

A Note on Harry Bailey's 'Juggement'

Daniel Elkind

Excerpt

Perhaps most noteworthy is the scene's placement in the context of the General Prologue: it occupies the General Prologue's last hundred or so lines and, as a result, sets the stage for the rest of the *Tales*. What this episode signals to us, as the company begins its journey and its 'game,' is that neither the pilgrims nor the *Tales* themselves can escape the social conventions which we might expect the pilgrimage to obscure. As soon as the pilgrimage and the 'game' are conceived, they become the targets of a social structure and a code of laws. Furthermore, an obsession with social prestige is on full display: the pilgrims become a sort of feudal band, or itinerant court, with the Host playing the role of king and the pilgrims serving as his 'lordinges.' (790) We notice that the Host repeats the term 'lordinges,' or 'lordes,' continually, as if it pleases him to say it: once at the end of the dinner feast ('now, lordinges, trewely, ye been to me right welcome, hertely,' 763-4), again as the Host introduces the rules of the game ('lordinges... now herkneth for the beste,' 790), and a third time as the Knight is chosen to tell the first tale ('lordes, herkneth if you leste,' 830). Chaucer highlights the distance between the real social order and the pilgrims' imaginary hierarchy through the words that the Host speaks to the Knight: 'my maister and my lord, draweth cut, for that is myn accord.' (839-40) In the space of one line, the Host returns briefly to reality, addressing the Knight as 'my maister and my lord,' before quickly reverting to the conviction that his and the Knight's roles are inverted: 'draweth cut,' the Host orders the Knight, 'for that is *myn accord*' (emphasis mine).

Works Cited

James Simpson and Alfred David, eds., *The Middle Ages*, 9th ed., vol. A, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012)

Fellow Commentary

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It is no easy task to decipher and analyze works written in Middle English. This essay is all the more impressive, then, for making its commentary on Chaucer’s General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* accessible to those outside of the discipline.

In this excerpt, the author demonstrates an expert use of evidence. Direct quotations orient the audience to the tone and themes of the Prologue, yet are used sparingly enough that readers are not overwhelmed by Chaucer’s complex language. The carefully cultivated quotes convey the sense that we are following along with the author through *The Canterbury Tales*. By its end, this short paragraph is able to craft a remarkably complex argument about social hierarchies in the General Prologue.