

1380

CANTERBURY TALES

THE MANCIPLE'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 Manciple's Prologue- Introduces the Manciple, an uneducated but shrewd man who steals from the lawyers who hire him.

THE MANCIPLES PROLOGUE

Do you not know where stands a little town
 That's called by all about Bob-up-and-down,
 Under the Blean, down Canterbury way?
 There did our host begin to jape and play,
 And he said: "Sirs, what! Dun is in the mire!
 Is there no man, then, who, for prayer or hire,
 Will wake our comrade who's so far behind?
 A thief might easily rob him and bind.
 See how he's nodding! See, now, by Cock's bones,
 As if he'd fall down from his horse at once.
 Is that a cook of London, with mischance?
 Make him come forward, he knows his penance,
 For he shall tell a tale here, by my fay,
 Although it be not worth a bunch of hay.
 Awake, you cook," cried he, "God give you sorrow!
 What ails you that you sleep thus? It's good morrow!
 Have you had fleas all night, or are you drunk?
 Or did you toil all night in some quean's bunk?
 So that you cannot now hold up your head?"
 The cook, who was all pale and nothing red,
 Said to our host: "So may God my soul bless,
 As there is on me such a drowsiness,
 I know not why, that I would rather sleep
 Than drink a gallon of best wine in Cheap."
 "Well," said the manciple, "if 'twill give ease
 To you, sir cook, and in no way displease
 The folk that ride here in this company,
 And if our host will, of his courtesy,
 I will, for now, excuse you from your tale.
 For in good faith, your visage is full pale,
 Your eyes are bleary also, as I think,
 And I know well your breath right sour does stink,
 All of which shows that you are far from well;
 No flattering lies about you will I tell.
 See how he yawns. Just look, the drunken wight,
 As if he'd swallow all of us outright.
 Now close your mouth, man, by your father's kin;
 Ah, may Hell's devil set his foot therein!
 Your cursed breath will soon infect us all;
 Fie, stinking swine, fie! Evil you befall!
 Ah, take you heed, sirs, of this lusty man.

Now, sweet sir, would you like to ride at fan?
 It seems to me you're in the proper shape!
 You've drunk the wine that makes a man an ape,
 And that is when a man plays with a straw."
 The cook grew wroth, for this had touched the raw,
 And at the manciple he nodded fast
 For lack of speech, and him his horse did cast,
 And there he lay till up the rest him took,
 Which was a feat of riding for a cook!
 Alas! That he had kept not to his ladle!
 For ere he was again within his saddle,
 There was a mighty shoving to and fro
 To lift him up, and hugeous care and woe,
 So all unwieldy was this sorry ghost.
 And to the manciple then spoke our host:
 "Since drink has got such utter domination
 Over this fellow here, by my salvation,
 I think that badly he would tell his tale.
 For whether wine or old or musty ale
 Is what he's drunk, he speaks all through his nose;
 He snorts hard and with cold he's lachrymose.
 Also he has more than enough to do
 To keep him and his nag out of the slough;
 And if he fall down off his horse again,
 We'll all have quite enough of labour then
 In lifting up his heavy drunken corse.
 Tell on your tale, he matters not, of course.
 "Yet, manciple, in faith, you are not wise
 Thus openly to chide him for his vice.
 Some day he'll get revenge, you may be sure,
 And call you like a falcon to the lure;
 I mean he'll speak of certain little things,
 As, say, to point out in your reckonings
 Things not quite honest, were they put to proof."
 "Nay," said the manciple, "that were ill behoof!
 So might he easily catch me in his snare.
 Yet would I rather pay him for the mare
 Which he rides on than have him with me strive;
 I will not rouse his rage, so may I thrive!
 That which I said, I said as jesting word;
 And know you what? I have here, in a gourd,
 A draught of wine, yea, of a good ripe grape,
 And now anon you shall behold a jape.
 This cook shall drink thereof, sir, if I may;

On pain of death he will not say me nay!"
And certainly, to tell it as it was,
Out of this gourd the cook drank deep, alas!
What need had he? He'd drunk enough that morn
And when he had blown into this said horn,
He gave the manciple the gourd again;
And of that drink the cook was wondrous fain,
And thanked him then in such wise as he could.
Then did our host break into laughter loud,
And said: "I see well it is necessary,
Where'er we go, good drink with us we carry;
For that will turn rancour and all unease
To accord and love, and many a wrong appease.
"O Bacchus, thou, all blessed be thy name
Who canst so turn stern earnest into game!
Honour and thanks be to thy deity!
Concerning which you'll get no more from me.
Tell on your tale, good manciple,
I pray." "Well, sir," said he, "now hear what I will say."

THUS ENDS THE MANCIPLE'S PROLOGUE