

1380

CANTERBURY TALES

THE PARSON'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 Parson's Prologue - Introduces the Parson, a poor loyal churchman who teaches by example.

THE PARSON'S PROLOGUE

What time the manciple his tale had ended,
 The sun down from the south line had descended
 So low that he was not, unto my sight,
 Degrees full nine and twenty yet in height.
 Four of the clock it was then, as I guess:
 Four feet eleven, little more or less,
 My shadow was extended then and there,
 A length as if the shadow parted were
 In six-foot equal parts, as I have shown.
 Therewith the moon's high exaltation known,
 I mean the sign of Libra, did ascend
 As we were entering a village-end;
 Whereat our host, since wont to guide was he,
 As in this case, our jolly company,
 Said in this wise: "Now, masters, every one,
 We lack no tales except a single one.
 My judgment is fulfilled and my decree,
 I think that we have heard from each degree.
 Almost fulfilled is all my ordinance;
 I pray to God to give him right good chance
 Who tells to us this story pleasantly.
 Sir priest," he asked, "can you a vicar be?
 Are you a parson? Tell truth, by your fay!
 Be what you will, break not our jolly play;
 For every man, save you, has told his tale,
 Unbuckle, show us what is in your mail;
 For truly, I think, judging by your cheer,
 You should knit up a mighty matter here.
 Tell us a fable now, by Cock's dear bones!"
 This parson then replied to him at once:
 "You'll get no foolish fable told by me;
 For Paul, when writing unto Timothy,
 Reproves all those that veer from truthfulness
 And tell false fables and such wretchedness.
 Why should I sow chaff out of my own fist
 When I may sow good wheat, if I but list?
 But if, I say, you something wish to hear
 In which the moral virtues will appear,
 And if you now will give me audience,
 I will right gladly, in Christ's reverence,

Give you such lawful pleasure as I can.
 But trust me, since I am a Southern man,
 I can't romance with 'rum, ram, ruff', by letter,
 And, God knows, rhyme I hold but little better;
 But if you wish the truth made plain and straight,
 A pleasant tale in prose I will relate
 To weave our feast together at the end.
 May Jesus, of His grace, the wit me send
 To show you, as we journey this last stage,
 The way of that most perfect pilgrimage
 To heavenly Jerusalem on high.
 And if you will vouchsafe, anon shall I
 Begin my tale, concerning which, I pray,
 Choose what you will, I can no better say.
 Yet this my meditation is, I own,
 Perhaps not free from errors to be shown
 By clerks, since I am not a learned man;
 I do but grasp the meaning as I can.
 Therefore, I do protest, I shall prepare
 To take what comes, and all correction bear."
 When he had spoken thus, we all agreed,
 For, as it seemed to us, 'twas right indeed
 To end with something virtuous in its sense,
 And so to give him time and audience.
 We bade our host that he to him convey
 The wish of all that he begin straightway.
 Our host, he had the very words for all.
 "Sir priest," said he, "may good to you befall!
 Say what you wish, and we will gladly hear."
 And after that he added, for his ear:
 "Tell us," he said, "your meditation grown,
 But pray make haste, the sun will soon be down;
 Be fruitful, tell us in a little space,
 And to do well God send to you His grace!"
 Explicit prohemium

THE END