

The Pardoner's Tale
from **The Canterbury Tales**
Geoffrey Chaucer,
translated by **Nevill Coghill**

The Prologue

“But let me briefly make my purpose plain;
I preach for nothing but for greed of gain
And use the same old text, as bold as brass,
Radix malorum est cupiditas.
5 And thus I preach against the very vice
I make my living out of—avarice.
And yet however guilty of that sin
Myself, with others I have power to win
Them from it, I can bring them to repent;
10 But that is not my principal intent.
Covetousness is both the root and stuff
Of all I preach. That ought to be enough.
“Well, then I give examples thick and fast
From bygone times, old stories from the past.
15 A yokel mind loves stories from of old,
Being the kind it can repeat and hold.
What! Do you think, as long as I can preach
And get their silver for the things I teach,
That I will live in poverty, from choice?
20 That’s not the counsel of my inner voice!
No! Let me preach and beg from kirk to kirk
And never do an honest job of work,
No, nor make baskets, like St. Paul, to gain
A livelihood. I do not preach in vain.
25 There’s no apostle I would counterfeit;
I mean to have money, wool and cheese and wheat
Though it were given me by the poorest lad
Or poorest village widow, though she had
A string of starving children, all agape.
30 No, let me drink the liquor of the grape
And keep a jolly wench in every town!
“But listen, gentlemen; to bring things down
To a conclusion, would you like a tale?
Now as I’ve drunk a draft of corn-ripe ale,
35 By God it stands to reason I can strike
On some good story that you all will like.
For though I am a wholly vicious man
Don’t think I can’t tell moral tales. I can!
Here’s one I often preach when out for winning;
40 Now please be quiet. Here is the beginning.”

The Tale

In Flanders once there was a company
Of youngsters haunting vice and ribaldry,
Riot and gambling, stews and public-houses
Where each with harp, guitar, or lute carouses,
45 Dancing and dicing day and night, and bold
To eat and drink far more than they can hold,
Doing thereby the devil sacrifice
Within that devil’s temple of cursed vice,
Abominable in superfluity,

50 With oaths so damnable in blasphemy
That it’s a grisly thing to hear them swear.
Our dear Lord’s body they will rend and tear. . . .
It’s of three rioters I have to tell
Who, long before the morning service bell,
55 Were sitting in a tavern for a drink.
And as they sat, they heard the hand-bell clink
Before a coffin going to the grave;
One of them called the little tavern-knave
And said “Go and find out at once—look spry!—
60 Whose corpse is in that coffin passing by;
And see you get the name correctly too.”
“Sir,” said the boy, “no need, I promise you;
Two hours before you came here I was told.
He was a friend of yours in days of old,
65 And suddenly, last night, the man was slain,
Upon his bench, face up, dead drunk again.
There came a privy thief, they call him Death,
Who kills us all round here, and in a breath
He speared him through the heart, he never stirred.
70 And then Death went his way without a word.
He’s killed a thousand in the present plague,
And, sir, it doesn’t do to be too vague
If you should meet him; you had best be wary.
Be on your guard with such an adversary,
75 Be primed to meet him everywhere you go,
That’s what my mother said. It’s all I know.”
The publican joined in with, “By St. Mary,
What the child says is right; you’d best be wary,
This very year he killed, in a large village
80 A mile away, man, woman, serf at tillage,
Page in the household, children—all there were.
Yes, I imagine that he lives round there.
It’s well to be prepared in these alarms,
He might do you dishonor.” “Huh, God’s arms!”
85 The rioter said, “Is he so fierce to meet?
I’ll search for him, by Jesus, street by street.
God’s blessed bones! I’ll register a vow!
Here, chaps! The three of us together now,
Hold up your hands, like me, and we’ll be brothers
90 In this affair, and each defend the others,
And we will kill this traitor Death, I say!
Away with him as he has made away
With all our friends. God’s dignity! Tonight!”
They made their bargain, swore with appetite,
95 These three, to live and die for one another
As brother-born might swear to his born brother.
And up they started in their drunken rage
And made towards this village which the page
And publican had spoken of before.
100 Many and grisly were the oaths they swore,
Tearing Christ’s blessed body to a shred;
“If we can only catch him, Death is dead!”
When they had gone not fully half a mile,
Just as they were about to cross a stile,
105 They came upon a very poor old man
Who humbly greeted them and thus began,
“God look to you, my lords, and give you quiet!”
To which the proudest of these men of riot

Gave back the answer, "What, old fool? Give place!
110 Why are you all wrapped up except your face?
Why live so long? Isn't it time to die?"
The old, old fellow looked him in the eye
And said, "Because I never yet have found,
Though I have walked to India, searching round
115 Village and city on my pilgrimage,
One who would change his youth to have my age.
And so my age is mine and must be still
Upon me, for such time as God may will.
"Not even Death, alas, will take my life;
120 So, like a wretched prisoner at strife
Within himself, I walk alone and wait
About the earth, which is my mother's gate,
Knock-knocking with my staff from night to noon
And crying, 'Mother, open to me soon!
125 Look at me, mother, won't you let me in?
See how I wither, flesh and blood and skin!
Alas! When will these bones be laid to rest?
Mother, I would exchange—for that were best—
The wardrobe in my chamber, standing there
130 So long, for yours! Aye, for a shirt of hair
To wrap me in!' She has refused her grace,
Whence comes the pallor of my withered face.
"But it dishonored you when you began
To speak so roughly, sir, to an old man,
135 Unless he had injured you in word or deed.
It says in holy writ, as you may read,
'Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head
And honor it.' And therefore be it said,
'Do no more harm to an old man than you,
140 Being now young, would have another do
When you are old'—if you should live till then.
And so may God be with you, gentlemen,
For I must go whither I have to go."
"By God," the gambler said, "you shan't do so,
145 You don't get off so easy, by St. John!
I heard you mention, just a moment gone,
A certain traitor Death who singles out
And kills the fine young fellows hereabout.
And you're his spy, by God! You wait a bit.
150 Say where he is or you shall pay for it,
By God and by the Holy Sacrament!
I say you've joined together by consent
To kill us younger folk, you thieving swine!"
"Well, sirs," he said, "if it be your design
155 To find out Death, turn up this crooked way
Towards that grove, I left him there today
Under a tree, and there you'll find him waiting.
He isn't one to hide for all your prating.
You see that oak? He won't be far to find.
160 And God protect you that redeemed mankind,
Aye, and amend you!" Thus that ancient man.
At once the three young rioters began
To run, and reached the tree, and there they found
A pile of golden florins on the ground,
165 New-coined, eight bushels of them as they thought.
No longer was it Death those fellows sought,
For they were all so thrilled to see the sight,

The florins were so beautiful and bright,
That down they sat beside the precious pile.
170 The wickedest spoke first after a while.
"Brothers," he said, "you listen to what I say.
I'm pretty sharp although I joke away.
It's clear that Fortune has bestowed this treasure
To let us live in jollity and pleasure.
175 Light come, light go! We'll spend it as we ought.
God's precious dignity! Who would have thought
This morning was to be our lucky day?
"If one could only get the gold away,
Back to my house, or else to yours, perhaps—
180 For as you know, the gold is ours, chaps—
We'd all be at the top of fortune, hey?
But certainly it can't be done by day.
People would call us robbers—a strong gang,
So our own property would make us hang.
185 No, we must bring this treasure back by night
Some prudent way, and keep it out of sight.
And so as a solution I propose
We draw for lots and see the way it goes;
The one who draws the longest, lucky man,
190 Shall run to town as quickly as he can
To fetch us bread and wine—but keep things dark—
While two remain in hiding here to mark
Our heap of treasure. If there's no delay,
When night comes down we'll carry it away,
195 All three of us, wherever we have planned."
He gathered lots and hid them in his hand
Bidding them draw for where the luck should fall.
It fell upon the youngest of them all,
And off he ran at once towards the town.
200 As soon as he had gone the first sat down
And thus began a parley with the other:
"You know that you can trust me as a brother;
Now let me tell you where your profit lies;
You know our friend has gone to get supplies
205 And here's a lot of gold that is to be
Divided equally among us three.
Nevertheless, if I could shape things thus
So that we shared it out—the two of us—
Wouldn't you take it as a friendly act?"
210 "But how?" the other said. "He knows the fact
That all the gold was left with me and you;
What can we tell him? What are we to do?"
"Is it a bargain," said the first, "or no?
For I can tell you in a word or so
215 What's to be done to bring the thing about."
"Trust me," the other said, "you needn't doubt
My word. I won't betray you, I'll be true."
"Well," said his friend, "you see that we are two,
And two are twice as powerful as one.
220 Now look; when he comes back, get up in fun
To have a wrestle; then, as you attack,
I'll up and put my dagger through his back
While you and he are struggling, as in game;
Then draw your dagger too and do the same.
225 Then all this money will be ours to spend,
Divided equally of course, dear friend.

Then we can gratify our lusts and fill
The day with dicing at our own sweet will.”
Thus these two miscreants agreed to slay
230 The third and youngest, as you heard me say.
The youngest, as he ran towards the town,
Kept turning over, rolling up and down
Within his heart the beauty of those bright
New florins, saying, “Lord, to think I might
235 Have all that treasure to myself alone!
Could there be anyone beneath the throne
Of God so happy as I then should be?”
And so the Fiend, our common enemy,
Was given power to put it in his thought
240 That there was always poison to be bought,
And that with poison he could kill his friends.
To men in such a state the Devil sends
Thoughts of this kind, and has a full permission
To lure them on to sorrow and perdition;
245 For this young man was utterly content
To kill them both and never to repent.
And on he ran, he had no thought to tarry,
Came to the town, found an apothecary
And said, “Sell me some poison if you will,
250 I have a lot of rats I want to kill
And there’s a polecat too about my yard
That takes my chickens and it hits me hard;
But I’ll get even, as is only right,
With vermin that destroy a man by night.”
255 The chemist answered, “I’ve a preparation
Which you shall have, and by my soul’s salvation
If any living creature eat or drink
A mouthful, ere he has the time to think,
Though he took less than makes a grain of wheat,
260 You’ll see him fall down dying at your feet;
Yes, die he must, and in so short a while
You’d hardly have the time to walk a mile,
The poison is so strong, you understand.”
This cursed fellow grabbed into his hand
265 The box of poison and away he ran
Into a neighboring street, and found a man
Who lent him three large bottles. He withdrew
And deftly poured the poison into two.
He kept the third one clean, as well he might,
270 For his own drink, meaning to work all night
Stacking the gold and carrying it away.
And when this rioter, this devil’s clay,
Had filled his bottles up with wine, all three,
Back to rejoin his comrades sauntered he.
275 Why make a sermon of it? Why waste breath?
Exactly in the way they’d planned his death
They fell on him and slew him, two to one.
Then said the first of them when this was done,
“Now for a drink. Sit down and let’s be merry,
280 For later on there’ll be the corpse to bury.”
And, as it happened, reaching for a sup,
He took a bottle full of poison up
And drank; and his companion, nothing loth,
Drank from it also, and they perished both.
285 There is, in Avicenna’s long relation

Concerning poison and its operation,
Trust me, no ghashtier section to transcend
What these two wretches suffered at their end.
Thus these two murderers received their due,
290 So did the treacherous young poisoner too. . . .
“One thing I should have mentioned in my tale,
Dear people. I’ve some relics in my bale
And pardons too, as full and fine, I hope,
As any in England, given me by the Pope.
295 If there be one among you that is willing
To have my absolution for a shilling
Devoutly given, come! and do not harden
Your hearts but kneel in humbleness for pardon;
Or else, receive my pardon as we go.
300 You can renew it every town or so
Always provided that you still renew
Each time, and in good money, what is due.
It is an honor to you to have found
A pardoner with his credentials sound
305 Who can absolve you as you ply the spur
In any accident that may occur.
For instance—we are all at Fortune’s beck—
Your horse may throw you down and break your neck.
What a security it is to all
310 To have me here among you and at call
With pardon for the lowly and the great
When soul leaves body for the future state!
And I advise our Host here to begin,
The most enveloped of you all in sin.
315 Come forward, Host, you shall be the first to pay,
And kiss my holy relics right away.
Only a groat. Come on, unbuckle your purse!”
“No, no,” said he, “not I, and may the curse
Of Christ descend upon me if I do! . . .”
320 The Pardoner said nothing, not a word;
He was so angry that he couldn’t speak.
“Well,” said our Host, “if you’re for showing pique,
I’ll joke no more, not with an angry man.”
The worthy Knight immediately began,
325 Seeing the fun was getting rather rough,
And said, “No more, we’ve all had quite enough.
Now, Master Pardoner, perk up, look cheerily!
And you, Sir Host, whom I esteem so dearly,
I beg of you to kiss the Pardoner.
330 “Come, Pardoner, draw nearer, my dear sir.
Let’s laugh again and keep the ball in play.”
They kissed, and we continued on our way.