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 MANCIPLE was there of a temple
Of which achatours might take example
For to be wise in buying of vitaille;  
For whether that he paid or took by tale
Algate he waited so in his achate
That he was aye before and in good state.
Now is not that of God a full great grace
That such a lawed manne's wit shall pass
575  The wisdom of a heap of learned men?
Of masters had he more than thricè ten
That were of law expért and curious
Of which there were a dozen in that house
Worthy to be stewardès of rent and land
580  Of any lord that is in Engeland
To make him livè by his proper good
In honor debtless, but if he were wood,
Or live as scarcely as him list desire;  
And able for to helpen all a shire
585  In any case that mighte fall or hap.
And yet this manciple set their aller cap.

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 rakeliness”: 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

Wot you not where there stands a little town  
Which that y-cleped is Bobbe-up-and-Down,  
Under the Blee, in Canterbury Way?  
There gan our hoste for to jape and play,  
And said: “Sirs, What! Dun is in the mire!  
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 cokkês bones,  
10 That he will fallê from his horse atones!  
Is that a cook of London, with mischance?  
Do him come forth, he knoweth his penance;  
For he shall tell a tale, by my fay,  
Although it be not worth a bottle hay.  

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

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.
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.

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

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?”

This cook, that was full pale and nothing red,
Said to oure host: “So God my soule bless, I don’t know why / I’d rather
As there is fall on me such heaviness,
N’ot I not why, that me were lever sleep
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,
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.

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 sour stinketh
That showeth well thou art not well disposed.
Of me, certáin, thou shalt not been y-glosed.
See how he ganeth, lo! this drunken wight,
As though he would swallwe us anonright.
Hold close thy mouth, man, by thy father kin!
The devil of hell set his foot therein!
Thy cursed breath infect will us all.

Fie, stinking swine! fie, foulé moot thee fall!
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!
I trowè that you drunken have wine ape, ²

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 wrav,  
_anger & upset_
And on the manciple he gan noddë fast  
_fine feat of horsemanship_
For lack of speech, and down the horse him cast,  
Pale
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 nadd hold him by his ladle!  
_angry & upset_
And ere that he again were in his saddle,  
_and his horse / mud_
There was great shoving bothë to and fro  
_again_
To lift him up, and muchel care and woe,  
_body_
So unwieldy was this sorry pall ghost.  
_It’s all he can do_
And to the Manciple then spoke our Host:  
_I don’t care_
  “Because drink hath dominatïon
Upon this man, by my salvation,
I trow he lewëdly would tell his tale.  
_and his horse / mud_
60 For, were it wine, or old or moisty ale,
That he hath drunk, he speaketh in his nose,  
_snorts & sniffles_
And fneseth fast, and eke he hath the pose.
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 fellë from his capul eftsoon,
Then will we allë have enough to doon  
_body_
In lifting up his heavy drunken corse.
Tell on thy tale; of him make I no fors.

_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_
Reclaimë thee and bringë thee to lure;  
_outwit & catch you_
I mean, he speakë will of smallë 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."

“No,” quod the manciple, “that were a great mischief!
So might he lightly bring me in the snare.
Yet had I lever payen for the mare
Which he rides on, than he should with me strive.

I will not wratthen him, also may I thrive!
That that I spoke, I said it in my bourd.

*The Manciple knows exactly how to make amends*

And wit you what? I have here in a gourd
A draught of wine, yeah, of a ripe grape,
And right anon you shall see a good jape.
This cook shall drink thereof, if [that] I may.
Up pain of death, he will not say me nay.”

And certainly, to tellen as it was,
Of this vessel the cook drank fast, alas!
What needed him? he drank enough beforne.

And when he hadde poued in this horn,
To the manciple he took the gourd again;
And of that drink the cook was wonder fain,
And thankèd him in such wise as he could.

Then gan our host to laughen wonder loud,
And said: “I see well it is necessary,
Where that we go, good drinkèd with us carry;
For that will tumè rancor and dis-ease
T' accord and love, and many a wrong appease.
O thou Bacchus, y-blessèd be thy name,

That so canst tumen earnest into game!
Worship and thank be to thy deity!
Of that matter you get no more of me.
Tell on thy talè, manciple, I thee pray.”

“Well, sir,” quod he, “now hearken what I say.
The Manciple's Tale

Some attributes of Phoebus Apollo

When Phoebus dwelled here in this earth adown,  
As oldé bookës maken mentíon,  
He was the mostë lusty bachelor  
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;  
And many another noble worthy deed  
He with his bowë wrought, as men may read.  
Playen he could on every minstrelcy,  
And singen, that it was a melody  

115 To hearen of his clearë voice the sound.  
Certes the king of Thebës, Amphioun,  
That with his singing wallëd that citï,  
Could never singen half so well as he.  
Therto he was the seemliestë man  

120 That is or was, since that the world began.  
What needeth it his features to descrive?  
For in this world was none so fair alive.  
He was therewith fulfilled of gentillesse,  
Of honour, and of perfect worthiness.  

125 This Phoebus, that was flower of bachelry,  
As well in freedom as in chivalry,  
For his desport, in sign eke of victóry  
Of Python, so as telleth us the story,  
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 couldé, by an hundred thousandth deal,
Singé so wonder merrily and well.

Another caged pet with different talents

Now had this Phoebus in his house a wife
Which that he loved more 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.

For him were loth be-japéd for to be,
And so is every wight in such degree;
But all in idle, for it availeth nought.
A good wife, that is clean of work and thought,
Should not be kept in no await, certain;
Jealous he was, and would have kept her fain.

And truly, the labour is in vain
To keep a shrewé, for it will not be.
This hold I for a very nicety,
To spillé labour for to keepé wives.
Thus writen oldé clerkés in their lives.

But now to purpose, as I first began:
This worthy Phoebus does all that he can
To pleasen her, weening for such pleasánce,
And for his manhood and his governance,
That no man should have put him from her grace.

The pointlessness of cages, even nice ones

But God it wot, there may no man embrace
As to distreyn a thing which that natûre
Hath naturally set in a créatûre.
Take any bird, and put it in a cage,
And do all thine intent and thy couráge
To foster it tenderly with meat and drink
Of all dainties that thou canst bethink,
And keep it all so cleanly as thou may,
Although his cage of gold be ne’er so gay,
Yet hath this bird, by twenty thousand fold,

G knows no man can contrive
To restrain

To waste

y. best effort

food

ever so splendid
Lever in a forest that is rude and cold
Go eaten wormés and such wretchedness.
For ever this bird will do his busyness
T’escape out of his cagé, if he may.
His liberty this bird desireth ay.

Nature will assert itself

Let take a cat and foster him well with milk
And tender flesh, and make his couch of silk,
And lat him see a mouse go by the wall,
Anon he waiveth milk and flesh and all,
And every dainty that is in that house,
Such appetite hath he to eat a mouse.
Lo here hath lust his domination,
And appetite fleemeth discretion,
A she-wolf hath also a villein’s kind.
The lewedest wolf that she may find,
Or least of reputation, -- him will she take
In timé when her list to have a make.
All these examples speak I by these men
That be untrue, and nothing by women.
For men have ever a likerous appetite
On lower things to pérform their delight
Than on their wives, be they ne’er so fair
Ne ne’er so trué, nor so debonair.
Flesh is so newfangled, with mischance,¹
That we ne can in nothing have pleasánce
That sowneth into virtue any while.

Back to the story

This Phoebus, which that thought upon no guile,
Deceivéd was, for al his jollity.
For under him another haddé she,
A man of little reputation,
Not worth to Phoebus in comparison.

¹ “Human nature is so addicted to novelty, alas, ...
The more harm is, it happens often so,  
Of which there cometh muchel harm and woe. 
And so befell, when Phoebus was absént,  
His wife anon hath for her lemman sent. 

More’s the pity  
Of which there cometh muchel harm and woe.

More commentary

205 Her “lemman”? Certes, this is a knavish speech!  
Forgive it me, and that I you beseech.  
The wisé Plató says, as you may read,  
The word must needs accorden with the deed.  
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,  
There is no difference, truly,  
Betwixt a wife that is of high degree,  
If of her body she dishonest be,

215 And a poor wench, other than this --  
If it so be they workè both amiss --  
But that the gentle, in estate above,  
She shall be cleped his “lady”, as in love;  
And for that other is a poor woman,

220 She shall be cleped his “wench” or his “lemman”,  
And, God it wot, mine owné dearé brother.  
Men lay that one as low as lies that other.  
Right so betwixt a titleless tyrant  
And an outlaw, or a thief errant,

225 The same I say there is no difference.  
To Alexander was told this sentence,  
That, for the tyrant is of greater might,  
By force of meinee, for to slay downright,  
And burnen house and home, and make all plain,

230 Lo, therefore is he cleped a capitain;  
And for the outlaw has but small meinee,  
And may not do so great a harm as he,  
Nor bring a country to so great mischief,  
Men clepen him an outlaw or a thief.

235 But, for I am a man not textual,  
I would not tell of textés never a deal;  
I will go to my tale, as I began.
Back to the tale again

When Phoebus’ wife had sent for her leman, Anon they wroughten all their lust volâge.

240 The white crow, that hung ay in the cage. Beheld their work, and saide never a word.
And when that home was come Phoebus, the lord, This crow sang “Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!”

245 Ne wert thou wont so merrily to sing That to mine heart it was a rejoicing To hear thy voice? Alas! what song is this?”
“By God!” quod he, “I singé not amiss. Phoebus,” quod he, “for all thy worthiness,

250 For all thy beauty and thy gentilesse, For all thy song and all thy minstrelcy, For all thy waiting, bleared is thine eye
With one of little reputation, Not worth to thee, as in comparison,

255 The montance of a gnat, so may I thrive! For on thy bed thy wife I saw him swive.”
What will you more? The crow anon him told, By sadde tokens and by wordès bold,

260 Him to great shame and to great villainy; How that his wife had done her lechery, And told him oft he saw it with his eyen.
His Phoebus gan awayward for to wrien, And thought his sorrowful heartë burst a-two.

265 And in his ire his wife then hath he slain. This is th’effect, there is no more to sayn; For sorrow of which he broke his minstrelcy, And eke he broke his arrows and his bow,

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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.”
And after that thus spoke he to the crow
“Traitor,” quod he, “with tongue of scorpion,
Thou hast me brought to my confusion;
Alas that I was wrought! why n’ere I dead? 
O dearè wife! O gem of lustihead!
That were to me so sad and eke so true,
Now liest thou dead, with facé pale of hue,
Full guileless, that durst I swear, y-wis!

Exclamatio with commentary built in

O rakel hand, to do so foul amiss!
O trouble[d] wit, O iré recchèless,
That unaviséd smiteth guileless!
O wantrust, full of false suspiciïon,
Where was thy wit and thy discretion?
O every man, beware of rakelness!
Nor trów no thing withouten strong witnéss.

Smite not too soon, ere that you witen why,
And be aviséd well and soberly
Ere you do any executïon
Upon your iré for suspiciïon.
Alas! a thousand folk hath rakel ire

Fully fordone, and brought them in the mire.
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.
Thou sangè whilom like a nightingale;

Now shalt thou, falsè thief, thy song forgon,
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;
Thou and thine offspring ever shall be black,

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.”
As a sign
And to the crow he start, and that anon,
rushed at / quickly
And pulled his white feathers every one,
derived him of
And made him black, and reft him all his song,
technically until him
And eke his speech, and out at door him slung
Unto the devil, which I him betake;
to whom I consign him
And for this cause be alle crowes black.

**Still more commentary and exhortation**

Lordings, by this example I you pray,
Beware, and taketh keepè what that you say
take care
Ne telleth never no man in your life
has covered
How that another man hath dight his wife;
He will you haten mortally, certaín.
Daun Solomon, as wisè clerkès sayn,
King S. / wise scholars
Teacheth a man to keepen his tongue well.
But as I said, I am not textual.
learned
But nonetheless, thus taughte me my dame:
my mother
“My son, think on the crow, in Godès name!
My son, keep well thy tongue, and keep thy friend.
A wicked tongue is worsè than a fiend;
a devil
My son, from a fiend men may them bless.
My son, God of his endless goodness
also
Walled a tongue with teeth and lippes eke,
For man should him avisè what he speak.
For = So that
My son, full often, for too muchè speech
ruined
Hath many a man been spilt, as clerkès teach;
little & thoughtful
But for little speech avisely
ruined
Is no man shent, to speaken generally.
My son, thy tonguè shoudest thou restrain
except when you’re trying
At allè times, but when thou dost thy pain
To speak of God, in honor and [in] prayer.
learn
The firstè virtue, son, if thou wilt lere,
Is to restrain and keepè well thy tongue;
Thus learnè children when that they be young.
ill-advised
My son, of muchel speaking evil avised,
Where lessè speaking had enough sufficed,
Comes muchel harm; thus was me told and taught.
14

In muchel speeches sinnë wanteth naught.
Wost thou wherof a rakel tonguë serveth? 1

340 Right as a sword forcutteth and forcarveth
An arm a-two, my dearë son, right so
A tonguë cutteth friendship all a-two.
A jangler is to God abominable.
Read Solomon, so wise and honourable;

345 Read David in his psalmes, read Senéc.
My son, speak not, but with thine head thou beck.
Dissimule as thou wert deaf, if that thou hear
A jangler speak of perilous matter.
The Fleming says, and learn it if thee lest,

350 That little jangling causeth muchel rest.
My son, if thou no wicked word hast said,
Thee thar not dread for to be betrayed;
But he that hath mis-said, I dare well sayn,
He may by no way clepe his word again.

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
A tale of which he is now evil apaid.
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,
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”