

1380

CANTERBURY TALES

THE LAWYER'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 Lawyer's Prologue - Introduces the Man of Law, a busy man who makes himself seem busier than he really is.

THE LAWYERS PROLOGUE

O Hateful evil! State of Poverty!
 With thirst, with cold, with hunger so confounded!
 To ask help shameth thy heart's delicacy;
 If none thou ask, by need thou art so wounded
 That need itself uncovereth all the wound hid!
 Spite of thy will thou must, for indigence,
 Go steal, or beg, or borrow thine expense.

Thou blamest Christ, and thou say'st bitterly,
 He misdistributes riches temporal;
 Thy neighbour dost thou censure, sinfully,
 Saying thou hast too little and he hath all.
 "My faith," sayest thou, "sometime the reckoning shall
 Come on him, when his tail shall burn for greed,
 Not having helped the needy in their need."

Hear now what is the judgment of the wise:
 "Better to die than live in indigence;"
 "Thy very pauper neighbours thee despise."
 If thou be poor, farewell thy reverence!
 Still of the wise man take this full sentence:
 "The days of the afflicted are all sin."
 Beware, therefore, that thou come not therein!

"If thou be poor, thy brother hateth thee,
 And all thy friends will flee from thee, alas!"
 O wealthy merchants, full of weal ye be,
 O noble, prudent folk in happier case!
 Your dice-box doth not tumble out ambace,
 But with six-cinq ye throw against your chance;
 And so, at Christmas, merrily may ye dance!

Ye search all land and sea for your winnings,
 And, as wise folk, ye know well the estate
 Of all realms; ye are sires of happenings
 And tales of peace and tales of war's debate.
 But I were now of tales all desolate,
 Were 't not a merchant, gone this many a year,
 Taught me the story which you now shall hear.

HERE ENDS THE LAWYER'S PROLOGUE