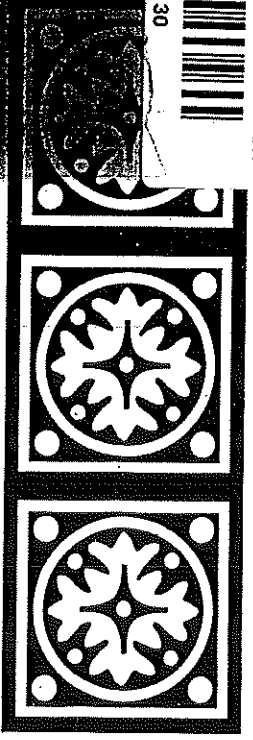


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COMPANION
TO

CHAUCER'S

Canterbury

Tales

Margaret Hallissy



gold in coffe" (I, A, 298). But he would rather spend his money this way than on the trappings of elegant university life. He is not an empty-headed young gentleman who is only at the university to enjoy himself. Chaucer's Clerk is a real student, the genuine article, as is also shown in his speech.

The hallmark of the Clerk's speech is sincerity. A "sober" or serious man (I, A, 289), he considers every word and refrains from idle chatter:

*Of studie took he moost cure and moost heede,
Noght o word spak he moore than was neede,
And that was seyde in forme and reverence,
And short and quyk and ful of hy sentence.*

Of study he took most care and most heed.
He spoke not one word more than was needed,
And that was said in proper form and reverence
And short and quick and full of high sentence.

(I, A, 303–306)

"High sentence" is a medieval term for the highest and most important purpose of speech: to teach a moral lesson. If it is true to his description in the "General Prologue," we can expect the "Clerk's Tale" to be didactic, which it is; but we might also expect it to be "short and quick," which it decidedly is not (perhaps Chaucer's little joke). From his description the Clerk seems solemn and a bit dull; but in the context of a society in which Chaucer sees so many hypocrites, the Clerk stands out as an ideal role model for academics: "Gladly would he learn and gladly teach" (I, A, 308).

THE SERGEANT OF THE LAW

The Oxford Clerk has removed himself from the world of profit and loss inhabited by the Merchant; with the Sergeant of the Law we return to that world. The legal profession in the Middle Ages, much like its counterpart today, allowed a man of common birth to make an excellent living on the basis of professional training. Chaucer describes his Lawyer in terms of legal competence (which shows in turn that Chaucer was familiar with the operations of courts and lawyers himself). The Lawyer is admirable, "rich in excellence" (I, A, 311), "discreet" and "of great reverence" (I, A, 312)—just the kind of lawyer one might employ today. This Lawyer really knows his law, as one would expect of one who had often been a "Justice . . . in the Assizes" (I, A, 314), the district civil court. He knows all the cases and legal decisions (I, A, 323) from the time of King William I (1066–1087), a major feat of memorization. Such expertise is well-rewarded:

The General Prologue

*For his science and for his heigh renown,
Of fees and robes hadde he many oon.*

Because of his learning and his high renown,
He had many fees and robes.

(I, A, 316–317)

A successful lawyer like him makes money and has good clothing. "Robe all hand-made, were, like books, expensive in the Middle Ages. Such a robe would have sufficient income to invest in real estate too. Every prope was a potential purchase, subject to his sole ownership, possession in "simple" (I, A, 319), a term used in real estate law to this day to indicate total and complete ownership.

With his portrait of the Lawyer, Chaucer calls the reader's attention the rising affluence of a new professional class. But Chaucer undercuts the portrait of this man so "rich in excellence" (I, A, 311) by suggesting that as in the case of the Merchant, all is not entirely as it appears to be. Twice the narrator describes the lawyer as "seeming": "He seemed rich" (I, 313), "He seemed busier than he was" (I, A, 322). "Seeming" suggests deceptiveness in the Lawyer's character. Why, for example, would a man who had a rich wardrobe wear a simple outer garment on this pilgrimaging? By these few suggestions of a disparity between the Lawyer's appearance and his reality, nowhere fully developed, Chaucer is perhaps alluding to distrust some feel for members of the legal profession.

THE FRANKLIN

As would be expected considering the Lawyer's high social position, he is accompanied by the Franklin, a country gentleman whose main character trait is his devotion to food. Medieval people were ambivalent about food as they were about other sensory pleasures. On the one hand, they were fond of great ceremonial meals featuring huge amounts of food and many elaborate courses. On the other hand, "feast" was opposed to "fast, the belief that to deny the body was to nourish the soul. In every way, the Franklin's description contrasts with the religious tradition of asceticism that was so much a part of medieval Christianity.

As "Epicurus' own son" (I, A, 336), a follower of the pagan philosopher Epicurus (c. 340–c. 270 B.C.), the Franklin believes that physical pleasure equals happiness. His portrait indicates that food is his main source of earthly joy. Specific items from the medieval menu are mentioned as being his particular favorites: bread, wine, ale, several varieties of "fish . . ."