

**The Manciple's Tale**  
**Geoffrey Chaucer**



**Here follows the Prologue of the Manciple's Tale.**

Do you know<sup>1</sup> where a little village called Bob-up-and-down stands, under Blean forest on the Canterbury road? Our host began to jest and to make mirth there, and said, "What! Sirs, Dun is in the mire! Is there no one who for prayer or pay will awaken our friend in the rear of the company? A thief might easily bind and rob him. See how he is napping! See, for Christ's bones, as if he would soon fall off his horse. Is that a London cook—bad luck to him! Make him come forth, he knows his penance, for he shall tell a tale, although it may not be worth a bottle of hay, by my faith! Awake, you Cook, God give you sorrow! What ails you to sleep in the morning? Have you had fleas all night, or been laboring with some trollop, or are you so drunk that you cannot hold up your head?" 19

This Cook, who looked very pale, said to our Host, "So God bless my soul, such heaviness has fallen on me, I don't know why, that I had rather sleep than have the best gallon of wine in Cheapside." 24

"Well," said the Manciple, "if it would help you, sir Cook, and annoy no person who rides here, and if our Host is willing, through his courtesy, I will excuse you of your story for now; for your face is pale, your eyes also look dazed, it seems to me, and I well know your sour breath stinks, which well shows you are indisposed; good faith, you shall never be flattered by me! 34

"Lo, this drunken creature! See how he yawns as though he would swallow us right now. By your father's soul, man, keep your mouth shut; may the Devil of hell set his foot in it! Your cursed breath will infect us all. Fie, stinking swine! Fie, may bad luck come to you! Ah, take heed, sirs, of this lusty fellow. Now, will you joust at the vane of the quintam? It seems to me that you are in great shape for that! I believe you have drunk ape-wine, and that is when people will play with a straw." 45

<sup>1</sup> Do you know. As this tale begins, it is unclear if it reflects anything that has come before it. *The Canterbury Tales* is a

At this speech the Cook grew upset and angry, and began to shake his head heatedly at the Manciple for lack of speech, and threw himself down from the horse, where he lay until men picked him up. This was quite a feat of horsemanship for a cook! Alas that he had not kept to his ladle! And before he was once more in the saddle there was a great deal of shoving to and fro to lift him up, and so much trouble and woe, so unwieldy was this sorry, pale ghost. 56

And our Host then said to the Manciple, "Because drink has dominion over this man, I believe by my salvation that he would tell his tale lewdly; for whether it was wine or old and musty ale that he has drunk, he speaks through his nose and puffs hard, and he has a head cold as well. He also has more than enough to do to keep himself and his horse out of the swamp. 65

"And if he should fall from his horse again, then we shall all have enough to do to lift up his heavy drunken carcass. Tell your tale; don't worry about him. But nevertheless, Manciple, you are too foolish, in faith, to reprove him so openly with his fault. 70

"Perhaps another day he will recall you and bring you down as a hawk to the lure. I mean he will speak of small matters, such as finding fault with your account books, which, if it came to the test, would not be honest." 75

"No," said the Manciple, "that would be a great misfortune; so he could lightly bring me into the trap. Yet I would rather pay for the mare that he rides on than have him quarrel with me; I will not anger him, as I hope to prosper! What I spoke, I said in jest. And what do you know? I have a draught of wine in a gourd here, yes, of a ripe grape, and soon you shall see a merry jest. This Cook shall drink from it, if I can make him, and he will not say no to me; I'll stake my life on it." 86

And truly, to tell it all, the Cook drank deep out of this vessel, alas! What need did he have? Already he had drunk enough. And when he had blown in this horn, he handed the gourd back to the Manciple. And he was extremely glad for this drink and thanked him in such a fashion as he was able. 93

Then our Host began to laugh marvelously loud and said, "I well see we will need to carry good drink with us wherever we go for that will turn rancor and

collection of various fragments, and this tale is usually taken to be the beginning of a fragment.

discomfort into accord and love, and appease many wrongs. O Bacchus, blessed is your name, which so can turn earnest to sport. Worship and thanks to your godhead! But you will get no more of that from me! Tell your tale, Manciple, I pray you." 103

"Well, sir," the Manciple said, "now listen." 104

Thus ends the Prologue of the Manciple.

Here begins the Manciple's Tale of the Crow.

When Phoebus dwelt down here on this earth, as old books make mention, he was the hardiest young knight in this entire world, and the best archer as well. He slew Python, the serpent, one day as he lay sleeping in the sunshine; and he completed many other noble worthy achievements with his bow, as one may read. 112

He could play on every type of instrument, and sing in such a way that it was a heavenly melody to hear the sound of his clear voice. Surely Amphion, king of Thebes, who walled that city by his singing, could never sing half so well as he. And he was the handsomest man that is or was since the world was made. What need is there to describe his features? For no man so handsome lived in this world. Likewise, he was full of gentle manners, of honor and of perfect worthiness. 124

This Phoebus, flower of all young men in both chivalry and in generosity, for his sport and also in sign of his victory over Python, as the history tells us, was accustomed to bear a bow in his hand. Now this Phoebus had in his house a crow, which he fostered for a long time in a cage and taught to speak, as one may teach a jay. This crow was white as a snow-white swan, and when he was to tell a tale, could counterfeit the speech of every man. And no nightingale in this entire world could sing one hundred thousandth as merrily or well. 138

Now this Phoebus had in his house a wife whom he loved more than his soul, and was ever busy night and day to please her and treat her with respect, except only, if I am to tell the truth, that he was jealous and anxious to guard her well; for he was loath to be tricked. And so is every creature in this case, but all in vain; it does not help. A good wife, clean in deed and thought, should not be watched, in truth; and truly the labor is in vain to watch an evil one, for that can not be done. This I believe to be true folly, to waste labor in watching wives; thus write old scholars. 154

But now to my purpose, as I first began. This worthy Phoebus did all he could to please her, thinking that with such pleasure and with his manhood and handsome looks nobody should remove him from her grace. But this, God knows, there is no man who can constrain a thing that Nature has placed in a creature's very being. 162

Take any bird, put it in a cage, and set your mind and heart entirely on fostering it tenderly with food and drink, with all dainty things you can imagine, and keep it as cleanly as you can; even if its cage may be ever so delightful with gold, this bird would still twenty thousand times rather go eat worms and other such wretched things from the cold and crude forest. For he will do his best at all times to escape from his cage, if he can; this bird always desires his liberty. 174

Take a cat, and foster him well with cream and tender meat and make him a silken couch; and let a mouse run by the wall. At once he forgets cream and fine meat and every dainty thing in that place, as he has such an appetite to eat a mouse. Lo, here desire has its dominion, and appetite banishes discretion. 182

A she-wolf also has a villainous low nature; at the time when she wishes to have a mate, she will take the most scurvy wolf she can find, or the one of least honor. 186

I speak all these examples concerning these men who are untrue--and never a bit concerning women! For men always have a wanton appetite to take their pleasure with lower creatures than their wives, no matter how beautiful or true or meek they may be. Flesh is so eager for something new--unfortunately--that not for long can we find pleasure in anything that is in pursuit of virtue. 195

This Phoebus thought of no deceit, and was deceived for all his good-heartedness; for behind his back she had another, a man of small reputation, worth nothing in comparison to Phoebus, which made it more painful! Thus it often happens, and much harm and woe comes from it. 202

And so it happened when Phoebus was away that his wife sent then after her lover. Lover? This is a churlish word surely; forgive me for it, I pray you. The wise Plato says, as you may find in the books, that word and act must be in agreement; if one shall tell a thing as it is, the word must be cousin to the deed. I am a plain man, I speak just so: there is truly no other difference between a wife of high degree

that is dishonest with her body, and a poor wench, other than this: if they both act wrongly, the gentlewoman, high in estate, shall be called his lady in love; and because the other is a poor woman, she shall be called his wench. And God knows, my own dear friend, men lay the one as low as the other. 222

Just as between a usurping tyrant and an outlaw or a roving thief, I say the same: there is no difference. This definition was told to Alexander, because the tyrant is of greater power by the force of his retainers to slay downright and to burn house and home and lay everything low, behold, he is therefore called a captain; and because the outlaw has only a small band and cannot do such great harm nor bring a country to such harm, men call him an outlaw or a bandit. But because I am not a bookish man, I will not retell any more sayings from books, but I will go to my tale, as I began. 237

When Phoebus' wife had sent for her lover, the white crow, which always hung in the cage, watched them, and never said a word. And when Phoebus the lord had come home, this crow sang "Cuckoo! cuckoo! cuckoo!" 243

"What, bird!" said Phoebus. "What song are you singing? Were you not accustomed to sing so merrily that it was a joy to my heart to hear your voice? Alas, what song is that?" 247

"By God," he said, "I am not singing the wrong thing.. Phoebus," he said, "despite all your worth, your beauty and your noble birth, despite all your sweet singing and all your melody, and despite all your vigilance, you have been hoodwinked by a man of small reputation, not worth a gnat alongside you, by my head!" 256

What more would you like to know? Soon the crow told him, by trusty tokens and bold words, how his wife had sinned, to his great shame and reproach; and he told him once and again that he had seen it with his eyes. 261

This Phoebus turned away; it seemed to him his sorrowful heart would burst in two. He bent his bow and set an arrow in it, and then in his rage he slew his wife. This is the conclusion; there is no more to say. And for sorrow of this he broke his instruments of music, his harp, lute, gittern, and psaltery; and he broke also his arrows and bow. 269

And after that he spoke thus to the bird: "Traitor," he said, "with a scorpion's tongue you have brought me to destruction. Alas that I was ever created! Why am I not dead? O dear wife, gem of delight, who was so constant to me and so faithful, now you lie dead with face pale of hue, so guiltless, that I dare truly swear! O rash hand, to do so foul a wrong! O troubled mind, O reckless anger, that heedlessly strikes the guiltless! O distrust, full of false suspicion, where was your wisdom and discernment? Let every man beware of rashness, and believe nothing without strong testimony; do not strike too soon, before you know why, and consider soberly and well before in wrath you execute anything upon suspicion. Alas! Rash anger has fully destroyed a thousand people, and brought them to the dust. Alas! I will slay myself for sorrow!" 291

And to the crow he said, "O false thief, from this point I will pay you back you for your false talk! You sang once like a nightingale; now, false thief, you shall forego your song and all your white feathers as well, and never in all your life shall you speak again. Thus shall men be avenged on a traitor; you and your offspring shall forever be black, and shall never make sweet sound but always cry before the tempest and rain, as a sign that through your fault my wife is dead." 302

And he rushed upon the crow, and swiftly plucked out every one of his white feathers and made him black, and bereft him of his song and of his speech as well, and slung him out the door to the Devil, to whom I commit him! And for this cause all crows are black. 308

Gentle people, by this example I pray you to take heed, and mark what I say: as long as you live never tell a man of his wife's frailty; in truth he will mortally hate you. Sir Solomon, as wise scholars say, teaches a man to guard his tongue well; but as I said, I am not a learned man. 316

Yet thus my mother taught me: "My son, in God's name, think carefully about the crow! "My son, hold your tongue and keep your friend. A bitter tongue is worse than a devil; my son, one may bless themselves against a devil<sup>2</sup>. My son, God, through His endless goodness, formed a wall around the tongue with teeth and lips as well, because one should consider well what one speaks. My son, many have been undone on account of too much speech, as

<sup>2</sup> Against a devil. The idea here is that people may bless themselves (with the sign of the cross) against the devil, but

they have no such protection against their own words, which can thus harm them more than the devil.

scholars teach; but nobody is ever harmed for little speech cautiously given. 328

“My son, you should restrain your tongue at all times, except when you take pains to speak of God in worship and prayer. The first virtue, son, if you will learn it, is to restrain and guard well your tongue; children learn this when they are young. My son, there comes great harm of much speech and ill-advised, where less speech would have been enough; so was I told and taught. In much speaking there is no lack of sin. 338

“Do you know what a rash tongue results in? Just as a sword cuts and carves an arm in two, so, my dear son, a tongue cuts friendship in two. A prattler is abominable to God: read Solomon so worthy and wise, read David in his psalms, read Seneca. My son, speak not, but nod with your head. Make as if you were deaf, if you hear any gossip speak of perilous matters. The Flemish say (and learn this, if you please), that ‘little prattling causes much rest.’ 350

“My son, if you have said no ill word, you need not fear to be betrayed; but one who has spoken ill, I affirm, can in no way recall those words. 354

“What is said, is said; it goes forth, whether or not one repents, or however unfavorable it may be. One is a slave to whom one has spoken a thing for which one is sorry now. My son, beware, and do not be the author of any new tidings, whether they are true or false. Wherever you go, among gentle or simple people, guard your tongue well, and think carefully about the crow.” 362

Here is ended the Manciple's Tale of the Crow.

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Prologue to the Manciple's Tale. The Host turns to the sleeping cook, and asks whether any man might be able to wake him. Awaking, pale and unalert, the Cook proclaims that he would rather sleep than have some of the best wine in Cheapside. The Manciple steps in courteously, excusing the cook, and then mocking him "his open mouth, which the devil could put his foot in, his stinking breath" to his face for his drunkenness. The Cook is furious, but too drunk to speak, and promptly falls off his horse.