

1380

CANTERBURY TALES

THE CLERK'S PROLOGUE

Geoffrey Chaucer

Chaucer, Geoffrey (1343-1400) - English poet, known as the most important writer of Middle English. His Canterbury Tales (~1380) are told by traveling pilgrims who meet at a tavern and have a storytelling contest to pass the time.

Each tale is preceded by an introductory prologue. The Clerk's Prologue - Introduces the Clerk, a serious young philosophy scholar.

THE CLERK'S PROLOGUE

Sir clerk of Oxford," our good host then said,
 "You ride as quiet and still as is a maid
 But newly wedded, sitting at the board;
 This day I've heard not from your tongue a word.
 Perhaps you mull a sophism that's prime,
 But Solomon says, each thing to its own time.
 "For God's sake, smile and be of better cheer,
 It is no time to think and study here.
 Tell us some merry story, if you may;
 For whatsoever man will join in play,
 He needs must to the play give his consent.
 But do not preach, as friars do in Lent,
 To make us, for our old sins, wail and weep,
 And see your tale shall put us not to sleep.
 "Tell us some merry thing of adventures.
 Your terms, your colours, and your speech-figures,
 Keep them in store till so be you indite
 High style, as when men unto kings do write.
 Speak you so plainly, for this time, I pray,
 "That we can understand what things you say."
 This worthy clerk, benignly he answered.
 "Good host," said he, "I am under your yard;
 You have of us, for now, the governance,
 And therefore do I make you obeisance
 As far as reason asks it, readily.
 I will relate to you a tale that
 Learned once, at Padua, of a worthy clerk,
 As he proved by his words and by his work.
 He's dead, now, and nailed down-within his chest,
 And I pray God to give his soul good rest!
 "Francis Petrarch, the laureate poet,
 Was this clerk's name, whose rhetoric so sweet
 Illumed all Italy with poetry,
 As did Lignano with philosophy,
 Or law, or other art particular;
 But Death, that suffers us not very far,
 Nor more, as 'twere, than twinkling of an eye,
 Has slain them both, as all of us shall die.
 "But forth, to tell you of this worthy man,
 Who taught this tale to me, as I began,
 I say that first, with high style he indites,
 Before the body of his tale he writes,

A proem to describe those lands renowned,
Saluzzo, Piedmont, and the region round,
And speaks of Apennines, those hills so high
That form the boundary of West Lombardy,
And of Mount Viso, specially, the tall,
Whereat the Po, out of a fountain small,
Takes its first springing and its tiny source
That eastward ever increases in its course
Toward Emilia, Ferrara, and Venice;
The which is a long story to devise.
And truly, in my judgment reluctant
It is a thing not wholly relevant,
Save that he introduces thus his gear:
But this is his tale, which you now may hear.

THE END