” like Chaucer’s Clerk), but who were not destined to a professional career within the Church. Chaucer arguably belonged to both of these new categories. What biographical details may have made him particularly sensitive to issues of social class?

In the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer is highly conscious of the social divisions known as the “estates.” While the genre of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole is a **frame narrative**, the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* is an example of **estates satire**, a genre which satirizes the abuses that occur within the three traditional estates (in particular, the Clergy). In her personal prologue, the Wife of Bath argues forcefully that the feminine estates of “wife” and “widow” should be valued as much as that of “virgin.”

The characters described by Chaucer in the *General Prologue* have gathered at the Inn in Southwark prior to departing on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. What is the usefulness of this

situation to Chaucer? (What sort of people went on pilgrimages?) From what walks of life do the pilgrims come? Note that Chaucer takes care to include representatives of all three traditional “male” and “female” estates (the Wife of Bath represents both “wife” and “widow,” while the Prioress, a nun, is presumably a virgin). Look for an idealized portrait of each of the traditional (male) “estates.” Which portraits are satirical? Note also the portraits representing two new groups that were gaining prominence in the fourteenth century: the middle class and intellectuals (people trained as “clerks”—i.e., “clerics”—but who are *not* destined to a career within the church). Which pilgrims represent these new classes?

Pay attention to the pilgrim portraits. As you read the various portraits, pick out a key word or phrase to describe each pilgrim. Note that physical details frequently provide insight into character (in medieval times, physiognomy was believed to be revealing of character—see also the concept of the four humors). What do the descriptions reveal about the pilgrims’ characters? Which figures are painted in a positive or in a negative light?

Pay particular attention to the portraits of religious figures (Prioress, Monk, Friar, Parson, Pardoner); to those representing the other two “official” estates (the aristocrats: Knight and Squire; the peasantry: the Plowman); to the “new” estate of intellectuals (the Clerk); and to the representatives of the “middle class” (e.g. Miller, Reeve, Cook, Wife of Bath, Franklin, Merchant, and Shipman). Note that the Nun’s Priest lacks a portrait (which is provided elsewhere, in the “epilogue” to the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*), although he is mentioned as one of three priests accompanying the Prioress. What is Chaucer’s attitude toward the Church? Is he anti-religious? What if anything is being satirized? Contrast the portraits of the two women, the Wife of Bath and the Prioress. Love is mentioned in both portraits. Is the sort of love which interests each woman the same? How might each define this “love”? Is it appropriate to her station in life? (What sort of love might one expect a Prioress to be concerned with?)