



Geoffrey Chaucer
The Pardoner's Tale
The Frankelneys Tale
The Nonne Preestes Tale in Middle English

THE
COMPLETE
TEXT

UNABRIDGED

POETRY

Read by **Richard Bebb**



NA243912D

1	The Prologue of The Pardoners Tale	4:18
2	By this gaude have I wonne, yeer by yeer...	5:09
3	Here biginneth The Pardoners Tale.	4:37
4	The apostel weping seith ful pitously...	4:09
5	And now that I have spoke of glotonye...	4:55
6	Thise ryotoures three, of whiche I telle...	4:11
7	This olde man gan loke in his visage...	4:42
8	'Brethren,' quod he, 'tak kepe what I seye...'	4:30
9	This yongest, which that wente un-to the toun...	4:17
10	O cursed sinne, ful of cursednesse!	5:35
11	The Prologue of The Frankeleyns Tale	1:31
12	Here biginneth The Frankeleyns Tale.	4:35
13	Heer may men seen an humble wys accord...	3:58
14	Now stood hir castel faste by the see...	3:51
15	So on a day, right in the morwe-tyde...	4:31
16	'Madame,' quod he, 'by god that this world made...'	4:46
17	He seyde, 'Appollo, god and governour...'	4:56
18	In langour and in torment furious...	4:45

19	Whan they were come almost to that citee	4:51
20	Upon the morwe, whan that it was day...	3:47
21	Aurelius, which that yet despeired is...	4:57
22	Yis, certes, lo, these stories beren witness...	4:00
23	O Cedasus! it is ful greet pitee...	4:59
24	This squyer, which that highte Aurelius...	4:00
25	Aurelius, that his cost hath al forlorn...	4:57
26	The Prologue of The Nonne Preestes Tale	3:54
27	Here biginneth The Nonne Preestes Tale	4:22
28	And so bifel, that in a daweninge...	3:57
29	Lo Catoun, which that was so wys a man...	4:03
30	And so bifel, that, longe er it were day...	4:33
31	And certes, in the same book I rede...	4:17
32	And forther-more, I pray yow loketh wel...	4:00
33	Whan that the month in which the world bigan...	5:14
34	Faire in the sond, to bathe hir merily...	4:14
35	This Chauntecleer stood hye up-on his toos...	4:35
36	Lo, how fortune turneth sodeinly...	4:38

Total time: 2:38:52

Geoffrey Chaucer

The Pardoner's Tale, The Frankeleyns Tale, The Nonne Preestes Tale

in Middle English

Here are three tales and tellers of extraordinary variety selected from different sections of *The Canterbury Tales*.

The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale is one of the few *Canterbury Tales* where there is a real complex sense of the individual character of the teller expressing himself as different from the poet, although this is a device, borrowed from the earlier French *Roman de la Rose*, whereby the poet satirises a character by showing him boasting of his own trickery.

A pardoner was a low level cleric licensed by high ecclesiastical authority to sell pardons to people who were repentant of their sins and could pay the Church for remission of time of suffering for their sins in Purgatory after their death. The money thus raised could be devoted to good causes. We are told in *The General Prologue* that the Pardoner was employed by the Hospital of St Mary of Rouncival at Charing Cross in London as a fund-raiser.

Chaucer with unusually hostile satire presents his Pardoner as an effeminate perhaps homosexual man with high-pitched voice of the kind that traditional masculine societies treat with great contempt. The system of pardons was wide open to abuse, fully revealed in the Pardoner's own description in his *Prologue* of his greed and his deception of simple country people. He also sells what he himself is represented as telling his pilgrim audience are bogus holy relics.

In *The Pardoner's Prologue* and at the end of the tale Chaucer shows the speaker carried away by his own eloquence, with subtle implications of self-awareness, which have given rise to much debate among critics.

The actual tale, like almost all *The Canterbury Tales*, has its root in a very widespread folk tale. In this case the moral is that cupidity is the root of all evil. In almost hysterical tones the Pardoner begins by condemning all kinds of sin. His tale is set in Flanders during a visitation of the plague and

has many ironic and realistic touches. It tells of three debauched 'riotours' who set out drunkenly to 'kill death'. They roughly ask the whereabouts of 'death' from the enigmatic figure of a frail old man who himself wishes in vain to die. The old man directs them to a grove where they find a heap of gold, the desire for which leads to their own death. The irony is that they have found what they seek but no longer wish for.

Death, and the fear of death, play some small part in the very different *Nonne Preestes Tale*, and in all its variety it is the most entertaining of *The Canterbury Tales*. There is really no sense of a specific dramatic narrator different from the poet. The ostensible teller, the Nun's Priest, is not even mentioned in *The Prologue of The Canterbury Tales*. In the sequence of tales *The Nonne Preestes Prologue and Tale* is a deliberate contrast to the preceding set of Tragedies told by the Monk. That has been cut short in response to the complaint of the Knyght, reinforced less politely by the Host, who both prefer cheerful stories with happy endings.

The core of the poem is the well-known fable of the fox who captures the cock, who then tricks the fox into speaking and thus releasing him, This core is enriched by comic evocations of the characters of the husbandly cock Chanticleer and his bossy chief wife Pertelote, by pseudo-learned

discussions of medicines, a story of a royal Anglo-Saxon child saint, another of a murdered traveller who disregarded a warning in a dream (as does Chanticleer), mock-serious references to fate and foreknowledge, elaborately absurd rhetorical description, a delightfully rapid narrative episode of the pursuit of the fox and ultimate escape of the cock, and in the end by a half-serious moralisation. All this is conveyed with a light-hearted satirical touch that keeps us in the farmyard.

The Frankeleyns Prologue and Tale is different again. It does not 'express' the personal character of the Franklin, who in *The General Prologue of The Canterbury Tales* is presented as a bluff wealthy man who keeps a generous open house and is of some consequence in the legal affairs of his county. His tale is courtly, well-informed in astronomical and other learned matters without being pedantic, and with great delicacy of feeling in matters of love.

The essence of it is the very widespread folklore theme sometimes called 'The Damsel's Rash Promise', or 'Which was the Noblest Act?'. A young woman, the beautiful lady Dorigen, who lives near the rocky coast of Brittany, in order to ensure the safe return of her absent beloved husband from across the sea, promises what she believes in good faith will never be required,

to be the lover of a squire, Aurelius. When her husband returns safely all is joy, except for the lovelorn Aurelius. He, however, with the help of a powerful magician, who charges him his whole inheritance, causes the dangerous rocks of the coast for a little while apparently to disappear. Thus, to her horror, the fulfilment of her promise is required.

Like so many improbable folk tale plots it creates in brief an example of a profoundly human dilemma, here the choice between two strong but contradictory moral obligations. The assumption is that 'trouthe' is an absolute value which demands faithfulness to her husband and also faithfulness to her promise to the squire.

The scene is placed in pagan times in Brittany and depends on the assumption that for a while the would-be lover's magic can appear (falsely) to overcome the natural dangers of the coast. In the narrative, taken from a tale of Boccaccio's, many interesting questions are raised, from questioning God's wisdom in creating such a dangerous world, the nature of marriage, the danger of interfering with the course of nature, the course of the tides, the validity of 'natural' magic. At the end is a long passage in which Dorigen, agonising over her dilemma, refers to the stories of many

women who have killed themselves to avoid adultery or rape.

Some modern critics regard this as very amusing. Chastity and faithfulness may not evoke much sympathy in modern literature but they still have force even in modern times. This is illustrated from the terrible story from the end of World War II when the Red Army went on the rampage in the German town of Demmin. Many women were continuously raped and many women drowned themselves, with their children, in the river, to avoid violation. (L.Rees, *The Nazis*, BBC Books, London, 1997. Note also the 'honour killing' in *The Physician's Tale*, narrated in the Naxos Chaucer series spoken by Richard Bebb.)

That such events happen is no matter for comedy in any age, nor despite Chaucer's reputation, since the eighteenth century, as a bawdy joker, is it likely that Chaucer intended the passage as other than an emphasis on the pathos and seriousness of Dorigen's plight. Tragedy is avoided in *The Frankeleyn's Tale* by the goodness and self-sacrificing generosity of husband, magician and would-be lover. It ends with the courtly question, who was most generous, knight, squire or clerk? It is a rich and noble tale.

Notes by Derek Brewer



Richard Bebb (1927–2006) was educated at Highgate School, London and Trinity College, Cambridge. He became an actor in 1947 in Michael Redgrave's *Macbeth* and then spent two years in repertory at Buxton and Croydon, where he met his future wife, the late Gwen Watford. They married in 1952 and had two sons.

From 1950 he worked regularly in all the theatrical media. He has appeared in a handful of West End plays, made over a thousand broadcasts, including sharing the narration with Richard Burton in the BBC recording of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* and also appeared in almost 200 television plays, including Alan Bennett's *A Question of Attribution*; among other television appearances were *Barchester Towers* and Agatha Christie's *A Murder Has Been Announced*. His one important film appearance was as the successful cricketer in Terence Rattigan's *The Final Test*.

He owned the largest collection of historic 78s of opera singers in England and lectured at Yale, Harvard, Princetown and the Smithsonian on theatrical and musical subjects. He discovered the unknown cylinder recordings of Sir Henry Irving.

Derek Brewer was born in 1923 and after attending elementary and grammar schools went to Magdalen College Oxford, where his tutor was C.S.Lewis. He was an infantry officer 1942–5. After appointments in the University of Birmingham and in Japan he was elected to a fellowship in English in Emmanuel College Cambridge and later Master (1977–90). He is now a Life Fellow. He has published many books and articles on Chaucer and other English literature. He set up the academic publishing firm Boydell and Brewer.

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The Pardoners Tale
The Frankeleyns Tale
The Nonne Preestes Tale

from *The Canterbury Tales*

in Middle English

Read by **Richard Bebb**

These three tales from *The Canterbury Tales* are read in the original Middle English by Richard Bebb under the direction of Britain's foremost Chaucer scholar, Derek Brewer. The tales and their story-tellers display extraordinary variety and come from from different sections of *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer's portrait of the Pardoner himself, laced with hostile satire, is as entertaining and revealing as the Tale itself – a search for a pot of gold during the plague. *The Nonne Preestes Tale* is the well-known folk story of the fox and the cock, Chanticleer. *The Frankeleyns Tale* is different again and concerns faithfulness, love and magic. They are presented here in the original Middle English, but with the sense of drama and storytelling intact.

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