

The Pardoner's Prologue

Here follows the Prologue to the Pardoner's Tale

Radix malorum est Cupiditas:

For the love of money is the root of all evil.

(1 Timothy 6:10)

'Lordings,' quoth he, 'in churches when I preach,

I take great pains to make a forceful speech,

And ring it out as soundly as a bell,

For I know all by rote, the tale I tell.

My theme is ever one, and always was:

"Radix malorum est cupiditas."

First I pronounce from whence it is I come,

And then my bulls I show them, all and some.

Our liege lord's seal is upon my patent

That I show first, as my bodily warrant,

So that none's so bold, priest nor clerk,

As to disturb me in Christ's holy work,

And after that, then I tell forth my tales.

Bulls of the popes and of cardinals,

Of patriarchs and bishops too, they view,

And in Latin I speak a word or two,

To season, as with saffron, declamation,

And stir them to reveal all their devotion.

Then I show forth my large crystal flagons,

Crammed full to the top with rags and bones;

Relics they are, adored by everyone.

Then I have in brass a shoulder-bone,

Belong to a holy Jew's dead sheep.

"Good men," say I, "note of my words now keep:

If that this bone be washed in any well,
If cow, or calf, or sheep, or ox should swell
That any worm has eat, or snake has stung,
Take water from that well and wash its tongue,
It will be whole anon; and furthermore,
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Of pox and scabs and every other sore
Shall every sheep be whole that of this well
Drinks a draught. Take note of what I tell:
If the good man that the beasts do follow
Shall every week, before the cockerels crow,
Fasting too, drink of this well a draught,
As this holy Jew our elders taught,
His beasts and his stock will fruitful be.
And, sires, also it heals the jealousy;
For though a man descend to jealous rage,
Let him add this water to his pottage,
And nevermore shall he mistrust his wife,
Though the truth of all her sin be rife,
And even though she's had a priest or three.
Here is a mitten too, as you can see;
He that his hand will put inside this mitten,
His grain shall multiply, as it were written,
Where he has sown, whether it's wheat or oats,
If he makes offering of pence or groats.
Good men and women, one thing though I vow;
If anyone is in this church right now
Who has done dreadful things, that he
Dare not, for shame of it, confess to me,

Or any woman, be she young or old,
Who has made of her husband a cuckold,
Such folk shall have no power and no grace
To make offering to my relics in this place.
And whoever's free of all such blame,
May come and make an offering, in God's name,
And I absolve them, by the authority
This papal bull has granted unto me."
By this trick have I gained, year on year,
A hundred marks since I made Pardoner.
I stand like a cleric in my pulpit,
And after the unlettered people sit,
I preach thus as you have heard before,
And tell a hundred false stories more.

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Then I take to stretching forth my neck,
And east and west nod with due effect,
Just like a dove sitting on a barn.
My hands and tongue then work so hard
That it is a joy to view the business.
Of avarice and all such wickedness
Is all my preaching, thus to set them free
To give their pence, and namely, unto me.
For my intent is only gain to win,
Not to correct them when they chance to sin.
For I care nothing, at their burying,
Whether their souls have gone blackberrying!
And certainly, many a declamation
Arises oftentime from ill intention:

Sometime to pleasure folk with flattery,
And gain advantage through hypocrisy,
Sometimes for vainglory, sometimes hate.
For when I dare not otherwise debate,
I'll sting him with my tongue and sharp
Preaching, so that he'll not flee far
From false slander, if it seems that he
Has offended my brethren now, or me.
For though I never speak his proper name,
Men shall know the person, all the same,
By signs and by other circumstances.
Thus I pay out folk who lead us dances;
Thus I spit out my venom with the hue
Of holiness, to seem holy still and true.
But briefly my intent I here confess:
I preach, but only out of covetousness.
Therefore my theme is now, and ever was:
"Radix malorum est cupiditas."
Thus do I preach against the very vice
I too indulge in, which is avarice.
Though I myself am guilty of that sin,
Yet I have power these other folk to win
From avarice, and bitterly to repent.

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Yet that is not my principal intent;
I preach only out of covetousness.
Enough now of that subject, I suggest.
Then I give examples many a one
Out of old stories from the times long gone.

For unlettered people love the tales of old;
Such things they can repeat, their minds can hold.
What! Think you, that while I can preach,
And gain gold and silver as I teach,
I would live in poverty wilfully?
Nay, nay, I've never thought so, truly!
For I can preach and beg in sundry lands.
I need never labour with my hands,
Nor make baskets, just to make a living,
Since not un-fruitfully I can go begging;
None of the apostles shall I counterfeit.
I must have money, wool, cheese and wheat,
Though it were given by the poorest page
Or the poorest widow in some village,
Though her children starve from famine.
Nay, I must drink the liquor of the vine,
And have a jolly wench in every town!
But hearken, lordings, in conclusion now:
Your pleasure is that I should tell a tale.
Now I have drunk a draught of malted ale,
By God, I hope to tell you of a thing
That shall with reason be to your liking!
For though myself I am a sinful man,
Tell you a moral tale? Well, that I can:
One that I am wont to preach for gain.
Now hold your peace; and I'll begin again.'