

# A DISHONEST WARDROBE

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## FASHION AND COSTUME IN GEOFFERY CHAUCER'S "GENERAL PROLOGUE"

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This paper analyzes fashion in medieval literature as a means of self-representation that reflects the wearer's honesty or dishonesty concerning their struggle with societal status. In the "General Prologue," Chaucer depicts a wealth of characters who capture this honesty and dishonesty of clothing in the fourteenth century, mirroring dress and self-representation in modern society. How one chooses to present themselves to the world is not only a reflection of themselves. It is also a reflection of how idealized expectations and clothing's illusion affect one's comfort disseminating a true identity. Pieces analyzed include the Knight's armor, the Prioress's gold brooch, the Wife of Bath's red hose and wimple, and other noteworthy costume components demonstrating this Chaucerian concept. However, the idea is paralleled in modern times as well. As brands continue to grow and the apparel industry moves toward fast-fashion models, the lines become blurred, and one can use fashion to either reveal or hide who they really are. In the twenty-first century, clothing can deceive, as copy-cat fabrics and the façade social media and fast fashion facilitate run rampant. In this paper, I assert that dishonest clothing is dress that is selected with the intent or purpose of showing society a form of the individual that is not entirely authentic. Through idiosyncratic apparel descriptions and the use of fashion as a metaphorical device, Chaucer's "General Prologue" serves to highlight this façade—witnessed in both the fourteenth century and today. This paper functions to address the concept of dishonest and honest clothing as it pertains to medieval literature and the implications that arise when viewing the textual evidence under a modern lens.

In another world—in another time—kings, queens, and the noble class were the celebrities of the fourteenth century. Fashion was important as ever, and the clothing someone wore mattered. It was, and continues to be, a representation of a person's place in

society. However, clothing is not always honest. In Chaucer's "General Prologue" of *The Canterbury Tales*, the wide range of characters exploit fashion and show the world who they want to be rather than who they really are. This medieval world parallels the one we live in today.

In both medieval and modern society, fashion is a means of self-representation that reflects the wearer's honesty or dishonesty concerning their struggle with societal status. How one chooses to present themselves to the world is not only a reflection of themselves; it is a reflection of how idealized expectations and clothing's illusion affect their comfort disseminating their true identity. As brands continue to grow, the apparel industry moves toward fast-fashion models allowing for the manipulation of dress through integration of cheaper fabrics, knock-off designs, and the rise of social media influencers who presents a façade of themselves to society. The lines become blurred, and one can use fashion to either reveal or hide who they really are. Through idiosyncratic apparel descriptions and the use of fashion as a metaphorical device, Chaucer depicts a wealth of characters who capture the honesty *and* dishonesty of clothing in the fourteenth century, mirroring modern societal projections of dress and self-representation.

Primarily, Chaucer's contextual descriptions regarding the costume and traits of his characters disclose revealing information about the dishonesty of clothing in the fourteenth century. In turn, the modern reader can connect this with the modern era we live in today. One example of this can be seen in the Knight and the Friar. Regarding the former, Chaucer describes the fourteenth century's chivalric ideal:

*Of fustian he wered a gipoun,  
Al bismotered with his habergeoun,  
For he was late ycome from his viage,  
And wente for to doon his pilgrimage.  
(I.75-78)*

One word that is especially important within this passage is "bismotered." The Middle English Dictionary defines it as "bespattered" or "soiled" (MED). Through use of this word, Chaucer

emphasizes the blood-stained armor to demonstrate that the Knight's worthiness is directly tied to his competence in battle and gives the reader their first glance at honest clothing. This honest clothing reconciles the character's real face with the mask shown to the world, and in the Knight's case, his face and mask are unequivocally the same. Echoing this sentiment, Mitchell posits, "...an excellence of strength or power (worthiness) is needed for efficiency

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or effectiveness (virtue)...the Knight's bravery is almost synonymous with his efficiency in action" (9). In other words, the Knight shows himself through the virtue of effectiveness in battle and never claims to be anything other than what he is; he never exploits his dress to amend for his downfalls—whatever they may be.

However, the Knight is not the typical character in the society Chaucer describes. In fact, he is a reprieve from the vast majority of characters attempting to hide their downfalls from the world through a selection of clothing specifically designed to trick society into seeing the mask and not the face. One example of this concept is the Friar, who does a good job of presenting this mask

to the world. Chaucer depicts him as a man who "...was lik a maister or a pope" (I.260). Chaucer continues, describing the Friar's dress, "Of double worstede was his semicope..." and paints a picture of the character in exceptionally made clothing and expensive fabrics (I.261). Here, the Friar's costume does not represent him; it represents his unease with his societal status in the fourteenth century. Gerald Morgan encapsulates this idea in his work, stating, "With the Friar there is a marked descent in both the social and moral orders. The double worsted is a good if not fine material but even so at odds with the ideal of evangelical poverty" (2). Although the Friar is poor—although he is expected to wear modest cloths and simple fabrics—his dress sharply juxtaposes this societal expectation of poverty. Rather than embrace his authentic self, the Friar chooses to wear dishonest clothing that draws attention to the fact that he is uncomfortable with his societal status, neglects his duties to the poor although his very title suggests the opposite, and is concurrently aware of how fashion plays a role in portraying this status and lack of concern to the world. Through fashion, individuals tell the world who they are without saying anything. By the contrast between the Knight and the Friar, Chaucer makes the primary distinction between projecting oneself through clothing in either an honest or dishonest way.

The Prioress, the head of an order of nuns, serves as yet another Chaucerian example of a religious figure selecting clothing that challenges their previously established role in society. In the text, Chaucer describes the Prioress as being "...gauded al with grene,/ And theron heng a brooch of gold ful shene..." (I.159-160). Rather than don the religious dress typically worn in an Abbey, the Prioress disregards her role in society

and embraces garish and gaudy costume. Rigby further examines this, arguing, "...it is not (as some critics have claimed) the Prioress's dress which the poet criticizes but rather her failure to live up to the inner moral standard..." (1). So then, it must be assumed that, through her dress, her amorality is publicized and proven to be of a lower standard than fourteenth-century society would expect. Pious, humble, and devoted are a few words which one might attribute to a prioress; however, Chaucer's Prioress, through dishonest clothing, contrasts this expected persona as her vanity in fashion prevails over her consecration to religion.

Likewise, the Monk exhibits comparable traits through costume as well. Of his dress, Chaucer describes:

*I seigh his sleeves purfiled at the hond  
With gris, and that the fineste of a lond;  
And for to festne his hood under his chin  
He hadde of gold ywroght a curious pin... (I.193-196)*

Similar to the Prioress, another religious figure is seen rejecting the typified traits their occupation possesses and instead uses fashion to show the world who they want to be rather than who they actually are. Morgan argues, "The Monk is hardly less of an impressive figure, worthy indeed to follow the Knight in tale-telling on the evidence of 'grys' and 'gold' in his array" (2). In other words, the Monk's clothing is "worthy" enough that he, in the fourteenth century, could stand next to the Knight and be viewed as just as impressive a figure. This concept appears in the Merchant's dress as well. Chaucer states, "...he was in dette,/ So estatly was he of his governaunce,/ With his bargaines and with his chevisaunce" (I.280-282). Here, a similar contradiction is evident as the Merchant—in debt and

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reduced to nothing but the clothes on his back—wears clothing that broadcasts precisely the opposite to the world.

However odd this may appear, we do, in fact, witness the same exact occurrence in the twenty-first century as well. These oddities—these portrayals of people and the facilitation through dishonest clothing—happen every day. Throughout the text, Chaucer's characters don dishonest clothing, and today, fast fashion, the rise of style influencers, and the effect of social media allow people to don dishonest clothing as well. In the twenty-first century, clothing has the ability to deceive, as copy-cat fabrics and the façade social media and fast fashion facilitate run rampant. This façade is most prominent when viewing celebrities, and the best modern example of this proves to be none other than musician Taylor Swift. Swift is known around the world, but *how* she is known is dictated by her dress. Her fashion has evolved throughout the decades she has remained in the spotlight, and the clothes she wears greatly dictate how she is viewed by society. Pop culture researcher Lyon posits, "The concept... could also explain why now that Swift is in pop music, she distances herself away from that identity by not using Southern features in her songs or in interviews" (14). In other words, Swift dons dishonest clothing—or clothing that is selected with the intent or purpose of showing society a form of the individual that is not entirely authentic—in order to keep her public persona intact. As seen in Chaucer's work, through the characters' deliberate choices to wear

dress that is inconsistent with their own societal status or authentic self, this concept is nothing new. However, the revolutionary inventions and technological innovations of the modern world have allowed dishonest clothing to grow at an increasing rate that has affected self-representation similar to what is seen in Chaucer's "General Prologue."

Concurrently, the modern closet of the twenty-first century is not so different than the medieval wardrobe of yesteryear. For centuries, humans have been polishing their self-image and subsequently advertising that polished version of themselves to their family, friends, and the rest of the world. In some cases, as seen in Chaucer's Friar, Monk, and Merchant, the changes made to oneself are extreme; in other cases, the polishing is barely noticeable. However, these changes made to oneself and the psychological factors influencing self-representation in both medieval and modern society affect how a person sees not only themselves but others as well. Psychologists Hajo and Galinsky, echo this sentiment in their findings, stating, "The current research provides initial support for our encloded cognition perspective that clothes can have profound and systematic psychological and behavioral consequences for their wearers" (5). In other words, dishonest clothing has the potential to alter "self"-identity and truly change the wearer's view on themselves and the world around them.

The Wife of Bath exemplifies the concept of encloded cognition, and

Chaucer describes her clothing and the woman herself to be representative of sexual prowess (I.445-475). One distinct article of clothing proves to be her red hose—hose that are a clear indication of a deviant and sexual nature (Renn 1). George Renn builds upon this idea, stating, “consistent with and amplifying that view, the red hose may also serve as a self-administered example of the allopathic folk medicine ‘doctrine of signatures’” (2). Here, the hose appears to be an example of the Wife of Bath’s view of herself, and this self-administered image very clearly aligns with how Chaucer and the reader view her as well. Another important piece of clothing encapsulating this idea is none other than the Wife of Bath’s wimple—the headdress adorning the character’s head, neck, and sides of the face. Chaucer states, “Hir coverchiefs ful fine were of ground;/ I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound/ That on a Sondag weren upon hir heed” (I.453-455). As a cloth maker, the Wife of Bath knows the impact fashion has on the individual *and* on society, and she uses these articles of clothing, such as the red hose and the wimple, to dictate how she is viewed by society. Further, these articles of clothing which have come to represent her sexuality have also come to represent the Wife of Bath as well—fully and indefinitely.

As one uses fashion to broadcast their self-image to the world, the distinction becomes blurred. Instead of simply broadcasting traits, an individual wishes to show people or wishes to possess, one ends up becoming their clothing. The lines become altogether

unclear, and fashion takes hold as self-representation becomes skewed. In the modern world, the Wife of Bath appears within everyone. People exhibit what they want the world to see—whether it’s a true reflection of themselves or not.

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Psychologist Galinsky posits that, “We think not just with our brains but with our bodies... clothes invade the body and brain, putting the wearer into a different psychological state...” (1). As the years have gone by, the rules of fashion and the act of embracing or rejecting one’s true self through costume have remained largely the same. The

twenty-first century sees the wearer approaching dress as a means to embody their self-identity how they choose to—whether that has honest implications or not—and exhibits how comfortable or uncomfortable an individual is with societal status and self-reflection. Moreover, this self-reflection sheds light on the fashion choices of the individual and reveals how society has taken ahold of the apparel industry and transformed fashion into not only an art but into a means of deception.

Chaucer’s wide variety of characters and the descriptions allocated to them throughout the “General Prologue” provide the reader and the modern century wearer with the primary distinction between honest and dishonest clothing and how that relates to self-representation in both the medieval and modern time periods. Through contextual study of the Knight and the Friar, Chaucer paints a rich picture in which the Knight’s honest clothing sharply contrast with the Friar’s dishonest apparel. The differentiation



between the two provides the reader with their first glimpse into the medieval closet where dishonesty hangs. Through Chaucer's thorough and idiosyncratic descriptions of the wealth of characters within *The Canterbury Tales*, the distinction and the implications that arise are made apparent. Centuries have passed since the fourteenth century, but the clothes hanging in the closet—and the people selecting the fashions and costume—do not seem to have changed much at all. The selection of honest and dishonest fashion has not evolved much since Chaucer delved into his work and characters. People within modern society exploit fashion just as people within the medieval era did. Overall, the deceit that hangs in the medieval closet parallels the contemporary world. Upon peeking inside both closets, they would remain identical—both in the individual's self-perception and consequent self-representation within society and fashion.

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