

THE TALE. <1>

When Phoebus dwelled here in earth adown, As olde bookes make
mentioun, He was the moste lusty* bachelere *pleasant Of
all this world, and eke* the best archer. *also He slew Python
the serpent, as he lay Sleeping against the sun upon a day; And many
another noble worthy deed He with his bow wrought, as men maye read.
Playen he could on every minstrelsy, And singe, that it was a melody To
hearken of his cleare voice the soun'. Certes the king of Thebes, Amphioun,
That with his singing walled the city, Could never singe half so well as he.
Thereto he was the seemlieste man That is, or was since that the world
began; What needeth it his features to describe? For in this world is none so
fair alive. He was therewith full fill'd of gentleness, Of honour, and of perfect
worthiness.

This Phoebus, that was flower of bach'lery, As well in freedom* as in
chivalry, *generosity For his disport, in signe eke of victory Of
Python, so as telleth us the story, Was wont to beare in his hand a bow.
Now had this Phoebus in his house a crow, Which in a cage he foster'd
many a day, And taught it speake, as men teach a jay. White was this
crow, as is a snow-white swan, And counterfeit the speche of every man He
coude, when he shoulde tell a tale. Therewith in all this world no
nightingale Ne coude by an hundred thousand deal* *part
Singe so wondrous merrily and well. Now had this Phoebus in his house a
wife; Which that he loved more than his life. And night and day did ever his
diligence Her for to please, and do her reverence: Save only, if that I the
sooth shall sayn, Jealous he was, and would have kept her fain. For him
were loth y-japed* for to be; *tricked, deceived And so is every
wight in such degree; But all for nought, for it availeth nought. A good wife,
that is cleane of work and thought, Should not be kept in none await*
certain: *observation And truly the labour is in vain To keep a
shrew,* for it will not be. *ill-disposed woman This hold I for a
very nicety,* *sheer folly To spille* labour for to keepe
wives; *lose

Thus writen olde clerkes in their lives. But now to purpose, as I first began.
This worthy Phoebus did all that he can To please her, weening, through
such pleasance, And for his manhood and his governance, That no man
should have put him from her grace; But, God it wot, there may no man
embrace As to distraint* a thing, which that nature *succeed in
constraining Hath naturally set in a creature. Take any bird, and put it in a

cage, And do all thine intent, and thy corage,* *what thy heart prompts
 To foster it tenderly with meat and drink Of alle dainties that thou canst
 bethink, And keep it all so cleanly as thou may; Although the cage of gold be
 never so gay, Yet had this bird, by twenty thousand fold, Lever* in a forest,
 both wild and cold, *rather Go eate wormes, and such
 wretchedness. For ever this bird will do his business T'escape out of his cage
 when that he may: His liberty the bird desireth aye. <2> Let take a cat, and
 foster her with milk And tender flesh, and make her couch of silk, And let
 her see a mouse go by the wall, Anon she weiveth* milk, and flesh, and all,
 *forsaketh And every dainty that is in that house, Such appetite hath she to
 eat the mouse. Lo, here hath kind* her domination,
 nature And appetite flemeth discretion. *drives out A
 she-wolf hath also a villain's kind The lewedeste wolf that she may find, Or
 least of reputation, will she take In time when *her lust* to have a make.*
 *she desires *mate All these examples speak I by* these men *with
 reference to That be untrue, and nothing by women. For men have ever a
 lik'rous appetite On lower things to perform their delight Than on their
 wives, be they never so fair, Never so true, nor so debonair.*
 *gentle, mild Flesh is so newefangled, *with mischance,* *ill luck to
 it* That we can in no thinge have pleasance That *souneth unto* virtue any
 while. *accords with

This Phoebus, which that thought upon no guile, Deceived was for all his
 jollity; For under him another hadde she, A man of little reputation, Nought
 worth to Phoebus in comparison. The more harm is; it happens often so, Of
 which there cometh mucche harm and woe. And so befell, when Phoebus was
 absent, His wife anon hath for her leman* sent. *unlawfulllover
 Her leman! certes that is a knavish speech. Forgive it me, and that I you
 beseech. The wise Plato saith, as ye may read, The word must needs accorde
 with the deed; If men shall telle properly a thing, The word must cousin be
 to the working. I am a boistous* man, right thus I say. *rough-spoken,
 downright There is no difference truely Betwixt a wife that is of high degree
 (If of her body dishonest she be), And any poore wench, other than this (If it
 so be they worke both amiss), But, for* the gentle is in estate above,
 *because She shall be call'd his lady and his love; And, for that other is a
 poor woman, She shall be call'd his wench and his leman: And God it wot,
 mine owen deare brother, Men lay the one as low as lies the other. Right so
 betwixt a *titleless tyrant* *usurper* And an outlaw, or else
 a thief errant, *wandering The same I say, there is no
 difference (To Alexander told was this sentence), But, for the tyrant is of
 greater might By force of meinie* for to slay downright,
 followers And burn both house and home, and make all plain,
 *level Lo, therefore is he call'd a capitain; And, for the outlaw hath but small

meinie, And may not do so great an harm as he, Nor bring a country to so
great mischief, Men calle him an outlaw or a thief. But, for I am a man not
textuel, *learned in texts I will not tell of texts never a deal; *
*whit I will go to my tale, as I began.

When Phoebus' wife had sent for her leman, Anon they wroughten all their
lust volage. *light or rash pleasure* This white crow, that hung aye in
the cage, Beheld their work, and said never a word; And when that home
was come Phoebus the lord, This crowe sung, "Cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo!"
"What? bird," quoth Phoebus, "what song sing'st thou now? Wert thou not
wont so merrily to sing, That to my heart it was a rejoicing To hear thy
voice? alas! what song is this?" "By God," quoth he, "I singe not amiss.
Phoebus," quoth he, "for all thy worthiness, For all thy beauty, and all thy
gentleness, For all thy song, and all thy minstrelsy, *For all thy waiting,
bleared is thine eye* *despite all thy watching, With one of little reputation,
thou art befooled* Not worth to thee, as in comparison, The mountance* of a
gnat, so may I thrive; *value For on thy bed thy wife I saw
him swive." What will ye more? the crow anon him told, By sade* tokens,
and by wordes bold, *grave, trustworthy How that his wife had
done her lechery, To his great shame and his great villainy; And told him oft,
he saw it with his eyen. This Phoebus gan awayward for to wrien; *
*turn aside Him thought his woeful hearte burst in two. His bow he bent,
and set therein a flo,* *arrow And in his ire he hath his wife
slain; This is th' effect, there is no more to sayn. For sorrow of which he
brake his minstrelsy, Both harp and lute, gitern* and psaltery;
*guitar And eke he brake his arrows and his bow; And after that thus spake
he to the crow.

"Traitor," quoth he, "with tongue of scorpion, Thou hast me brought to my
confusion; Alas that I was wrought! *why n'ere** I dead? *made **was
not O deare wife, O gem of lustihead,* *pleasantness That
wert to me so sad,* and eke so true, *steadfast Nowliest thou
dead, with face pale of hue, Full guilteless, that durst I swear y-wis! *
certainly O rakel hand, to do so foul amiss *rash, hasty O
troubled wit, O ire reckeless, That unadvised smit'st the guilteless! O
wantrust,* full offalse suspicion! *distrust <3> Where was thy
wit and thy discretion? O! every man beware of rakelness,*
rashness Nor trow no thing withoute strong witness. *believe
Smite not too soon, ere that ye weete* why, *know And *be
advised* well and sickerly** *consider* *surely Ere ye *do any
execution *take any action Upon your ire* for suspicion.
upon your anger* Alas! a thousand folk hath rakel ire Fouilly fordone, and
brought them in the mire. Alas! for sorrow I will myself slee*

*slay And to the crow, "O false thief," said he, "I will thee quite anon thy
 false tale. Thou sung whilom* like any nightingale, *once on a
 time Now shalt thou, false thief, thy song foregon,* *lose And
 eke thy white feathers every one, Nor ever in all thy life shalt thou speak;
 Thus shall men on a traitor be awak. *revenged Thou and
 thine offspring ever shall be blake,* *black Nor ever sweete noise
 shall ye make, But ever cry against* tempest and rain, *before, in
 warning of In token that through thee my wife is slain." And to the crow he
 start,* and that anon, *sprang And pull'd his white feathers
 every one, And made him black, and reft him all his song, And eke his
 speech, and out at door him flung Unto the devil, *which I him betake; *
 to whom I commend him And for this cause be all crowes blake. Lordings,
 by this ensample, I you pray, Beware, and take keep* what that ye say;
 *heed Nor telle never man in all your life How that another man hath dight
 his wife; He will you hate mortally certain. Dan Solomon, as wise clerkes
 sayn, Teacheth a man to keep his tongue well; But, as I said, I am not
 textuel. But natheless thus taughte me my dame; "My son, think on the
 crow, in Godde's name. My son, keep well thy tongue, and keep thy friend; A
 wicked tongue is worse than is a fiend: My sone, from a fiend men may them
 bless.* *defend by crossing My son, God of his endless goodness
 themselves Walled a tongue with teeth, and lippes eke, For* man should him
 advise,** what he speak. *because **consider My son, full often for too
 muche speech Hath many a man been spilt,* as clerkes teach;
 destroyed But for a little speech advisedly Is no man shent, to speak
 generally. *ruined My son, thy tongue shouldest thou
 restrain At alle time, *but when thou dost thy pain* *except when you
 do To speak of God in honour and prayere. your best effort* The
 firste virtue, son, if thou wilt lear,* *learn Is to restrain and
 keepe well thy tongue;<4> Thus learne children, when that they be young.
 My son, of muche speaking evil advis'd, Where lesse speaking had enough
 suffic'd, Cometh much harm; thus was me told and taught; In muche
 speche sinne wanteth not. Wost* thou whereof a rakel** tongue serveth?
 *knowest **hasty Right as a sword forcutteth and forcarveth An arm in two,
 my deare son, right so A tongue cutteth friendship all in two. A jangler* is
 to God abominable. *prating man Read Solomon, so wise
 and honourable; Read David in his Psalms, and read Senec'. My son, speak
 not, but with thine head thou beck,* *beckon, nod Dissimule as thou
 wert deaf, if that thou hear A jangler speak of perilous mattere. The Fleming
 saith, and learn *if that thee lest,* **if it please thee* That little jangling
 causeth muche rest. My son, if thou no wicked word hast said, *Thee thar
 not drede for to be bewray'd;* *thou hast no need to But he that hath
 missaid, I dare well sayn, fear to be betrayed* He may by no way call
 his word again. Thing that is said is said, and forth it go'th, <5> Though him

repent, or be he ne'er so loth; He is his thrall,* to whom that he hath said
*slave A tale, *of which he is now evil apaid.* *which he now regrets*
My son, beware, and be no author new Of tidings, whether they be false or
true; <6> Whereso thou come, amonges high or low, Keep well thy tongue,
and think upon the crow."