

The Manciple, his Prologue and his Tale

The portrait of the Manciple from the General Prologue.

The Manciple is in charge of buying provisions for a group of Lawyers in London, but is shrewder in his management than all of them put together.

	A gentle MANCIPIE was there of a temple ¹	
	Of which achatours mightè take example	<i>buyers</i>
	For to be wise in buying of vitaille;	<i>victuals, food</i>
570	For whether that he paid or took by taille	<i>by tally, on credit</i>
	Algate he waited so in his achate	<i>Always / purchasing</i>
	That he was aye before and in good state.	<i>always ahead</i>
	Now is not that of God a full great grace	
	That such a lewèd mannè's wit shall pass	<i>uneducated / brains</i>
575	The wisdom of a heap of learned men?	
	Of masters had he more than thricè ten	<i>more than thirty</i>
	That were of law expért and curious	<i>skilled</i>
	Of which there were a dozen in that house	
	Worthy to be stewardès of rent and land	
580	Of any lord that is in Engèland	
	To make him livè by his proper good	<i>on his own income</i>
	In honor debtless, but if he were wood,	<i>unless he was mad</i>
	Or live as scarcely as him list desire; ²	<i>as frugally as he wished</i>
	And able for to helpèn all a shire	<i>capable / county</i>
585	In any case that mightè fall or hap.	<i>befall or happen</i>
	And yet this manciple set their aller cap.	<i>fooled all of them</i>

¹ 567: A manciple was a buying agent for a college or, as here, for one of the Inns of Court, the Temple, an association of lawyers, once the home of the Knights Templar. Clearly the meaning of the word "gentle" here as with the Pardoner later, has nothing to do with good breeding, "gentle" birth. Presumably it does not mean "gentle" in our sense either. Its connotations are hard to be sure of. See "ENDPAPERS."

² 576-583: He worked for more than thirty learned lawyers, at least a dozen of whom could manage the legal and financial affairs of any lord in England, and who could show him how to live up to his rank (*in honor*) within his income (*debtless*), unless he was mad; or how to live as frugally as he wished.

Manciple's Tale: Introduction

Harry Bailey, the Host, is not shy with his literary criticism, but he has nothing to say one way or the other about the Manciple's Tale, which is part fabliau, part morality. The fabliau element in this tale, unlike that in the tales of the Miller, the Reeve and the Shipman, is quite subordinate; it takes second place to the moral that can be drawn from the tale. Or the pseudo-moral. For it is an odd maxim to draw from a tale of adultery and murder that you should keep your mouth shut about offenders, since you may be tarred and unfeathered if you inform on them.

Another adage: you cannot change the basic nature of an animal, bird, beast or human. You cannot civilize what does not want to be civilized: a wolf is a wolf, and a slut is a slut.

Still another precept: do not act rashly or on little evidence. "Beware of rakelness": Beware of rashness. At least half of this axiom is another odd derivative from this particular tale: for, though Phoebus's act is rash, he does act with apparently convincing evidence. What would he have done differently had he confirmed the truth by questioning the crow further or interrogating his wife?

The narrative line is thin, for while it is a tale that includes a murder that is the result of an adultery, each of those items gets about two lines; the moralizing about them takes up most of the space, and some of the details that are emphasized seem pointless. Though we are told about Phoebus's collection of musical instruments, for example, we never hear him play, unlike Nicholas in the Miller's Tale, where we even know the name of one of the songs he sings, an actual demonstration of one of his attractions. In this tale, by contrast, musicianship seems to be just one of Apollo's attributes that the narrator feels obliged to mention, and which he then forgets about until it is time to break up the instruments in anger.

Not only is the story line thin, but there is a noticeable lack of any sort of characterization for the major actors, except perhaps the crow. The protagonist, Phoebus, was handsome, he was heroic with a bow, he could play many musical instruments. What more could a woman want? What more could a reader want? Again, the fabliau of the Millers Tale gives an instructive contrast. The wife here is never more than a word, and does not even have a name, unlike Alison of the Millers Tale who is described in considerable and seductive detail, and who has a personality of her own. Again, unlike Alison's lover -- the very memorable Nicholas -- the wife's "lemman" or lover, in the Manciple's Tale is as shadowy as she.

One of the more memorable elements in the tale is a sardonic comment on social and linguistic convention: an aristocratic adulteress is called a "ladylove", while a lower class one is a vulgar "wench" or "lemman". This, however, is a comment from *outside* the tale; it is not *derived* from it. Another sardonic comment remains a little underdeveloped: Alexander is a hero for robbing and slaughtering thousands, and is even called the Great because he is an emperor; the small time offender is simply a thief or vandal whom the Alexanders of this world want to punish.

The Manciple's Tale is the bare bones of an exemplum told for the sake of the attached morals or prudential maxims, with small narrative interest of its own. An exemplum need not lack in narrative power as the compelling specimens that occupy most of the Pardoner's Tale testify. The Pardoner's tale also embodies a moral, but does so dramatically, by *building* it into the story, not merely appending it. Here the prudential advice takes precedence over narrative which is simply the peg on which to hang the banal proverbial "wisdom". Moreover, the Manciple's Tale lacks the masterful control of dialogue that characterizes its Prologue where the exchange among the Host, the Manciple and the Cook is as good as the contest between the Miller and the Reeve or that between the Friar and the Summoner earlier in the series.

The Manciple's Tale and Prologue occupy Fragment IX in the manuscripts, and there is no connecting material between this fragment and the tale that precedes.

The Manciple's Own Prologue

The Host makes fun of the Cook, who is too drunk to tell a tale

<p>Wot you not where there stands a little town Which that y-clepèd is Bobbe-up-and-Down, Under the Blee, in Canterbury Way? There gan our hostè for to jape and play, And saidè: "Sirs, What! Dun is in the mire!"¹ Is there no man, for prayer nor for hire, That will awake our fellow all behind? A thief might him full lightly rob and bind. See how he naps! see how, for cokkès bones, 10 That he will fallè from his horse atones! Is that a cook of London, with mischance? Do him come forth, he knoweth his penáncè; For he shall tell a talè, by my fay, Although it be not worth a bottle hay."²</p>	<p><i>Don't you know Is called Near Blean forest joke mud for love or money at the end of the procession (?) God's bones at once for heaven's sake! Make him on my faith bundle of hay</i></p>
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¹ "The horse is in the mud". We're stuck.

² There is no reference here to the fact that the Cook had started a tale just after the Reeve's near the beginning of the storytelling. That fragment of the Cook's tale ended without explanation after about 60 lines.

Awake, thou cook," quod he, "God give thee sorrow!

What aileth thee to sleepè by the morrow?

in the morning

Hast thou had flees all night, or art thou drunk?

Or hast thou with some quean all night y-swonk,

whore / labored

So that thou mayst not holden up thine head? "

20 This cook, that was full pale and nothing red,

Said to oure host: "So God my soulè bless,

As there is fall on me such heaviness,

N'ot I not why, that me were lever sleep

I don't know why / I'd rather

Than the best gallon [of] wine in Cheap."

Cheapside, London

The Manciple intervenes to mock the Cook, and offers to tell a tale in his stead.

"Well," quod the manciple, "if it may do ease

To thee, sir cook, and to no wight displease,

displease nobody

Which that here rideth in this company,

Which = Who

And that our host will, of his courtesy,

I will as now excuse thee of thy tale.

30 For, in good faith, thy visage is full pale,

Thine eyen dawsen eke, as that me thinketh,

eyes droop

And, well I wot, thy breath full sourè stinketh

I know

That showeth well thou art not well disposed.

not feeling well

Of me, certáin, thou shalt not been y-glosed.

By me / flattered

See how he ganeth, lo! this drunken wight,

gapes / man

As though he wouldè swallow us anonright.

quickly

Hold close thy mouth, man, by thy father kin!

The devil of hellè set his foot therein !

Thy cursed breath infectè will us all.

40 Fie, stinking swine! fie, foulè moot thee fall!

devil take you

Ah! taketh heed, sirs, of this lusty man.

Now, sweet sir, will you jousten at the fan? ¹

Thereto me thinketh you be well y-shape!

In good shape for it

I trowè that you drunken have wine ape, ²

You're silly drunk

¹ A jeer. "Will you joust at the vane (quintain)?" This was a feat of horsemanship in which the rider struck with a wooden lance a vane or flat piece at the end of a pole with a bag or club at the other end which then swung around and would unhorse the rider unless he were nimble enough. Clearly the cook is not *well y-shape* for that feat.

² Ape drunk was apparently considered one of the stages of drunkenness: the silly stage when you might find even a straw funny..

And that is when men playen with a straw.”

Drunk and angry, the Cook falls off his horse

And with this speech the cook wax wroth and wraw, *angry & upset*
 And on the manciple he gan noddé fast
 For lack of speech, and down the horse him cast,
 Where as he lay, till that men him up took.
 50 This was a fair chiváchee of a cook! *fine feat of horsemanship*
 Alas! he naddé hold him by his ladle! ¹
 And ere that he again were in his saddle,
 There was great shoving bothè to and fro
 To lift him up, and muchel care and woe,
 So unwieldy was this sorry palléd ghost. *pale*
 And to the Manciple then spoke our Host:
 “Because drink hath domination
 Upon this man, by my salvation,
 I trow he lewédly would tell his tale. ²
 60 For, were it wine, or old or moisty ale,
 That he hath drunk, he speaketh in his nose,
 And fneseth fast, and eke he hath the pose. *snorts & sniffles*
 He hath also to do more than enough *It's all he can do*
 To keep him and his capul out of the slough; *his horse / mud*
 And if he fallè from his capul eftsoon, *again*
 Then will we allè have enough to doon
 In lifting up his heavy drunken corse. *body*
 Tell on thy tale; of him make I no fors. *I don't care*

The Host gives some advice to the Manciple, who takes it well

But yet, manciple, in faith thou art too nice, *too blunt*
 70 Thus openly reprove him of his vice.
 Another day he will, peráventure, *perhaps*
 Reclaimè thee and bringè thee to lure; *outwit & catch you*
 I mean, he speakè will of smallè things,
 As for to pinchen at thy reckonings, *question your accounts*

¹ “Pity he did not stick to his ladle.”

² “I guess he would tell his tale badly.”

That were not honest, if it came to preef. ”

if audited

“No,” quod the manciple, “that were a great mischíef!

So might he lightly bring me in the snare.

Yet had I lever payen for the mare

I'd rather

Which he rides on, than he should with me strive.

80 I will not wratthen him, also may I thrive!

anger him, I promise

That that I spoke, I said it in my bourd.

That which / in jest

The Manciple knows exactly how to make amends

And wit you what? I have here in a gourd

guess what

A draught of wine, yeah, of a ripe grape,

And right anon you shall see a good jape.

joke

This cook shall drink thereof, if [that] I may.

Up pain of death, he will not say me nay.”

On pain

And certainly, to tellen as it was,

Of this vessel the cook drank fast, alas!

What needed him ? he drank enough befor.

90 And when he haddè poupèd in this horn,

belched (or farted)

To the manciple he took the gourd again;

And of that drink the cook was wonder fain,

was v. glad

And thankèd him in such wise as he could.

Then gan our host to laughen wonder loud,

95 And said: “I see well it is necessary,

Where that we go, good drinkè with us carry;

For that will turnè rancor and dis-ease

& tension

T' accord and love, and many a wrong appease.

To harmony

O thou Bacchus, y-blessèd be thy name,

B = god of wine

100 That so canst turnen earnest into game!

seriousness into joke

Worship and thank be to thy deity!

Of that mattér you get no more of me.

Tell on thy talè, manciple, I thee pray.”

“Well, sir,” quod he, “now hearken what I say.

listen

The Manciple's Tale

Some attributes of Phoebus Apollo

	When Phoebus dwelled here in this earth adown,	<i>God of the sun</i>
	As oldè bookès maken mention,	
	He was the mostè lusty bachelor	<i>young knight</i>
	In all this world, and eke the best archer.	
	He slew Python, the serpent, as he lay	
110	Sleeping against the sun upon a day;	<i>in the sun</i>
	And many another noble worthy deed	
	He with his bowè wrought, as men may read.	
	Playen he could on every minstrelcy,	<i>instrument</i>
	And singen, that it was a melody	
115	To hearen of his clearè voice the sound.	
	Certes the king of Thebès, Amphioun,	
	That with his singing walled that city,	
	Could never singen half so well as he.	
	Therto he was the seemliestè man	<i>handsomest</i>
120	That is or was, since that the world began.	
	What needeth it his features to describe?	<i>describe</i>
	For in this world was none so fair alive.	<i>so handsome</i>
	He was therewith fulfilled of gentillesse,	<i>good manners</i>
	Of honour, and of perfect worthiness.	
125	This Phoebus, that was flower of bachelry,	<i>kighthood</i>
	As well in freedom as in chivalry,	
	For his desport, in sign eke of victóry	<i>his pleasure</i>
	Of Python, so as telleth us the story,	<i>Over Python</i>
	Was wont to bearen in his hand a bow.	

His talented pet crow

130:	Now had this Phoebus in his house a crow
	Which in a cage he fostered many a day,
	And taught it speaken, as men teach a jay.
	White was this crow as is a snow-white swan,
	And counterfeit the speech of every man
135:	He could, when he should tell a tale.
	Therewith in all this world no nightingale

Ne couldè, by an hundred thousandth deal,
Singen so wonder merrily and well.

part

Another caged pet with different talents

- Now had this Phoebus in his house a wife
140: Which that he lovèd morè than his life,
And night and day did ever his diligence
Her for to please, and do her reverence,
Save only, if the sooth that I shall sayn.
Jealous he was, and would have kept her fain. *would gladly have confined her*
- 145: For him were loth be-japèd for to be, *to be fooled*
And so is every wight in such degree; *every person*
But all in idle, for it availeth nought. *in vain*
A good wife, that is clean of work and thought,
Should not be kept in no await, certáin; *kept confined*
- 150: And truly, the labour is in vain
To keep a shrewè, for it will not be.
This hold I for a very nicèty, *foolishness*
To spillè labour for to keepè wives. *To waste*
Thus writen oldè clerkès in their lives.
- 155: But now to purpose, as I first began:
This worthy Phoebus does all that he can
To pleasen her, weening for such pleasánce, *thinking*
And for his manhood and his governance, *behavior*
That no man should have put him from her grace. *her favor*

The pointlessness of cages, even nice ones

- 160: But God it wot, there may no man embrace *G knows no man can contrive*
As to distreyn a thing which that natúre *To restrain*
Hath naturally set in a crëatúre.
Take any bird, and put it in a cage,
And do all thine intent and thy couráge *y. best effort*
- 165 To foster it tenderly with meat and drink *food*
Of allè dainties that thou canst bethink,
And keep it all so cleanly as thou may,
Although his cage of gold be ne'er so gay, *ever so splendid*
Yet hath this bird, by twenty thousand fold,

The more harm is, it happens often so,
Of which there cometh muchel harm and woe.

More's the pity

And so befell, when Phoebus was absént,
His wife anon hath for her lemman sent.

her lover

More commentary

- 205 Her "lemman"? Certes, this is a knavish speech! *low language !*
 Forgive it me, and that I you beseech.
 The wisè Plato says, as you may read,
 The word must needs accorden with the deed. *must match*
 If men shall tellen properly a thing.
- 210 The word must cousin be to the working.
 I am a boystous man, right thus say I, *plain, rough*
 There is no differencè, truly,
 Betwixt a wife that is of high degree, *high rank*
 If of her body she dishonest be, *unfaithful*
- 215 And a poor wench, other than this --
 If it so be they workè both amiss -- *if they both do wrong*
 But that the gentle, in estate above, *gentlewoman, of high rank*
 She shall be cleped his "lady", as in love; *be called*
 And for that other is a poor woman,
- 220 She shall be cleped his "wench" or his "lemman",
 And, God it wot, mine ownè dearè brother. *God knows*
 Men lay that one as low as lies that other.
 Right so betwixt a titleless tyrant *usurping*
 And an outlaw, or a thief errant, *vagabond thief*
- 225 The same I say there is no difference.
 To Alexander was told this sentéce, *this opinion was expressed*
 That, for the tyrant is of greater might,
 By force of meinee, for to slay downright, *force of numbers*
 And burnen house and home, and make all plain, *flatten everything*
- 230 Lo, therefore is he cleped a capitain;
 And for the outlaw has but small meinee, *small band*
 And may not do so great a harm as he,
 Nor bring a country to so great mischíef,
 Men clepen him an outlaw or a thief. *call him*
- 235 But, for I am a man not textual, *learned*
 I would not tell of textès never a deal;
 I will go to my tale, as I began. *won't quibble about words(?)*

Back to the tale again

	When Phoebus' wife had sent for her lemman,	<i>lover</i>
	Anon they wroughten all their lust voláge.	<i>wanton lust</i>
240	The whitè crow, that hung ay in the cage.	<i>always</i>
	Beheld their work, and saidè never a word.	
	And when that home was come Phoebus, the lord,	
	This crow sang "Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!" ¹	
	"What, bird?" quod Phoebus, "What song singest thou?"	<i>said P.</i>
245	Ne wert thou wont so merrily to sing	<i>Weren't you accustomed?</i>
	That to mine heart it was a rejoicing	
	To hear thy voice? Alas! what song is this?"	
	"By God!" quod he, "I singè not amiss.	
	Phoebus," quod he, "for all thy worthiness,	
250	For all thy beauty and thy gentillesse,	<i>nobility</i>
	For all thy song and all thy minstrelcy,	
	For all thy waiting, blearèd is thine eye ²	<i>you are hoodwinked</i>
	With one of little reputation,	<i>By a man</i>
	Not worth to thee, as in comparison,	
255	The montance of a gnat, so may I thrive!	<i>The amount</i>
	For on thy bed thy wife I saw him swive."	<i>ride</i>
	What will you more? The crow anon him told,	<i>What more do you want?</i>
	By saddè tokens and by wordès bold,	<i>conclusive proof & blunt words</i>
	How that his wife had done her lechery,	
260	Him to great shame and to great villainy;	<i>to his g. s. & disgrace</i>
	And told him oft he saw it with his eyen.	<i>eyes</i>
	His Phoebus gan awayward for to wrien,	<i>to turn away</i>
	And thought his sorrowful heartè burst a-two.	<i>would burst</i>
	His bow he bent, and set therein a flo,	<i>an arrow</i>
265	And in his ire his wife then hath he slain.	<i>anger</i>
	This is th'effect, there is no more to sayn;	<i>the outcome</i>
	For sorrow of which he broke his minstrelcy,	<i>instruments</i>
	Both harp, and lute, and gitern, and sautry;	<i>guitar & small lute</i>
	And eke he broke his arrows and his bow,	

¹ The connection between "cuckoo" and "cuckold" (a man being deceived by his wife) is a common one.

² "In spite of all your watching (of your wife) ..." or "for all your attentive waiting upon her, you are hoodwinked."

270 And after that thus spoke he to the crow
 “Traitor,” quod he, “with tongue of scorpion,
 Thou hast me brought to my confusion; *destruction*
 Alas that I was wrought! why n’ere I dead? ¹
 O dearè wife! O gem of lustihead! *pleasure*
 275 That were to me so sad and eke so true, *so faithful & also*
 Now liest thou dead, with facè pale of hue,
 Full guiltèless, that durst I swear, y-wis! *I dare swear, indeed*

Exclamatio with commentary built in

O rakel hand, to do so foul amiss! *O rash hand*
 O trouble[d] wit, O irè recchèless, *troubled mind, reckless anger*
 280 That unavisèd smiteth guiltèless! *thoughtlessly strikes*
 O wantrust, full of false suspiciòn, *O distrust*
 Where was thy wit and thy discretiòn? *your sense & judgement*
 O every man, beware of rakelness! *rashness*
 Nor trow no thing withouten strong witiñess. *believe nothing*
 285 Smite not too soon, ere that you witen why, *before you know why*
 And be avisèd well and soberly
 Ere you do any execution *Before you take out ...*
 Upon your irè for suspiciòn. *... your anger*
 Alas! a thousand folk hath rakel ire *rash anger*
 290 Fully fordone, and brought them in the mire. *Totally destroyed / mud*
 Alas! for sorrow I will myselfen slay!”

Blame the messenger

And to the crow “O falsè thief!” said he,
 I will thee ’quite anon thy falsè tale. *requite, repay*
 Thou sangè whilom like a nightingale; *you used to sing*
 295 Now shalt thou, falsè thief, thy song forgon, *forego*
 And eke thy whitè feathers every one,
 Ne never in all thy life ne shalt thou speak.
 Thus shall men on a traitor been awreak; *be avenged*
 Thou and thine offspring ever shall be black,
 300 Ne never sweetè noisè shall you make,

¹ “Alas that I was born (literally “made”); why am I not dead.?”

But ever cry against tempést and rain,
 In tok'ning that through thee my wife is slain."
 And to the crow he start, and that anon,
 And pulled his whitè feathers every one,
 305 And made him black, and reft him all his song,
 And eke his speech, and out at door him slung
 Unto the devil, which I him betake;
 And for this cause be allè crowès black.

*As a sign
rushed at / quickly*

deprived him of

to whom I consign him

Still more commentary and exhortation

Lordings, by this example I you pray,
 310 Beware, and taketh keepè what that you say
 Ne telleth never no man in your life
 How that another man hath dight his wife;
 He will you haten mortally, certáin.
 Daun Solomon, as wisè clerkès sayn,
 315 Teacheth a man to keepen his tongue well.
 But as I said, I am not textual.
 But nonetheless, thus taughtè me my dame:
 “My son, think on the crow, in Godès name!
 My son, keep well thy tongue, and keep thy friend.
 320 A wicked tongue is worsè than a fiend;
 My son, from a fiend men may them bless.
 My son, God of his endèless goodness
 Wallèd a tongue with teeth and lippès eke,
 For man should him avisè what he speak.
 325 My son, full often, for too muchè speech
 Hath many a man been spilt, as clerkès teach;
 But for little speech avisèly
 Is no man shent, to speaken generally.
 My son, thy tonguè shouldest thou restrain
 330 At allè times, but when thou dost thy pain
 To speak of God, in honor and [in] prayer.
 The firstè virtue, son, if thou wilt lere,
 Is to restrain and keepè well thy tongue;
 Thus learnè children when that they be young.
 335 My son, of muchel speaking evil avisèd,
 Where lessè speaking had enough sufficed,
 Comes muchel harm; thus was me told and taught.

take care

has covered

King S. / wise scholars

learned

my mother

a devil

also

For = So that

ruined

little & thoughtful

ruined

except when you're trying

learn

ill-advised

- In muchel spechê sinné wanteth naught. *Sin is not absent*
 Wost thou wherof a rakel tonguè serveth? ¹
- 340 Right as a sword forcutteth and forcarveth *“for-” is intensive*
 An arm a-two, my dearè son, right so *in two*
 A tonguè cutteth friendship all a-two.
 A jangler is to God abomináble. *A gabber*
- Read Solomon, so wise and honouráble;
 345 Read David in his psalmès, read Senéc. *Seneca, Roman philosopher*
 My son, speak not, but with thine head thou beck. *just nod*
 Dissimule as thou wert deaf, if that thou hear *Act as if*
 A jangler speak of perilous mattér.
 The Fleming says, and learn it if thee lest, *Flemish proverb / if you please*
- 350 That little jangling causeth muchel rest.
 My son, if thou no wicked word hast said,
 Thee thar not dreadè for to be betrayed; *You need not fear*
 But he that hath mis-said, I dare well sayn,
 He may by no way clepe his word again. *call back*
- 355 Thing that is said is said, and forth it goth,
 Though him repent, or be him ne’er so loth.²
 He is his thrall to whom that he has said *He is at the mercy of the one*
 A tale of which he is now evil apaid. *is now sorry*
- My son, beware, and be no author new
 360 Of tidings,³ whether they been false or true.
 Whereso thou come, amongst high or low, *Wherever*
 Keep well thy tongue, and think upon the crow.

Here ends the Manciple’s Tale

¹ “Do you know (*wost thou*) what a rash tongue is good for?”

² “Though he regrets it or is ever so sorry”

³ “Don’t be the first to bring tidings, true or false”.