

# Canterbury Tales

## Manciple'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.

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# Manciple's Tale

**W**ite ye nat wher ther stant a litel toun · which that y-cleped is Bob-up-and-down · under the Blee, in Caunterbury weye? – Do you know a little place called Bob-up'n Down that lies at the edge of Blean Forest near Canterbury? Well, here our host began to laugh and joke: 'Look! Over there behind us!' he called. 'Dun has strayed into a bog! Wake him up, somebody, or a thief will come along and tie him up, and steal everything that he has. Look, he's fast asleep. He's falling off his horse! Is this that London cook by any chance? Go and bring him here. He knows the penalty, he shall tell a tale, by my faith, although it will be worth less than a bottle of hay I should imagine.

'Wake up, cook!' he shouted. 'God bring you grief, what's wrong with you that you fall asleep at this time of day? Have you been kept awake all night scratching at fleas, or are you drunk? Or were you screwing some tart until dawn and haven't got the strength left now to keep your head up even?'

This cook, who looked as grey as a corpse, replied: 'God bless my soul, I feel so hung over. I'd rather go to sleep now than have the best gallon of wine in all of Cheapside, although I've no idea why.'

'Well, if it will bring you any comfort, Sir cook' said the manciple, 'and if nobody else in this company minds, and if our host has no objection, I, for one, would like to excuse you your tale. For, really! Your face is so dreadfully pale, your eyes so bleary and your breath so stinking sour that I don't imagine you're in any condition to do anything at all, let alone tell us a tale, and you'll receive very few complements from me! See how he yawns at us, this drunken wretch, as though he wants to swallow us all whole? Close your mouth, man! By your grandfather's sons, may the devil stick his foot in it! Your stinking breath will infect us all. Foul pig! Take note, everybody, look at this fine specimen of a man. Let us ask him, now Sir, will you practice at your jousting today? You look fit enough for it. Or have you gone ape with the wine instead and now you're barely capable of holding a thatching reed at the ready?'

*Does Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury tale from the manciple contain a warning, and if so, is it a similar warning to the one that Chaucer gives to Bukton? For in his poem to Bukton, Geoffrey advises caution. Take a wife, he says, making it clear that this is a metaphor, he means this figuratively. Hide under a cloak of conformity. Look to Free Fresia if things in England become intolerable. Pretend to believe what the Church says, for only a fool would risk imprisonment.*

*In the Manciple's Tale, the manciple tells a Just So story about how the crow was punished for indiscretion by losing his ability to speak, his ability to sing and his speech and language, so that now he can only caw. The story involves a pagan divinity and some careless talk, and there is a long warning at the end about blabbing and saying too much. Look what you might suffer – Chaucer tells us – if you don't hold your tongue when you should. Remember what happened to the crow, and keep your mouth shut. Perhaps Geoffrey sensed danger afoot.*

*This tale from the manciple 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.*

The cook was very angry at this outburst and searched fruitlessly for words to express his feelings of contempt for the manciple, and by so doing displayed such fine equestrian skills that he fell off his horse. Men ran over to pick him up. It's a pity you can't control a horse with a ladle.

There was a great deal of shoving to and fro to lift him up, and much straining and cursing before the cook was back in the saddle, so unwieldy was this pallid, dishevelled ghost.

'Since drink has taken such a hold of him,' said our host to the manciple, 'I imagine he will tell a filthy story, by my salvation, so tell your tale, manciple. I'm going to take no more notice of him. For be it wine, or old or new ale that he's drunk, he seems to be having difficulty speaking, and also, he has enough to keep himself occupied just guiding his horse at the moment and keeping it out of the ditch, and if he falls off again, we'll have to lift up his heavy, drunken body once more. Yet, I think you're being rather foolish for speaking to him in the way you did. For another day he might, by chance, be able to get his own back at you; I mean by finding small faults with your purchases or your accounts that might be shown to be, shall we say, economical with the truth.'



'You're right,' replied the manciple, anxiously. 'He could trap me in a snare quite quickly and I would rather pay for that horse that he's riding than have that happen to me. I'll make no more fun of him. I was only joking. And do you know what? I have here in a gourd, a draft of some fine wine and, look, here's a good joke. This cook shall have some of it. I swear on my life, he won't say no!'

And certainly, in all honesty, the cook was happy to take a great quaff from this vessel. Alas! What need was there? Hadn't he drunk enough already? But then he thanked the manciple with the best words he could find, and our host began to laugh heartily: 'I can see that it is necessary to carry good wine with us wherever we go,' he said, 'for it turns argument and discord into love and agreement and appeases many a wrong. Oh Bacchus, blessed be your name, for turning seriousness so easily into fun. All thanks and worship be to your godhead. But let me say no more about that! Get on with your tale, manciple, I beg you.'

'Well,' replied the manciple. 'Then listen to what I have to say.'

When Phebus dwelled here in this erthe adoun, as olde bokes maken mencioune, he was the moste lousty bachiler in al this world, and eek the beste archer – When the god Phoebus Apollo lived here on Earth, as is written in old books, he was the most accomplished and energetic young man in the whole world. He was the best archer, and he killed the serpent Python as it lay sleeping beside the cave at Delphi one day, so I've heard, and achieved many other noble deeds with his bow as well, as you can read. And he was accomplished at every kind of music. He could sing beautifully to his own accompaniment on the lyre, and certainly, Amphion, the king of Thebes, whose singing so charmed the very stones that the sound of his voice moved them to build the seven-gated wall of that city, could not sing half as well as Phoebus. Phoebus was as accomplished in these arts as any man living, and any man who has ever lived. And what need is there to describe his facial features? He was the most handsome man alive, and he was also a paragon of virtue, courteous, honourable and a perfect gentleman.



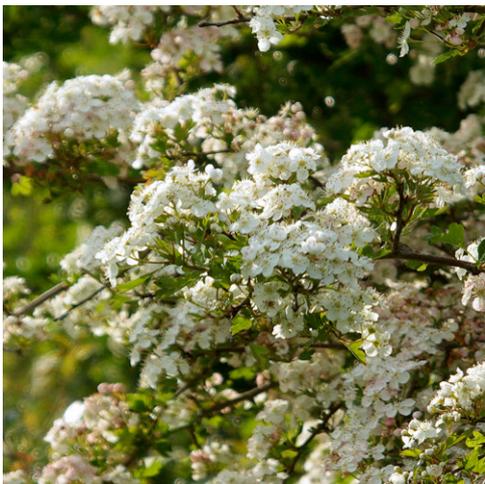
This Phoebus, who was the finest of all the young men of his day, both in generosity and in valour, had taken to carrying his bow around with him at all times, as a mark of his victory over Python. Now Phoebus kept a crow in his house, which he fed every day and had taught to speak, as people do nowadays with jays. This crow was as white as a swan and could imitate the voice of anybody that spoke to it and faithfully reproduce any conversation it heard. No nightingale could sing as well as this crow, not by a hundred-thousandth part!

Phoebus had a wife at home whom he loved more than his own life, and he strived day and night to honour her and to please her, in every way that he could. He worshipped and respected her, although he was also a little jealous, if the truth be told, and would gladly have been able to limit her freedom somewhat, for he was frightened of being made the butt of jokes; and so is every man, to be honest, although it's a waste of time. It does no good. A wife whose thoughts are wholesome and who works hard should certainly not be kept under constant surveillance, and honestly, the labour is in vain wherever a cunning woman is concerned. It cannot be done. She cannot be confined to the house and I consider it foolishness for a man to waste time in trying, and you can find this same opinion expressed in old books.

But to my theme. This fine young man Phoebus did all he could to please his wife, believing that by giving her every comfort she could wish for, and because of his authority and his manhood, he would be safe from any of the dangers that preyed upon his mind. But God knows, no man is able to repress a thing that is part of the very nature of a creature. Take any bird, put it in a cage, do everything you can to make it comfortable,

provide it with food, fresh water and all the choicest little tidbits you can think of, clean out its cage every day, but even if this golden cage is the most beautiful in the world, yet this bird would rather – by twenty-thousand times would it rather! – be out in a cold and dirty forest eating worms and other disgusting things. This bird will constantly try to escape from its captivity, so important to it is its freedom.

Or take a cat, nourish it with milk and little bits of fillet steak and give it a silk cushion to sleep on, but if a mouse runs by the wall, milk and steak and cushion are instantly forgotten! All it wants to do is to eat a mouse. Natural desires override all others, and away goes discretion. A she-wolf will seek out the roughest, most ill-bred wolf she can find, the one with the worst reputation, and choose him to father her cubs, since it is in her reprobate nature to do so.



Men are equally as bad though, always driven by a need to perform sex, which is their greatest delight, and with women who are in every sense plain and ordinary compared with their wives, however beautiful, virtuous and refined their wives may be. To have a new body to play with is such an irresistible novelty to we men that we find it more stimulating than anything that is virtuous.

But on this occasion, Phoebus was the victim of deception; it was his wife who had a lover, a man of little reputation and worth nothing in comparison with her husband. Misbehaviour was the furthest thing from Phoebus's mind, and worse still, this happens all the time, which is a cause of much sorrow and woe.

When Phoebus was away, his wife at once sent for her 'bit on the side'. Bit on the side! What a vulgar expression. Forgive me for using it, I beg you, but the wise philosopher Plato once said – and you may see this written – that a word must match precisely the thing that it describes if a thing is to be properly said. I am an ordinary man and I believe that there is no difference between a noblewoman, if she is playing around with men, and a poor milkmaid doing the same thing, except for this: that although they are both behaving badly, the one of high birth is called the gentleman's 'lady love' and because the other is a poor woman she is disparagingly known as his 'bit on the side'. But God knows, they'll both be laid in the same position! It's the same with a usurper and a tyrant on the one hand, and an outlaw and a thief on the other. Alexander the Great was once told this: that because a tyrant is of greater strength and can command a large following, and is therefore able to kill and maim and burn houses and cities, and thieve and bring desolation to an entire land, lo! he is called a 'captain of men' and receives accolades, but because the outlaw has only a small band of followers and can cause much less harm and destruction, and cannot bring an entire country to its knees, then men call him an outlaw, a thief and a renegade. But I am not a learned man and cannot quote you chapter and verse, so I shall proceed with my tale.

When Phoebus's wife had sent for her lover, they gave expression to their wanton lust very promptly and energetically. The white crow, who was perched in his cage, looked on at their lovemaking and never said a word. But when Phoebus returned home, this crow sang: 'Cuckold! Cuckold! Cuckold!'

'What is this song that you are singing?' Phoebus asked the crow. 'It has always been a delight to me to hear your voice. But alas! Why are you singing this?'

'By God,' replied the crow, 'I know what I'm doing! For all your honour and all your good looks and courtesy, your singing and lute-playing and for all the lavish attention that you give to your wife, Phoebus, your eyes must have grown dim. A man of little reputation – and not worth a gnat compared with you, so may I prosper! – has been rolling about in your bed, making love to your wife.'

What more needs to be said? The crow went on to describe everything in graphic detail, and insisted often that he had seen it with his own eyes. Phoebus stormed off, in great distress, to be alone with his thoughts, feeling that his very heart was about to break in two. He strung his bow, fixed an arrow to it and, in his anger, he killed his wife. This is what happened. There is no more to be said. In sorrow he smashed all his instruments, his harp and his lute, his cittern and his psaltery, and he broke all his arrows and his bow. Then he returned to this feathered thing in the cage.

'Your tongue has made me into a madman!' he screamed at it. 'Scorpion! Traitor! Alas that I was born! Why do I still live? Oh dear wife, oh gem of my delight! Your love was so profound and so faithful. But now you lie dead – guiltless, I declare! – your face drained of all its colour. Oh rash hand, to strike so undeservedly. Oh madness! Oh anger! Oh distrust, full of false suspicion, where was your intelligence and your discretion? Beware, everybody, of rashness! Believe nothing without good evidence. Be sure that you know all the facts before you strike. Be advised before you let your anger carry you away. Alas, blind rage has caused the destruction of thousands of folk and urged them into the mire, and I also shall die, for sorrow, at my own hand!' And to the crow he said:

'Oh deceitful criminal! I shall avenge your lying tongue. Your singing is like a nightingale's, but now you will lose your song entirely, and all of your white feathers as well. You will not speak a single syllable from now on, for your entire life! This is the way revenge should be taken upon a traitor. You and all your offspring shall be black, and never more will any sweet sounds come from your throats; instead, you will caw discordantly against the wind and the rain, forever lamenting the death of my dear wife whom you killed.'

Phoebus moved quickly against the crow, pulled out all his white feathers and made him black, took away his song and all his speech and then slung him out at the door for the devil to find! And the devil is welcome to him, as far as I'm concerned.

And it is for this reason that crows are black.

Lords, by this example I urge you all to be careful and to heed what I say: never in your life let a man know what clandestine arrangements another man has made with this first

man's wife. He will bear you a mortal hatred for telling him. Solomon, as knowledgeable clerics will affirm, taught that a man should mind his own business; although I cannot give you chapter and verse, as I've already said, for I'm not a learned man. But nonetheless, my mother always said:

'My son, in God's name think of the crow. Hold your tongue and keep a friend! A wicked tongue is a fiendish thing; it is even worse than a fiend, since a simple blessing will protect you from a devil. My son, God in his endless bounty walled in a tongue with teeth, and lips that can close and keep shut when it is wise for them to do so. Many a man has been destroyed for the want of a little discretion, as clergymen will tell you, but in general, with a little caution, no man is killed. The primary virtue, son, if you will learn it, is to have full control over your tongue. A tongue should be restrained at all times, except when you are doing your best to speak of God, in honour and in prayer. Children learn this when they are very little. Verbal diarrhea causes a nasty stink! If a few words will suffice, saying too much in an ill-advised way will cause a great deal of harm – this is what was taught to me.

'Just as a sword can cut an arm into two pieces, so careless talk can cut a friendship in two. A jabberer is abominable to God. Read Solomon, that wise and honourable king, and read David in his psalms, read Seneca, my son, and say nothing without bowing your head to Christ at the same time. If you find yourself speaking with a jabberer who starts saying perilous things, pretend to have suddenly gone deaf. Look as though you don't understand.

'Those in the Low Countries say – and learn this by heart if you wish – that a measured conversation results in immeasurable ease. My son, if you have said nothing wicked, you have no fear of being betrayed. But he who speaks unwisely, I venture to suggest, cannot take back what he may foolishly have let out of the bag. A thing once said is said forever. Out it goes into the world, whether the speaker is happy for it to or not. It is too late to repent. He is at the mercy of a person who may have heard words that he now bitterly regrets having uttered. So, my son, be wary and never be the first to reveal anything, whether it be true or false. Wherever you are, amongst high or low, **kepe wel thy tonge, and thenk up-on the crowe.**'