

IN PRAISE OF ANIMAL LABORANS, THE LABORING BODIES OF CHAUCER'S GENERAL PROLOGUE

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Abstract: In the late medieval England, the long futile wars, famine and death tolls caused by the plagues highlighted the value of laboring bodies. Attitudes to labor changed, especially labor for food production. The attitude of the clergy, however, was paradoxical towards labor. According to the Christian doctrine and ethics, work was a virtue, but, practically speaking, in the feudal system of the medieval period, manual work was allotted to the peasants. To cope with this ideological flaw, the clergy triumphed in their (non-productive) clerical labor and services, meditative and ascetic life. Failure in achieving these ideals is depicted and satirized in the *General Prologue* of the *Canterbury Tales*, by the pilgrim-Chaucer's highlighting the significance of both food and food-makers.

Keywords: Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, *General Prologue*, Late medieval, labor, idleness, food production

Introduction

Chaucer's depictions of work in the *General Prologue* and within the *Tales* are substantial, yet not fully surveyed. As Kellie Robertson notes in his "Authorial Work", "Chaucer was obviously fascinated by working bodies and makes spectacular use of them" yet "[d]espite the fact that all of the pilgrims are described in terms of the work that they do, previous critical approaches to the question of work in relation to Chaucer's composition practices are surprisingly few" (441-458, 448-50).

Chaucer uses hand imagery frequently in the *General Prologue*. In his economy of hand symbolism, there are a few references to certain pilgrims' hands that seem suggestive of his preoccupation with manual function. First, it is the Knight's son and squire who "carf biforn his fader

at the table" (I, 100).¹ Second, it is the Yeoman (of the Knight or his son) who "in his hand he baar a mighty bowe" (108). Third, the Prioress with her tender way of eating with her hand (127-136), and also her arm that was adorned with a precious set of beads (158-162). Then there is the Parson going by foot with his staff in his hand (495). Next comes our worthy Miller's "thombe of gold" (563), and the last, the Summoner with a cake or a loaf of bread which he had fashioned into a shield for himself, and supposedly carried it by his hand (668). Of these manual manifestations in action, two belong to the camp of the nobility, the Squire and the Yeoman, and three to the clerical estate of the Prioress, the Parson, and the Summoner. The last one belongs to the third estate, the peasantry, represented by the Miller. Except for the Miller whose golden thumb is praised for its alchemy of food production in transforming grain to flour, the other members of the two higher estates use their hands for food consuming mostly. The Squire carves for his father, the Prioress eats with her hand, (her luxurious set of praying beads laying in idle adornment round her arm), and the frivolous Summoner holds a loaf of bread before him like a buckler in a militant pose. The exceptions are the Yeoman and the Parson. The Yeoman is a member of the Knight's household. According to Anthony J. Pollard, "the fourteenth-century aristocratic household was structured into four ranks: squire, yeoman (*valet*, in French, *valettus* in Latin), groom (*garçon / garcionis*), and page." He notes that the "Yeoman's role in the chase (the aristocratic pastime) and in war (the aristocratic calling) is as important as his woodcraft." The Yeoman is displayed not in eating pose but in holding his bow in his hand; an ambiguous act of either a militant or hunting pose, as he is a forester, or a bodyguard of his master. As Pollard notes: "In addition to his task of patrolling the forest and assisting with the chase, the Yeoman's implied military service as an archer, either with the Knight on crusade or with the Squire on chevauche, would have been obvious to Chaucer's immediate audience." Pollard also resorts to Keneth J. Thompson's argument that the Yeoman's "mighty bow [...] is not the conventional forester's bow, it is a great war bow, and expensive to boot" (77-93).

¹ The text from the *Canterbury Tales* used in this article is from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). The Roman numerals refer to the number of the 'fragment' from the *Canterbury Tales* and the Arabic numerals to the lines of the verses.

Laboring Bodies in the *General Prologue*

Labor and the images of means and motifs of labor are reflected in the *General Prologue* in a way that appreciate the more useful manual labor in contrast with the idleness or uneconomic labor. They are often applied for those pilgrims that are involved in the productive labor, or more specifically, in the food production, notably, the Plowman, the Miller, and the Cook. In connection with food production, the motifs of eating, consumption, and gluttony are also related, with the medieval mores.

The Plowman, the most directly linked laborer to the earth and the production of food, is the “idealized representative” of his estate, according to Jill Mann. With the Knight and the Parson who represent the other two estates, they “form the skeletal structure of medieval society” (55). The Plowman’s description (I, 529-541) begins by mentioning his affiliation with the pious Parson, as the two brothers represent the ideals of their respective estates, and then the narrator eulogizes the Plowman’s devotion to his work and society, his combining Christian humbleness, penance and piety with social obligations. Among his various manual occupations there is his dung distribution over the fields mentioned first: He is the man “That hadde ylad of dong ful many a fother” (I, 530). The prize of his work is the recycling of feces in the process of food production, a job with the implications of economy and ethics both. Indeed, in the moral economy of the medieval Christianity the plowman’s work was a metaphor for the greater recycling of man, his salvation, by redemption of his excremental body. As Susan S. Morrison observes, despite the negative notion of the medieval peasant as being regarded subhuman because of their association with manure, excrement and filth, the plowmen in Chaucer’s the *General Prologue* or William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* are viewed as virtuous, since for them “dung is understood to help society” (119). Actually, rural dung-heaps signified wealth, according to Morrison, since “dung that fertilized crops would help society and symbolized community” in both secular and religious ways (Ibid 10).

There are of course some contradictory explanations offered by Mark Bailey for the cliché appraisal of the Plowman in the *General Prologue*, related to the stereotypes of plowman in medieval England, such as the medieval convention of representing “ploughing as a metaphor for the act of penance,” or symbolizing it as “the act of labour in general, and, by extension, the penance of humanity after the fall of Adam” (Ibid 361). Another explanation, which is related to the contemporary situation of the labor power, argues the notoriety of the laborers for their greediness, laziness, and other such vices in the

context of the greater demand for the laboring hands in the late fourteenth century. Accordingly, Bailey concludes that “in doing so, Chaucer promotes a model of how the third estate should behave” (Ibid 364). In sum, Chaucer’s

Ploughman epitomized the noble qualities of labour, and in doing so fused together the characteristics of the estates ideal and the model Christian. The choice of a ploughman to promote this ideal, rather than a shepherd, was deliberate and symbolic. Both were metaphors with a long Christian tradition for spiritual leadership, yet a ploughman was part of a team producing essential foodstuffs, who stood for cooperation and social responsibility, in contrast to the more solitary shepherd. A ploughman was more obviously an integral member of a cohesive community, who shouldered responsibilities on behalf of the aristocracy, the church, and the king. Chaucer portrayed him briefly, because his audience was already familiar with the symbolism of ploughing and its social implications. (Ibid 367)

The next pilgrim who contributes to manual labor relating to food production is the notorious Miller, whose main importance and necessity, despite his many vices and villainies, and apart from his many other features, lies in his function in the food production. Beside animal imagery, his bodily description in the *General Prologue* contains some imagery of metals and tools related to the Miller’s agricultural labor, his ‘iron-ic’ estate, in accordance with the metallic metaphors in *The Republic* of Plato: “All of you in this land are brothers; but the god who fashioned you mixed gold in the composition of those among you who are fit to rule, so that they are of the most precious quality; and he put silver in the Auxiliaries, and iron and brass in the farmers and craftsmen” (106-7). It is interesting that in the portrait of “the povre Persoun” who is nevertheless “riche he was of hooly thoght and werk” (I, 478-79), the Parson himself uses Plato’s metal metaphor, applying gold for his own true clerical estate and iron for the laymen, as the narrator Chaucer re-narrates from him: “And this figure he added eek therto, / That if gold ruste, what shal iren do? / For if a preest be foul, on whom we truste, / No wonder is a lewed man to ruste” (499-502).

To return to our Miller and his metallic attributes, his beard is likened to a “spade” (I, 553), his mouth to “forneys” (559), associated with smithery and making tools for tillage, which is also mentioned in his tale, in Gerveys the blacksmith and his “kultour” episode (3766-85). The final ‘iron-ic’ attribution to Miller’s body is the metaphorization of ‘gold’ for his hand, as if to defy Plato’s hierarchy of the tripartite estates

of the golden rulers, the silver Auxiliaries, and the iron farmers and craftsmen. The narrator Chaucer refers to Miller's "thombe of gold" (563), presumably based on a contemporary proverb that indicated the economic triumph of the millers of the time generally. Jill Mann quotes from the *Oxford English Dictionary*: 'An honest miller hath a golden thumb' (160) and refers to "other proverbs incorporating the notion of the miller's dishonesty" (281).

However, no matter whether "a thumb of gold" means "one that brings profit to its owner" as it seems to Mann, (160) or refers to the Miller's dishonesty as it is commonly believed, it also indicates the miller's manual dexterity and craftsmanship, his being no simple hand like the plowman but an industrial worker. Indeed, the watermills of the day were the forerunners of modern mills or factories. "Most mills were dedicated to grinding grain," notes Paul Freedman, "although after the Black Death the percentage of watermills that were used for industrial processes, such as cutting wood or fulling cloth, grew modestly." Also, both kinds of watermills and windmills "were expensive, high-maintenance, and relatively complicated machines that were of key importance to local subsistence and to the English economy" (374). And this is another enhancement of industry due to the crisis in the late fourteenth century.

Both the pilgrim Robyn in the *General Prologue* and the double fictitious Symkyn in the *Reeve's Tale* represent "the power of the miller in medieval England" as Jane E. Archer, Howard Thomas, and Richard M. Turley note. As they further explain:

The satirical treatment of the miller, and the tale's concern with sex and social status, are responses to the power of the miller in medieval England. As guardians of the food chain, millers were regulated by the Assize of Bread (1266-1820) by which the government and local authorities regulated the ingredients, weight and price of bread (Davis 2004; Ross 1956). Chaucer's satire, and other aspects of this tale, suggest that in spite of the Assize, it was felt that the miller held a disproportionate amount of power. (23-24)

Finally, the golden thumb of the Miller may be attributed to the larger hand symbolism in the Christian economy, of embodying God's Creation, Jesus Christ's reviving, healing, and feeding, and also the secular medieval world of the three estates, of those who fight, the *bellatores*, those who pray, the *oratores*, and those who work, the *laboratories*. Like Jesus Christ, the pious Parson uses his hand in the service of the society. However, it is his brother the Plowman who is

more praised in the *General Prologue*, arguably for his role in the food production, and moreover, it is only the craftsman Miller's productive 'crafty' hand that is highlighted.

Ultimately, there is the Host's commanding hand (already active in food production) that unites all the pilgrim hands for the production of tales, by drawing a straw to determine the first story-teller: "ley hond to, every man! / Anon to drawen every wight bigan" (I, 841-42). Here also the relation between the human hand the straw which is handy as pilgrims travel through the fields, and as a metonymy for grain or food, is meaningful.

The third pilgrim in the field of food production in the *General Prologue* is the Cook. His role, like the Miller's and the Host's, involves the transformation of nature, turning food materials into meals that play a central role in the frame of the *Canterbury Tales*, as the whole project of story-telling competition in the book is based on the reward of a free meal for the winner. He is a real rival to the Host, their job enjoying more variety than the Miller's whose function is mainly to grind grains into flour, and more directly linked to the consumers. Of the necessity of the Cook and his profession it suffices to say that he is the only pilgrim in the company on duty. Indeed, he deals with the most necessary and continuous need of the human body, eating. As Christopher M. Woolgar also notes, like many other pilgrims, the portrait of the Cook "turns on the question of work," but "the Cook's case is nonetheless different. As well as representing a character type [...] the Cook is hired for the pilgrimage: he is there to work (I: 379-81)." Despite "deficiencies of the profession and dangers of their cuisine, which contemporaries did not fail to criticize, 'cooks and their high-quality foods were nonetheless emblems of the luxury and taste [...]' (267).

Cooks are central figures in the banquet motif, doing the underground job, working without being visible and often unacknowledged. On the relation of food and labor Mikhail Bakhtin observes:

In the oldest system of images food was related to work. It concluded work and struggle and was their crown of glory. Work triumphed in food. Human labor's encounter with the world and the struggle against it ended in food, in the swallowing of that which had been wrested from the world. As the last victorious stage of work, the image of food often symbolized the entire labor process. There were no sharp dividing lines; labor and food represented the two sides of a unique phenomenon, the struggle of man against the world, ending in his victory. It must be stressed that both labor and food were collective; the whole of society took

part in them. Collective food as the conclusion of labor's collective process was not a biological, animal act but a social event. (281)

Accordingly, the *General Prologue* begins by a random gathering of some pilgrims by a supper table that organizes them into a community, with the leadership of the tavern keeper. Harry Bailly establishes his popularity, or rather, his hegemony, after he hosts a good meal and drink to the pilgrims (I, 747-60).

What actually happens in the late fourteenth century England in relation with the discourse of labor and idleness is that, arguably, the estate of the clergy that represents Christianity, encounters a paradoxical attitude towards the meaning of labor. On the one hand, according to the Biblical instructions, labor, especially labor related to food production is considered necessary and virtuous, and idleness or sloth as a deadly sin, and on the other hand, this praiseworthy labor is allotted to the peasant estate, leaving the role of the clergy still uncertain. The clergy are mostly consumers rather than producers. One such controversial figure in respect with labor and idleness is the Prioress, a prominent figure of female clergy. The Prioress in the *General Prologue* "peyned hire to countrefete cheere/ Of court, and to been estatlich of manere" (I, 139-140). She keeps some pet dogs, feeding them luxurious food, although "nuns were forbidden by church law to keep dogs" (466).

After this satiric, cunning description of the idle Prioress, the pilgrim-Chaucer openly satirizes the Monk, who frankly disobeys and defies the church fathers who recommend the monks to manual labor, etc. (165-207). And after this, the Friar, who is also a consuming idle pleasure-seeker (208-69). Likewise, another Friar is satirized in the *Summoner's Tale* for his gluttony and many other such vices, especially for his misuse of the sanctified terms of work and labor, passing his prayers as productive labor at the service of the people: "'God woot,' quod he, 'laboured I have ful soore,..." (III, 1784), differentiating himself with the inefficient works of the curates who are very negligent and slow in their services (1816). In his lengthy lecture to his sick host he emphasizes the wage of the worker: "Thou woldest han oure labour al for noght./ The hye God, that al this world hath wrought,/ Seith that the werkman worthy is his hyre" (1971-73). The tired, sick and angry host gives the Friar's wage by a meaningful fart which symbolizes both the Friar's empty words and his own laboring body: "Amydde his hand he leet the frere a fart;/ Ther nys no capul, drawynge in a cart,/ That myghte have lete a fart of swich a soun" (2149-51). This image of the animalistic laboring body has also been depicted in the previous *Friar's Tale* when

a carter labors along with his horses to drag a load up a hill (1539-1570). The Friar, already entertained by a large meal at the peasant's house, goes to the Lord of the village to complain against his host, and finds the lord at dining. Here Chaucer gathers representatives of the three estates together, associated with the images of food production and consumption. The peasant functions for production, the lord for ruling and consumption, and the friar, passing for clergy here, and with his fake function, consumes from both the other estates. This particular friar, with his defunct services for the society, is ridiculed and humiliated by both the lord and the layman.

One of the other members of the team of the Prioress, beside the three nuns, is the Nuns' Priest who is not described in the *General Prologue*, but he and the second nun have told their tales. The *Nun's Priest's Tale* begins by a eulogistic description of a village widow for her productive role and abstinence from too much consumption (VII, 2821-46). At the climax of the tale, when the fox robs the poor widow's cock, the whole village rise to save the productive cock, himself the product of the laboring peasants, from the jaws of the devouring idle fox. In this wholehearted chase one of the village busy hands has even her "dystaf in hir hand" (3384). Alluding to Jack Straw (3394), the narrator associates this general mobilization of the villagers against the robber to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 when the peasants entered London and the workmen killed many rich persons from both the estates of the nobility and the clergy, including an archbishop and the treasurer of the king, for the cause of class conflict.

The Nuns' Priest himself, however, like many of his brethren in the *General Prologue*, seems a man of consumption, despite his praise of work. In the epilogue to the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, Harry Bailey the Host satirizes his stout figure which indicates his gluttony, and he also describes the priest's potential sexual productivity, etc. (3447-62).

The last pilgrim who praises work and condemns idleness is the second nun. Alcuin Blamires notes that "it is 'The Second Nun's Tale' and 'The canon's Yeoman's Prologue' and 'Tale' that engage most pointedly in dialectic about work" (207). In his study of 'work' in these two Tales, Blamires regards the former allegorically, viewing work metaphorically, and the latter, the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, as a satire against futile and fruitless labors of alchemists that are also attributed to high level clergy who knew Latin well. Anyway, the Second Nun begins her prologue in condemnation of idleness, though in her view of the work it is rather aimed at occupation-therapy and defiance of idleness, sloth, and sin rather than at its productive function (VIII, 1-21).

In her condemnation of the idle, who live off the labor of others, “to devouren al that othere swynke,” (21), the Second Nun does not include her own estate, the *oratores*, because in her ideological praise of work/labor but practical evasion from it, the church broadened the semantic field of the word ‘work/labor’ to cover her own services. The church consecrated the clergy’s meditative life, or holy idleness, and endorsed it as expertise and reverent labor. The second Nun considers her Tale, a painstaking translation, such a labor: “And for to putte us fro swich ydelnesse,/ That cause is of so greet confusioun,/ I have heer doon my feithful bisynesse/ After the legende in translacioun/ Right of thy glorious lif and passioun,” (22-26).

The heroine of her *Tale* is a saint who suffers and sweats and is martyred not for food production but for the higher values of the faith. The narrator’s labor, however, is limited to the translation and preaching of the *Tale*, to justify her not being idle. As Blamires observes, “in the last tales of the Canterbury sequence the proprieties of fruitful work become intertwined with the proprieties of fruitful language,” (207) yet, much to the embarrassment of late medieval Christianity, the ideals of the original, almost socialistic Christianity were in conflict with the later institutionalized faith that yielded to the feudal polarized society of class distinction, in which the members of the clergy wavered between the *Noble Idleness* and common labor.

Conclusion

Chaucer constructs binaries in the *General Prologue*, such as the Parson-Plowman / the Summoner-Pardoner binary that distinguishes between the two groups of ideal bodies and the idle ones. The pious Parson-Plowman brotherhood, their economic function and practice, and their relation to the society and the earth, are in contrast with the pathological Summoner-Pardoner connection, with their unnatural fellowship and chrematistic approach to the society. The distinction is epitomic of the other occupations and jobs in the *General Prologue*, in which they are contrasted in their economic versus chrematistic attitudes to life and society. That is, their productive properties that are useful and economic for both the agent and the society versus non-productive, exploitative, chrematistic, defunct, or unnecessary occupations, without any use or service for the welfare of the society. For example, the Pardoner gets drunk and preaches a sermon for his prologue, confessing his idleness, in spite of authentic Christian values:

What, trowe ye, that whiles I may preche,
And wyne gold and silver for I teche,
That I wol lyve in poverte wilfully?

Nay, nay, I thoghte it nevere, trewely!
 For I wol preche and begge in sondry landes;
 I wol nat do no labour with myne handes,
 Ne make baskettes and lyve therby,
 By cause I wol nat beggen ydelly.
 I wol noon of the apostles countrefete;
 I wol have

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**U SLAVU ANIMAL LABORANSA, TIJELA KOJA RADE ČOSEROVOG OPŠTEG
PROLOGA**

U kasnosrednjovjekovnoj Engleskoj, dugi uzaludni ratovi, glad i broj smrtnih slučajeva uzrokovanih kugom isticali su vrijednost tijela koja rade. Promijenjen je odnos prema radu, posebno prema radu u svrhu proizvodnju hrane. Odnos sveštenstva prema radu je, međutim, bio paradoksalan. U skladu sa hrišćanskom doktrinom i etikom, rad je bio vrlina, ali, u praksi, u feudalnom sistemu srednjeg vijeka, manuelni rad bio je namijenjen seljacima. Da bi se izborilo sa ovom ideološkom nedostatnošću, sveštenstvo je trijumfovalo u svom (neproduktivnom) sveštenučkom radu i službi, u meditativnom i asketskom životu. Neuspjeh u postizanju ovih ideala prikazan je u satiričnom ključu u *Opštem prologu Kenterberijskih priča*, tako što hodočasnik Čoser ističe značaj kako hrane, tako i proizvođača hrane.

Ključne riječi: Čoser, *Kenterberijske priče*, *Opšti prolog*, kasni srednji vijek, rad, nerad, proizvodnja hrane