

1380

CANTERBURY TALES

THE MANCIPLE'S TALE OF THE CROW

Geoffrey Chaucer

Chaucer, Geoffrey (1343-1400) - English poet, known as the most important writer of Middle English. His Canterbury Tales (~1380) are told by traveling pilgrims who meet at a tavern and have a storytelling contest to pass the time.

Each tale is preceded by an introductory prologue. The Manciple's Tale - Tells the story of a crow who is a tattle-tale.

THE MANCIPLES TALE

When Phoebus once on earth was dwelling, here,
 As in the ancient books it is made clear,
 He was the lustiest of bachelors
 In all this world, and even the best archer;
 He slew Python, the serpent, as he lay
 Sleeping within the sunlight, on a day;
 And many another noble, worthy deed
 He with his bow wrought, as all men may read.
 He played all instruments of minstrelsy,
 And sang so that it made great harmony
 To hear his clear voice in the joyous sun.
 Truly the king of Thebes, that Amphion
 Who, by his singing, walled that great city,
 Could never sing one half so well as he.
 Therewith he was the handsomest young man
 That is or was since first the world began.
 What needs it that his features I revive?
 For in the world was none so fair alive.
 Compact of honour and of nobleness,
 Perfect he was in every worthiness.
 This Phoebus, of all youthful knights the flower,
 Whom generous chivalry did richly dower,
 For his amusement (sign of victory
 Over that Python, says the old story),
 Was wont to bear in hand a golden bow.
 Now Phoebus had within his house a crow,
 Which in a cage he'd fostered many a day,
 And taught to speak, as men may teach a jay.
 White was this crow as is a snow white swan,
 And counterfeit the speech of any man
 He could, when he desired to tell a tale.
 Therewith, in all this world, no nightingale
 Could, by a hundred-thousandth part, they tell,
 Carol and sing so merrily and well.
 Now had this Phoebus in his house a wife,
 Whom he loved better than he loved his life,
 And night and day he used much diligence
 To please her and to do her reverence,
 Save only, if it's truth that I shall say,
 Jealous he was and so did guard her aye;
 For he was very loath befooled to be.

And so is everyone in such degree;
 But all in vain, for it avails one naught.
 A good wife, who is clean in deed and thought,
 Should not be kept a prisoner, that's plain;
 And certainly the labour is in vain
 That guards a slut, for, sirs, it just won't be.
 This hold I for an utter idiocy,
 That men should lose their labour guarding wives;
 So say these wise old writers in their lives.
 But now to purpose, as I first began:
 This worthy Phoebus did all that a man
 Could do to please, thinking that by such pleasures,
 And by his manhood and his other measures
 To make her love him and keep faithful, too.
 But God knows well that nothing man may do
 Will ever keep restrained a thing that nature
 Has made innate in any human creature.
 Take any bird and put it in a cage
 And do your best affection to engage
 And rear it tenderly with meat and drink
 Of all the dainties that you can bethink,
 And always keep it cleanly as you may;
 Although its cage of gold be never so gay,
 Yet would this bird, by twenty thousand-fold,
 Rather, within a forest dark and cold,
 Go to eat worms and all such wretchedness.
 For ever this bird will do his business
 To find some way to get outside the wires.
 Above all things his freedom he desires.
 Or take a cat, and feed him well with milk
 And tender flesh, and make his bed of silk,
 And let him see a mouse go by the wall;
 Anon he leaves the milk and flesh and all
 And every dainty that is in that house,
 Such appetite has he to eat a mouse.
 Desire has here its mighty power shown,
 And inborn appetite reclaims its own.
 A she-wolf also has a vulgar mind;
 The wretchedest he-wolf that she may find,
 Or least of reputation, she'll not hate
 Whenever she's desirous of a mate.
 All these examples speak I of these men
 Who are untrue, and not of sweet women.

For men have aye a lickerish appetite
 On lower things to do their base delight
 Than on their wives, though they be ne'er so fair
 And ne'er so true and ne'er so debonair.
 Flesh is so fickle, lusting beyond measure,
 That we in no one thing can long have pleasure
 Or virtuous keep more than a little while.
 This Phoebus, who was thinking of no guile,
 He was deceived, for all his quality;
 For under him a substitute had she,
 A man of little reputation, one
 Worth naught to Phoebus, by comparison.
 The more harm that; it often happens so,
 Whereof there come so much of harm and woe.
 And so befell, when Phoebus was absent,
 His wife has quickly for her leman sent.
 Her leman? Truly, 'tis a knavish speech!
 Forgive it me, I do indeed beseech.
 The wise old Plato says, as you may read,
 The word must needs accord well with the deed.
 And if a man tell properly a thing,
 The word must suited be to the acting.
 But I'm a vulgar man, and thus say I,
 There is no smallest difference, truly,
 Between a wife who is of high degree,
 If of her body she dishonest be,
 And a poor unknown wench, other than this
 If it be true that both do what's amiss
 The gentlewoman, in her state above,
 She shall be called his lady, in their love;
 And since the other's but a poor woman,
 She shall be called his wench or his leman.
 And God knows very well, my own dear brother,
 Men lay the one as low as lies the other.
 Between a tyrant or usurping chief
 And any outlawed man or errant thief,
 It's just the same, there is no difference.
 One told to Alexander this sentence:
 That, since the tyrant is of greater might,
 By force of numbers, to slay men outright
 And burn down house and home even as a plane,
 Lot for that he's a captain, that's certain;
 And since the outlaw has small company
 And may not do so great a harm as he,

Nor bring a nation into such great grief,
 Why, he's called but an outlaw or a thief.
 But since I'm not a man the texts to spell,
 Nothing at all from texts now will I tell;
 I'll go on with my tale as I began.
 When Phoebus' wife had sent for her leman,
 At once they wrought all of their libertinage.
 And the white crow, aye hanging in the cage,
 Saw what they did, and never said a word.
 And when again came Phoebus home, the lord,
 This crow sang loud "Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!"
 "What, bird?" asked Phoebus, "What song now sing you?
 Were you not wont so merrily to sing
 That in my heart it was a joyful thing
 To hear your voice? Alas! What song is this?"
 "By God," said he, "I do not sing amiss;
 Phoebus," said he, "for all your worthiness,
 For all your beauty and your nobleness,
 For all your song and all your minstrelsy,
 For all your watching, bleared is your bright eye
 By one of small repute, as well is known,
 Not worth, when I compare it with your own,
 The value of a gnat, as I may thrive.
 For on your bed your wife I saw him swive."
 What will you more? The crow thereafter told,
 In sober fashion, giving witness bold,
 How that his wife had done her lechery
 To his great shame and with great villainy;
 Repeating that he'd seen it with his eyes.
 Then Phoebus turned away in sad surprise;
 He thought his wretched heart would break for woe;
 His bow he bent and set there an arrow,
 And in his angry mood his wife did slay.
 This the result; there is no more to say;
 For grief of which he ceased his minstrelsy,
 Broke harp and lute, gittern and psaltery;
 And, too, he broke his arrows and his bow.
 And after that he spoke thus to the crow.
 "Traitor," cried he, "with tongue of scorpion,
 You have brought me to ruin, treacherous one!
 Alas, that I was born! Why died I not?
 O my dear wife, jewel of joy, God wot,
 Who were to me so trusty and so true,
 Now you lie dead, with face all pale of hue,

And you were guiltless, I dare swear to this!
 O hasty hand, to do so foul amiss!
 O stupid brain, O anger all reckless,
 That unadvisedly struck the guiltless!
 O ill distrust that jealousy had sown!
 Where were your thought and your discretion flown?
 O every man, beware of hastiness,
 Do not believe without a strong witness;
 Strike not too soon, before you reason why,
 And be advised full well and soberly
 Ere you do any execution thus
 In your wild anger when it is jealous.
 Alas! A thousand folk has hasty ire
 Ruined, and left them bleeding in the mire.
 Alas! I'll slay myself forthwith for grief!"
 And to the crow he said, "O you false thief!
 I will anon requite you that false tale!
 You sang but lately like a nightingale;
 Now, you false thief, your songs are over and done,
 And you'll all those white feathers lose, each one,
 Nor ever in your life more shall you speak.
 Thus men on traitors shall their justice wreak;
 You and your offspring ever shall be black,
 Nor evermore sweet noises shall you make,
 But you shall cry in tempest and in rain
 In token that through you my wife was slain."
 And on the crow he leaped, and that anon,
 And plucked out his white feathers, every one,
 And made him black, and stilled for evermore
 His song and speech, and flung him out the door
 Unto the devil, where I leave this jack;
 And for this reason, now all crows are black.
 Masters, by this example, I do pray
 You will beware and heed what I shall say:
 Never tell any man, through all your life,
 How that another man has humped his wife;
 He'll hate you mortally, and that's certain.
 Dan Solomon, as these wise clerks explain,
 Teaches a man to keep his tongue from all;
 But, as I said, I am not textual.
 Nevertheless, thus taught me my good dame:
 "My son, think of the crow, in high God's name;
 My son, keep your tongue still, and keep your friend.
 A wicked tongue is worse than any fiend.

My son, from devils men themselves may bless;
 My son, high God, of His endless goodness,
 Walled up the tongue with teeth and lips and cheeks
 That man should speak advisedly when he speaks.
 My son, full oftentimes, for too much speech,
 Has many a man been killed, as clerics teach;
 But, speaking little and advisedly,
 Is no man harmed, to put it generally.
 My son, your foolish tongue you should restrain
 At all times, save those when your soul is fain
 To speak of God, in honour and in prayer.
 The first of virtues, son, if you'll but hear,
 Is to restrain and to guard well your tongue
 Thus teach the children while they yet are young
 My son, of too much speaking, ill advised,
 Where less had been enough and had sufficed,
 Much harm may come; thus was I told and taught.
 In fluent speaking evil wants for naught.
 Know you of where a rash tongue has well served?
 Just as a sword has cut deep and has carved
 A many an arm in two, dear son, just so
 A tongue can cut a friendship, well I know.
 A gossip is to God abominable.
 Read Solomon, so wise and honourable,
 Or David's Psalms, what Seneca has said.
 My son, speak not, but merely bow your head.
 Dissemble like one deaf, if you but hear
 A chatterer speak what's dangerous in your ear.
 The Fleming says, and learn it, for it's best,
 That little prattle gives us all much rest.
 My son, if you no wicked word have said,
 To be betrayed you need not ever dread;
 But he that has missaid, I dare explain,
 He may not aye recall his words again.
 That which is said, is said, and goes, in truth,
 Though he repent, and be he lief or loath.
 A man's the slave of him to whom he's told
 A tale to which he can no longer hold.
 My son, beware and be not author new
 Of tidings, whether they be false or true.
 Where'er you come, among the high or low,
 Guard well your tongue, and think upon the crow."

HERE IS ENDED THE MANCIPLE'S TALE OF THE CROW