

1380

CANTERBURY TALES

THE MONK'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 Monk's Prologue - Introduces the Monk, a fat hedonist, who prefers being out of his cloister.

THE MONK'S PROLOGUE

The Merry Words of the Host to the Monk
 When ended was my tale of Melibee
 And of Prudence and her benignity,
 Our host remarked: "As I am faithful man,
 And by the precious corpus Madrian,
 I'd rather than a barrel of good ale
 That my wife Goodlief could have heard this tale!
 For she has no such patience, I'll avow,
 As had this Melibeus' Prudence, now.
 By God's own bones! When I do beat my knaves
 She fetches forth the stoutest gnarly staves
 And cries out: 'Slay the damned dogs, every one!
 And break their bones, backbone and every bone!'
 And if but any neighbour, aye, of mine
 Will not, in church, bow to her and incline,
 Or happens to usurp her cherished place,
 Why, she comes home and ramps right in my face,
 Crying, 'False coward, go avenge your wife!
 By corpus bones! Come, let me have your knife,
 And you shall take my distaff and go spin!'
 From day to day like this will she begin:
 'Alas!' she cries, 'that ever fate should shape
 My marriage with a milksop coward ape
 That may be overborne by every wight!
 You dare not stand up for your own wife's right!
 This is my life, unless I choose to fight;
 And through the door anon I must take flight,
 Or else I'm lost, unless, indeed, that I
 Be like a young wild lion, foolhardy.
 I know well she will make me kill, one day,
 Some neighbour man and have to run away.
 For I am dangerous with a knife in hand,
 Albeit that I dare not her withstand;
 For she's big of arm, and wickedly inclined,
 As anyone who crosses her will find.
 But let us leave that doleful subject here.
 "My lord the monk," said he, "be of good cheer
 For you shall tell a tale, and verily.
 Lo, Rochester is standing there hard by!
 Ride up, my own liege lord, break not our game,
 But, by my truth, I do not know your name,
 Whether I ought to call you lord Don John,

Or Don Thomas, or else Don Albion?
 Of what house are you, by your father's kin?
 I vow to God you have a right fair skin;
 It is a noble pasture where you're most;
 You are not like a penitent or ghost.
 Upon my faith, you are some officer,
 Some worthy sexton, or a cellarer,
 For by my father's soul, I guess, in sum,
 You are a master when you are at home.
 No cloisterer or novice can you be:
 A wily governor you seem to me,
 And therewithal a man of brawn and bone.
 A person of some consequence you've grown.
 I pray that God confound the silly fool
 That put you first in a religious school;
 You would have been a hen-hopper, all right!
 Had you as good a chance as you have might
 To work your lust in good engendering;
 Why, you'd beget full many a mighty thing.
 Alas! Why do you wear so wide a cope?
 God give me sorrow but, if I were pope,
 Not only you, but every mighty man,
 Though he were shorn full high upon the pan,
 Should have a wife. For all the world's forlorn!
 Religion, why it's gathered all the corn
 Of treading, and we laymen are but shrimps!
 From feeble trees there come but wretched imps.
 That's why our heirs are all so very slender
 And feeble that they may not well engender.
 That's why our goodwives always will essay
 Religious folk, for you may better pay
 With Venus' payments than we others do;
 God knows, in no light weight of coin pay you!
 But be not wroth, my lord, because I play;
 Full oft in jest have I heard truth, I say."
 This worthy monk took all with sober sense,
 And said: "I will do all my diligence,
 So far as it accords with decency,
 To tell to you a tale, or two, or three.
 And if you care to hear, come hitherward,
 And I'll repeat the life of Saint Edward;
 Or rather, first some tragedies I'll tell,
 Whereof I have a hundred in my cell.
 Tragedy is to say a certain story

From ancient books which have preserved the glory
Of one that stood in great prosperity
And is now fallen out of high degree
In misery, where he ends wretchedly.
Such tales are versified most commonly
In six feet, which men call hexameter.
In prose are many written; some prefer
A quantitative metre, sundry wise.
Lo, this short prologue will enough suffice.
“Now hearken, if you’d like my speech to hear;
But first I do beseech, let it be clear
That I, in order, tell not all these things,
Be it of popes, of emperors, or kings,
Each in his place, as men in writings find,
But I put some before and some behind,
As they to memory may come by chance;
Hold me excused, pray, of my ignorance.”

Explicit

THE END