




Thirty Pilgrims and Two Cities: Approaching The Canterbury Tales through an Augustinian Route

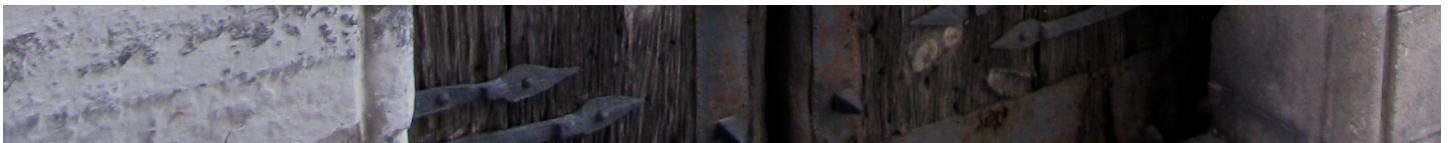


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The Canterbury Tales presents a spectrum of themes surrounding its characters as they undertake their journey and offer their tales. Members of Chaucer's cast of characters represent people across the span of society; each with their own assumed estate. Some exhibit a surprising contrasting with images most readers would conjure up based on their names. The tales have this range, too, spanning from courtly, high romance to lecherous, low-class fabliau. However, none of these tales stand out quite as much as "The Parson's Tale," which concludes the entire collection. Instead of ending his story with another tale of "solas," Chaucer concludes *The Canterbury Tales* with a long religious sermon. Chaucer explicitly demonstrates his theological interest in this piece of prose, and he follows it with a retraction that

applies its messages. In studying this tale in relation to the others, interesting connections can be made between the stories of Chaucer and the theology of Saint Augustine, especially in the scope of Augustine's *City of God*. Within the frame of pilgrimage and extending to the choice between love of self and love of God—the crux of Augustine's own "tale" of two cities—Chaucer builds a resounding theme of sin and repentance. Chaucer's theological interest in modes of thinking resound with St. Augustine's *City of God* can be analyzed within the overall pilgrimage framing the tales, "The Parson's Tale," and Chaucer's personal retraction.

Augustine remains to be one of the foremost figures of Christian antiquity, and the depth and span of his remarkable writings have carved out a general consensus of his



importance in all Christian studies. Because of this, Augustine became a standard source for theological writings, and this pattern was certainly in place during Chaucer's lifetime (Kellogg 427). This assertion does not stand alone as proof that Chaucer put stock into Augustine's teachings. Throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer references Augustine, always with a tone of utmost deference, in a peppering of nods to the saint. In the "Monk's Prologue," Augustine is remembered in his physical toils, as is appropriate to monastic life (1.187-88). Also, in the "Shipman's Tale," Brother John wishes for the blessings of God and St. Augustine on his friend (7. 259). In the "Physician's Tale," Augustine is called the "Doctour" of the Church, and his description of "Envye" is applied (6. 117). Finally, in the "Nun's Priest's Tale," St. Augustine is given similar reverence when he is referred to as "the hooly doctour Augustyn" at a point where the narrator speaks of God's "forwityng" in man's life (7. 3241-44). In an explanatory note within *The Riverside Chaucer*, Augustine is pointed out as one of the "four original Doctors of the Church," and the passage goes on to explain his doctrine on predestination as "orthodox," saying he believed that God bestowed plans unto mankind as

God pleased (Benson, 939). In exploring bits of Augustinian doctrine and including respectful references to him, Chaucer shows that he could understand, apply, and honor the teachings of this fundamental figure of the early Church.

The sections of Augustine's *City of God* that can apply to *The Canterbury Tales* tell of what the saint metaphorically calls two cities, termed the City of God and the City of Man. The first, he writes, is concerned with "love of God even to contempt of self," and the second is absorbed in "love of self even to contempt of God" (14. 8). Humankind, then, is caught between these two opposing cities in a sort of battleground existence (Battenhouse 258).

Augustine writes that the cities are "intertwined and mixed in this world until they [are] separated by the final judgment" (1. 34). In addition, Augustine clearly states that the City of God is not one in the same as the Church, but he writes that the City of God can begin wherever divine love touches and moves human will (Ames 210). Although this is a simplified look at a complex work, the basic duality of Augustine's symbolic cities can apply to *The Canterbury Tales*.

In reviewing the main message of *The City of God* and identifying exhortation of

Augustine within *The Canterbury Tales*, connections between Chaucer's text and the theology of St. Augustine can begin to show up in the overarching span of the tales. Throughout the *Tales*, Chaucer's characters are on pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Thomas Beckett, the "hooly blissful martir," at Canterbury Cathedral (1. 17). The pilgrims, with all their diversities, are drawn together by a common religious journey. Both New Testament and patristic writings have advocated the view that Christians are pilgrims in life, "en route to the heavenly Jerusalem," an idea that resounded in medieval religious communication (Philips 133). Augustine repeatedly compares the progression of human life to a pilgrimage toward God. He instructs Christians to "enjoy their earthly blessings in the manner of pilgrims," trying not to become "attached" to these things (1. 29). Christians are to use goods "like a pilgrim in a foreign land" as to not be distracted from God through earthly attachment (19. 17). Chaucer makes explicit reference to this common idea in "The Parson's Tale", where he places these words on the Parson's lips: "And Jhesu, for hos grace, wit me sende/ To shewe yow the wey, in this viage,/ Of thike parfit glorious pilgrimage/ That highte Jerusalem celestial" (10. 48-52). By

tucking this idea into the tales, Chaucer demonstrates that this theme was on his mind when he decided to frame the story with a smaller, less transcendental pilgrimage.

Within this idea of a pilgrimage, connections back to Augustine's *City of God* can be observed. All religious traditions peg pilgrimages to spiritually significant sites as undertakings of great depth. Those on such a journey would take it with their minds on the sacred, leaving the secular behind for its duration. Both the arrival and the journey itself would be times of prayer and reflection during which they would strive to find spiritual enrichment, or perhaps even undergo dramatic spiritual change. Also, as echoed in "The Parson's Tale," pilgrimages can serve as penance, and they can even be undertaken without full consent as atonement for sins (10. 104). However, instead of explicitly writing about the spiritual journey of the community of pilgrims, Chaucer sets up an occasion for tale-telling, which arises out of a combination of boredom and incentive for a free dinner. Noticing this rift between expectation and reality on this pilgrimage echoes the division between Augustine's cities, or rather, the traits that embody each.

The view of a pilgrimage as a journey of spiritual transformation seems aligned with Augustine's City of God. A journey of this nature, one of self-denial and focus on the divine, seems like a microcosm of the life heaven-bound life Augustine urged Christians to live. But the behavior of many of the pilgrims is nearly the opposite of this ideal. Many of the pilgrims "argue, squabble, swear, overindulge and often exhibit a questionable degree of piety and penitence" (Philips 136). Some of the stories, such as "The Miller's Tale," are purposefully ribald and even recounted by a drunken teller. A few tales are even framed as personal attacks between the travelers, such as the combative tales exchanged by the Friar and the Summoner. The Wife of Bath, who admits she took a previous pilgrimage to Jerusalem to "pleye" instead of pray, offers a prologue and tale that is rife with sexuality, even when she tries to tie in biblical stanchions to justify her lifestyle (3. 551). What may be even more surprising is the degree of corruption among some of the characters that are associated with the Church, such as the Summoner, Friar, and Monk. Both the Summoner and the Friar are swindlers, and the Monk ignores the tenants of monastic life, feeling that being

cloistered is "nat worth an oyster" (1. 182). The theme of tranquility and order that Augustine backs as a trait of the City of God also appears in the *Tales*. The semblance of order between all the pilgrims at the outset is quickly tossed aside as the tales commence, proven once again by the contention between certain members of the party as they try to requite the previous tales. This setup is much more aligned with Augustine's City of Man, the city inclined toward disharmony between human beings and distance from God. With this arrangement, Chaucer seems to be communicating that the pilgrims do not understand that their pilgrimage is lacking in spiritual meaning.

Even with this setup already framing the *Tales* in a reasonably Augustinian fashion, a trove of the saint's teachings rounds out the entire story within "The Parson's Tale" and even extends through Chaucer's retraction of his work. The first two points to note about this tale are its position and form, both of which stand out among all the other tales. "The Parson's Tale" takes the final position in the work, presented in prose that reads like an in-depth sermon. Because it follows all the other tales and presents itself in a new form, one cannot help but contrast it from the rest

of the tales and even see it as a commentary on them. “The Parson’s Tale” exalts Augustine’s wisdom by using many of his quotes to bolster religious arguments. This tale deliberately sides with the self-sacrificing City of God, while many of the tales that preceded it seemed aligned with the City of Man, full of what the Parson would describe as vice in their content, such as lechery in “The Miller’s Tale” and greed in both “The Summoner’s Tale” and “The Friar’s Tale.” Although some of the other tales carry religiosity that may echo conceivably Augustinian themes, such as “The Prioress’s Tale” in its tragic story of a young martyr, none of them compare to the abstract, theological density of “The Parson’s Tale.” The continuity of the spiritual pilgrimage theme applies so well to the occasion of the stories, making it a suitable ending that truly does repay the other tales by reminding the travelers that their whole lives are pilgrimages. To simplify, “The Parson’s Tale” is a deep, faith-filled look at virtue and vice and how one should deal with sin. The tale can be seen as twofold, beginning and ending with a full description of penitence and proper contrition, with a discourse on the Seven Deadly Sins and their counters occupying the middle. The Parson set out to show the pilgrims

quite literally the way to salvation, and he weaves this powerful theme throughout the tale (10. 48-52). Just as “The Parson’s Tale” has two main divisions, its application to the teachings of Saint Augustine is twofold.

In regards to the section on penitence and contrition, Augustine is called in as an authority figure in a multitude of quotes. In most of the prose, the Parson offers a bit of theology or moral teaching and backs each up with words from a saint or church father. On the surface, the use of any church father’s teachings on repentance would help in solidifying an argument made to a reader who bought into the wisdoms they offer. In using Augustine’s wisdom, however, the Parson builds an even more reliable scaffold beneath his own teaching, given Augustine’s experience with personal repentance. One of Augustine’s most renowned writings, entitled *Confessions*, details his gradual move from taking comfort in a life of sin and distance from God to renouncing his past through conversion, penitence, and creating a relationship with God. Augustine had lived through and succeeded in exactly what the Parson discusses as having “steadfast purpose to shriven hym, and for to amenden hym of his lyf” (10. 304). In presenting

the literate world with the story of his journey from vice to virtue, Augustine confessed and demonstrated how he altered his life which, in short, defines the teaching of the Parson on penitence.

Augustine's authority is again defined and his teachings reflected in the succeeding topic of "The Parson's Tale" which deals with the Seven Deadly Sins. The Parson offers evaluations of these sins that come straight from Augustine's *City of God*. For example, the Parson shares Augustine's definition of Anger, or "Ire," as the "wikked wil to been avenged by word or by dede" (10. 534). The Parson later uses Augustine's summary of Avarice, calling it "a likerousnesse in herte to have erthely thynges," including "somytyme in science and in glorie" (10. 742). Both of these definitions are adapted from book fourteen of *City of God*. Along with offering characterizations of each of the seven vices, the Parson suggests remedies. This remedying of sins can be associated with the themes of the *City of God*. The Parson frequently reminds the pilgrims that every sin listed in the tale "is expresseek agayn the comandement of God" (10. 817). Just as these sins are opposed to God, Augustine's City of Man stands against the City of God.

Sins of selfishness characterize this city, which dwells in the earthly. These maladies, since they are opposed to God as the Parson says, service the earthly and wound the spirit. The spirit is aligned with the City of God, and therefore cannot prosper in the mire of sin which traps the City of Man, "ruled by its lusts of rule" (Augustine, 1. 1). But in calling forth the City of Man in his study of sin, the Parson shoots down each sin with a virtue that is aligned with Augustine's City of God. In place of pride, he suggests humility (10. 475). To quell anger, he proposes patience (10. 653). Against gluttony, he champions abstinence, and so on (10. 831). Virtues such as these embody the harmony between people that Augustine gets at in *City of God*. In stemming the wiles of sin, these traits lead the spirit to turn from the earthly city to the heavenly one, where "instead of life, [there is] eternity" (Augustine, 2. 29). In summary, the Parson's whole treatise on the Seven Deadly Sins can be seen as the achievable victory of the City of God over the City of Man, which stands as the primary message of Augustine's *City of God*.

The retraction that follows the final tale further reflects these themes. In it, Chaucer requests mercy, imploring readers to "preye for me that Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me

my giltes;/ and namely of my translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns” (10. 1083-84). Much like how the Parson called for Christians to repent for six main reasons, including fear of divine judgment, Chaucer seeks forgiveness so that he “may been oon of hem at the day of doom that shulle be saved” (10. 1091). In this retraction, Chaucer appears to apply what the Parson preached about to his own life. He attempts to prove to the reader that he distinctly turned away from the previous tales that contained the workings of sin in hopes of restoring his own virtue. Whether or not Chaucer is truly repentant, he writes of his decision to move away from the worldly and examine his own spiritual health,

praying that his alignment with the sacred can be restored, just as Augustine called Christians to reject the sin of the City of Man and set their minds on the spirit-driven City of God.

The connections between *The Canterbury Tales* and *The City of God* are proven by Chaucer’s settlement on St. Augustine’s authority. He inserts respectful mentions of the saint throughout the tales, culminating in his heavy quotation of Augustine in “The Parson’s Tale.” These concrete, observable examples show that Chaucer and Augustine are analytically comparable involving the Canterbury pilgrimage, the Parson’s sermon, and Chaucer’s retraction with the *City of God*.

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