

Chapter 9

The Friar

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An ambiguous pilgrim

Huberd, a jolly friar with questionable morals, is one of the most controversial characters in the 'General Prologue'. For some, it was this portrait, along with that of Friar John in the 'Summoner's Tale', that helped secure Chaucer's place in the gallery of medieval antifraternal authors, alongside writers such as William of St Amour, Jean de Meun, Giovanni Boccaccio, and John Wyclif. Yet a closer look at the Friar's fabrication raises doubts about Chaucer's rejection of religious mendicancy (antifraternalism in its narrowest definition) and the extent to which his writings may parallel, or even reflect, Lollard-style anticlericalism or foreshadow Reformation abolitionism. For, on the one hand, the antifraternal tradition undergirding Huberd was at least as reform-driven as it was rejectionist; and, on the other, Chaucer's appropriation of anti-mendicant tropes attest his subtlety as a social satirist and master of ambiguity rather than supporting a reading that sees him attacking, in the form of Huberd, everything for which friars stood. Such an open reading of this portrait is strengthened if Huberd is placed within a longer antifraternal literary tradition, which Chaucer both inherited and promoted.

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An ecclesiological fray

Sometime in the late fourteenth century, an anonymous polemicist, appropriating a Latin sermon by the English theologian and ecclesiastical reformer John Wyclif (1330–84), warned his readers against a grave danger menacing the entire church and, by implication, the spiritual welfare of all Christians:

Christ bydduþ us be war wiþ þese false prophetis, þat comen in cloþing of schep, and ben wolues of raueyne. And þese ben specially men of þese newe ordres, and moste þese frerys þat laste comen in, for þe feend sutileþ euere aʒenes holy chirche.¹

The ‘frerys’ or friars alluded to here were members of several religious orders—Augustinian Hermits, Carmelites, Dominicans, and Franciscans, to name ‘alle the ordres foure’ (I: 210)—jointly known as mendicants. Organized and orthodox, these idiosyncratic monks pursued a life of voluntary poverty in imitation of Christ, a choice that required them to beg (Latin: *mendicare*) and perform a number of pastoral tasks, mostly in Britain’s and Europe’s urban centres.

Their beginnings were not always smooth. Brother Solomon, remembered as the first convert to Franciscanism in England, was scorned and rejected by his family.² In 1224, the residents of Dover treated the newly arrived Dominicans as foreign spies, and other locals, including Benedictine monks, secular clergymen, and those whose orthodoxy was challenged by some mendicant preachers, understandably expressed their reservations in word and deed throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.³ Yet they soon became popular and successful, partly because they helped fill a spiritual and administrative gap left by the church, not only in its struggle to

¹ *English Wycliffite Sermons*, five volumes, eds Pamela Gradon and Anne Hudson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983–96), II: 366–78, at 366. The editors (Volume V: 277–81) deny the attribution of the text to Wyclif on numerous grounds, contrary to *Select English Works of John Wyclif*, volume II, ed. Thomas Arnold (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1871), pp. 379–89.

² Thomas of Eccleston, *De adventu Fratrum Minorum in Angliam*, ed. Andrew G. Little (Paris: Fischbacher, 1909; revised edition, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1951), col. 3; translation in *The Coming of the Friars Minor to England and Germany*, trans. E. Gurney Salter (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1926), pp. 3–128, at 17.

³ G. Geltner, *The Making of Medieval Antifraternalism: Polemic, Violence, Deviance, and Remembrance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), Appendix I, nos. 3, 24, 54, 56, 59, 67, 75–6, 82, 86–7, 96–9, 102–3, 106.

define the boundaries of orthodoxy, but also in its capacity to address the needs of a growing urban population.⁴ In particular, the profit-economies that enabled urban communities to flourish simultaneously exposed the ‘obsolescence of prevailing Christian morality’.⁵ Among the mendicants’ greatest achievements and sources of attraction therefore was their ability to introduce new devotional practices to address this situation.⁶

One can and indeed should look beyond the spiritual release-valve fashioned by the friars in order to understand their tremendous success. Other factors, including charismatic leadership, local pride, papal and royal support, rising rates of literacy, social and cultural accessibility, the promise of mobility (both social and geographical), and a capacity to dovetail with urban elites’ political and economic agendas, all helped establish religious mendicancy as a hugely influential movement. By the late thirteenth century well over one hundred mendicant convents dotted England and Wales;⁷ and by the late fourteenth century, in and beyond the British Isles, hundreds of friars filled the highest ranks of ecclesiastical and royal administrations, acting as inquisitors, confessors, and bishops as well as urban and princely treasurers, missionaries, and ambassadors.⁸

⁴ Jens Röhrkasten, *The Mendicant Houses of Medieval London, 1221–1539* (Münster: Lit, 2004). See also Susan Reynolds, *An Introduction to the Study of English Medieval Towns* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 51, 85–6.

⁵ Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 19.

⁶ Gerald R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), pp. 49–95; Siegfried Wenzel, *Preachers, Poets, and the Early English Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); H. Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Alan J. Fletcher, *Late Medieval Popular Preaching in Britain and Ireland: Texts, Studies, and Interpretations* (Turnholt: Brepols, 2009).

⁷ David Knowles and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses: England and Wales* (London: Longman, 1971), pp. 33–7, 212–50. Around 900 further convents were established farther afield. See Ian B. Cowan and David E. Easson, *Medieval Religious Houses: Scotland* (second edition, London: Longman, 1976), pp. 114–42 and 152–5; Aubrey Gwynn and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses: Ireland* (London: Longman, 1970), pp. 208–305, 307–26; Richard W. Emery, *The Friars in Medieval France: A Catalogue of French Mendicant Convents, 1200–1550* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), pp. 1–17; John B. Freed, *The Friars and German Society in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Medieval Academy of America, 1977), pp. 22–3; John R. H. Moorman, *Medieval Franciscan Houses* (St Bonaventure: The Franciscan Institute, 1983), p. ix.

⁸ Clifford H. Lawrence, *The Friars: The Impact of the Early Mendicant Movement on Western Society* (London: Longman, 1994), pp. 166–201.

Thus, despite our polemicist's depicting them as 'newe ordres', fourteenth-century friars were hardly *arrivistes*; well over a century had elapsed since their initial settlement in England and throughout the Continent. Furthermore, and partly in order to distance themselves from their Dominican and Franciscan co-religionists, the Hermits traced their origins to Augustine's time in Late Antiquity and the Carmelites hailed Elijah the Prophet as their founder.⁹ Rather a different sense of newness is being invoked here, namely innovation or outright incongruence with the traditional structure of the church. Since their earliest days, mendicants were seen to blur the ancient distinction between the regular and secular clergy, that is, between monks and priests. The two latter groups comprised an ecclesiastical hierarchy founded on the examples of the original twelve Apostles and that of the seventy-two Disciples, respectively. These two orders—and they alone, as the argument ran—foreshadowed the structure of the church; and, as William of St Amour (d. 1272), the friars' most radical critic, put it, 'whence this third order emerged we do not know. And what lacks a reason must be extirpated'.¹⁰

William had a point. For centuries Apostles and Disciples, priests and monks, had played their assigned roles in the economy of Christian salvation. Overlaps and tensions notwithstanding, the former administered the sacraments, including the Eucharist, confession, and the last rites, to laymen, while the latter prayed in relative isolation for their own spiritual growth and for their patrons' and benefactors' souls. From the influential doctrinal perspective articulated by Pseudo-Dionysius in the early sixth century, priests were 'perfect', having been ordained by a line stretching back to Christ, while monks painstakingly advanced on the narrow path to Christian perfection.¹¹ To those who understood the church in such terms, a fundamental problem with the friars was that they carried out both priestly and monastic duties

⁹ Frances Andrews, *The Other Friars: The Carmelite, Augustinian, Sack and Pied Friars in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006); Andrew Jotischky, *The Carmelites and Antiquity: Mendicants and their Pasts in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁰ William of Saint-Amour's *De Periculis Novissimorum Temporum: An Introduction, Edition, and Translation*, ed. G. Geltner (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), pp. 52–3, citing Gratian, *Concordia discordantium canonum*, in *Corpus iuris canonici*, ed. Emil Friedberg (Leipzig: B. Tauchnitz, 1879), pt. I, dist. 68, c. v §1 (col. 255).

¹¹ For the text and its later medieval reception, see *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy: The Thirteenth-Century Paris Textbook Edition*, ed. L. Michael Harrington (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), especially Chapters 5–6.

while conforming in full to the strictures of neither. The friars' enormous success thus seemed to some to be undermining the very institution that they purported to uphold. It was only a small step to construe mendicants as dangerous hypocrites and to demand their removal from the hierarchy of the church.

It is into this ecclesiological fray that Chaucer and other medieval authors of fiction who employed friar-characters ostensibly entered.¹² Yet the assumption that the charges made by the mendicants' traditional critics were a central plank in the construction of Chaucer's Friar rests on rather weak foundations. For it is based, first, on insufficient familiarity with the history of opposition to medieval mendicants ('antifraternalism') and, secondly, on a limited view of Chaucer's sophistication as an estates satire poet.¹³ Insights recently gained into the social history of medieval antifraternalism, and current literary-historical analysis of the 'General Prologue', work together to support the suggestion that scholars who seek in this text precursors to nationalism, the Protestant Reformation, or even modern anticlericalism, as well as those who view Chaucer as championing a medieval form of conservatism, fundamentally misconstrue Huberd as a vehicle for promoting a partisan cause. Instead, the sophistication of his character and its role in the economy of the *Canterbury Tales* makes it not merely difficult but impossible to pin him down.

Chaucer as an antifraternal writer

Where Chaucer stood on the issues that occupied his early readers was often deemed paramount in securing his legacy as the father of modern English and *ipso facto* as an architect of Englishness.¹⁴ Both before but especially since the English Reformation, some readers have felt the need to identify Chaucer as the poet of change and progress, whatever specific content was poured

¹² May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century, 1307–1399* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), pp. 309–10, 503–4; M. H. Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages: A Political History* (London: Methuen, 1973), pp. 223–4.

¹³ Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

¹⁴ George Holmes, *The Later Middle Ages, 1272–1485* (London: Nelson, 1967), pp. 135–6 and n. 9.

into these elusive terms. Accordingly, in 1542 the *Canterbury Tales* was officially dropped from a list of forbidden books, and in 1570 John Foxe hailed Chaucer as a true Wycliffite, part of another trend that is often imagined as a precursor to the Reformation.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, it was in this period too that the probably apocryphal tale about Chaucer beating up a friar on Fleet Street appeared in English historiography, setting up a biographical parallel to his supposed literary critique.¹⁶ Chaucer was therefore connected to a specific kind of robust Englishness, and as the trajectory of the Tudor state and its separatist religious politics was tracked, the antifraternalism of the ‘General Prologue’ and the ‘Summoner’s Tale’ were commonly construed as a logical extension of the poet’s allegedly reformist or even anticlerical agenda.¹⁷

Modern heirs of this approach continue to emphasize Huberd’s negative traits (alongside those of other Ricardian-era fictional friars) and even to regard them as typical of real-life friars in general and as a metonym for the moral corruption of the Roman Catholic church, be it in England or farther afield.¹⁸ Down to the 1960s Huberd (along with Friar John in the ‘Summoner’s Tale’) were almost uniformly understood as deplorable characters, even by those, like Arnold Williams, who argued that both were plausible,

¹⁵ Derek Brewer, ed., *Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*, two volumes (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1978), 1: 98, 108.

¹⁶ John Gross, ed., *New Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 3. For this incident, see also Chapter 22, The Manciple.

¹⁷ See Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 146–91; Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 305–6.

¹⁸ Religious and literary historians continue to draw inspiration from one another in a self-perpetuating cycle. Thus Siegfried Wenzel’s article, ‘The Dominican Presence in Middle English Literature’, in Kent Emery Jr and Joseph P. Wawrykow, eds, *Christ among the Medieval Dominicans* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), pp. 315–31, undergirds the following remark by Marc B. Cels, ‘Reconciling Mendicant and Secular Confessors in late Medieval England’, *Journal of Medieval History*, 38 (2012), pp. 225–43, at 225, n. 1: ‘Gower and Chaucer’s friars are generic; Langland criticizes the friars generally before singling out disciples of first Francis and then Dominic for particular vitriol. Friars often stood for all clergy’. See also Cels, ‘Reconciling Mendicant and Secular Confessors in late Medieval England’, p. 228: ‘Chaucer’s criticism of the friars as greedy and rapacious disturbers of order probably appealed to his elite lay audience’—an observation building on Alcuin Blamires, ‘Chaucer the Reactionary: Ideology and the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*’, *Review of English Studies*, n.s., 51 (2000), pp. 523–39, at 533. See also Connie Brim, ‘The Development and Decline of British Antifraternal Literature’ (unpublished McMaster University Ph.D. dissertation, 1990), especially pp. 208–42.

albeit untypical, representations of real medieval mendicants.¹⁹ So strong was Williams's (and others') fixation on placing Chaucer on one side or the other of a clear ecclesiological divide, that the Friar's historical authenticity was seldom challenged.

This is not to deny that authors such as Gower and Langland may have inveighed against friars.²⁰ However, at least in the case of Chaucer's Friar Huberd, it is difficult to identify a clear agenda driving his depiction. For, on the one hand (and as the next section will show), there are many reasons to doubt that Chaucer was interested in criticizing friars *per se* in the 'General Prologue'. On the other, to the extent that he did engage in antifraternel polemics, he seems to have had deviant brethren in mind rather than religious mendicancy in general. Indeed, Chaucer, like most medieval authors of antifraternel screeds, sympathized with calls to reform erring friars and to curb their over-privileged orders rather than wishing to see the orders eradicated *per se*. It is crucial to distinguish between abolitionists and reform-minded critics of the friars (including members of the orders themselves), since the former approach is often implied to be typical of 'forward-looking' writers such as Chaucer, while in fact it is mostly limited to the reactionary writings of William of St Amour, the Hammer of the Friars.²¹

For all the havoc he created among Franciscans and despite his influence in shaping a literary tradition, William of St Amour, a Parisian secular theologian and author of the foundational antifraternel treatise *De periculis novissimorum temporum* (*On the Dangers of the Last Times*; 1254), received little support for his original agenda. *De periculis* depicted religious mendicants as ruthlessly strategic harbingers of the Antichrist and called on secular clergymen, as well as what William argued were dangerously naïve laymen, to recognize the friars as a dangerous threat that had to be flushed out of the church. In this attack, the brethren's hypocrisy is epitomized by their pious garb and behaviour, and seen as endemic to the orders in general rather than as a characteristic of certain deviant members. As such, it was futile to ask that the brethren's behaviour should simply be curbed since the mendicants were

¹⁹ Arnold Williams, 'Chaucer and the Friars', *Speculum*, 28 (1953), pp. 499–513.

²⁰ But see Lawrence M. Clopper, 'Songs of Recklessness': *Langland and the Franciscans* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

²¹ Penn R. Szittyá, *The Antifraternel Tradition in Medieval Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Michel-Marie Dufeil, *Guillaume de Saint-Amour et la polémique universitaire parisienne, 1250–1259* (Paris: Picard, 1972).

evil incarnate, with their social and moral deviancy being an inherent aspect of their preordained historical role.

De periculis influenced later authors in various ways, but contrary to what many scholars have assumed, implied, or argued, the radical agenda and the doctrinal argument behind it failed to gather much momentum, even if the Biblical stereotypes it invoked to describe the friars—of Pharisees, false apostles, and the followers of Antichrist—were influential in later polemics. Few, if any, critics before the sixteenth century, whether in England or elsewhere, and whether among professional theologians, authors of fiction or other members of late medieval society, argued that the friars were inherently evil or called for the abolition of their orders. Richard FitzRalph, archbishop of Armagh (d. 1360), and John Wyclif have been deemed exceptions to this rule, but the former explicitly denied he was pursuing such a line, and the latter, after years of expressly admiring the brethren, advised that they should be disbanded along with most forms of monasticism, which he saw as an illegitimate form of ‘private’ religion.²² Beyond these two men, the friars’ opponents both within and beyond the British Isles continued to comprise those who sought to limit rather than eliminate their unique privileges and legal status.

To be sure, Williamine *topoi* abound in contemporary and later writings, including—as we shall see—the *Canterbury Tales*. But virtually none of the authors of literary antifraternalism ever called for the mendicant orders’ eradication or suggested that nothing short of that would suffice. The same holds for the many clerics who confronted friars in ecclesiastical or secular tribunals.²³ They, like the friars’ more quotidian opposition, never challenged the ideal of religious mendicancy itself, but simply underscored the failure of certain brethren to emulate it, in similar vein to the usual ‘conservative’ critique of an estate or profession. Archival and narrative sources likewise attest the concerns of parents regarding the brethren’s

²² On the literary and theological *Nachleben* of *De periculis*, see Geltner, *The Making of Medieval Antifraternalism*, pp. 23–44.

²³ Robert N. Swanson, ‘The “Mendicant Problem” in the Later Middle Ages’, in Peter Biller and R. Barrie Dobson, eds, *The Medieval Church: Universities, Heresy, and the Religious Life. Essays in Honour of Gordon Leff*, Studies in Church History, Subsidia 11 (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1999), pp. 217–38, at 226, observes ‘the general lack of hostility to the mendicants—even among the secular clerics. There is no evidence of any deep streak of hostility towards the friars, certainly nothing which would entail their radical uprooting’.

immense influence on their children; of frustrated city elders who objected to their exemptions from property and inheritance taxes; of xenophobic urban residents who questioned their local loyalties; and of invading armies who assumed the opposite. Many had an axe to grind, and yet the notion that friars were somehow the church's self-destruct mechanism is scarcely documented.²⁴

It is hard therefore to connect opposition (broadly understood) to the friars with either an archconservative or a proto-Reformist camp. To the extent that Chaucer sought to promote an antifraternal agenda—and the next section will challenge that very premise—his estates satire should be seen as participating in a public chastisement of brethren behaving badly rather than as a concerted effort to cast religious mendicancy into the dustbin of history.

Fabricating the Friar

Some scholars have seen Chaucer's Friar, whose description follows on the heels of those of the Prioress and the Monk, as marking the nadir of an ecclesiastical moral deterioration traced by the 'General Prologue'.²⁵ Yet the portrait is also lodged between that of the Monk and the Merchant, and can thus be seen as straddling the rural, introspective world of the cloister and the dynamic world of the city.²⁶ Indeed, much like the Monk, Friar Huberd spends his time outside the convent and within his designated turf or 'limit', where he begs for alms, sings, preaches the gospel, and hears people's confessions (I: 218, 221–2, 235–6, 253–5). Unlike the activities of the Monk, however, the Friar's undertakings were regarded by the church as legitimate and staple occupations of the mendicant orders. In other words, from the standpoint of numerous contemporaries, there was nothing socially or doctrinally wrong in Huberd's routine, understood in general terms. Indeed, this intentional conflation of a *vita contemplativa* and a *vita activa* spotlights some of the unique tensions converging upon mendicant life, such as the desire for

²⁴ Geltner, *The Making of Medieval Antifraternalism*, pp. 45–102.

²⁵ Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 40. See also Chapter 8, The Monk.

²⁶ Nicholas Havely, 'Chaucer's Friar and Merchant', *ChR.*, 13 (1978–9), pp. 337–45.

a purer form of *imitatio Christi* and the need to make ends meet by begging for alms in an urban environment that displayed the extremes of wealth and poverty.

Nevertheless, the Friar does not simply embody numerous, though often conflicting, religious aspirations. Rather, his tendency to pursue baser passions instead of loftier goals seems to indicate that he has made certain choices, which in turn taint him as morally dubious, even a hypocrite. The company he keeps, the clothes he wears, the food he seeks (I: 216–7, 240–1, 248, 261–3)—all contrast sharply with the particular kind of humility and moral rigour espoused by any mendicant order. Moreover, these traits resonate with some of Christ’s original allegations against the Scribes and Pharisees, whom he targeted specifically for their self-righteousness, pride, and hypocrisy (Matthew 23: 23–4). Those who wish to see Huberd as representative of the friars’ moral decay will find this parallel with the Pharisees particularly damning. However, if his deviance is supposed to be personal (whether as a way of targeting erring brethren or as a means of creating comic effects), the irony is strong but contained.

Either way, nothing Huberd does seems right. Even the description of his manner and pursuit of begging (I: 252–2b) fits rather uncomfortably with what behoves an imitator of Christ. The aggressively transactional nature of his ministry, moreover, leaves little doubt as to where his priorities lie: ‘And over al, ther as profit sholde arise, / Curteis he was and lowely of servyse’ (I: 249–50). Most damning of all, perhaps, is Huberd’s refusal to associate with beggars and lepers,²⁷ the most obviously legitimate objects of urban charity (I: 242–8):

For unto swich a worthy man is he
 Acorded nat, as by his facultee,
 To have with sike lazars aqueytaunce.
 It is nat honest; it may nat avaunce,
 For to deelen with no swich poraille,
 But al with riche and selleres of vitaille.

Chaucer’s tracing of the contours of the Friar’s character does not end here, however. For beyond his avariciousness, Huberd is also sensuous (I: 238), affected (I: 264–5), and a flirt who carries trinkets, such as pins and knives,

²⁷ Carole Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), pp. 142–54.

'for to yiven faire wives' (I: 233–4). He is not merely a hypocrite, then, but also unmanly in ways that either gesture at the gender-bending underpinnings of traditional monastic life, underscore his hypersexuality, or both.²⁸

To complicate things further, Huberd exhibits certain traits that can be seen as charitable rather than sinister, and as conducive to social order rather than chaos, such as securing grooms for poor maidens 'at his owene cost' (I: 213). Though he does not come across as an altruistic character, it is nevertheless possible to respond positively to his jolly, outgoing spirit, and see this as indicative of an ability to get on well with the people he encounters socially. For it was not just the friars' humility that appealed to urban dwellers, or their allegedly easy penances (I: 223), but also their 'fair langage' (I: 211), of which some orders were rather proud. For the friars were trained to hone their debating and preaching skills and exhibited a love of learning; this was not limited to the Dominicans but was ideologically pursued by the followers of Francis as well. On the other hand, certain friars were accused of using their skills as speakers, their 'fair langage', to their own advantage, as a means of exhorting money and seducing women. Such a friar is ridiculed in the 'Summoner's Tale', and a more subtle form of that same ridicule is in play here.

Nor does the narrator attempt to elide the questionable moral logic of Huberd's fervent quest for alms. But, rather than this demonstrating the friars' (or one friar's) greed, what is being highlighted here are the institutional and the social circumstances of the mendicants' advent. This fictional friar, like many of his real-life equivalents, benefited immensely from the prevailing and papally sanctioned notion that 'unto a povre ordre for to yive / Is signe that a man is wel yshryve' (I: 225–6). Disposable income, a form of excess wealth, was the premise of the mendicants' urban mission, the bleeding wound that called for the friars' spiritual balm. Whether or not individual friars abused this privilege is one thing, but the practice itself was orthodox and, from a psychological (let alone a doctrinal) point of view, beneficial to their supporters; both friars and their lay patrons acted under the approving gaze of the papacy. However, Chaucer allows ample space for

²⁸ Lynda L. Coon, *Dark Age Bodies: Gender and Monastic Practice in the Early Medieval West* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), especially Chapters 3–4; C. David Benson, 'Chaucer's Pardoner: His Sexuality and Modern Critics', *Medievalia*, 8 (1982), pp. 337–46; Richard F. Green, 'The Pardoner's Pants and How They Matter', *SAC*, 15 (1993), pp. 131–45.

allegations of collusion (or merely reliance): ‘in stede of wepynge and preyeres, / Men moote yeve silver to the povre freres’ (I: 231–2). With readings of the kind illustrated above, recent generations of Chaucerians have underscored the open-endedness of the poet’s attitude to the friars, and argued that such an attitude can co-exist with the way in which this particular Friar is satirized for his many failings. Scholars from John Fleming to Jill Mann to Nicholas Havely have demonstrated how the Friar’s depiction, speech, and literary pedigree variously highlight the ambiguity of Chaucer’s position rather than placing him in one corner or the other of an ecclesiological debate.²⁹ In doing so they implicitly, and at times explicitly, adopted what Bakhtin would call a dialogic (or even polylogic) approach over a monologic one (see Chapter 1, Reading Chaucer: Literature, History, and Ideology). That is not to detract from the power and persuasiveness of each facet of Chaucer’s presentation of Huberd, but rather to celebrate Chaucer’s extraordinary talent, which lies partly in his ability to avoid an overt authorial voice.

Huberd and the antifraternal tradition

It would seem then that the ‘General Prologue’ leaves us wondering what Chaucer’s own attitude towards friars might have been. One could similarly leaf through *Chaucer’s Life-Records* and be none the wiser about this aspect of his religious biography, other than the (aforementioned and probably apocryphal) anecdote about him beating a friar on Fleet Street.³⁰ In lieu of further biographical materials to shed light on this matter, there are few paths that remain open to broadening the scope of a historical investigation. One way would be to try and establish, beyond Chaucer’s original intention, the range

²⁹ John V. Fleming, ‘The Antifraternalism of the *Summoner’s Tale*’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 65 (1966), pp. 688–700; John V. Fleming, ‘The Friars and Medieval English Literature’, in David Wallace, ed., *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 349–75; Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*; Nicholas Havely, ‘Chaucer, Boccaccio, and the Friars’, in P. Boitani, ed., *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 249–68; Patricia Anne Odber de Baubeta, *Anticlerical Satire in Medieval Portuguese Literature* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992).

³⁰ *Chaucer Life-Records*, *passim*.

of actual readers' responses to Huberd, of the kind that may be found inscribed in some of the margins of *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts and also in manuscripts of *Troilus and Criseyde*.³¹ However, in the case of the 'General Prologue', by and large, scribes, editors, readers, and illuminators responded to the Friar (as to certain other characters) with silence.³²

Another option is to situate Chaucer's Friar within a literary tradition and in analogy to another famous friar character, Jean de Meun's False Seeming in the *Roman de la Rose*, completed in the late thirteenth century. By this means we may illuminate Huberd as one stage in the development of long traditions of antifraternal literature and estates satire, traditions in which Chaucer was well-versed, and which he advanced brilliantly.³³ As a reader, translator, and adapter of Jean de Meun's part of the *Roman*, Chaucer knew False Seeming as the very image of Hypocrisy.³⁴ False Seeming's own stand on religious mendicancy is ambiguous, not least since he is quite literally unbelievable, a Cretan liar who embarks on a strategic confession to the baronial host he is eager to join, prior to the final assault on the castle of the Rose and the culmination of the *Roman*.³⁵

That many late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century readers of the *Roman* found False Seeming, Huberd's main textual progenitor, too mercurial to associate with a clear antifraternal statement is well documented. His confession has frequently been omitted, expanded, or redacted, and texts accompanied by his image attest to diverse efforts to obliterate his ambiguity,

³¹ Daniel S. Silvia, 'Glosses to the *Canterbury Tales* from St. Jerome's *Epistola Adversus Jovinianum*', *Studies in Philology*, 62 (1965), pp. 28–39; Graham D. Caie, 'The Significance of the Early Chaucer Manuscript Glosses (With Special Reference to "The Wife of Bath's Prologue")', *ChR*, 10 (1975–6), pp. 350–60; Malcolm Richardson, 'The Earliest Known Owners of "Canterbury Tales" MSS and Chaucer's Secondary Audience', *ChR*, 25 (1990–1), p. 17–32.

³² *The Canterbury Tales*, eds Robert Boening and Andrew Taylor (second edition, Petersborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2012), pp. 50–1. Nor is the silence broken by the marginalia to the 'Summoner's Tale' in this edition.

³³ Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales*, pp. 294–320; Szittyá, *The Antifraternal Tradition*, pp. 231–46.

³⁴ *The Romaunt of the Rose and Le Roman de la Rose: A Parallel-Text Edition*, ed. Ronald Sutherland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968); Robert R. Raymo, 'The Friar', in Robert M. Correale, ed., *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, volume two (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), pp. 25–8. False Seeming may in turn be based on the poet Rutebeuf's 'Du Pharisien' and 'De Maistre Guillaume de Saint Amour'. See *Cœuvres Complètes de Rutebeuf*, vol. 1, eds Edmond Faral and Julia Bastin (Paris: Picard, 1959), pp. 251–5, 258–66.

³⁵ *Le Roman de la Rose par Guillaume de Lorris et Jean de Meun*, volume three, ed. Ernest Langlois (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1921), ll. 10999–12009.

for instance by depicting him as a member of a mendicant order or (more often) as a Benedictine monk.³⁶ Textual and iconographical studies thus suggest that some audiences found it easier to situate False Seeming within the broader tradition of estates satire than that of antifraternal polemics, while others clearly pulled in an opposite direction, most notably by interpolating the original confession with a later passage that inveighed against the privileges friars had secured and defended since 1282, that is after the poem's completion. Yet another method of disambiguating False Seeming's character was to attribute the entire poem to William of St Amour, thereby infusing it with a well-known partisan voice.³⁷

But is the medieval reception of False Seeming a useful model or analogy for the interpretation of Huberd? The probability that Chaucer, an accomplished translator of the *Roman*, was familiar with the attempts to attribute the poem to William as well as with the interpolation and its purpose, suggest that it is.³⁸ For, as we have seen, Huberd is equally hard to pin down as a means of achieving an understanding of Chaucer's personal views on religious mendicancy. It is likely that, on this particular matter as on so many others, he consciously tried to steer clear of a position of authority.

³⁶ Sylvia Huot, *The Romance of the Rose and its Medieval Readers: Interpretation, Reception, Manuscript Transmission* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); G. Geltner, 'Faux Semblants: Antifraternalism Reconsidered in Jean de Meun and Chaucer', *Studies in Philology*, 101 (2004), pp. 357–80; Timothy L. Stinson, 'Illumination and Interpretation: The Depiction and Reception of Faus Semblant in *Roman de la Rose* Manuscripts', *Speculum*, 87 (2012), pp. 469–98.

³⁷ Ernst Langlois, *Les manuscrits du Roman de la Rose: description et classement* (Lille and Paris: Honoré Champion, 1910), pp. 426–30. See Langlois, *Roman de la Rose*, pp. 11, 25, 83, 127, 190, and 131, for manuscripts in which the *Roman* is attributed to William of St Amour.

³⁸ Geltner, 'Faux Semblants', pp. 369–76.

The Friar's Tale and the next one, The Summoner's Tale, belong together as a unit because the Friar tells an uncomplimentary tale about a corrupt summoner, and the Summoner, in his turn, tells an uncomplimentary tale about a corrupt friar. The reader should remember that in spite of the personal animosity between the Friar and the Summoner, the greater quarrel is about the importance and validity of their respective professions. The Friar commends the Wife of Bath for her tale, and then says, in line with his promise between the Wife's Prologue and Tale, that he will tell a tale about a summoner. He does not wish to offend the Summoner who travels with them, but insists that summoners are known for fornication and lewd behavior. The Summoner, on the surface at least, does not take offense, but does indicate that he will "œquit" the Friar in turn. The Friar's Tale, one of the 24 stories in *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer. The Friar relates the comeuppance of a corrupt summoner—an ecclesiastical court officer—in a story based on a medieval French fabliau. The summoner befriends a bailiff, who is the devil in disguise, and the two. Thank you for your feedback. Our editors will review what you've submitted and determine whether to revise the article. Join Britannica's Publishing Partner Program and our community of experts to gain a global audience for your work! The English term Friar is derived from the Norman French word *free* ("brethren"), from the Latin *frater* ("brother"), which was widely used in the Latin New Testament to refer to members of the Christian community. The Dominicans, founded c. 1216. They are also known as the "Friar Preachers", or the "Black Friars", from the black mantle ("cappa") worn over their white habit. A friar is a brother and a member of one of the mendicant orders founded in the twelfth or thirteenth century; the term distinguishes the mendicants' itinerant apostolic character, exercised broadly under the jurisdiction of a superior general, from the older monastic orders' allegiance to a single monastery formalized by their vow of stability. The most significant orders of friars are the Dominicans, Franciscans, Augustinians and Carmelites.