

1380

CANTERBURY TALES

THE SECOND NUN'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 Second Nun's Prologue Introduces the Second Nun who accompanies the Prioress.

THE SECOND NUN'S PROLOGUE

That servant and that nurse unto the vices
 Which men do call in English Idleness,
 Portress at Pleasure's gate, by all advices
 We should avoid, and by her foe express,
 That is to say, by lawful busyness,
 We ought to live with resolute intent,
 Lest by the Fiend through sloth we should be rent.

For he, that with his thousand cords and sly
 Continually awaits us all to trap,
 When he a man in idleness may spy
 He easily the hidden snare will snap,
 And till the man has met the foul mishap,
 He's not aware the Fiend has him in hand;
 We ought to work and idleness withstand.

And though men never dreaded they must die,
 Yet men see well, by reason, idleness
 Is nothing more than rotten sluggardry,
 Whereof comes never good one may possess;
 And see sloth hold her in a leash, no less,
 Only to sleep and eat and always drink
 And to absorb all gain of others' swink.

And so, to save us from such idleness
 Through which great trouble and distress have grown,
 I have here done my faithful busyness,
 Translating the old legend, to make known
 All of that glorious life which was thine own,
 Thou ever with the rose and lily crowned,
 Cecilia, for virtues high renowned.

Invocatio ad Mariam

And Thou that art the flower of virgins all
 Of whom Saint Bernard loved so well to write,
 To Thee at my beginning do I call;
 Thou comfort of us wretches, help me indite
 Thy maiden's death, who won through her merit
 The eternal life, and from the Fiend such glory
 As men may read hereafter in her story.

Thou Maid and Mother, Daughter of Thy Son,
 Thou well of ruth, of sinful souls the cure,
 In Whom, for goodness, God was embryon,
 Thou humble One, high over each creature,
 Thou did'st ennoble so far our nature
 That no disdain God had of humankind
 His Son in blood and flesh to clothe and wind.

Within the blessed cloister of Thy sides
 Took human shape eternal love and peace
 Who all the threefold world as sovereign guides,
 Whom earth and sea and heaven, without cease,
 Do praise; and Thou, O stainless Maid, increase
 Bore of Thy body- and wert kept a maid
 The mighty God Who every creature made.

Assembled is in Thee magnificence,
 With mercy, goodness, and with such pity
 That Thou, Who art the sun of excellence,
 Not only keepest those that pay to Thee,
 But oftentimes, of Thy benignity,
 Freely, or ever men Thy help beseech,
 Thou goest before and art their spirits' leech.

Now help, Thou meek and blessed,
 Thou fair Maid, Me, banished wretch, in wilderness of gall;
 Think how the Canaanitish woman said
 That even dogs may eat of the crumbs all
 Which from the master's laden table fall;
 And though I, now, unworthy son of Eve,
 Am sinful, yet accept me, who believe.

And since all faith is dead divorced from works,
 That I may do the right, O give me space
 To free me from that darkness of deep murks!
 O Thou, Who art so fair and full of grace,
 Be Thou my advocate in that high place
 Where without ever end is sung "Hosanna,"
 Thou, Mother of Christ and daughter of Saint Anna!

And of Thy light my soul illuminate,
 That troubled is by the contagion sown
 Here in my body, also by the weight

Of earthly lust and false loves I have known;
 O haven of refuge, O salvation shown
 To those that are in sorrow and distress,
 Now help, for to my work I'll me address.

Yet pray I all who read what I do write,
 Forgive me that I do no diligence
 By subtle change to make the story right;
 For I have taken both the words and sense
 From him who wrote the tale in reverence
 Of this one saint; I follow her legend
 And pray you that you will my work amend.

Interpretacio Nominis Caecilie
 Quam Ponit Frater Iacobus
 Ianuensis in Legenda Aurea.

First would I you the name of Saint Cecilia
 Expound, as men may in her story see.
 It is to say, in English, "Heaven's lily,"
 Symbol of pure and virgin chastity;

Or, since she had the white of modesty,
 And green of good conscience, and of good fame
 The savour sweet, so "lily" was her name.
 Or else Cecilia means "path for the blind,"
 For she example was, by good teaching;
 Or else Cecilia, as I written find,
 Is made, after a manner of joining,
 Of "Heaven" and "Lia"; and, in figuring,
 The "Heaven" is put for "thought of holiness"
 And "Lia" for enduring busyness.

Cecilia may mean, too, in this wise,
 "Lacking in blindness," for her shining light
 Of sapience, and for good qualities;
 Or else, behold! this maiden's name so bright
 From "Heaven" and "leos" comes, for which, by right,
 Men well might her the "Heaven of people" call,
 Example of good and wise works unto all.

Leos is folk in English, so to say,
 And just as men may in the heavens see
 The sun and moon and stars strewn every way,

Just so men ghostly, in this maiden free,
See of her faith the magnanimity,
And the whole glory of her sapience,
And many actions, bright of excellence.

And just as these philosophers do write
That heaven is round and moving and burning,
Just so was fair Cecilia the white
Eager and busy ever in good working,
Large and whole-hearted, steadfast in each thing,
And shining ever in charity full bright;
Now have I told you of her name aright.

Explicit

THE END