European Christianity underwent massive upheaval in the fourteenth century. Corruption in the church increased tremendously, culminating in the so-called “Babylonian Captivity” when, from 1378 to 1417, the church split in two with competing popes and papal courts in Rome and Avignon, France. During the last half of the fourteenth century, several reform movements sprung up dedicated to eliminating corruption in the church and restoring it to its earlier purity. In England, the reform movement, based on the writings and teachings of John Wyclif, became known as Lollardy.

John Wyclif (1330?-1384), a Biblical scholar and theologian at Oxford University, emphasized the inward aspects of religion and the mystical source of grace that the Bible revealed to all of God’s People, in contrast with the organized church, which (according to Wyclif) favored worldly power and wealth. He argued for secular authority over the Church in certain specific areas, becoming well-known for his anti-ecclesiastical positions, and received support from Princess Joan of Wales (the widow of the eldest son of King Edward III and mother of King Richard II) and John of Gaunt,
Duke of Lancaster, third son of Edward III and one of the most powerful men in England.

Wyclif started to publish texts not in Latin, the language of scholars, but in English. Based on his research, his works openly criticized the church and its clergy for emphasizing form over substance and allowing—even encouraging—corruption. In 1381 Wyclif began his own translation of the Bible from Latin into English, completing the project in 1388. Using his writings, followers of Wyclif preached a reformed Christian doctrine that promoted personal faith, the reading of the Holy Scripture in the vernacular and equality of the sexes. By 1387 these followers were being called by their critics “Lollards,” from the Middle Dutch word lollaerd (mumbler). Lollards questioned the current state of the church and criticized many of its practices and its wealth, displaying a marked anti-clerical attitude. After the coup d’état of 1399 that overthrew Richard II and replaced him with Henry IV (son of John of Gaunt), the Lollards were outlawed by the statute De haeretico comburendo in 1401 and persecuted for heresy until the English Reformation of the sixteenth century.

Was Chaucer a Lollard?
Many of Chaucer’s writings demonstrate a willingness to criticize and make fun of church authority, especially its more egregious transgressions against moral standards. Several of the criticisms suggested in The Canterbury Tales (e.g., buying and selling of church offices, abuse of church courts, use of ecclesiastical positions for personal aggrandizement) parallel those of Wyclif and the Lollards. Chaucer promoted the use of English, the common language, over the use of French and Latin, as did Wyclif. And Chaucer had intimate connections to the households of Princess Joan and the Duke of Lancaster. Nevertheless, we have no firm evidence that Chaucer himself was a Lollard. He may have sympathized with many of their goals and supported their positions but it seems unlikely that he played any active role in the movement. Still, all of the ecclesiastical portraits in The Canterbury Tales are influenced by the Lollard controversy and appear to illustrate many of the points then in contention.