The General Prologue of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales
Character analysis of the Monk, the Friar, the Reeve.

MIC, ENGLISH, SEM- IV

While medieval monks were supposed to stay cloistered and devote their lives to the study of scripture, the Monk in *The Canterbury Tales* proudly dismisses this dictate. A devoted outdoorsman and huntsman, he spends his money on hunting expeditions, equipment, and lavish clothing. In addition to such frivolous spending being against behavioral convention for monks, hunting itself was considered improper behavior for members of the clergy. The Monk has a strong physical presence, harkened by the loud bells on his horse's bridle. These bells are apparently as loud as a chapel bell, which emphasizes the Monk's skewed priorities. The Narrator describes him as a "manly man," and in the Monk's prologue the Host remarks that if the Monk had not joined the clergy he would have wooed many women. Nevertheless, the Monk tells a tale quite suited for his station, a dower cycle of tragedies from Classical, Biblical, and Historical sources that he claims to know hundreds of. As the Monk begins this tale after the Host's comment that he doesn't look like a Monk and shouldn't have become one, we can read the Monk's conventional tale as a rebuttal to the Host's teasing.

he silver-tongued Friar is a prime example of Chaucer's satire of corrupt clergy. The Narrator hints that the Friar is a womanizer, saying that he is "beloved and familiar" with various women. This line abuts another line describing that he hears confessions. Since hearing confession is a very private spiritual act, it's possible to read the juxtaposition of him being well-known to the women of town and hearing confession as having sexual implications. In addition, the comment that the Friar has paid the dowry for several young women hints that the Friar may have slept with these women and paid for their marriages to cover up the scandal. The Narrator also focuses on how persuasive and impressive a speaker the Friar is in his role as alms collector, describing his manner of speaking as "sweet," and "pleasant." The Friar employs his natural gift of persuasion to encourage people to atone for their sins by giving more money to the Friars. However, his lavish garb of fine, heavy fabric suggests where the money he collects actually goes.

The Friar picks a fight with the Summoner with his tale, which features a corrupt summoner who befriends a demon and ends up in hell. The Summoner, of course, retaliates with a tale of corrupt Friars. Some of the hatred between them may be because of their similar ways of operating. Both the Friar and the Summoner extort money from the lay people in exchange

for lessening their sins. They are also both portrayed as lusty womanizers who take sex as a bribe. In a sense, the Friar attacks the Summoner and vice versa almost as if they are two con men competing for the same territory. The specific story the Friar tells focuses on the power of a curse that's meant from the heart, which may be a direct refutation of the Summoner's unorthodox statement that if someone pays him they needn't fear excommunication. However, while the Friar may be less blunt about his corruption than the Summoner, his way of hearing confession is not so different.

A reeve is the manager of a landowner's estate. Chaucer's Reeve is a shrewd man who meticulously guards his master's assets so that he may profit from them himself. The young landowner he serves is so clueless as to the workings of his own estate that he often borrows from the Reeve, not realizing that he borrows his own property. The Reeve's description in the General Prologue highlights how he disrupts Medieval social hierarchy. He appears to have traits of all three estates: the church, the nobility, and the laypeople. The Narrator mentions that he looks like a member of the clergy, with his hair like a priest and his long coat tucked up like a friar. In addition, he is the de facto owner of his master's resources and carries a rusty blade, a corroded version of the swords typically carried by knights and squires (i.e., the nobility). Finally, he's also a carpenter by trade, a working man. These contradictions emphasize the curious social mobility the Reeve has, being technically rich but never gentry.

The Narrator also notes the Reeve's choleric, irritable nature. We see the full force of his bad temper when he takes offense at the Miller's tale for having the cuckolded character be a carpenter. Though he initially claims he's too old to trade blows with the Miller, he ends up telling a retaliatory story about a dishonest Miller who gets cuckolded in revenge. Many scholars point out that the Reeve's tale feels meaner and darker than the Miller's cheerful tale, which did not appear to be intended as a personal slight. In fact, the Carpenter amongst the Guildsmen doesn't take offense. With this reading, the Reeve's tale highlights how prone he is to anger. The Reeve's closing remark, "Thus have I quyt the Millere in my tale," demonstrates how personally he takes the Miller's tale. He says that he has "quit," or rebutted the Miller, not the Miller's tale, which implies that he considers his own tale an attack on the Miller himself, not merely his tale, which is a harsh attitude for a storytelling contest.