

THE ADVOCATE: A CHEATSHEET

"A medieval courtroom drama, satire, thriller, and murder mystery. [The film] contains . . . the kind of irony the MPAA would need Cliff's Notes to understand." –Desson Howe, *The Washington Post*.

In the Middle Ages, canon law applied to more than just humans. Since it was the common belief that God ordained a place for all things in the natural hierarchy, all sorts of suspects could be held accountable and charged with crimes--including animals, inanimate objects, natural phenomena, and evil spirits.

The main character in *The Advocate* is a young, hotshot medieval trial lawyer, Richard Courtois, who abandons Paris for the French countryside. He expects to find relative peace marred by only occasional land disputes and petty quarrels. Instead, he enters a hotbed of murder, rape, bestiality, sorcery, and corruption. The court is trying and hanging people (and animals) for the most heinous crimes, and someone (or something) is murdering young children. The blame is pinned on a pig belonging to a roaming band of gypsies, and Courtois is saddled unwillingly with the job of defending the porker. It soon becomes clear that strange events are afoot, and a conspiracy is in place. What is going on? Why is an inquisitorial spy watching the trial? Is the normally good-natured swine possessed by a demon? Did a witch commit the murder? The band of gypsies passing through? The secretive guild of local businessmen? A hidden cabal of Cathar heretics? The local Seigneur who reportedly hunts humans for sport? It's up to our hero Courtois to uncover the truth using an insane legal system.

SETTING: Abbeville, France, in early fall of 1452 (Shortly before the eighth outbreak in France of the black plague.)

CHARACTERS:

- **Richard Courtois** (Colin Firth): Courtois is a handsome young lawyer, sick of the legal rat race, who decides to move to the small village of Abbeville to escape the urban corruption of Paris.
- **Samira** (Armina Annabi): This buxom Gypsy-lass capture's Courtois' attention. It is her family's pig that is put on trial for murder. If the pig is executed and burnt at the stake, her family will have no meat for the coming winter, and may starve. While passionate and of good humor, like all independent women of the time, Samira lives in permanent danger of being burned as a witch. Because medieval court law was undecided as to whether or not Gypsies were humans with souls, Courtois' relationship with her opens him to charges of bestiality.
- **The Seigneur** (Nicol Williamson): He is technically a vavasour rather than a seigneur, a rich merchant and master guildsman who makes no bones about how he purchased his way into nobility with cold cash. His family controls the village of Abbeville, and he readily abuses his considerable power over the court and the local churches.
- **Filette** (Lysette Anthony): She is the not-right-in-the-head daughter of the Seigneur, the result of years of in-breeding. She is twenty-years old, and her father wants to marry her off to someone with connections as soon as possible, but has been hindered by the annoying way she laughs ("she brays like a she-ass"). He settles on Courtois as a likely match, and hires the lawyer to teach his daughter courtly manners and flirtation with a long-term goal of forcing Courtois to marry her.
- **Albertus** (Ian Holm): This Catholic priest's personal beliefs fail to match the orthodoxy and superstition he publicly espouses, but he befriends our hero because they both value scholastic logic and rationality.
- **Pincheon** (Donald Pleasence): The aging, local prosecutor in Abbeville, he believes whole-heartedly in the value of traditional law--including its most bizarre stipulations. He has an excellent and moving speech in which he defends the medieval legal system as necessary--even its most nonsensical elements.
- **Goodwife the Witch** (Harriet Walter): She is Courtois' first major client, a local woman accused of witchcraft. She provides both a painful legal lesson to Courtois and an ironic prophecy that comes true.
- **Mathieu** (Jim Carter): Courtois' scribe and trial assistant. Mathieu apparently understands the nature of the town a great deal better than his naïve employer does.

You can read Kip Wheeler's brief review of the movie reproduced on the Oregon Medieval English Literature Society's website at <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~midages/advocate.shtml>.