

Canterbury Tales

Cook's tale

Geoffrey Chaucer

fourteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This Canterbury tale has been translated and retold from: Walter W Skeat (Ed), 1912, reprinted 1973. Chaucer: Complete Works, edited from numerous manuscripts. Oxford University Press. With reference to The Riverside Chaucer, 2008 Edition. Oxford University Press.

Copyright © Richard Scott-Robinson, 2011, 2016

All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. The download of a single copy for personal use, or for teaching purposes, does not require permission.
richardsr@hotmail.co.uk



Cook's Tale

The Cook of London, whyl the Reve spak, for joye, him thoughte, he clawed him on the bak – All the while that the reeve had been speaking, the London cook had been slapping him on the back and roaring with laughter. ‘Ha-ha-ha-ha!’ he guffawed. ‘By Christ’s crucifixion, this bloody miller got his comeuppance. What did Solomon say? – “Don’t let every man into your house.” So letting someone stay the night must be fraught with danger! You should be careful who you allow in, mate! I pray to God, so give me sorrow, that as truly as my name is Roger of Ware, I’ve never heard a better tale about a miller in all my life. What a malicious joke to play on someone! But God forbid that we should stop now. If you will all condescend to hear a tale from me, a poor man, I will describe, as best I can, a little escapade that happened once in London.’

‘Tell away,’ urged our host at once. ‘And see that your tale’s a good one – you’ve let many a pasty bleed out all its gravy and sold many a Jack of Dover that’s been reheated twice and allowed to cool down; you’ve earned Christ’s curse from many a pilgrim who’s had to run back and forth to the bog all day after eating the parsley that came with *your* fatted goose, your shop’s so full of flies! But tell on, gentle Roger. Take no notice of my jokes. A man can tell as much truth as he wishes when he’s joking!’

‘That’s very true. But a joke’s not so funny when the truth flies back and bites you, so watch out, Harry Baily, and don’t get angry if I choose to tell a story about an innkeeper. I’ll get my own back before we arrive in Canterbury, though I won’t tell that story yet ‘cos there’s another one I have in mind.’ Then he laughed again and began to tell the following tale.

Like Harry Bailey of the Tabard Inn, Southwark, the cook on this pilgrimage was a well-known contemporary figure known to Chaucer, by the name of Roger of Ware. The Canterbury Tales, however, is an unfinished work and only a few lines of this tale exist. When the cook reappears in the narrative, in the prologue to the Manciple’s Tale, they are getting near to Canterbury and he still owes a tale, but is the worse for drink, so the manciple tells a story in his place.

This unfinished tale from the cook follows the tale from the reeve in all versions of the sequence, and is another of Geoffrey’s Canterbury Tales – a collection of short stories each recounted from the mouth of a pilgrim on the way to Saint Thomas Becket’s shrine in Canterbury Cathedral.

Heer biginneth the Cokes tale

Aprentis whylom dwelled in our citee, and of a craft of vitailleurs was he; gaillard he was as goldfinch in the shawe – There was once an apprentice in our city who was learning the grocery trade. He strutted merrily about like a goldfinch in a wood, as brown as a berry, quite a short little fellow with black hair that was always well combed. He danced so energetically and so enthusiastically that he was called Perkin the reveller, and he was as full of love and having his wicked way with young ladies as a beehive is of honey. Lucky was the young wench who met up with him!

He was at every wedding, singing and dancing, and he much preferred to be in a tavern than in the shop. Whenever horses rode in royal procession down Cheapside on the way to the Tower of London, or in the opposite direction towards the Palace of Westminster, or if knights were jousting on the tournament field nearby, he would run out of the shop to watch and to sing and dance with all his friends, until the festivities were over. He and his mates would arrange times to meet in some street or other to play at dice, and there was no apprentice in the whole of London who could cast a pair of dice as well as Perkin could, although he liked to be generous to his friends whether he won or lost. His



master was well aware of all this, and he often found that the shop's takings were gone.

Certainly the master of an apprentice who engages in dice, revelry, riot and wenches, quickly finds himself subsidising a lifestyle in which he takes no active part himself. Riotous living inevitably leads to theft, regardless of how skilfully a man can play the guitar or the lute. Exuberance and honesty, among the lower orders, do not sit comfortably together.

This jolly apprentice lived with his master until he was nearly ready to practice the trade himself, although he was often reprimanded and sometimes led a merry jig to the local prison at Newgate. But at last, his master, going through the books of account, recalled the old proverb: "Get rid of a rotten apple before it sends everything else bad." Perkin had to go. Better to lose his services than to risk corrupting all the other servants through his bad influence.

So this grocer sacked Perkin the reveller, annulled his apprenticeship and sent him away with a kick up the backside. This young man can revel all night if he wants to now, but not at the grocer's expense.

Because there is no thief who does not have companions who are just as dishonest as he is, Perkin was able to send his bed and his possessions to a friend who was just as fond of gambling and revelling as he was and who had a wife who, though ostensibly keeping a shop, supported herself and her husband by prostitution...