**The Pardoner's Tale**

PROLOGUE

"My lords," said he, "in churches when I preach

I take great pains to have a haughty speech 330

And ring it out as roundly as a bell;

I know it all by heart, what I've to tell.

My theme's always the same and ever was:

[*Radix malorum est Cupiditas*](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#Radix)*.*

"First I announce from where it is I come 335

And then show all my bulls, not only some.

My patent with the bishop's seal I show

To help safeguard my person as I go,

That no man be so bold, though priest or [clerk](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#clerk),

As to obstruct me in Christ's holy work. 340

And after that my tales I start to tell,

And bulls of popes, of cardinals as well,

Of patriarchs and bishops, I display.

A few words in the Latin tongue I say

To add a little spice to what I preach 345

And stir men to devotion as I teach.

"And then I show to them like precious stones

My long glass cases crammed with rags and bones,

For these are relics (so they think). And set

In metal I've a shoulderbone I let 350

Them see, from the sheep of a holy Jew.

'Good men,' say I, 'pay heed to me. When you

Shall take this bone and wash it in a well,

If cow or calf or sheep or ox should swell

Because it ate a worm or it's been stung, 355

Take water from that well and wash its tongue

And right away it's whole. And furthermore,

From pox and scab and every other sore

Shall every sheep be whole that of this well

Drinks but a draught. Pay heed to what I tell. 360

If every farmer owning stock will go

Each week before the cock's had time to crow

And, fasting, from this well will take a drink

(This Jew once taught our elders so to think),

His beasts will be assured of progeny. 365

And, sirs, it also heals of jealousy;

For though a man by jealousy be wroth,

Use water from this well to make his broth

And nevermore shall he mistrust his wife,

Despite the truth about her sinful life, 370

With even priests as lovers, two or three.

"'Here also is a mitten you may see.

Whose hand goes in this mitten will thereby

Find that his grain will greatly multiply

When he has sown, whether it's wheat or oats 375

(Provided he has offered pence or groats).

"'Good men and women, of one thing I warn:

If in this church there's any fellow born

Who's done some horrid sin and who for shame

Does not dare to be shriven for the same, 380

Or any woman young or elderly

Who's done her husband wrong by cuckoldry,

Such folk shall have no power and no grace

To offer to my relics in this place.

But whoso finds himself without such blame, 385

Let him come forth and offer in God's name

And I'll absolve him by authority

That has by papal bull been granted me.'

"And with this trick I've won each year about

A hundred marks since first I started out. 390

I stand there in my pulpit like a clerk,

These ignorants sit down, and right to work

I go, I preach as you have heard before

And tell a hundred silly stories more.

And I take pains to get my neck to stretch, 395

To nod both east and west to every wretch

Just like a dove that's sitting on the barn.

My tongue and hands go spinning such a yarn

That it's a joy to see my craftiness.

Of avarice and all such cursedness 400

I always preach, to make them ever free

To give their pence (and give only to me);

For my concern is only with collection

And not with any sin that needs correction.

Once buried, they don't mean a thing to me 405

Though their souls pick blackberries. Certainly

Many a sermon seemingly well meant

Has often come from less than good intent:

To please the folks, to offer flattery,

To get promoted by hypocrisy, 410

Some for vainglory, some for simple hate.

For if I dare not otherwise debate,

My tongue in preaching will a sting impart

That no man can escape, he'll feel the smart

And falsely be defamed if ever he 415

Has done wrong to my brethren or to me;

For though I may not call him by his name,

All men shall be aware that he's the same

By signs or by what chances may permit.

Thus folks who wrong us I repay, I spit 420

My venom under holiness's hue,

That truthful I may seem and holy too.

"But briefly my intent I'll summarize:

It's greed alone that makes me sermonize.

And so my theme is yet and ever was: 425

*Radix malorum est Cupiditas.*

Yes, I myself can preach against the vice

Of avarice that is my own device;

For though I'm guilty of that very sin,

These other folks I'm able still to win 430

From avarice and sorely they'll repent.

But that is not my principal intent,

I only preach to satisfy my greed.

Enough of that, for more there's not a need.

"I tell them many moral tales I know, 435

Old stories set in times of long ago;

The ignorant find in these tales much pleasure,

Such things as they can well repeat and treasure.

Do you believe, as long as I can preach,

Acquiring gold and silver while I teach, 440

That willfully I'd live in poverty?

It's never crossed my mind, quite truthfully!

No, I will preach and beg in sundry lands

And never will I labor with my hands

Or take up basketweaving for a living. 445

I won't be begging idly, they'll be giving.

Apostles I'll not try to counterfeit;

I'll have my money, wool, and food, though it

Be from some page whose poverty is dire

Or from the poorest widow in the shire; 450

Although her kids be starving, I'll be fine,

For I will drink the liquor of the vine

And have a jolly wench in every town.

But listen, lords, we'll set that matter down,

Your pleasure is that I should tell a tale. 455

Now that I've had my draught of corny ale,

By God, I hope to tell you something striking

That with good reason will be to your liking.

Though I'm a man of vices through and through,

I still can tell a moral tale to you, 460

One that I preach to bring the money in.

Now hold your peace, my tale I will begin."

## The Pardoner's Tale

In [Flanders](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#Flanders) some time back there was a troop

Of youths who were a folly-loving group,

What with their parties, gambling, brothels, bars, 465

Where with their harps and lutes and their guitars

They'd dance and play at dice both day and night.

They also ate and drank beyond their might,

So that they gave the devil sacrifice

Within the devil's temple by the vice 470

Of gluttony, which is abomination.

Their oaths were great, so worthy of damnation

It was a grisly thing to hear them swear;

The body of our blessed Lord they'd tear

As if the Jews had not torn him enough. 475

Each laughed at every other's sinful stuff

And right away came dancing girls to boot,

All neat and trim, and young girls selling fruit,

Singers with harps, then bawds, girls selling cake--

All agents of the devil, no mistake, 480

All kindlers of the fire of lechery

That goes so hand in hand with gluttony.

My witness is God's Holy Writ, no less,

That lechery's in wine and drunkenness.

Behold how drunken Lot unnaturally 485

Lay with his daughters both, unwittingly,

So drunk he was unconscious of the deed.

King Herod, about whom one well should read,

When at a feast much wine he had been swilling,

Gave orders at the table for the killing 490

Of John the Baptist, guiltless as could be.

[Seneca](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#Seneca) says good things undoubtedly;

He said that not one difference could he find

Between a man who's gone out of his mind

And one who's drunk (except that madness will, 495

In one whose nature is already ill,

Be longer lasting than will drunkenness).

O gluttony, so full of cursedness!

O first cause of our trial and tribulation,

O origin of all our souls' damnation 500

Till we were purchased back by blood of Christ!

How dearly, I'll say briefly, it was priced,

How much was paid for this depravity!

Corrupt was all the world with gluttony.

Our father Adam and his wife also 505

From Paradise to labor and to woe

Were driven by that vice, and do not doubt it.

While Adam fasted, as I read about it,

He was in Paradise, but then when he

Ate of the fruit forbidden on the tree 510

He was at once cast out to woe and pain.

O gluttony, with reason we complain!

O if one knew how many a malady

Must follow such excess and gluttony,

To eat with moderation he'd be able 515

Whenever he is sitting at his table.

Alas! the short throat and so tender mouth

Make men both east and west, both north and south,

In water, earth, and air, work to produce

Fine meat and beverage for a glutton's use! 520

How well this matter, O Saint Paul, you treat:

"Meat's for the belly, belly's for the meat,

God shall destroy both"--so Paul is heard.

Alas! for by my faith it is a word

So foul to have to say (but foul's the deed) 525

That so much white and red a man should need

He makes his throat his privy hole, no less,

Because of such accurst excessiveness.

The [Apostle](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#Apostle) has with so much pity mourned:

"So many walk that way whom I have warned-- 530

I say this weeping, with piteous voice--

Foes of the cross of Christ, if that's their choice,

For which the end is death. Their god's the belly."

O gut, O bag, O belly foul and smelly,

So full of dung and of corruption found! 535

From either end of you foul is the sound.

By what great cost and labor you have dined!

These cooks, how they must pound and strain and grind,

And transform substance into accident,

Until your glutton's appetite is spent! 540

From hard bones they knock marrow for one's taste,

For there is nothing they let go to waste

That's soft and sweet and might the gullet suit.

With spices of the leaf, the bark and root,

His sauces will be made for such delight 545

He'll wind up with a whole new appetite.

But he who lets such pleasures so entice

Is dead while he is living in such vice.

A lecherous thing is wine, and drunkenness

Is full of striving and of wretchedness. 550

O drunken man, disfigured is your face,

Sour your breath, you're foul to the embrace!

And through your drunken nose it seems the sound

Is "Samson, Samson" that you would expound,

Though, God knows, Samson never drank of wine. 555

You fall as if you were a stricken swine;

Your tongue is lost, your self-respect you gave

To drunkenness, which is the very grave

Of man's discretion and intelligence.

When drink in him has taken dominance 560

One cannot keep a secret, truly said.

So keep yourself away from white and red,

Especially from Lepe white wine bought

In [Cheapside](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#Cheapside) or Fish Street. This wine that's brought

From Spain is known to creep up subtly 565

In other wines grown in proximity,

From which there then arise such heady fumes

That when a man three draughts of it consumes,

Though he thinks he's in Cheapside at his home,

He'll find to Lepe, Spain, he's come to roam 570

And not off to Bordeaux or La Rochelle--

And "Samson, Samson" he'll be saying well.

But listen, lords, to this one word, I pray:

All of the sovereign actions, I daresay,

All victories in God's Old Testament, 575

Through grace of him who is omnipotent,

Were all achieved in abstinence and prayer.

Look in the Bible and you'll learn it there.

Behold Attila: that great warrior died

While in a shameful sleep, unglorified, 580

His nostrils pouring blood, a drunken sot.

A captain's life should be a sober lot.

You should above all else consider well

The wise commandment given Lemuel

(Not Samuel but Lemuel I said), 585

Expressly in the Bible to be read,

On serving wine to justices at court.

That should suffice, no more need I report.

On gluttony I've said a thing or two,

And now from gambling I'd prohibit you. 590

For gambling is the source of every lie,

Of all deceit that curses men to die.

It's blasphemy of Christ, manslaughter, waste

Of time and property. To be disgraced,

That's what it is, dishonorable, defaming, 595

To be held one who takes to common gaming.

The higher one might be in social station

The more he'll be accused of depravation;

If there's a prince who gambles constantly,

On all his governance and policy 600

The judgment of opinion will be such

His reputation's bound to suffer much.

A wise ambassador named Stillbon, sent

From Sparta, in great pomp to Corinth went

To arrange for an alliance. When he came, 605

It happened that by chance he found, for shame,

That all the greatest who were of that land

Were at the game of hazard, dice in hand.

With that, as soon as Stillbon could get started,

Back home to his own country he departed, 610

And said, "In Corinth I'll not lose my name

Nor take upon myself so great a shame,

I'll not ally you with such hazarders.

Send to them other wise ambassadors,

For on my oath I'd perish in defiance 615

Before I'd make for you such an alliance.

For you, with honors that have been so glorious,

Shall not ally with gamblers so notorious--

Not by my will or treaty anyway."

That's what this wise philosopher had to say. 620

At King Demetrius now take a look:

Parthia's king, so we're told in the book,

Sent him in scorn a pair of golden dice;

For playing hazard long had been his vice,

For which Demetrius's fame and glory 625

To Parthia's king were a worthless story.

Cannot lords find some other forms of play

Honest enough to pass the time of day?

And now on oaths, when false or indiscreet,

A word or two, such as the old books treat. 630

Strong swearing is an awful thing to do

And worse yet when you swear what isn't true.

The Lord on high forbade we swear at all,

As Matthew tells. Especially recall

What holy Jeremiah says about it: 635

"Speak truth, not lies, in oaths, that none should doubt it;

Swear but for justice and for righteousness."

But idle swearing is a cursedness.

Behold and see in that first table of

The worthy laws God gave us from above: 640

The second of these laws is very plain

To say, "Thou shalt not take my name in vain."

The Lord forbids such swearing sooner, then,

Than homicide and many a curséd sin.

I tell it in the order that it stands-- 645

As he who God's commandments understands

Is well aware, the second one is that.

And furthermore I now will tell you flat

That vengeance on his house will be unsparing

When one engages in such awful swearing 650

As "By God's precious heart," and "By his nails,"

And "By the blood of Christ that is in Hales,

My chance is seven, yours is five and three!"

"By God's arms, if you play deceitfully

You'll see how well your heart this dagger hones!" 655

This is the fruit of those two curséd bones:

Forswearing, ire, deceit, and homicide.

So for the love of Christ who for us died,

Leave off your oaths, the small ones and the great.

Now, sirs, my tale I further will relate. 660

These three young revelers of whom I tell

Much earlier than nine by any bell

Were sitting in a tavern and were drinking.

And as they sat, they heard a bell go clinking:

A corpse was being carried to its grave. 665

Then one of them called over to his knave

And said, "Go quickly, ask without delay

What corpse that is that's passing by the way,

And see that you report his name correctly."

"No need for that," the boy replied directly, 670

"Two hours before you came here, sir, they told

Me who he was. The fellow was an old

Comrade of yours, one who was slain at night

With suddenness. While he sat drunk, upright,

There came a stealthy thief that's known as Death, 675

Throughout this country robbing folks of breath;

And with his spear he smote his heart in two,

Then went his way without a word. And through

This plague he's slain a thousand. Master, ere

You come into his presence anywhere, 680

I think that it is very necessary

That you beware of such an adversary.

To meet him, sire, be ready evermore.

My mother taught me this. I say no more."

"By Saint Mary," the tavern keeper said, 685

"The child is right! This year he's left for dead

In just one town (a mile from here, I'd gauge)

Both man and woman, child and knave and page--

I think his habitation must be there.

It would be very wise, then, to beware 690

Lest he should do a fellow a dishonor."

"Yea, by God's arms!" declared this rioter,

"Is he so very perilous to meet?

I'll seek him in the by-ways and the street,

I vow it by the worthy bones of God! 695

My friends, are we not three peas in a pod?

Let's each hold up a hand to one another,

Each of us will become the others' brother.

With this false traitor Death we'll do away;

The slayer of so many we shall slay 700

Before it's night, by God's sweet dignity!"

Together then they made their pledge, the three,

To live and die each of them for the others

As if they'd been born naturally as brothers.

Then up they jumped in drunken agitation 705

And headed down the road, their destination

The village they had just been told about.

And many a grisly oath they shouted out

And tore Christ's blessed body limb from limb--

Death shall be dead if they get hold of him! 710

When they had gone not fully half a mile,

And were about to step across a stile,

They met a poor old man. Upon their meeting,

The old man very meekly gave them greeting:

"My lords," he said, "may God watch over you." 715

To which the proudest of this rowdy crew

Replied, "What's that, you churl of sorry grace?

Why are you all wrapped up except your face?

Why live to be so ancient? Tell us why!"

The old man looked the fellow in the eye 720

And said, "Because I'd never find a man,

Were I to walk as far as Hindustan,

In any town or village, who would give

His youth for my old age. So I must live,

I'm destined to remain an old man still, 725

As long a time as it may be God's will.

And Death, alas! won't take my life, and so

I walk, a restless wretch, and as I go

I knock with this my staff early and late

Upon the ground, which is my mother's gate, 730

And say, 'Beloved Mother, let me in!

Look how I vanish, flesh and blood and skin!

Alas! when will these old bones be at rest?

How gladly, Mother, I'd exchange my chest,

Which has so long a time been on my shelf, 735

For haircloth in which I could wrap myself!'

And yet she won't allow me such a grace,

That's why so pale and withered is my face.

"But, sirs, you show a lack of courtesy

To speak to an old man so brutishly, 740

Unless he has trespassed in word or deed.

In Holy Writ you may yourself well read:

'Before an old man with a hoary head

You should arise.' I counsel as it's said,

No harm to an old fellow you should do, 745

No more than you would have men do to you

When in old age, should you so long abide.

Now God be with you where you go or ride,

I must go on to where I have to go."

"No, you old churl, by God, that isn't so!" 750

The gambler said at once. "You won't be gone

So lightly on your way, no, by Saint John!

What of that traitor Death were you just saying?

Our friends in all this country he is slaying.

I promise you--since you're a spy of his-- 755

You'll pay if you don't tell us where he is,

By God and by the holy sacrament!

For truly you and he have one intent,

To kill us who are young, you thief and liar!"

"Now, sirs," said he, "if you have such desire 760

To find Death, then turn up this crooked way--

I left him in that grove. I truly say,

Beneath a tree he was; there he'll abide,

Your boasting will not make him run and hide.

See yonder oak? He's there, as you will find. 765

God save you, as he ransomed all mankind,

And mend you!" So replied this aged man.

And each of these three revelers then ran

Until he reached the tree, and there they found

Some [florins](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#florins), coined of gold and fine and round-- 770

Well nigh eight bushels, that was their impression.

To seek Death was no longer their obsession,

As each of them, so gladdened by the sight

Of golden florins, all so fair and bright,

Sat down beside the hoard that they had found. 775

The worst of them was first to speak a sound.

He said, "My brothers, heed what I've to say,

My wits are keen although I joke and play.

It's Fortune that has given us this treasure

That we may live our lives in mirth and pleasure. 780

As easy as it comes we'll spend it. Aye!

Who would have thought this very morning, by

God's dignity, we'd have so fair a grace?

And if this gold be carried from this place

Home to my house, or else to yours--be it 785

Well understood, it's our gold every bit--

Then we'll be in a high and happy way.

But truly it cannot be done by day,

We'd be accused of brazen thievery

And for our gold they'd hang us from a tree. 790

This treasure we must carry home by night,

As cleverly and slyly as we might.

So I advise that lots among us all

Be drawn, and let's see where the lot will fall;

And he who draws the lot then cheerfully 795

Shall run to town, and do that speedily,

To bring some bread and wine back on the sly,

While two of us shall carefully stand by

To guard this treasure. If he doesn't tarry,

When it is night this treasure we will carry 800

To where we all agree it would be best."

In that one's fist were lots held for the rest,

He bade them draw to see where it would fall.

It fell upon the youngest of them all,

Who started off to town immediately. 805

No sooner had he left their company

When that one of those staying told the other,

"Now you know well that you are my sworn brother;

Here's something that will profit you to know.

Our friend back into town has had to go, 810

And here is gold in plentiful degree

That is to be divided by us three.

But nonetheless, if I could work it so

Between us two we split it when we go,

Would I have not done you a friendly turn?" 815

"But how?" the other answered with concern.

"For he will know the gold is with us two.

What shall we say to him? What shall we do?"

"Shall it be kept our secret?" said the first.

"Then in a few short words you shall be versed 820

In what we'll do to bring it all about."

"I grant it," said the other, "do not doubt,

You have my oath, I'll not be false to you."

"Now," said the first, "you know that we are two,

And two of us are stronger than is one. 825

As soon as he sits down, as if for fun

Arise as though you'd have with him some play,

Then in both sides I'll stab him right away

While you and he are struggling as in game.

And with your dagger see you do the same. 830

Then all this gold, dear friend, when we are through

Shall be divided up twixt me and you;

The two of us can then our lusts fulfill

And play at dice as often as we will."

So these two rogues agreed they would betray 835

And slay the third, as you have heard me say.

Meanwhile the youngest, who had gone to town,

In his mind's eye saw rolling up and down

The beauty of those florins new and bright.

"O Lord," said he, "if only that I might 840

Have all this treasure for myself alone!

There is no man who lives beneath God's throne

Who could then live as I, so merrily!"

And then at last hell's fiend, our enemy,

Put in his mind that poison he should buy 845

And give to his two mates and let them die.

The fiend had found this man's life so profane

He used his leave to bring the man to pain,

For it was plainly this man's full intent

To slay them both and never to repent. 850

So forth he went--no longer would he tarry--

Into the town to an apothecary,

Whom he asked that he sell to him if willing

Some poison: he had rats that needed killing,

And in his yard a polecat, so he said, 855

Was reason why his capons now were dead,

And he'd wreak eager vengeance if he might

On vermin that were ruining him by night.

The apothecary answered, "Let me tell you,

So help me God, here's something I will sell you, 860

And there is not a creature anywhere

That eats or drinks this mixture I prepare,

Though in amount as little as a kernel,

That will not go at once to the eternal--

Yea, he will die, and in a shorter while 865

Than it would take you, sir, to walk a mile,

This poison is so strong and virulent."

With this in hand, this curséd fellow went

(He took it in a box), and then he ran

Up the adjoining street to see a man 870

Who loaned him three large bottles. Of the three,

He poured his poison into two, for he

Would keep the third one clean for his own drinking.

"I'll be at work all night," so he was thinking,

"To carry all the gold out from that place." 875

And when this ne'er do well of such disgrace

Had filled with wine three bottles to the brim,

He went back to his mates awaiting him.

What need is there to preach about it more?

For just as they had planned his death before, 880

So by them he was slain right on the spot.

Then that one, when they'd carried out the plot,

Said, "Let us sit and drink and make us merry,

And afterwards his body we will bury."

It happened then by chance that with that word 885

He took the bottle poisoned by the third

And drank from it, then gave some to his mate,

And both of them met promptly with their fate.

But surely Avicenna, I suppose,

Did not include in all his canon's prose 890

More wondrous symptoms of a poisoned state

Than these two wretches suffered in their fate.

So these two killers met with homicide,

And also their false poisoner has died.

O curséd sin, so full of wretchedness! 895

O homicidal traitors! Wickedness!

O gluttony! O gambling! Lechery!

You blasphemers of Christ with villainy,

With mighty oaths from habit and from pride!

Alas, mankind, how can it so betide 900

That to the Lord who made you, your Creator,

Who with his dear heart's blood redeemed you later,

You are so false and so unkind? Alas!

Now, good men, God forgive you your trespass

And guard you from the sin of avarice. 905

My holy pardon saves you from all this;

If you will offer nobles, sterlings, rings,

Some brooches, spoons or other silver things,

Just bow your head beneath this holy bull.

Come up, you wives, and offer of your wool; 910

Your name I'll here enroll, then you may know

Into the bliss of heaven you will go.

My high power will absolve you, to be sure,

If you will give. You'll be as clean and pure

As when first born.--And, sirs, that's how I preach. 915

Now Christ, physician to the soul of each

Of us, grant you his pardon to receive,

For that is best, and you I'll not deceive.

But, sirs, one thing that slipped my memory when

I spoke my tale: I've relics, pardons in 920

My pouch, in England none could finer be,

The pope's own hand entrusted them to me.

If anyone devoutly has resolved

To make a gift and by me be absolved,

Come forth at once and meekly on your knees 925

Receive my pardon. Or, if you so please,

Take for yourself a pardon as you go--

One fresh and new at every town--just so

You offer to me, all the while we ride,

Some pence and nobles that are bonafide. 930

It is an honor for each one who's here

To have a competent pardoner near

To absolve you in the country as you ride,

In view of all the things that may betide.

There may be one (if not two) on the trek 935

Who falls down off his horse and breaks his neck;

Look what security it is for all

That in your fellowship I chanced to fall,

Who can absolve you all from first to last

Before your soul has from your body passed. 940

Let me advise our Host here to begin,

For he's the one enveloped most in sin.

Come forth, Sir Host, and offer first right now,

And kiss then each and every relic. How?

For just a groat! Unbuckle now your purse." 945

"Nay, nay," said he, "then I would have Christ's curse!

It shall not be, if I should live in bliss!

Your breeches, I am sure, you'd have me kiss

And swear they were the relic of a saint,

Though of your foul behind they bear the taint. 950

But by the cross that Saint Helena found,

Your balls I'd like to have my hand around

Instead of relics or a reliquary!

Let's cut them off, I'll even help to carry,

We'll find a hog, enshrine them in his turd." 955

The Pardoner then answered not a word,

He was too mad to have a thing to say.

"Now," said our Host, "I will no longer play

This game with you, or any angry man."

And right away the worthy Knight began, 960

When he saw all were laughing at the spat:

"Now quite enough, let's have no more of that!

Sir Pardoner, be merry, of good cheer.

And you, Sir Host, who are to me so dear,

I pray that you will kiss the Pardoner; 965

And, Pardoner, I pray, draw near him, sir,

And as we did now let us laugh and play."

They kissed at once and rode along their way.