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Chaucer's Constructive Ecclesiastical Criticism

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Oral Presentation 4.2

CHAUCER'S CONSTRUCTIVE ECCLESIASTICAL CRITICISM

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In his *Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer shoots critical arrow at several institutions that deserve to be attacked in some form. This criticism was extended to all levels of the medieval Church. Chaucer's negative portrayal of religious in the *Tales* has led some scholars to suggest that he was a proto-Reformationist, a predecessor to Luther or Calvin who wanted to discard the entire Church and start over. It is true that he pointed out the faults within the Church and criticized its members, but he also saw that it was salvageable through internal reform. Many scholars have emphasized the similarities between Chaucer and the heretical Lollards, leading to the labeling of Chaucer as a Lollard. But as other scholars indicate, Chaucer's resemblance to the Lollards does not mean that Chaucer supported their heretical stance. I will attempt to show that Chaucer supported the Church and so wanted to reform it from the inside. His portraits of clergy reveal people who are not living up to the standards of the Church, with the implication that these standards are worth trying to attain. Chaucer also creates an impeccable Parson, who as the one religious who is true to God and the Church is seen as the perfect example for all to follow.