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## The Clerk Conundrum: Chaucer's Attitude towards Pilgrim and Profession

Chaucer's attitude towards clerks throughout his poetry provides a puzzling take on the profession. Jill Mann takes special note of the frame Clerk's profile in her book *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* when she discusses the "emphasis on the 'moral vertu' which is the content of the Clerk's conversation, and which seems to determine the tone of his character" (75). Yet several of the clerks in the actual Canterbury stories are represented as less admirable: these men are used as vehicles of humor or mentioned with derision. Even though the clerks of the "Reeve's Tale" eventually obtain the justice they seek through underhanded methods, Chaucer pokes fun at the characters throughout the tale before they can receive their desired outcome. Crafty Nicholas of the "Miller's Tale" is portrayed as a sly and sinister fellow, quite different from the man of his trade seen on the pilgrimage. When we delve into discrepancies between the Canterbury Clerk's self-representation and Chaucer's depictions of his counterparts in other tales, a positive representation of the clerk estate rises to the surface in the *Canterbury Tales* frame. Chaucer's portrayal of the brazen attitude and negative behavior of his clerks in the "Miller's Tale" and "Reeve's Tale" is at odds with the intellectual yet morally just and considerate Clerk who takes part in the pilgrimage.

In the "General Prologue," Chaucer begins to formulate his model of the pilgrim Clerk as both a man and a general character type. The Clerk of the pilgrimage is a poor scholar, who cares for learning and his books above all other worldly things and places a high value on morality. Chaucer stresses that he "hadde geten hym yet no benefice, / Ne was so worldly for to have office" ("General Prologue" 291-92). The Clerk stresses the pursuit of knowledge so much, it seems, that it has affected his ability to procure a benefactor or secure a political office for himself. However, Chaucer continues, "Sownynge in moral vertu was his speche, / And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche" ("General Prologue" 307-08). This man is content to pass on the knowledge he has gleaned from his books, and he lives a simplistic life with few luxuries. The Clerk appears to see learning not as a weapon, but as a tool that he is happy to show others how to use. Indeed, as Mann notes, "The phrase 'the eternal student' aptly sums up our impression, not only of his willingness to go to learning and edifying others, but also of his slight remoteness from the world of social ends" (74). The pilgrim Clerk's apparent benevolence and physical remove will prove clearly different from the clerks in Chaucer's forthcoming tales, who use their intelligence as the method of inflicting

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shame or revenge on their hapless victims. As of yet, however, it is too soon to tell whether or not the Clerk will show any symptoms of malice when telling his own tale. In his discussion of the “General Prologue,” H. Marshall Leicester declares, “Where we are never in doubt about what we are to think of the monks or friars or townsmen in other estates satires, we are almost always unsure of exactly how good or bad their counterparts in the General Prologue are” (246). Leicester’s observation that Chaucer leaves the virtue of his characters ambiguous at the beginning of his estates satire, allowing readers to formulate their own suppositions at first, has particular relevance to Chaucer’s pilgrim clerk. Through his own speech, the Clerk still has the potential to reveal the negative characteristics which Chaucer attributes to his other fellows: only the pilgrimage and the passage of time will reveal his true character.

It would seem that the Clerk’s character portrait in the “General Prologue” lacks an accurate description of the clerk’s occupation. In his description of the actual lay clerk John Carpenter, George Shuffelton provides some of this much-needed historical context for our understanding of fourteenth-century clerks. He notes, “If we break down the term . . . and consider clerk as a general term for anyone possessing clergie or learning, the category . . . include[s] virtually any literate layman of the period” (Shuffelton 435). The Canterbury pilgrim Clerk has studied at Oxford, and his portrayal clearly reveals his learning and skills. The Clerk’s status is not so elevated as others in his profession because he is not engaged in learning as a stepping-stone to the higher institutional levels of employment; as Shuffelton stresses, “Lay clerks performed crucial social functions that had been largely dominated by the Church, such as education and the administration of charity” (436). Thus, the Clerk clearly still occupies an important niche in society as an instructor and provider of moral guidance who is not necessarily affiliated with the Church and other clergymen, although he does carry the potential for church connections as a learned scholar. This intellectual’s prowess in that regard is clear through his possession of “twenty books, clad in blak or reed,

/ Of Aristotle and his philosophie” (“General Prologue” 294-95). This collection is easily comparable to John Carpenter’s in Shuffelton’s study, as this clerk, who served as the Common Clerk of London, owned “at least twenty-five texts in fifteen different volumes” as seen in his will (446). Although Chaucer’s pilgrim does not possess political power like that of Carpenter, the fictional man’s collection of books almost rivals what the actual man had gathered upon his death. Clearly, clerks have various methods of utilizing their skills, and this notion of extensive potential shall become even more apparent as Chaucer’s stories unfold.

In the story that draws the ire of the Reeve, Nicholas the clerk is portrayed as a crafty character from the start of the “Miller’s Tale.” Unlike the clerks who appear in the “Reeve’s Tale,” this man lives in Oxford, giving him slightly more similarity to the actual pilgrim Clerk depicted in the “General Prologue.” Knowledge seems to be of more import to him than it was to Aleyne and John, as Chaucer tells of his

Almageste, and bookes grete and smale,  
His astrelabie, longynge for his art,  
His augrym stones layen faire apart.  
(“Miller’s Tale” 3208-10)

In a sharp contrast from the actual Clerk, Nicholas’ interests lie in stargazing and astrology, not philosophy and other such teachings that would provide moral education. In addition, before the actual plot of the tale takes place, the Miller ensures that his audience knows Nicholas has made a cuckold of the carpenter. As a man of morality, the pilgrim Clerk would shy away from such scandalous behavior. Yet Nicholas’ plot to sleep with Alison while publicly humiliating her husband shows an innate, although cruel, depth of thought that has clearly been honed by a high level of education.

Although Chaucer’s readers will note that Nicholas’ intellectual interests tend toward the questionable science of astrology, the carpenter is clearly impressed by his education. In fact, he believes Nicholas studies too much: “Me reweth soore of hende Nicholas. / He shal be rated of his studying” (3462-63). While looking

at the comedic aspects of Chaucer's tales, A. Booker Thro remarks, "Chaucer is concerned to accentuate the cleverness rather than the cuckolding, and thus causes his clerk to conceive of a stratagem wholly gratuitous in its complexity to the practical needs of the situation" (98). To this end, Nicholas constructs an elaborate plot to convince John the carpenter that he has seen a vision of Noah's flood, and that they must prepare for the worst and protect Alison from danger. The unassuming man follows Nicholas' strange requests to the letter, never once guessing the clerk's true intent even when he blatantly drops hints about Alison's affair. When first setting up the trick, Nicholas awakes from a fake stupor to tell the carpenter that he will "speke in pryvetee / Of certeyn thyng that toucheth me and thee" ("Miller's Tale" 3493-94). Again, the clerk is using double entendre, outwardly referring to the plan he has concocted but really talking about Alison's private parts. Nicholas is telling the carpenter that he is sleeping with his wife, and the poor fool has no idea of the subterfuge. Thro is therefore correct when he declares that the carpenter's "mental deficiencies define the clerk's brilliance by contrast" (101). Nicholas is highly intelligent, but he uses his skills to manipulate those around him into giving him what he wants, therefore serving as an example of a scholar searching for entertainment even though he still has an interest in gaining knowledge.

As the Reeve begins his tale, his audience is treated to a depiction of clerks John and Aleyn, manipulated scornfully by the pilgrim as instruments of revenge against the Miller. Yet these clerks orchestrate their own revenge for their humiliation at the hands of the fictional miller Symkyn. From the very beginning of the tale, these clerks are noticeably different from the humble Clerk of the pilgrimage. While the Clerk received training at Oxford, John and Aleyn studied at "Cantebregge," although they share their counterpart's poverty. Of these young men, Chaucer declares,

Testif they were, and lusty for to pleye,  
 And, oonly for hire myrthe and revelrye  
 [...] goon to mille and seen hir corn ygrounde.

("Reeve's Tale" 4004-05; 4008)

These men pursue not knowledge but amusement. They are obviously intelligent and are working towards receiving an education that will afford them lucrative job opportunities, but their main joy is seeking out sources of entertainment. In an essay which discusses these young adults as the stereotypical "class clowns," Ethan K. and Kipton D. Smilie remark, "The students, or clerks, as they were more commonly called in Chaucer's day ... are undoubtedly clowns, who 'work the system' for the sake of leisure and to show off" (38). This flippant attitude towards education is evident in their reaction to the discovery of their college maunciple's grave illness. The clerks use this opportunity to leave their studies and journey to the mill to see their corn ground.

When John and Aleyn arrive at the mill, Chaucer plays up their Northern dialect tremendously. This distinction in speech creates a joke at the young men's expense and tricks Symkyn into thinking that these young students can be easily fooled. In his discussion concerning Chaucer and dialect, Robert Epstein asserts that "however accurately he portrays the regional dialect of the clerks, Chaucer is inviting laughter at their unfamiliar speech and encouraging the reader to assume that they are comically rustic rubes" (101). In this way, Chaucer ensures that Symkyn is not the only one who is fooled by the two young men. Although the clerks do not anticipate the brief loss of their horse or the necessity of staying the night in the miller's house, they twist the insulting situation for their own benefit, highlighting their own intelligence through their method of revenge. Epstein continues, "John and Aleyn's subsequent conversations are marked by ... academic reasoning, [which seems] unnecessarily complex and hermetically theoretical" (102). It is no wonder the miller and his family find these clerks' ideas and behavior puzzling. This type of long, drawn-out discussion is most clearly present in Aleyn's justification of sleeping with the miller's daughter. He tells John, "And syn I sal have neen amendent / Agayn my los, I will have esement" ("Reeve's Tale" 4185-86). This "esement" is used

as a double entendre, meaning both a repayment for the loss of pride dealt to Aleyn and his own physical gratification with the miller's offspring. Although the two scholars are Northerners, the miller's misunderstanding of their intent and their true personalities leads to the loss of everything he once prized: his mastery of the situation, his stolen goods, and most importantly, his daughter's virtue.

When the Clerk himself is granted an opportunity to speak, his knowledge and moral values are apparent in the tale that he tells. Before he can begin his story, however, the Host entreats him to tell the tale in a manner that anyone can understand, urging him to stay away from "youre termes, youre colours, and youre figures" ("Clerk's Prologue" 16). In other words, the Host fears that the scholarly man will use language and discourse that the other members of the pilgrimage will find difficult to follow; thus, he asks the Clerk to make his tale simple. The Clerk is only too happy to oblige, taking a Petrarchan tale that was once embellished with flowing rhetoric and simplifying it slightly. Leah Schwebel discusses Chaucer's translation of the tale of Griselda and Walter from Petrarch's version, which was in turn a translation from the original by Boccaccio. She declares that "by translating Petrarch's words into English, a vulgar un-literary tongue, [the Clerk] conforms to the Host's injunction to tell a tale that common folk can understand" (Schwebel 290). Although the Clerk admits that the story was first told in the sort of high style the Host does not want to hear, he assures his audience of plain speech and clear understanding. To Schwebel, this emphasis means that "Chaucer progressively aligns Petrarch with a method of writing useless to anyone but the most elite" (288). This focus also highlights the Clerk's own social status as a scholar who is not elite but who still possesses more knowledge than his peers on the pilgrimage. In short, the Clerk is a pilgrim who can serve as a bridge between social classes depending upon the state of his career.

Although the "Clerk's Tale" is a controversial one that features a husband who repeatedly tests his wife's loyalty and honesty in an unfathomably cruel manner, the pilgrim makes his

opinions heard even through the source material of his story. In a thorough examination of the tale, Michael Raby notes, "The Clerk weaves strands of commentary into his translation of Petrarch's story, interjections that vary between outrage, admiration, and rationalization" (223). Most of the Clerk's verbal asides are necessary because of the actions of Walter, the perpetually paranoid husband who fails to trust his wife until she undergoes years of his emotionally brutal testing. Over the course of the tale, Walter fakes the murders of both of his children and casts Griselda out of both their home and marriage, all to test her devotion to him. However, throughout the narration, the Clerk offers qualifying commentary that clearly shows his disdain for these events, his respect for Griselda, and his understanding of Griselda's willingness to comply with her husband's demands. As Walter begins his first test, taking his infant daughter away from Griselda and pretending to have the newborn slain, the pilgrim remarks,

I seye that yvele it sit  
To assaye a wyf whan that it is no need,  
And putten hire in angwyssh and in drede.  
("Clerk's Tale" 460-62)

The Clerk vehemently denounces Walter's tests, stating the futility of causing pain to a virtuous wife for no reason. Again, when the couple's son is born and Walter repeats his child-snatching and false murder, the pilgrim narrator voices his opposition. Before Walter begins his final and most elaborate torment, the Clerk pauses again to pass judgment on the nobleman's decision-making skills. This intelligent narrator poses a rhetorical question, asking,

What koude a sturdy housbonde more  
devyse  
To preeve hir wyfhod and hir steadfastnesse,  
And he continuyng evere in sturdinesse?  
("Clerk's Tale" 608-700)

Raby suggests that comments such as these, which simultaneously praise Griselda and scorn Walter, also serve another purpose for the pilgrim. He believes that with these interjections



“the Clerk tries to dispel some of the scandal embedded in his source material” (Raby 224). Again, a marked difference is visible between the pilgrim Clerk and his fictional brethren. This Clerk seems to be attempting to give Griselda some compensation for the abuse she suffers within his tale by thoroughly apologizing for it.

In fact, the Clerk may be guiding his audience towards an allegorical interpretation of the tale through the method of description. Walter tests his wife’s loyalty, devotion, and faith in him, and Griselda remains steadfast in her responses to her lord. Griselda’s stoicism in the face of extreme hardship may bring to mind Job: like that Old Testament model, she loses her children, her status, and her self-worth. Additionally, the Clerk’s version of the tale allows the notion of the earthly lord to translate to the Lord of Heaven, which would resonate with both his audience in the pilgrimage and actual medieval readers of Chaucer’s work. This allegorical interpretation also allows Chaucer’s Clerk to justifiably lament the lack of women like Griselda while reassuring the women in his audience that they should not feel the need to emulate her. Peggy Knapp notes in her book *Chaucer and the Social Contest* that “the Clerk himself ... seems to encourage only the allegorical lesson about the soul, finding it ‘inportable’... for women to be so humble in relation to their husbands,” therefore rejecting the notion that he believes the women outside his story should act as Griselda does towards their own husbands (131). The morality of Chaucer’s Clerk, then, seems to be on display, and so, too, is his desire to educate without tricking or belittling his audience, which sets him clearly apart from the clerks in the stories his companions on the pilgrimage have told. While Nicholas, John, and Aleyen revel in scandal in their own various ways, the pilgrim Clerk actively seeks to avoid it, even going so far as attempting to at best denounce or at least apologize for plot points in his story that might offend his fellow pilgrims and Chaucer’s audience as a whole.

Throughout the pilgrimage depicted in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer presents fictional clerks whose scandalous personalities conflict with that of his pilgrim Clerk, a kind and moral

scholar with a penchant for reading extensively and sharing his knowledge. John, Aleyen, and Nicholas use their intelligence for their own devious ends of obtaining revenge and duping foolish men, but the Clerk looks down on such behavior and strives to aid others instead of disrupting their learning. This strange inconsistency in the depiction of Chaucer’s clerks ultimately foregrounds the positive character of the Clerk as a pilgrim and allows Chaucer to satirize the profession without causing extensive damage to its reputation.

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