

Canterbury tales: the squire and absolon

Literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Canterbury Tales is a collection of stories written by Geoffrey Chaucer in the late 14th century. The original piece was written as a poem in Middle English. The Tales start off with Chaucer, acting as the narrator, explaining to us in the “ General Prologue” that along with 29 other pilgrims, he will be travelling to Canterbury Cathedral to pay homage to Saint Thomas Beckett. Along the way, every pilgrim will be responsible for a telling tale to entertain their companions. Chaucer goes into great detail on each of his companions, giving readers not only a physical description, but also a sense of the narrator’s opinion of each traveler.

Chaucer gives us an extremely varied group of characters from all walks of life, from the “ noble knight” (Oxford 4) who is regarded as the highest social-ranking member of the group, to the drunken miller, the thrice-married wife of Bath, and the untrustworthy pardoner. Two of the characters in The Canterbury Tales, the squire, who is Chaucer’s fellow traveler, and Absolon, one of the characters in “ The Miller’s Tale”, appear to be very different, but in reality they both embody and represent the same set of beliefs that Chaucer ridicules. The squire is one of the pilgrims travelling with Chaucer and first appears in the “ General Prologue”.

He is the son of the noble and reputable knight and appears to be the ideal son and squire we would expect; the narrator describes him as “ polite, modest, willing to serve” and had “ taken part in cavalry forays” (5). As a knight in training, the squire should be focusing on the skills that will make him a good knight like his father, jousting and riding for example. The narrator, however, spends a relatively short amount of time describing his

knightly qualities; instead, the majority of the characterization focuses on the squire's physical description and his other unexpected skills.

The physical description of the squire, with “ his clothes [...] embroidered like a field / full of the freshest flowers, white and red”, seem almost feminine, a strong contrast to his father, who as a knight “ in the king's service [had] fought valiantly” (4). He is also portrayed as the epitome of youthfulness: the narrator estimates that the squire is around “ twenty years of age” and describes him as “ fresher than the month of May” (5). The squire is also described as being able to “ dance, and also draw and write”, and he liked to “ make music too, and songs to go with it” (5).

These are all qualities that are not usually associated with a squire or knight, and indeed, the character does not use these skills in his capacity as a squire, but rather in his role as a lover hoping to gain the favor of his lady. In fact, everything that the squire does is not in hope or receiving the honor and privilege that knights strive for, but rather that he will “ stand well in his lady's eyes” (5). The squire also exhibits another stereotypical quality of courtly love; he is so struck with love, “ that come nightfall / he'd sleep no more than any nightingale” (5).

As a good representation of his high social standing, the squire seems to be a direct contrast to the miller's character Absolon in his tale. Absolon, a character in “ The Miller's Tale”, is a parish clerk who desires the “ young [and] comely” (84) Alison, the wife of the aging but rich carpenter. Absolon is the physical contrast of the squire; where the squire was “ wonderfully athletic, and of great strength” (5), Absolon's “ face was red [and] his eyes grey as a goose” (86).

Absolon is also described as “ a bit squeamish / of farting” and liking to keep company with “ lively barmaids”. Despite his natural uncomely state, he is always “ dressed stylishly” in fashion, and enjoys to dance “ in twenty different styles” (86). Absolon, being able to “ play upon a tiny two-stringed fiddle” and sing in a “ loud falsetto” (86), also has significant musical talents. Through the miller’s description of the parish clerk, it is clear that the he holds none of the respect for Absolon that the narrator of the prologue seems to have for the squire.

In his attempts to woo Alison, Absolon stays awake daily; he sings to her, “ quavering and trilling like a nightingale” (87), sends her “ honey-wine, mead and spiced ale” (87), and proffers cash to her. In the tradition of courtly love and chivalry, Absolon is the typical and ideal lover in his attempts to win over Alison, even “ swear[ing] that he will be her slave” (87); however, he only “ wins a snub for all his labour” (88), as Alison had already set her heart on Nicholas. Fly Nicholas, as he was called, was a young student boarding with the carpenter, Alison’s husband.

Ironically, he was able to gain Alison’s favor by a much more direct approach; he simply grabbed her and pleaded with her. After accepting Nicholas however, Alison, “ made a monkey of [Absolon]; all his earnest is turned by Alison into a jest” (88). Throughout the tale, it is clear that the miller disapproves of Absolon’s romantic language and beliefs in courtly love, and thus makes him out to be a vain fool. Despite their immense physical and social differences, both the squire and Absolon are written to reflect upon the ideals of courtly love.

Both the squire and Absolon use their talents in music, dance, and writing in their attempts to woo their ladies. As evidenced by his love of the arts, the squire integrates his own belief in courtly love into his interpretation of his role as a squire. The squire, who despite having all the virtues of an ideal squire or knight, spends much of his time and energy courting his lady, rather than improving his honor and reputation as a knight should be doing. Absolon, in fact, does this as well. Instead of being portrayed as the typical parish clerk, or man of religion, he is shown as spending most of his time courting and pining after Alison.

Both the squire and Absolon are ridiculed in *The Canterbury Tales* and are painted as parodies of the conventional chivalric or courtly lover. Absolon, for all his efforts, not only does not receive a kiss from Alison, but rather gets “half-blinded by the blast” (98) of Nicholas’ fart. Through Absolon’s fate, the miller denounces the romantic language and chivalric behavior so popular in literature during Chaucer’s time. The miller is under the opinion that men who follow the rules of courtly love are generally unsuccessful in their attempts at wooing women. Chaucer the narrator seems to be in accordance with the miller in this belief.

The squire is motivated by love, rather than religion or honor as his father is; therefore, he spends much of his time courting his lady, rather than honing his knightly skills. Although there is no specific mention of whether the squire’s attempts are successful or not, there seems to be the implication that he is still working at attaining the love of his lady. The squire is a strong and youthful representation of his social class, while Absolon is depicted as

an uncomely parish clerk who still takes great pride in his appearance and loves to spend time at the inns and bars with the liveliest barmaids.

Despite the fact that both the squire and Absolon's conducts are strictly defined by their religious and social standings, Chaucer the writer manages to give the characters in The Canterbury Tales a significant departure to their perceived roles by imbuing the ideas and rules of courtly love into their behavior, dress, and manner. Perhaps it is this insight into relationships and people from all walks of life in medieval England that gives The Canterbury Tales its lasting influence and fame in common-day literature and society.