



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET
INST FÖR SPRÅK OCH LITTERATURER
ENGELSKA

Germanic and French adjectives in The Canterbury Tales

How are etymologically different adjectives used in the
General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales?

Sanne Eriksson

Kandidatuppsats
HT 2012

Handledare:
Jennifer Herriman
Examinator:
Monika Mondor

Title: *Germanic and French adjectives in the Canterbury Tales: How are etymologically different adjectives used in the General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales?*

Author: Sanne Eriksson

Supervisor: Jennifer Herriman

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to investigate how etymologically different adjectives are used in the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*. Are etymologically French adjectives used for people of higher society and are therefore the Germanic ones reserved for the people of a lower social class? In order to find out, *The Canterbury Tales* was read in its original 14th century language and the adjectives were taken out and investigated. The etymology of the adjectives were researched and subsequently composed on each character, after which I compared the individual results with each other. The conclusion of this investigation is that Chaucer definitely used adjectives with French etymology for certain people, however the usage of them has nothing to do with social class. Instead he simply used the most appropriate adjectives in order to create nuanced and rich characters and sometimes satire. He must therefore have been aware and knowledgeable of the etymology of the adjectives, but utilised that not in order to reflect class but to differentiate between the characters and their individual personalities.

Keywords: French, Germanic, adjectives, etymology, General Prologue, *The Canterbury Tales*.

Table of contents	Page
1. Introduction	4
1.1 Aim	4
1.2 Background	5
1.3 Characters	6
1.4 Previous Study	8
2. Design of the present study	10
2.1 Material	10
2.2 Method	10
3. Result & Discussion	11
3.1 The Etymology of the Adjectives	11
3.2 The Etymology of Adjectives used for each separate character	12
4. Conclusion	17
References	20
Appendix	21
Appendix 1: Adjectives in the General Prologue	21
Appendix 2: Adjectives for each character.	23

1. Introduction

The few centuries between the 11th and 15th are historically called the High to Late Middle Ages and during this time the majority of the people of Britain spoke what is now known as Middle English. Middle English was a mix between French and an earlier form of English called Old English. Languages are not, however, so easily labelled and the two distinct languages co-existed for some time before they started to merge together creating a new language.

The 11th century posed many changes to the English people. It was an era with many social and political developments and the language at the time reflects that. When the French-speaking Normans invaded the British Isles in 1066, it altered the entire political structure of the country, as well as the social structure and subsequently also the language. England became a socially divided country where the main body of the population spoke Old English whilst also having a ruling aristocracy that spoke French. A direct result of the French-speakers was an increased vocabulary and by the late 12th, early 13th century this fusion of Old English and French has become a language of its own (Crystal, 2000: 30-33). Sources from this time period are scarce but one of the few texts that have survived in its original Middle English language is the Canterbury Tales. The text, albeit fragmented, can serve as a portal 600 years back in time, as it creates a way to understand and to experience the time when it was written.

1.1 Aim

The main focus of this essay is the General Prologue in the Canterbury Tales. It will specifically look at adjectives describing the characters that have descriptions in the prologue. This paper will focus on the etymology of all the adjectives and if there is any correlation to whom the words describe i.e. are Germanic adjectives used to describe people of lower social standing and subsequently are the French ones used for people of a higher social class. Are quite simply to the social aspects of England during this period featured in this part of the text? Or has Chaucer simply used the most descriptive and appropriate word regardless of their etymology.

Is it possible to detect class issues from a single word? In a language such as English this is definitely a possibility. Because of the French influence after 1066 the language changed and became something new. Modern English is such an expressive language where you can state things of the same meaning in many different ways because of the incorporation of words with different etymological backgrounds. The following example, not only illustrates the increased vocabulary, but also how social status can be represented in everyday language. The animals are called *cow* or *ox*, *sheep* and *swine/pig* while the different meats are named *beef*, *mutton* and *pork*. The animal names are derived from Old English and are etymologically Germanic, while the food names originate from French. This is quite simply because the English or British raised and kept the animals, and the French aristocracy ate them. Another example is the word *king*, which is etymologically Germanic, it has two synonyms in *royal* and *regal*, from French *royale* and Latin *rex* (Mobärg, 13-09-2011).

1.2 Background

Geoffrey Chaucer was born around 1343 in London. Both his father and grandfather were vintners (wine merchants) and came from a line of Ipswich merchants. In comparison to contemporaries such as William Langland, of whom we know virtually nothing, Chaucer was a public servant and therefore his life was well documented. As a teenager Chaucer was brought to the court of Elizabeth de Burgh to work as a page to the duchess. Via this position he was introduced to the inner court circles where he stayed in employment for most of his life. Chaucer had many different titles during his life, working among other things as a courtier, a diplomat and a civil servant. Because of this he was an avid traveller and a frequent visitor of continental Europe. It is believed that he went to France in July 1368 as he was issued a warrant to receive a license to cross with the ferry to Calais. Whether he travelled further down in Europe or stayed in Calais is not known today, but he did not return to England for another three months. In 1372 he was also commissioned to go to Italy to talk with the Doge of Genoa (Brewer, 1996:98). Towards the end of his life, during the period when he wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, he lived in Kent. At first he was working as a customs officer, before being elected Justice of the Peace and Knight of the shire. The latter meant that he would be representing Kent at the parliament on the 1st of October 1386. Because of these

appointments it is natural to assume that Chaucer was, at least toward the end of his life, a landowner (Brewer, 1996:156).

The Canterbury Tales was written in the later years of Chaucer's life and the outline of the story with the different storytellers had been used many times before. Therefore Chaucer merely followed what was a medieval tradition. The most famous of these previous works was written by Chaucer's contemporary Boccaccio and called *The Decameron*, which was published in 1353. *The Decameron* is about a group of people who end up together while escaping the plague in Florence, and to pass the time they decide to tell stories. *The Canterbury Tales* is similar, and about a group of people who meet at an inn while on their way to Canterbury Cathedral on a pilgrimage. They agree to tell stories as a competition where the person telling the "best" story gets a free meal at the inn where they met, called Tabard inn. *The Canterbury Tales* is not a finished piece of literature, so we do not get all the stories nor do we know who "won". Although one cannot be certain that Chaucer ever read *The Decameron*, one can be sure that he must have been aware of the genre of story-collections (Cooper, 1983: 8-9).

The life of Chaucer is important when one looks at *The Canterbury Tales* because it is clearly reflected within the tale. Chaucer came into contact with all members of society, with foreign courts and subsequently foreign languages and this is clearly visible in *The Canterbury Tales*, whether he meant it to be or not. Chaucer lived through most of the 14th century and experienced many of the changes that occurred during this era. To name only a few there was the Avignon Papacy in 1309-1379, which later resulted in the Western Schism of the church. There was the peasant revolt in 1381 and the start of the hundred years' war in 1337. These events changed the way people thought about and saw the world. It sparked questions on life, which probably were not new, but could no longer be left unanswered. Important questions such as; how should society be ruled? Or to what extent were people in charge of their own lives? Perhaps people should be more in charge of their own lives and not leave everything up to either the state or church anymore (Bisson, 2000: 7-10).

1.3 Characters

In the beginning of the Prologue Chaucer writes " *Wel nyne and and twenty in a companye, Of sondry folk, by aventure Y-falle*"- therefore we can conclude that there are a total of twenty-nine characters. Twenty-six of these have a section in the Prologue and

only twenty-four of them a tale. In the General Prologue the characters described include the Knight and with him his son, the Squire, and a Yeoman. There is a Prioress, a Monk, a Friar, and a Merchant. Then there is the Clerk, the Sergeant-at-Law and the Franklin. A Haberdasher, a Carpenter, a Weaver, a Dyer, a Tapestry-maker and the Wife of Bath. There is the Cook, the Shipman, the Physician, the Parson and the Ploughman. Lastly there is the Miller, the Reeve, the Pardoner, the Summoner and the Manciple. The different characters are quite obviously from differing parts of society and one would expect therefore that they are described accordingly.

However, before continuing there is something that needs to be sorted; what is meant by the term finer or higher society? Historically it is the part of society that is aristocratic and therefore usually rich, and because of this wealth and power they are in a higher class than for example peasants. In literature this is of importance as the people most likely to be able to read longer text were aristocrats. Exactly how literate the general public of the Middle Ages were is difficult to measure. However, due to an increased number of texts produced, most people could probably read at least single words and then perhaps put it together. For most though, reading a text such as *The Canterbury Tales* would have been very difficult. Since stories and texts were mostly read by the upper classes, writers would ascribe as many good and sophisticated qualities to the people within that social group as possible (Goldberg, 2004: 267-69). The Knight and The Prioress, for example, should belong to this finer society and indeed they do have attributes such as gentle, reputable, amiable and dignified, while characters such as the Miller have fewer words all together and not as sophisticated ones. This might then be an indication to the usage of French adjectives, but to really find out one must dig deeper. Before we do that though there are more aspects to be dealt with.

Scholars have long agreed to disagree when it comes to in which order the characters come, in both description in the Prologue and in telling their tales. The theories are therefore many and varied. Some, for example, say that there is not an order, that Chaucer just put them in at random. While others would have it that there is a distinct order, the most common theories being that they are ordered due to social and/or economical status in some way (Nevo, ed. Bloom 1988: 9-20). Coghill (1967) argues that Chaucer has selected the characters and the telling of their stories in an order based on profession and economy. He puts the characters into five groups. By being a part of the landowning aristocracy the Knight naturally features high on the

income list, so does the Prioress, Monk and Friar. In the next group we have the self-made men such as the Merchant, the Sergeant of Law and the Franklin. After that we have the Guildsmen such as the Dyer, the Doctor and the Wife of bath (she is the widow of a Tradesman). The Parson, the Miller and the Ploughman follow, as people of peasant origin, and they in turn come before the last group, consisting of the Manciple, Reeve, Summoner and Pardoner.

According to Nevo (in Bloom, 1988), who uses Coghill's theory, this economic division is the most probable, as the other theories do not stand up to further scrutiny. Nevo (in Bloom, 1988) argues that if social class is the case, why then is the mendicant friar "above" the wealthy Merchant. This simply does not work. Nor, she states, does a secular/religious angle. This is why some scholars are tempted to say that there is no order at all, a claim, which Nevo refutes. Instead she agrees with Coghill and the economic order i.e. that the characters are put in order retaining to wealth and how that wealth had been acquired. The highest ranked person economically is therefore the Knight, the Prioress and the Friar, amongst others. While the lowest of them are the men with the professions of Manciple, Reeve, Summoner and Pardoner, of which the Pardoner is the very last. According to Coghill and Nevo, the reason these four are last is because have not created an income from owning property or having a trade. Instead they have to negotiate their salary and therefore have a parasitic position in society (Nevo, ed. Bloom, 1988: 9-20). This division of society within the text is certainly interesting, and it will be interesting to see if this study can somehow strengthen or weaken this and/or other theories.

1.4 Previous studies

An important point of research that is of interest for this essay is how English has been influenced through the centuries. Miller (2012: 160-64) discusses the French influence on English and how authors such as Chaucer and Gower utilised this. According to Miller, it is an established fact that Chaucer used a "specialised vocabulary" retaining to certain characters. Miller (2012) goes on by referring to a study made by Hughes (1988) where he compiled all the words in each of the characters' descriptions and subsequently compared the Prioress's section to the Miller's. The Prioress has 68 words in total, of which 14 are etymologically French. While the Miller has a total of 63 words but only two are of French origin (2012:163). This is not however conclusive evidence

that French words are used to refer to a person of higher class, only that in this case that certainly seems to be the case. On further scrutiny though there are occurrences that suggest that there can be more than one way of using etymologically French words. Miller goes on by discussing other works on the subject, such as Pons-Sanz (2012). She has examined the characters in the General prologue and, according to her, there can be many reasons why Chaucer borrowed and used the words that he did. Besides from what might be considered the most prominent factor i.e. the characterisation and most evidently the eloquence and sophistication that French words might bring, French words were also used to create nuance. She mentions Chaucer's evident ability to create nuance and satire by mixing the etymologies of the words. According to her there was also an inferiority complex present in many writers of this age. There was an idea that English was a second-class language, therefore the writers of that age needed to compensate for that by borrowing words from French and Latin (Miller 2012: 163).

Hughes (1988) discusses how this borrowing took place and the subsequent development of the English language. Most words representing other things than the absolute basic were most often borrowed from influencing languages. The exception is the Scandinavian languages and their influence on English. The reason being that the Vikings that came over to England were not superior or inferior, but on equal terms. The borrowing of Scandinavian words was therefore not a class issue. Hence basic or 'neutral' vocabulary includes words with Anglo-Saxon origins, such as *house* or *food*, but also etymologically Scandinavian words such as *leg*, *window* and *sister*. French, Latin and Greek words and phrases, on the other hand, only became incorporated when the need for nuance or innovation arose. Hughes explains it further by saying

“The Norman-French terms will usually have associations of rank, courtliness and refinement, while the Latin and Greek will frequently have connotations of learning, science and abstraction.”(Hughes, 1988: 20)

Chaucer had, much like Shakespeare 200 years later, a deep understanding of his language and that gave him the possibility to use and play these “differing word-stocks” against each other creating nuance and satire (Hughes, 1988: 18-20).

Aside from the linguistic works, there is much research from an historical perspective i.e. how you can see historical aspects in the way it is written or what you can tell about Chaucer as an historical character from reading it. Bisson (2000) states

that the man Chaucer and his opinions about politics and religion shine through the Canterbury Tales and via that his stance on classes. She believes that the satirical way in which he deals with members of the clergy is a representation on his own religious views in some of the issues that came into light during the 14th century. According to Bisson it is clear that Chaucer was willing to see a change in how the church was run and how it interacted with people and that this is visible through *The Canterbury Tales* and its language. Bisson paints Chaucer as a man who mixed with aristocracy, royalty, peasants and clergy alike, a man who was highly aware of social class and its issues. An awareness that is used in *The Canterbury Tales*, especially in character descriptions and subsequently these character's stories. Chaucer uses French as more than just refinement words, they add as I have mentioned in the previous section, an extra layer of nuance. This is viewable in some of the descriptions about the members of the clergy, as they seem to like activities not appropriate for their profession. This is then where you can clearly see Chaucer's criticism of the Church (Bisson, 2000: 49-71).

However on this subject there are, as always, conflicting ideas and Cooper (1996) states:

different genres give different readings of the world: the fabliau scarcely notices the operations of God, the saint's life focuses on those at the expense of physical reality, tracts and sermons insist on prudential or orthodox morality, romances privilege human emotion. The sheer number of varying persons and stories renders the Tales as a set unable to arrive at any definite truth or reality, (Cooper, 1996 p. 21).

This suggests that it is precarious to try and discern any sense of reality or realism both about the characters and the author by reading *The Canterbury Tales*, as the personalities and their realities display such a vast spectrum of opportunities.

2. Design of the Present Study

2.1 Material

The primary material in this study is naturally *The Canterbury Tales*, but as the original is difficult to get hold of, the resource that has been used as the primary source is a non-translated version of it. For extra reference and to make the text more understandable when reading it, a translated version has also been used.

- The non-translated version can be found in the book *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteen Tales and The General Prologue; Authoritative Text, Sources and Backgrounds, Criticism* (Kolve & Glending, 2005)
- The translated version is a part of the *Oxford World's Classics. The Canterbury Tales*. (Wright, 2011)

2.2 Method

The method of this study has been quite straightforward: the main objectives have been to read, investigate, compose and discuss. To be able to execute this investigation it was essential to read the original version of the General Prologue, i.e. not a translated one.

After the books were read the adjectives were singled out and investigated.

The adjectives in this study are the ones that directly relate to the characters and are parts of the characters' descriptions. Therefore any adjectives describing their clothing, equipment and horses etc. have not been included. Research into the origins of the adjectives and their meaning were done, after which they were counted, compiled and analysed to try and detect any pattern in their usages. To easily find out the origins and meanings of words the Oxford English Dictionary Online

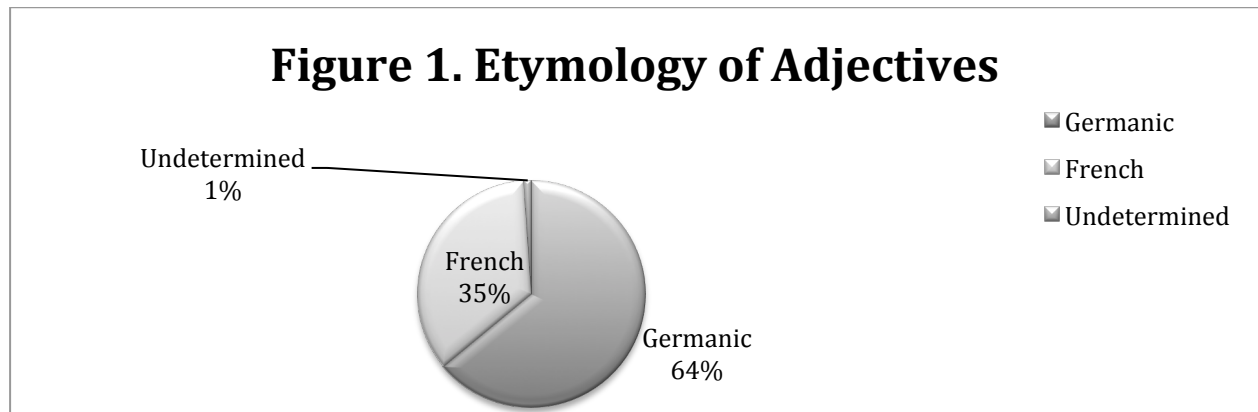
(<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.ub.gu.se/>) was used. Pure etymology and meanings have primarily been taken from this dictionary, but there have also been times when a more understandable context has been needed. Therefore the Oxford World's Classics translated version of *The Canterbury Tales* (transl. Wright, 2011) has been necessary to use as well.

3. Result

In this chapter I will present the results of the investigation, after which there is a discussion where the results are evaluated. The section contains one graph, showing an overall view on all adjectives and the total percentage each etymology has amongst the adjectives. It also contains a graph where the aim is to demonstrate how many adjectives of the different etymologies each character has.

3.1. The Etymology of the Adjectives

Altogether 164 adjectives were found. Of these 56 have French etymology. Therefore words with Germanic etymology outnumber the ones with French origins. Germanic words are, as mentioned, more prevalent with a percentage of 64, whilst French words are the minority and are represented at 35%; the remaining 1% are words with an undetermined etymology.



3.2 The Etymology of Adjectives used for each separate character

Table 1 shows more closely how the words with different etymology are placed in the individual sections about characters. There are four separate categories; one for words with Germanic etymology, one for words with French etymology, one for those which are undetermined and one showing the total number of adjectives found for each character. The guildsmen (the Haberdasher, Carpenter, Weaver, Dyer and Tapestry-maker) are not described individually in the General Prologue; instead, they are described as a group and therefore used as such in this table.

Table 1. The Etymology of Adjectives used for each separate character.	Germanic:	French:	Undetermined:	Total:
The Knight	6	4	0	10
The Squire	5	3	1	8
The Yeoman	2	0	0	2
The Prioress	5	11	0	16
The Monk	5	2	1	8
The Frere	10	7	0	17
The Merchant	2	2	0	4

Character:	Germanic:	French:	Undetermined:	Total:
The Clerk	3	1	0	4
Sergeant of Lawe	6	2	0	8
The Franklyn	3	3	0	6
The Haberdassher, Carpenter,Webbe, Dyere & Tapicer	3	1	0	4
The Cook	0	0	0	0
The Shipman	4	1	0	5
The Doctour of Physik	0	3	0	3
The Wife of Bath	9	0	0	9
The Parsoun	7	7	0	14
The Plowman	2	0	0	2
The Miller	10	2	0	12
The Maunciple	0	1	1	2
The Reve	7	2	1	10
The Somonour	7	4	0	11
The Pardoner	5	2	2	9

What then are the results? Well the first thing that needs to be established is how many adjectives of the two different etymological branches each character has and as the French adjectives are less common overall they will be the starting point. The person with the most etymologically French adjectives is the Prioress, who has 11 in her description, closely followed by the Friar and the Parson who each have seven French adjectives. Then there is the Knight and the Summoner who both have four, followed by the Squire, the Franklin and the Doctor who have three each. There are six characters that each have a total of two etymologically French adjectives, the Monk, the Merchant, the Sergeant of Law, The Miller, the Reeve and the Pardoner. Lastly there are a total of four characters with one French adjective each, the Clerk, the Guildsmen, the Shipman and the Manciple. Technically, if one counts the Guildsmen individually there are eight, but the Guildsmen are put together as a group in the table and they are described as a group, therefore in this case they are used as such. There are four characters that only have Germanic or no adjectives in their descriptions, the Yeoman, the Cook (who has none), the Wife of Bath and the Ploughman.

The etymologically French adjectives and the part they play do not, however, become evident until we also take the Germanic ones into account. There are two characters that have the highest number of Germanic adjectives (10), the Friar and the Miller, closely

followed by the Wife of Bath, who has nine. Then there is the Parson, the Reeve and the Summoner with seven each, followed by the Knight and the Sergeant of Law with six Germanic adjectives. There are four characters with five Germanic words, the Squire, the Prioress, the Monk and the Pardoner. The shipman has four and the Clerk, the Franklin and the Guildsmen have three. There are three characters with two Germanic adjectives, the Yeoman, the Merchant and the Ploughman. Lastly there are three characters that have no Germanic adjectives, the Doctor, the Manciple and the Cook, who has none whatsoever.

In conclusion then, the majority of characters, 18 out of 26, have a higher number of Germanic adjectives. Some have a slightly higher percentage, this includes characters such as the Knight (6/10), the Squire (6/9), the Monk (5/8), the Pardoner (5/9) and the Clerk (3/4). Some of them such as the Miller (9/11), the Guildsmen (3/4) and the Shipman (3/4) have a very high percentage of Germanic adjectives. Only in six descriptions does the number of etymologically French adjectives exceed or equal the Germanic ones. This occurs in the descriptions of the Prioress (11/16), the Parson (7/14), the Franklin (3/6), the Merchant (2/4), the Manciple (1/2) and the Doctor (3/3). The Doctor is the only character to only have etymologically French words. There are also, as previously mentioned, four characters who have no etymologically French adjectives, the Yeoman, the Ploughman, the Wife of Bath and the Cook (who has none).

The results from this are not at first exceptionally conclusive or clear. There is a tendency, certainly, to use etymologically French words for certain people. However, as we can see in the previous section these people are not all a part of the higher social classes. Therefore the conclusion can be drawn that they are not always used to add sophistication. The other usage of French adjectives that has been discussed in this paper is that they are utilised to create nuance and/or satire. This then poses further inquiries such as, who are the characters where it is satire as opposed to sophistication? And how do we distinguish between the two?

When looking at the characters with the absolute highest number of French adjectives, the Prioress, the Friar, the Parson, the Knight, the Summoner and the Doctor (who is important, as he only has etymologically French adjectives) they can, based on the adjectives and character descriptions, be put into two groups. The first consisting of the Parson, the Knight and the Doctor and the second consisting of the Prioress, the Friar and the Summoner. The characteristics that seem to bind the first three together is that

they are good at their individual jobs. They are, in short, credits to their professions. The Parson is, for example, *benigne, diligent, noble, (not) despitous, pacient, povre* and *vertous*. Furthermore when Chaucer writes about the characters it is mostly positive “A good man ther was of religioun” and “By good ensample, this was his business” and lastly “A bettre preest I trowe that nowher noon is” (Kolve & Glending, 2005: 14-15).

The Knight is also portrayed as a credit to his knighthood and as an important member of society. His section includes the French adjectives *gentil, parfit, soveryen* and *verray*, as in “he was a verray, parfit, gentil knight” meaning in short that he was the perfect knight (2005:4). Some would argue, amongst others Terry Jones (1985), that the Knight should be featured in the second group i.e. with the characters where the description is more satirical and they are not credits to their professions. He argues that the Knight is scum of the earth, a man who preys on fellow Christians to make money and that there is nothing honest and virtuous about him at all. This could naturally be the case, but if we look at the overall picture it seems that if Chaucer meant to be satirical it would be visible, at least more visible than it is in this particular characters’ section. Therefore in this paper he is featured as he seems to be described, as a perfect, kind and gentle knight.

Moving on instead with the Doctor, who has three French adjectives *parfit* and *verray*, as in a *verray* (true) practitioner. “In al this world ne was ther noon him lyk” and “he knew the cause of everich maladye” (2005:12-13).

Contrastingly, the thing that seems to bind the other three together is that they are not outstanding members of society or of their profession. The two characters who represent the clergy are perhaps not exemplary members of their guild. The Friar’s description contains seven etymologically French adjectives, *curteys, famuliar, murye, noble, pleausant, solempne* and *vertuous*, but it seems as if these are there for satirical effect. Chaucer writes, “He hadde maad ful many a mariage, Of yonge wommen, at his coste” and two lines further down “ful wel biloved and famuliar was he”. Chaucer continues with his description of the Friar with lines such as “Ful swetely herde he confessioun And pleausant was his absolucioun” and “ther was no man nowher so vertous (capable), he was the beste beggere in his hous” (Kolve & Glending, 2005: 7-9). The Friar’s paragraph is one of the longer ones in the General Prologue, which might explain why the total number of adjectives is as many as 17, the longer the text the more

adjectives are generally used. The reason it is quite long might be that Chaucer needed that amount of text to get all the aspects of the Friar across to the reader.

The next character is the Prioress. In *The Canterbury Tales* there are some characters that would, quite clearly, be a part of a higher class in society, and the Prioress is one as she has servants and companions etc. As previously mentioned, the Prioress has the most etymologically French adjectives. Can we, however, be sure that the French adjectives used on her are supposed to make her seem more sophisticated? Most of her description is about her appearance and her attempts to seem graceful and ladylike in areas such as singing and eating. Chaucer for example writes “ful wel she song the service divine, entuned in hir nose ful semely” meaning in short that she sang through her nose. He continues with “And frensh she spoke ful faire and fetiysly (elegantly), after the scole of Stratford ate Bowe, For Frensh of Paris was to hire unknowe” (2005: 6). So she spoke French, just not proper French of France but a muddled English variety. More to the point is that there is not one single sentence, in her entire paragraph, which is quite long, that actually describes her abilities to run a convent. Leading to the conclusion that she tries very hard to look the part of a fine lady but is in the end unsuccessful to do so.

The Summoner, on the other hand, has, via his position as a summoner, a parasitic function in society. He depends on others to make a living rather than having a trade of his own. Therefore he is also in this group, and he is described as among other things “a gentil harlot” (a proper rascal) (2005: 18).

In conclusion then the results of this investigation seem to concur with the theory that French adjectives are used for two main reasons, one to make it understood that they are characters worthy of esteem, usually more due to personality and personal qualities than class and the second is for satire. What does this then mean when applied to the characters with no etymologically French adjectives? Does it mean that they are only to be mocked and therefore not refined characters?

As previously mentioned there are four characters that do not have any French adjectives at all, the Yeoman, the Ploughman, the Wife of Bath and the Cook (who does not have any). The feature that these characters have in common is that they seem to be quite rough characters that Chaucer seems to have a more positive view of, which becomes clear if we compare them to for example the Miller. The good Wife of Bath for example is described as *fair, worthy, bold* and *good*. She is also *deef, gat-tothed, large,*

reed and *wrooth* but when putting these perhaps less flattering adjectives into context, neither of them is derogatory. For example she gets *wrooth* (angry) if another woman in the parish would exceed her in almsgiving. What these characters seem to have in common is that they appear to be a bit rough, either in the way they talk, act or in the line of work that they do, and therefore they do not have any French adjectives. This is not necessarily meant as derogatory, because as a reader there is still a feeling that these are amiable characters. Instead Chaucer, who knew his audience very well, might have assumed that putting in French adjectives would be seen as mockery, and because these characters were not to be mocked, he kept to the appropriate Germanic adjectives. If we again use the Summoner as an example, and compare him to the Ploughman it becomes increasingly clear how the French adjectives are used as a whole. The Summoner has a total of 11 adjectives, four of them French. The first is *Cherubines* referring to the form of his face, two of them are derogatory, *lecherous* and *sawceeflem* (afflicted with disease) and the fourth one is *gentil*. *Gentil* is often used by Chaucer and has many meanings; it can mean kind, noble (the meaning in the Knight's description) or proper, which is how it is used on the Summoner, "He was a gentil harlot (rascal) and a kinde" (natural one) (Kolve & Glending, 2005:18). These adjectives does not shed much positive light on this character, hence they are used to, once again, create satire rather than sophistication. The Ploughman, on the other hand, is without any French adjectives in his description, instead he has two Germanic ones *trewe* (true, steadfast) and *good* as in "a trewe swinkere" (worker) and "good was he" (2005:15). In the end the lasting impression one gets about these characters is that the Summoner is a red-faced, proper rascal who seems to enjoy being what he is while the Ploughman is a hard and steadfast worker who simply tries to get by.

There is, as mentioned, only one character, the Cook, who has no adjectives in his section. Instead he is depicted with the usage of adverbs such as "ful wel" (very well). The lack of adjectives in the Cook's introduction is an interesting matter and in itself it is a result. The conceivable notion for why this might be is that he is a servant to the Guildsmen and therefore not that important. However seeing as he, much like the Yeoman (who is in the service of the Knight) has a section describing him, he must have been seen as somewhat important. Or perhaps Chaucer felt, again much like the Yeoman, that there was something to be done with these two characters. They have a profession of their own, something that they are proficient in, even though they are serving

someone else. Their counterparts, the Nun and the Monk (in the company of the Prioress), are what their titles imply. They live under quite restrictive rules and regulations and are not perhaps in Chaucer's mind professionals. Perhaps, therefore, there was not much more to be said about those figures, while both the Cook and Yeoman were important characters in the everyday activities of the company. Perhaps it is because of this involvement that they are described in the first place, as well as being comical characters.

4. Conclusion

The Canterbury Tales is an important piece of literature, especially as a source of Middle English language, but also as a literary and historical piece. It can tell us, living in the 21st century, much about life 600 years ago, perhaps more than many history books as it gives us an insight into the mind of a Middle English speaking Englishman. During this investigation I have learned much about both *The Canterbury Tales* and the Middle English Language. The Norman conquest of England is the first piece of the puzzle that gave the English language the vast vocabulary it has today. It gave writers, such as Chaucer, the ability to be even more creative and inventive with their words and terminology.

The aim of this investigation was to examine how Chaucer uses adjectives in describing his characters. The initial theory was that there might be a co-relation between the character and the etymological background of the adjectives used to describe said character. The main question asked in the beginning was: Are etymologically French adjectives used to describe people of higher social classes and are the Germanic ones then subsequently only reserved for the lower classes?

The answer to that is both yes and no. The results show that there is a higher percentage of Germanic adjectives overall, and that 24 out of 26 have Germanic words in their description (the Doctor has only French adjectives and the Cook has no adjectives at all). So Germanic adjectives are quite clearly not only reserved for the lower social classes. When it comes to the French adjectives there seems to be two usages, one to create estimable characters such as the Parson and the Doctor and the other to create satire (the Prioress and the Friar). This corroborates the general ideas discussed by Miller (2012), Pons-Sanz (2012) and Hughes (1988) in the previous studies section of this paper of that French adjectives are there to create nuance and to use as a tool for

personification of the different characters. It does not however strengthen the idea of French adjectives are used as solely sophistication words, only used on the higher classes. Because, as we can see throughout the paper, the sections in which Chaucer uses sophisticated French words are the descriptions of people who are good and estimable and these do not necessarily belong to higher society. The two best examples of this are the Parson and the Doctor, who have seven and three etymologically French adjectives respectively. While having said that Chaucer's way of describing his characters also goes beyond simple etymology, he continuously used the same words on different characters, but the meaning would vary each time. This is done either by how he has written it, in what context the word is in or how the overall description of the character looks like. If the character was to be mocked, French adjectives such *verray* and *gentil* could be used. However the context in which they are found is different than if the intention was the opposite. If, for example, a character was to be truly admired Chaucer would make this understood somehow. In short, the context in which the adjectives are used provides the clues necessary to know if it is one or the other.

In conclusion this seems to indicate, once again, that Chaucer used the most appropriate adjectives for each of the characters. He must have been aware and knowledgeable of the etymology of the adjectives he used, but he utilised that not to reflect their class but to differentiate between the characters and their individual personalities. This is visible in the way he plays the different "word-stocks" against each other throughout the General Prologue and the whole of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer used his creativity, awareness and knowledge of the language to create characters with very different personalities and that is why *The Canterbury Tales* today contains an array of rich, colourful and fantastically real characters. The reason for this was, as previously mentioned, not to differentiate between the social groups of the characters, but rather to create a group of 26 characters with varying, personable and vibrant personalities.

References:

Primary Sources:

Chaucer, Geoffrey. 2011. *The Canterbury Tales*. (Transl. by David Wright and intro. by Christopher Cannon). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kolve, V.A. and Glending Olson (Eds.) 2005. *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteen Tales and The General Prologue; Authoritative Text, Sources and Backgrounds, Criticism*. A [Norton Critical Edition](#) (2nd ed.). New York, London: W.W. Norton and Company.

Secondary sources:

Bisson, Lillian M. 2000. *Chaucer and the Late Medieval World*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Brewer, Derek. 1996 (2nd Ed). *Chaucer and His World*. Suffolk: D.S.Brewer

Cooper, Helen. 1996. *Oxford guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cooper, Helen. 1983. *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Crystal, D. 2003. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. (2nd Ed.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Emerson, Oliver Farrar. 1909. *A Middle English Reader*. New York: Macmillan.

Goldberg, P. J. P. 2004. *Medieval England: A Social History 1250-1550*. NY: Oxford UP.

Hughes, G. 1988. *Words in Time: Social History of English Vocabulary*. Oxford: Blackwell

Jones, Terry. 1985. *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary*. York: Methuen Publishing ltd.

Miller, G. 2012. *External Influences on English: From its beginnings to the Renaissance*. Oxford: Oxford University press.

McWhorter, J. 2008. *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue: The Untold History of English*. New York: Gotham Books.

Nevo, Ruth (ed. Bloom) 1988. *Geoffrey Chaucer's the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales: Chaucer: Motive and Mask in the General Prologue*. New York: Chelsea House.

Lectures:

Mats Mobärg, LEN201, Linguistic Survey Course, 13/9-11.

Appendix

Includes all the adjectives that have been a part of this investigation, first in alphabetic order and then in order by the character and occurrence within each character's section. Also includes etymology, (F) stands for French etymology and (G) for Germanic, there is also one instance of Latin (L) and a few with unknown or obscure etymology, which it then states. The meanings of the adjectives used are also featured in this section.

Appendix 1: Wordlist of all Adjectives used in the General Prologue

Adjectives:	Occurrences:	Adjectives:	Occurrences:	Adjectives:	Occurrences:
Agile	1	Amiable	1	Balled	1
Benigne	1	Beste	1	Bettre	1
Biloved	1	Bisy	1	Bisier	1
Blake	2	Bold	1	Brawn	1
Brood	2	Broun	2	Charitable	1
Cherubinnes	1	Colerik	1	Coy	1
Crulle	1	Curteys (Cyrteys)	2	Deef	1
Diligent	1	Discreet	1	Dokked	1
Envied	1	Enwyned	1	Estatlich	1
Estatly	1	Fair (reputable)	3	Faire (beautiful)	1
Famuliar	1	Fat	2	Fetis	1
Fresh	1	Forked	1	Fyr-reed	1
Gat-tothed	1	Gentil	4	Glaring	1
Good	7	Greet	8	Greye	1
Hardy	1	Hollow	1	Holy	1
Hoot	1	Large	1	Lecherous	1

Adjectives:	Occurrences:	Adjectives:	Occurrences:	Adjectives:	Occurrences:
Lene	1	Lerned	1	Lewed	1
Longe	1	Loude	1	Lowly	2
Lusty	1	Manly	1	Meke	1
Measurable	1	Merye (merry)	1	Murye (pleasant)	1
Narwe	1	Noble	2	Not-heed	1
Nyce	1	Pacient	1	Parfit	2
Piled	1	Pitous	1	Plesaunt	2
Povre	1	Prominent	1	Reechless	1
Reed	4	Riche	2	Sangwyn	1
Sawcefleem	1	Scalled	1	Sclendre	1
Servisable	1	Shaply	1	Short	1
Short-shouldered	1	Simple	1	Sleighte	1
Small	2	Smothe	2	Soberly	1
Softe	1	Solempne	2	Soveryn	1
Stout	1	Strong	1	Swete	1
Tendre	1	Thikke- knarre	1	Thinne	1
Tretys	1	Trewe	1	Tukked	1
Verray	2	Vertous	2	Wantowne	1
War	1	Whyt	3	Worthy	8
Wrooth	1	Wyde	1	Wys	4

Appendix 2: Wordlist of adjectives
divided into each character.

No 1: The Knight

Gentil (noble) (F)
Meke (proverbial-meke as a mayde)(G)
Parfit (having all characteristics) (F)
Sovereyn (higher rank) (F)
Verray (true) (F)
Worthy x 4 (good, excellent)(G)
Wys (wise) (G)
Total: 10 (6/10 G)

No 2: The Squire

Agile (F)
Cruelle (curly) (G)
Cyrteys (F)
Evene (average) (G)
Fresh (not sullied) O.E before that
etymology undetermined
Greet (great) (G)
Lowly (humble in demenaur)(G)
Lusty (full of healthy vigour)(G)
Servisable (F)
Total: 9 (6/9 G)

No 3: The Yeoman

Broun (skin colour or tan) (G)
Not-heed (Cropped head)(G)
Total: 2 (G)

No 4: The Prioress

Amiable (F)
Charitable (loving) (F)
Coy (modest)(F)
Estatlich (dignified, majestic) (F)
Faire (beautiful) (F)
Fetis (well-formed) (F)
Greet (great) (G)
Greye (G)
Pitous (compassionate) (F)
Plesaunt (pleasing manners, demeanour
etc) (F)
Reed (G)
Simple (innocent &harmless) (F)
Small (G)
Softe (G)
Tendre (F)

Tretys (graceful) (F)
Total: 16 (5/16 G)

No 5: The Monk

Anoint (anointed) (F)
Balled (undetermined)
Fair-good (G)
Fat (G)
Good (G)
Manly (masculine) (G)
Prominent (F)
Reccheless (reckless) (G)
Total: 8 (5/8 G)

No 6: The Frere

Beste (G)
Biloved (G)
Curteys (humble) (F)
Famuliar (extremely friendly) (F)
Lowly (G)
Merye (merry) (G)
Murys (pleasant) (F)
Noble (F)
Pleasant (F)
Solempne (distinguished) (F)
Strong (G)
Swete (G)
Wantowne (jovial) (G)
Vertuous (F)
Whyt (white) (G)
Worthy x 2 (G)
Total: 17 (10/17 G)

No 7: The Merchant

Estatly (F)
Forked (F)
Worthy x 2 (G)
Total: 4 (2/4 G)

No 8: The Clerk

Fat (not) (G)
Hollow (vacant) (G)
Short (G)
Soberly (grave) (F)
Total: 4 (3/4 G)

No 9: The Sergeant of Law

Bisier (G)
 Bisy (G)
 Discreet (judicious, prudent) (F)
 Greet x 2 (much) (G)
 War (alert) (G)
 Wys x 2 (G)
 Total: 8 (7/8 G)

No 10: The Frankeleyn

Envied (F)
 Enwyned (F)
 Greet (G)
 Sangwyn (blood-red "tempered") (F)
 Whyt (G)
 Worthy (G)
 Total: 6 (3/6 G)

No 11, 12, 13, 14 & 15 The Habberdasher, Carpenter, Webbe, Dyere & Tapicer

Fair (reputable) (G)
 Greet (G)
 Shaply (G)
 Solempne (dignified) (F)
 Total: 4 (3/4 G)

No 16: The Cook: None**No 17: The Shipman**

Broun (brown, tanned) (G)
 Good (G)
 Hardy (courageous) (G)
 Nyce (scrupulous) (F)
 Wys (G)
 Total: 5 (4/5 G)

No 18: The Doctour of Physik

Measurable (Moderate) (F)
 Parfit (F)
 Verray (F)
 Total: 3 (F)

No 19: The Wife of Bath

Bold (G)
 Deef (G)
 Fair (G)
 Gat-tothed (gap-toothed) (G)
 Good (G)
 Large (G)
 Reed (G)
 Worthy (G)
 Wrooth (angry) (G)
 Total: 9 G

No 20: The Parsoun

Benigne (F)
 Bettre (G)
 Diligent (F)
 Good x 2 (G)
 Holy (G)
 Lernerd (G)
 Noble (F)
 Not despitous (F)
 Not sinful (G)
 Pacient (F)
 Povre (poor) (F)
 Riche (G)
 Vertous (F)
 Total: 14 (7/14 G)

No 21: The Ploughman

Good (G)
 Trewe (steadfast, dependable) (G)
 Total: 2 (G)

No 22: The Miller

Blake (black)(G)
 Brawn (F)
 Brood x2 (moody/wide) (G)
 Greet x2 (large) (G)
 Reed x2 (G)
 Short-shouldered (G)
 Stout (F)
 Thikke-knarre (thick-set) (G)
 Wyde (G)
 Total: 12 (9/11 G)

No 23: The Maunciple

Gentil (proper) (F)
Lewed (not holy) unknown origin
Total: 2 (1 F)

No 24: The Reve

Colerik (bilous) (F)
Dokked (cut-short) (G)
Good x 2 (G)
Lene (L/F)
Longe (G)
Riche (powerful) (G)
Scendre: obscure origin
Sleighte (cunning) (G)
Tukked (belted) (G)
Total: 10 (7/10 G)

No 25: The Somonour

Blake (black) (G)
Cherubines (cherubic) (F)
Fyr-reed (fire-red) (G)
Gentil (proper) (F)
Hoote (G)
Lecherous, (F)
Narwe (narrow) (G)
Piled (spiked) (G)
Sawcefleem (affected with the disease)
(F)
Scalled (G)
Whyte (G)
Total: 11 (7/11 G)

No 26: The Pardoner

Gentil (worthy)(F)
Glaring (G)
Loude (G)
Noble (F)
Smal (G)
Smothe x 2 (unknown/ O.E)
Thinne (G)
Yelow (G)
Total: 9 (5/9 G)