

EN2010: Chaucer The General Prologue

Estates Satire

A range of late fourteenth-century poets practise a broad satire designed to address and criticise each order of society. Estates satire... both surveys and implicitly addresses the whole nation, conceived as a set of occupations or estates.
James Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.146.

be pence þat singeþ nasse.
For his yowessee.
And for owe þinge.
Bute he do nithesse.
In eche sothnesse.
His scale he may bynne.

*The priest that singeþ mass
For his own benefite
And for his own sake alone
If he does not give alms to the poor
into every season
He will bring his soul*

þus knyghtes beoþ so bold.
Ewene heo habbeþ aquile.
Heore crystene ivere.
Aþ salþanes þe olde.
þe samle wele it holde.
And make heo vifere.

*These knights are so brave
When they have vanquished
Their Christian companions.
But when the old
Will serve their souls
And make them weak*

Of alle men a lunde.
Meest soynkeþ þe lunde.
And most hyer ned rþne.
Aþ for al þis sure soynke
In helþe þe may adryke.
If þe stich crikes theofinge.
Sow hit aþel þim þeche.
Deap in helþe stanche.

*Of all men on earth
The peasant works the hardest
And is the most without...
But for all his hard work
In half he may be deceived
If the sneaky Christ's goods.
Sow it will cost him.
Deep in the sink of hell*

His smale he may bringe
Sinnereþ Beware' (c.1200). *An Old English Miscellany*, ed. Richard Morris (London: Treharne, 1872), pp.89-113.

*His soul he will bring
To the sink of hell*

Rex sine sapientia.
Episcopus sine doctrina.
Dominus sine consilio.
Miles sine castitate.
Miles sine probitate.
Iudex sine iusticia.
Dignus sine elemosina.
Papalis sine lege.
Sacerdos sine religione.
Senex sine ianore.
Pauper sine pietate.
Aculeus sine obediencia.

*The King without wisdom,
The Bishop without learning,
The Lord without counsel,
The Lord without control,
The Lady without charity,
The Knight without honour,
The Judge without justice,
The Rich man without charity,
The Poor man without religion,
The Old Man without humility,
The Poor Man proud,
The Young Man without obedience,
The Young Man without humility,
The Poor Man proud,
The Young Man without obedience,
The Young Man without humility,*

'Duo decem abasviti (Twelve abuses)' (c.1400), *Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, ed. Rosell Hope Robbins (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p.232.



The Three Estates
Is swaþeþ whiche þat co þyse worlde
synd þren endedyrlyse on amysse
gesteþe. þre synd *laborerz*, *overes*,
bellatores. *laborerz* synd þa þe urne
þigstafan þeswyldeþ. *Overes* synd þe
us to Gode geþingad. *Belatores* synd þa
þe ure burga healdþ and ure end
þewerþ wot anwyldeþe þere. No
swerd se ylling enbe urne þigstafan
þe se worlde-cornu seall wyltan wif
þe þeod and se Godes þerwa seall synle
þe þeodan and þeodan geþelwe weþ
þe þeodan and þeodan geþelwe weþ
þe þeodan and þeodan geþelwe weþ

Now, however, that in this world there
orders are established. There are
laborers, overes, bellatores.
Laborers are those that labour for our
sustenance. Overes are those who
intercede for us with God. Bellatores are
those who protect our towns and defend
our land against the invading army. Now
the former labours for our food and the
warrior must fight against our enemies
and the servant of God must continually
pray for us and spiritually fight against
wicked forces.

Author: *Chronicles of the Saints*, ed. W.W. Skeat, 2 vols. (London: Treharne, 1881), 1:120-22.

Chaucer the Pilgrim

I am not the impression that many readers, too much influenced by Chaucer's brilliant
versatility, tend to regard his famous pilgrimage to Canterbury as significant not
because it is a great fiction, but because it seems to be a remarkable record of a fourteenth-
century pilgrimage... If we treat it too narrowly as such there are going to be certain
difficulties among the elements that make up the fiction. Perhaps first among these elements
is the fictional reporter, Chaucer the pilgrim, and the role he plays in the Prologue to the
Canterbury Tales and in the links between them. I think it here that he was rescued from
the comparatively dull record of history and put back into his poem. He is not really
Chaucer the poet... They bore a close resemblance to one another, and, indeed, they
frequently got together in the same body. But that does not excuse us from keeping them
distinct from one another, difficult as their close resemblance makes our task.
E. T. Donaldson, 'Chaucer the Pilgrim', *PMLA* 69 (1954), p.929.

So the narrator is a writer and a pilgrim, but that still doesn't tell us what his actual
job was. He's not improbably Chaucer, or a civil servant, or a courtier, or a cleric, or in any
other of the usual categories; he's not even labelled by his marital status.
Katharine Wilson, 'What Man Artow?', *Chaucer's Pilgrims*, ed. Laura C. Lambdin
and R.T. Lambdin (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), p.369.

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