

THE PARDONER'S
PROLOGUE AND TALE



*The wordes of the Hoost
to [the Phisicien and] the Pardoner*

Thou beel amy, thou Pardoner,' he sayde,
'Telle us som myrthe or japes right anon.'

320 'It shal be doon,' quod he, 'by Seint Ronyon!
But first,' quod he, 'heere at this alestake
I wol bothe drynke and eten of a cake.'

But right anon these gentils gonne to crye,
'Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye!

325 Telle us som moral thyng, that we may leere
Som wit, and thanne wol we gladly heere.'

'I graunte, ywis,' quod he, 'but I moot thyinke
Upon som honest thyng while that I drynke.'

THE HOST'S INTRODUCTION TO THE
PARDONER'S TALE¹

*The words of the Host
to [the Physician and] the Pardoner*

'You, good friend, you Pardoner,' he said, 'tell us now some comic story or some jokes.' 'It shall be done,' he said, 'by St Ronan!² But first,' said he, 'I'll have a drink at this pub and some bread.' Straight away, however, the cultured members protested, 'No, don't let him tell a dirty story! Tell us a story with a moral, so that we can learn wisdom, and then we'll happily listen.' 'All right, then,' he said, 'but I'll have to think about some decent subject while I have a drink.'

1. The *Riverside Chaucer* correctly commences 'The Host's Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale' at line 287, but lines 287-317 are the Host's comments on the preceding *Physician's Tale* (not included in this collection). That tale so saddened him that he looks to the Pardoner to tell a comic story (319).
2. A Celtic saint revered in Brittany.

*Heere folweth the Prologe of
the Pardoners Tale*

*Radix malorum est Cupiditas.
Ad Thimotheum, 6°.*

330 'Lordynges,' quod he, 'in chirches whan I preche,
I peyne me to han an hauteyn speche,
And ryngge it out as round as gooth a belle,
For I kan al by rote that I telle.
My theme is alwey oon, and evere was –
Radix malorum est Cupiditas.

335 'First I pronounce whennes that I come,
And thanne my bulles shewe I, alle and some.
Oure lige lordes seel on my patente,
That shewe I first, my body to warente,
That no man be so boold, ne preest ne clerk,
Me to destourbe of Cristes hooly werk.
340 And after that thanne telle I forth my tales;
Bulles of popes and of cardynales,
Of patriarkes and bishopes I shewe,
And in Latyn I speke a wordes fewe,

THE PARDONER'S PROLOGUE

*Radix malorum est Cupiditas.
Ad Thimotheum, 6th.³*

'Gentlemen,' he said, 'when I preach in churches, I strive to put on an elevated voice, with ringing tones, clear as a bell, because I know by heart what I say. My text is always the same – always has been – "The Root of the Sins is Avarice".'

'First of all, I tell them where I've come from,⁴ and then I exhibit my papal documents of indulgencies, collectively and separately. Our bishop's seal on the open letter authorizing me to preach, I show first in self-protection, so that no one is bold enough, be he priest or deacon, to interrupt me in Christ's holy work. And, when that's done, I tell my stories. I show them papal and cardinals' documents, and those of the Church Fathers and bishops, and speak a few phrases in Latin

3. (Latin) 'The root of the sins is avarice. [St Paul's] Epistle to Timothy, [chapter] 6.' The Seven Deadly Sins are Pride, Envy, Gluttony, Avarice (Greed), Lust, Wrath and Sloth.

4. See *General Prologue*, 671, where we are told that the Pardoner has recently arrived from the Vatican in Rome.

345 To saffron with my predicacioun,
 And for to stire hem to devocioun.
 Thanne shewe I forth my longe cristal stones,
 Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones –
 Relikes been they, as wenen they echoon.
 350 Thanne have I in latoun a sholder-boon
 Which that was of an hooly Jewes sheep.
 “Goode men,” I seye, “taak of my wordes keep;
 If that this boon be wasshe in any welle,
 If cow, or calf, or sheep, or oxe swelle
 355 That any worm hath ete, or worm ystonge,
 Taak water of that welle and wassh his tonge,
 And it is hool anon; and forthermoore,
 Of pokkes and of scabbe, and every soore
 Shal every sheep be hool that of this welle
 360 Drynketh a draughte. Taak kep eek what I telle:
 If that the good-man that the beestes oweth
 Wol every wyke, er that the cok hym croweth,
 Fastynge, drynken of this welle a draughte,
 As thilke hooly Jew oure eldres taughte,
 365 His beestes and his stoor shal multiplie.
 “And, sires, also it heeleth jalousie;
 For though a man be falle in jalous rage,
 Lat maken with this water his potage,
 And nevere shal he moore his wyf mystriste,
 370 Though he the soothe of hir defaute wiste,
 Al had she taken prestes two or thre.
 “Heere is a miteyn eek, that ye may se.
 He that his hand wol putte in this mitayn,
 He shal have multipliying of his grayn,
 375 Whan he hath sowen, be it whete or otes,
 So that he offre pens; or elles grotes.
 “Goode men and wommen, o thyng warne I yow:
 If any wight be in this chirche now
 That hath doon synne horrible, that he
 380 Dar nat, for shame, of it yshryven be,
 Or any womman, be she yong or old,
 That hath ymaked hir housbonde cokewold,

to spice up my preaching and to stir them to devotion. Then I show them my tall glass bottles, stuffed tight with bits of cloth and bones – every one of them believes they are relics. Then I've got, mounted in latten,⁵ a shoulder-bone which came from the sheep of a holy Jew. “Good people,” I say, “mark my words: if this bone is washed in any well, should it be that a cow, calf, sheep or ox has swollen up because it has eaten some stomach worm, or been stung by a snake, take water from that well and wash its tongue, and it's cured at once. Moreover, every sheep that has eruptive spots, or mange, or any sort of skin-disease, that has drunk from this well will be cured. Pay attention to what I tell you: if the good man who owns the animals will, each week, before cockcrow, having fasted, have a drink from this well, his animals and stock will increase, just as the holy Jew taught our predecessors.

“And, gentlemen, it also cures suspiciousness, because, even if a man is madly jealous, just make his soup with this water in it, and he won't mistrust his wife again, even if he is aware of her infidelity, and even if she's had intercourse with two or three priests.

“Here, too, is a glove, as you see. He who puts his hand in this glove will have increase of his grain when he sows, be it wheat or oats, so long as he donates pennies or fourpenny pieces [at the collection].

“Good men and women, I warn you about one matter: if there is anyone now in this church who has committed a sin so terrible that he doesn't dare confess it for shame, or if any woman, young or old, has cuckolded her husband, [. . .]

5. *latoun* [350]: an alloy of copper, tin, and other metals.

Swich folk shal have no power ne no grace
 To offren to my relikes in this place.
 385 And whoso fyndeth hym out of swich blame,
 He wol come up and offre a Goddes name,
 And I assoille him by the auctoritee
 Which that by bulle ygraunted was to me."

390 'By this gaude have I wonne, yeer by yeer,
 An hundred mark sith I was pardoner.
 I stonde lyk a clerk in my pulpet,
 And whan the lewed peple is doun yset,
 I preche so as ye han herd bifoore
 And telle an hundred false japes moore.
 395 Thanne peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke,
 And est and west upon the peple I bekke,
 As dooth a dowve sittyng on a berne.
 Myne handes and my tonge goon so yerne
 That it is joye to se my bisynesse.
 400 Of avarice and of swich cursednesse
 Is al my prechyng, for to make hem free
 To yeven hir pens, and namely unto me.
 For myn entente is nat but for to wynne,
 And nothyng for correccioun of synne.
 405 I rekke nevere, whan that they been beryed,
 Though that hir soules goon a-blakeberied!
 For certes, many a predicacioun
 Comth ofte tyme of yvel entencioun;
 Som for plesance of folk and flaterye,
 410 To been avaunced by ypocrisye,
 And som for veyne glorie, and som for hate.
 For whan I dar noon oother weyes debate,
 Thanne wol I styng hym with my tonge smerte
 In prechyng, so that he shal nat asterte
 415 To been defamed falsly, if that he
 Hath trespassed to my bretheren or to me.
 For though I telle noght his propre name,
 Men shal wel knowe that it is the same,
 By signes, and by othere circumstances.
 420 Thus quyte I folk that doon us displeasances;

such people do not have the authority or grace to make an offering here to my relics. Whoever is living free from such guilt should come up and make his contribution in God's name, and I give him absolution by the authority that has been granted to me by papal document."

'By this trick, I've earned an annual £66, ever since I became a pardoner.⁶ I stand like a priest in my pulpit, and when the ignorant people are seated, I preach as I told you just now, and tell them a hundred more cunning tricks. Then I strive to stretch out my neck, and waggle my head east and west on the congregation, like a dove perched on a barn. My hands and my tongue are so busy that it is a delight to see my energy. My teaching is exclusively about greed and similar wickedness, so as to soften them up to contribute pennies, namely to me, because my intention is solely for gain, and not at all for the correction of sin. I don't care for a moment what happens when they're buried, even if their souls go blackberrying! There's no doubt about it, many a sermon is delivered with a wicked aim in mind: some to please or flatter people, so as to gain promotion through hypocrisy, some for self-advertisement, and some out of spite. So, when I don't risk disagreeing by some other means, I sting them with my biting words in my preaching, so that no one will escape being falsely slandered if he has injured me or my fellow pardoners. Thus, even if I don't say his actual name, people will know perfectly well who it is, through gestures and other details. In this way, I pay back people who harm us.

6. After the first outbreak of the Black Death (1348-51), a skilled craftsman's earnings increased from 3 to 5 pence a day, roughly £6 a year. Chaucer earned around £50 a year.

Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe
Of hoolynesse, to semen hooly and trewe.

425 'But shortly myn entente I wol devyse:
I preche of no thyng but for coveityse.
Therefore my theme is yet, and evere was,
Radix malorum est Cupiditas.

Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice
Which that I use, and that is avarice.
But though myself be gilty in that synne,
430 Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne
From avarice and soore to repente.

But that is nat my principal entente;
I preche nothyng but for coveitise.
Of this mateere it oghte ynogh suffise.

435 'Thanne telle I hem ensamples many oon
Of olde stories longe tyme agoon.
For lewed peple loven tales olde;
Swiche thynges kan they wel reporte and holde.
What, trowe ye, that whiles I may preche,
440 And wynne gold and silver for I teche,
That I wol lyve in poverte wilfully?

Nay, nay, I thoghte it nevere, trewely!
For I wol preche and begge in sondry landes;
I wol nat do no labour with myne handes,
445 Ne make baskettes and lyve therby,
By cause I wol nat beggen ydelly.

I wol noon of the apostles countrefete;
I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete,
Al were it yeven of the povereste page,
450 Or of the povereste wydwe in a village,
Al sholde hir children sterve for famyne.
Nay, I wol drynke licour of the vyne
And have a joly wenche in every toun.

But herkneth, lordynges, in conclusioun:
455 Youre likyng is that I shal telle a talle.
Now have I dronke a draughte of corny ale,
By God, I hope I shal yow telle a thyng
That shal by reson been at youre likyng:

Thus, I spit out my venom under colour of holiness, so that I
appear to be holy and honest.

'But I'll attempt to sum up my intentions: I preach exclusively
out of greed. Consequently, my text remains, and always has
been, "The Root of the Sins is Avarice". In this way, I preach
against the very vice I possess, namely avarice. But, even if I
myself am guilty of that sin, I can still make others give it up,
and painfully repent. But that's not my primary motive: I just
preach out of personal greed. That should sum up this subject.

Then I tell them a lot of stories with a moral to them – old
tales of long ago – because simple people love old stories – they
can easily remember and repeat them. Hey! Do you believe
that, so long as I can preach and gain gold and silver [coins]
through teaching, I would choose to live in poverty? No, no! I
can honestly say that I've never contemplated that. So I'll preach
and beg in various countries. I don't want manual labour, or
to weave baskets for a living, because I wouldn't want to be an
idle beggar. I don't want to imitate any of the apostles. I want
money, wool, cheese and wheat, even if they are donated by
the poorest serving boy or the poorest widow in the village,
and even if her children should die of starvation. Oh no! I shall
drink of the juice of the vine, and have a jolly mistress in every
town. And, to conclude, hear me, gentlemen. You want me to
tell a story. Now that I've drunk a measure of malt-ale, by God
I trust I shall tell you something that will, with good reason,
delight you. [...]

460 For though myself be a ful vicious man,
 A moral tale yet I yow telle kan,
 Which I am wont to preche for to wynne.
 Now hoold youre pees! My tale I wol bigynne.'

Heere bigymeth the Pardoners Tale

In Flaundes whilom was a compaignye
 Of yonge folk that haunteden folye,
 465 As riot, hasard, stywes, and tavernes,
 Where as with harpes, lutes, and gyternes,
 They daunce and pleyen at dees bothe day and nyght,
 And eten also and drynken over hir myght,
 Thurgh which they doon the devel sacrifice
 470 Withinne that develes temple in cursed wise
 By superfluytee abhomynable.
 Hir othes been so grete and so dampnable
 That it is grisly for to heere hem swere.
 Oure blissed Lordes body they totere –
 475 Hem thoughte that Jewes rente hym noght ynough –
 And ech of hem at otheres synne lough.
 And right anon thanne comen tombesteres
 Fetys and smale, and yonge frutesteres,
 Syngeres with harpes, baudes, wafereres,
 480 Whiche been the verray develes officeres
 To kyndle and blowe the fyr of lecherye,
 That is annexed unto glotonye.
 The hooly writ take I to my wisse
 That luxurie is in wyn and dronkenesse.
 485 Lo, how that dronken Looth, unkyndely,
 Lay by his doghtres two, unwityngly;
 So dronke he was, he nyste what he wroghte.
 Herodes, whoso wel the stories soghte,
 Whan he of wyn was repleet at his feeste,
 490 Right at his owene table he yaf his heeste

Though I myself am a very wicked man, I can nonetheless tell you a story with a moral to it, which I'm accustomed to use in my sermon to gain money. Now, keep quiet! I want to begin my tale.'

THE PARDONER'S TALE

Here begins the Pardoner's Tale

Once upon a time in Flanders there was a group of young people who spent all their time in foolishness, such as debauchery, betting, brothels and pubs, where with harps, lutes and guitars they danced and played dice day and night too, and they also ate and drank more than they could cope with, through which they made sacrifices to the devil in that devil's temple,⁷ in contemptible manner through their appalling over-indulgence. Their oaths were so strong and wicked that it was ghastly to hear them swearing. They ripped apart the body of our blessed Lord⁸ – it seemed that the Jews hadn't torn him sufficiently – and each of them laughed at the others' wickedness. And straight away there came women acrobats, shapely and petite, and young women selling fruit, singers to the harp, procurers for prostitutes, wafer-sellers, who are the functionaries of the devil himself, to light and blow the fire of lust, which is joined to gluttony. I take the Holy Bible to confirm that in wine and drunkenness there exists lust.

Look how, in all ignorance, the drunken Lot, against nature, slept with his two daughters. He was so drunk that he didn't realize what he was doing. If you look carefully at the story of Herod, you will see how, when he was full of wine at his feast, he gave the command at his own table [...]

7. The inn was often contrasted with the church in sermon literature: in one, God performs His miracles (restoring sight to the blind, etc.), in the other, the devil performs his contrary miracles (those who enter can see perfectly well, but, when drunk, have bleared vision, etc.) See C. Wilcockson, 'Glutton's Black Mass: *Piers Plowman*, B-text, Passus V, 296–384', *Notes & Queries*, NS Vol. 45, No. 2 (June 1998), pp. 173–6.

To sleen the Baptist John, ful giltelees.
 Senec seith a good word doutelees;
 He seith he kan no difference fynde
 Bitwix a man that is out of his mynde
 And a man which that is dronkelewe,
 But that woodnesse, yfallen in a shrewe,
 Persevereth lenger than doth dronkenesse.
 O glotonye, ful of cursednesse!

O cause first of oure confusioun!
 O original of oure dampnacioun,
 Til Crist hadde boght us with his blood agayn!
 Lo, how deere, shortly for to sayn,
 Aboght was thilke cursed vileynye!
 Corrupt was al this world for glotonye.

Adam oure fader, and his wyf also,
 Fro Paradys to labour and to wo
 Were dryven for that vice, it is no drede.
 For whil that Adam fasted, as I rede,
 He was in Paradys; and whan that he
 Eet of the fruyt deffended on the tree,
 Anon he was out cast to wo and peyne.
 O glotonye, on thee wel oghte us pleyne!
 O, wiste a man how manye maladyes
 Folwen of excesse and of glotonyes,
 He wolde been the moore mesurable
 Of his diete, sittyng at his table.
 Allas, the shorte throte, the tendre mouth,
 Maketh that est and west and north and south,
 In erthe, in air, in water, men to swynke
 To gete a glotoun deyntee mete and drynke!
 Of this matiere, O Paul, wel kanstow trete:
 'Mete unto wombe, and wombe eek unto mete,
 Shal God destroyen bothe,' as Paulus seith.
 Allas, a foul thyng is it, by my feith,
 To seye this word, and fouler is the dede,
 Whan man so drynketh of the white and rede
 That of his throte he maketh his pryvee
 Thurgh thilke cursed superfluitee.

for the slaying of the quite innocent John the Baptist.

Seneca certainly made an excellent observation. He said he could find no difference between a man who is insane and a man who is drunk, except that insanity in some wretch lasts longer than drunkenness. O gluttony, full of evil! O first cause of our ruin! O origin of our damnation, till Christ redeemed us with his blood! To put it succinctly: see how dearly that accursed sin was paid for. The whole world was corrupted because of gluttony.

Adam our father, and his wife too, were driven from Paradise to labour and to misery, specifically because of that vice. For, so I read, whilst Adam abstained from the food he remained in Paradise, and when he ate some of the forbidden fruit from the tree he was instantly banished to a life of grief and misery. O Gluttony, well should we lament you! Oh, if a man were to realize how many types of sickness result from excesses and from gluttony, he would be more moderate in the amount he eats when he sits at the dinner-table. Alas, the brief [pleasure of the] throat, the delicate mouth, forces people to work east, west, north and south, in earth and in water, in order to obtain refined food and drink for a glutton. St Paul [the Apostle], you express this matter well: 'Food for the belly, and the belly for food; God shall destroy both.' So says Paul. Alas, on my word of honour, it is a disgusting thing to talk about, and even more disgusting is the deed itself, when a man drinks so much of white and red wine that he makes a lavatory of his throat through that shameful overindulgence.

8. Swearing by parts of Christ's body was thought to revisit the pains of crucifixion on Him.

530 The apostel wepyng seith ful pitously,
 'Ther walken manye of whiche yow toold have I—
 I seye it now wepyng, with pitous voys —
 They been enemys of Cristes croys,
 Of whiche the ende is deeth; wombe is hir god!⁹
 O wombe! O bely! O stynkyng cod,
 535 Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun!
 At either ende of thee foul is the soun.
 How greet labour and cost is thee to fynde!
 This cookes, how they stampe, and streyne, and
 grynde,
 And turnen substaunce into accident
 540 To fulfille al thy likerous talent!
 Out of the harde bones knocke they
 The mary, for they caste noght away
 That may go thurgh the golet softe and swoote.
 Of spicerie of leef, and bark, and roote
 545 Shal been his sauce ymaked by delit,
 To make hym yet a newer appetit.
 But, certes, he that haunteth swiche delices
 Is deed, whil that he lyveth in tho vices.
 A lecherous thyng is wyn, and dronkenesse
 550 Is ful of stryvyng and of wrecchednesse.
 O dronke man, disfigured is thy face,
 Sour is thy breeth, foul artow to embrace,
 And thurgh thy dronke nose semeth the soun
 As though thou seydest ay 'Sampsoun, Sampsoun!⁹
 555 And yet, God woot, Sampsoun drank nevere no wyn.
 Thou fallest as it were a styked swyn;
 Thy tonge is lost, and al thyn honeste cure,
 For dronkenesse is verray sepulture
 Of mannes wit and his discrecioun.
 560 In whom that drynke hath dominacioun
 He kan no conseil kepe; it is no drede.
 Now kepe yow fro the white and fro the rede,
 And namely fro the white wyn of Lepe
 That is to selle in Fysshstrete or in Chepe.

The Apostle, in tears, speaks movingly: 'There walk many of you here whom I have mentioned to you — I say this weeping and with a sad voice — who are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose destiny is death. Their belly is their god!' O stomach! O belly! O stinking intestines, replete with excrement and decay! From both ends of you is emitted a disgusting noise. What massive work and expense it is to maintain you! How strenuously do these cooks pound, sieve and grind, and turn raw material into something that becomes quite different,⁹ so as to satisfy your greedy desires! They knock marrow from the hard bones, for they throw nothing away that can pass softly and sweetly through the throat. Spices from leaves, bark and root must be made into his delicious sauce to stimulate fresh appetite. But, there's no question about it, he who resorts to such delicacies is dead in those sins while he lives.

Wine induces lust, and drunkenness leads to aggressiveness and misery. O drunk man, your features are disfigured, your breath is revolting, it is horrible to embrace you, and through your drunken nose emanates a noise that seems as if you are saying 'Sampson, Sampson!' Yet, God knows, Samson never drank any wine. You stumble like a stuck pig; you can't speak properly, and your whole sense of decency is lost, because drunkenness is indeed the grave of man's intellect and of his disciplined behaviour. He who is overpowered by drink cannot keep a secret, no doubt about that! Now abstain from the white and the red, notably from the white wine of Lepe which is on sale in Fishstreet and Cheapside. [. . .]

9. *substaunce into accident* [539]: an allusion to the theological dispute at the time as to whether the bread and wine at the Eucharist became in their physical makeup (accident) the body and blood of Christ, or, while remaining chemically unchanged, became in their essence (substance) the body and blood.

565 This wyn of Spaigne crepeth subtilly
 In othere wynes, growynge faste by,
 Of which ther ryseth swich fumositee
 That whan a man hath dronken draughtes thre,
 And weneth that he be at hoom in Chepe,
 570 He is in Spaigne, right at the toun of Lepe –
 Nat at the Rochele, ne at Burdeux toun –
 And thanne wol he seye 'Sampsoun, Sampsoun!'

But herkneth, lordynges, o word, I yow preye,
 That alle the sovereyn actes, dar I seye,
 575 Of victories in the Olde Testament,
 Thurgh verray God, that is omnipotent,
 Were doon in abstinence and in preyere.
 Looketh the Bible, and ther ye may it leere.

Looke, Attila, the grete conquerour,
 580 Deyde in his sleep, with shame and dishonour,
 Bledynge ay at his nose in dronkenesse.
 A capitayn sholde lyve in sobrenesse.
 And over al this, avyseth yow right wel
 What was comaunded unto Lamuel –
 585 Nat Samuel, but Lamuel, seye I;
 Redeth the Bible, and fynde it expresly
 Of wyn-veyng to hem that han justise.
 Namooore of this, for it may wel suffise.

And now that I have spoken of glotonye,
 590 Now wol I yow deffenden hasardrye.
 Hasard is verray mooder of lesynges,
 And of deceite, and cursed forswerynges,
 Blaspheme of Crist, manslaughtre, and wast also
 Of catel and of tyme; and forthermo,
 595 It is repreeve and contrarie of honour
 For to ben holde a commune hasardour.
 And ever the hyer he is of estaat,
 The moore is he yholden desolaat.
 If that a prynce useth hasardrye,
 In alle governaunce and policye
 600 He is, as by commune opinioun,
 Yholde the lasse in reputacioun.

This Spanish wine cunningly edges its way into other wines that grow near it, from which mixture such vapours arise that, when a man has drunk three measures and thinks he's at home in Cheapside, he's in Spain right in the town of Lepe – not at La Rochelle or at the town of Bordeaux. And then he'll say 'Samson, Samson!'

But, gentlemen, hear me I beg you: I guarantee all the most significant victorious events in the Old Testament were, through the true and omnipotent God, accomplished in a state of abstinence and prayer. Look in the Bible, and you can read about it.

Look how Attila, the great conqueror, died in his sleep in shame and dishonour, his nose bleeding all the time in his drunken state. A captain should live soberly. And, moreover, take due note what Lemuel¹⁰ was commanded to do – I'm not saying 'Samuel', but 'Lemuel'. Read the Bible, and you'll find it specifically talks about serving wine to those who dispense justice. That's all on this subject. Enough is enough.

And now that I have finished talking about gluttony, I would like to forbid betting. Betting is the master of lies and of deceit, of accursed breaking of promises, of blaspheming against Christ, of murder, of the loss of property, and of squandering of one's time. And, what's more, it is shameful, and destructive of one's reputation to be reckoned to be a notorious gambler. For the greater one's rank, the more shameful one is considered to be. Should a prince indulge in gambling, he is universally diminished in his reputation, in his whole governorship and policy-making.

10. Biblical king of Massa; see Proverbs 31:4.

Stilboun, that was a wys embassadour,
 Was sent to Corynthe in ful greet honour
 605 Fro Lacidomye to make hire alliaunce.
 And whan he cam, hym happede, par chaunce,
 That alle the gretteste that were of that lond,
 Pleyynge atte hasard he hem fond.
 For which, as soone as it myghte be,
 610 He stal hym hoom agayn to his contree,
 And seyde, 'Ther wol I nat lesé my name,
 Ne I wol nat take on me so greet defame,
 Yow for to allie unto none hasardours.
 Sendeth othere wise embassadours;
 615 For, by my trouthe, me were levere dye
 Than I yow sholde to hasardours allye.
 For ye, that been so glorious in honours,
 Shul nat allyen yow with hasardours
 As by my wyl, ne as by my treetee.'
 620 This wise philosophre, thus seyde hee.
 Looke eek that to the kyng Demetrius
 The kyng of Parthes, as the book seith us,
 Sente him a paire of dees of gold in scorn,
 For he hadde used hasard ther-biforn;
 625 For which he heeld his glorie or his renoun
 At no value or reputacioun.
 Lordes may fynden oother maner pley
 Honest ynough to dryve the day away.
 Now wol I speke of othes false and grete
 630 A word or two, as olde bookes trete.
 Gret sweryng is a thyng abhominable,
 And fals sweryng is yet moore reprevable.
 The heighe God forbad sweryng at al,
 Witnesse on Mathew; but in special
 635 Of sweryng seith the hooly Jeremye,
 'Thou shalt swere sooth thyne others, and nat lye,
 And swere in doom and eek in rightwisnesse';
 But ydel sweryng is a cursednesse.
 Bihooold and se that in the firste table
 640 Of heighe Goddes heestes honourable,

Stilbo,¹¹ who was a wise ambassador, was dispatched to
 Corinth with great pomp from Lacedaemon, to forge an alli-
 ance. And when he arrived, it so turned out that he found all
 the people of the highest rank in that country playing betting
 games. For that reason, he slipped away to his own country as
 soon as he could, and reported, 'I would ruin my reputation
 there, nor would I wish to be responsible for such a shameful
 act as to ally you to any gamblers. Send other wise ambassadors,
 because, upon my honour, I would prefer to die than ally you
 to gamblers. For you, who are so renowned for honour, will
 not draw up an alliance with gamblers with my blessing, or by
 an agreement of my making.' So spoke this wise philosopher.

Look, too, how, as the book recounts, the King of Parthia
 sent to King Demetrius a pair of golden dice in mockery,
 because he used to gamble in the past; and because of that he
 considered his glory and fame to be worthless and of no repute.
 Lords can find other kinds of sport as perfectly honest pastimes.

Now I wish to speak a word or two about false promises
 and swearing, as discussed in old books. Strong language is a
 disgusting thing, and oath-breaking is even more reprehensible.
 God on high forbade all swearing. Look at Matthew's Gospel.¹²
 But holy Jeremiah specifically says about swearing, 'You must
 swear upon your word truthfully, and not lie, and swear in
 judgement and in righteousness.'¹³ But false oath-taking is to
 be damned. Look and see in the first list of the honourable
 commandments of God on high,¹⁴ [. . .]

11. It is possible that Chaucer misread 'Stilbo' for 'Chilon' in John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, where the story of Demetrius (see 621 ff.) immediately follows that of Chilon.

12. Matthew 5:34.

13. Jeremiah 4:2.

14. The first three Commandments relate to man's duty to God; the remaining seven relate to man's duty to mankind.

Hou that the seconde heeste of hym is this:
 'Take nat my name in ydel or amys.'
 Lo, rather he forbedeth swich sweryng
 Than homycide or many a cursed thyng;
 645 I seye that, as by ordre, thus it stondeth;
 This knoweth, that his heestes understondeth,
 How that the seconde heeste of God is that.
 And forther over, I wol thee telle al plat
 That vengeance shal nat parten from his hous
 650 That of his othes is to outrageous.
 'By Goddes precious herte,' and 'By his nayles,'
 And 'By the blood of Crist that is in Hayles,
 Sevene is my chaunce, and thyn is cynk and treye!
 'By Goddes armes, if thou falsly pleye,
 655 This daggere shal thurghout thyn herte go!' –
 This fruyt cometh of the bicched bones two,
 Forsweryng, ire, falsnesse, homycide.
 Now, for the love of Crist, that for us dyde,
 Lete youre othes, bothe grete and smale.
 660 But, sires, now wol I telle forth my tale.
 These riotoures thre of whiche I telle,
 Longe erst er prime rong of any belle,
 Were set hem in a taverne to drynke,
 And as they sat, they herde a belle clynke
 665 Biforn a cors, was caried to his grave.
 That oon of hem gan callen to his knave:
 'Go bet,' quod he, 'and axe redily
 What cors is this that passeth heer forby;
 And looke that thou reporte his name weel.'
 670 'Sire,' quod this boy, 'it nedeth never-a-deel;
 It was me toold er ye cam heer two houres.
 He was, pardee, an old felawe of youre,
 And sodeynly he was yslayn to-nyght,
 Fordronke, as he sat on his bench upright.
 675 Ther cam a privee theef men clepeth Deeth,
 That in this contree al the peple sleeth,
 And with his spere he smoot his herte atwo,
 And wente his way withouten wordes mo.

how the second commandment is this, 'Take not my name foolishly or wrongly.' You see, He forbids such swearing ahead of murder or many a damnable matter. I tell you, such is the order [of the Ten Commandments]. Anyone who understands His commandments knows this, how that one is the second of God's commandments. And, furthermore, I tell you plainly that God's punishment will not leave the house of anyone who swears too appallingly. 'By the precious heart of God!' and 'By his nails!' and 'By the blood of Christ in Hales!¹⁵ my dicing-call is seven, and your is five and threel!' 'By God's arms, if you play falsely, this dagger will pierce your heart!' This is the fruit of the two cursed dice: breaking your promise, anger, dishonesty, murder. Now for the love of God who died for us, leave off your swearing, be it strong or mild. But, gentlemen, now I'll tell my tale.

These three rioters I'm speaking about, well before the bell was tolled for the six o'clock service in the morning, had seated themselves to drink in the inn. And while they were sitting there, they heard a bell ringing in front of a corpse which was being carried to its grave. One of them called his servant, 'Hurry up,' he said, 'and quickly enquire what corpse it is that is passing by here, and make sure you get the name right.'

'Sir,' said the servant, 'there's no need at all [for that]. I was informed two hours before you arrived. He was, in fact, an old friend of yours, and he was killed suddenly last night, absolutely drunk as he sat up on the bench. A sly thief called Death, who kills all the folk in this region, came, and with his spear he split his heart in two, and left without another word. [. . .]

15. Hales Abbey in Gloucestershire, where there was a vial of blood, said to be that of Christ.

He hath a thousand slayn this pestilence.
 680 And, maister, er ye come in his presence,
 Me thynketh that it were necessarie
 For to be war of swich an adversarie.
 Beth redy for to meete hym everemoore;
 Thus taughte me my dame; I sey namoore.
 685 'By Seinte Marie!' seyde this taverner,
 'The child seith sooth, for he hath slayn this yeer,
 Henne over a mile, withinne a greet village,
 Bothe man and womman, child, and hyne, and page;
 I trowe his habitacioun be there.
 690 To been avysed greet wysdom it were,
 Er that he didē a man a dishonour.'

'Ye, Goddes armes!' quod this riotour,
 'Is it swich peril with hym for to meete?
 I shal hym seke by wey and eek by strete,
 695 I make avow to Goddes digne bones!
 Herkneþ, felawes, we thre been al ones;
 Lat ech of us holde up his hand til oother,
 And ech of us bicomen othere's brother,
 And we wol sleen this false traytour Deeth.
 700 He shal be slayn, he that so manye sleeth,
 By Goddes dignitee, er it be nyght!'

Togidres han thise thre hir trouthes plight
 To lyve and dyen ech of hem for oother,
 As though he were his owene ybore brother.
 705 And up they stirte, al dronken in this rage,
 And forth they goon towards that village
 Of which the taverner hadde spoke biforn.
 And many a grisly ooth thanne han they sworn,
 And Cristes blessed body they torente –
 710 Deeth shal be deed, if that they may hym hente!

Whan they han goon nat fully half a mile,
 Right as they wolde han troden over a stile,
 An oold man and a povre with hem mette.
 This olde man ful mekely hem grette,
 715 And seyde thus, 'Now, lordes, God yow see!'

The proudest of thise riotoures three

This plague¹⁶ has killed a thousand people. And, master, before
 you approach him, it seems to me that one should be careful of
 such a foe. Be on the constant lookout in case you meet him.
 That's what my mother taught me; that's all I have to say.' 'By
 St Mary!' said the innkeeper, 'the boy speaks the truth, for he
 has this year killed, over a mile from here in a sizeable village,
 both man, woman, child, farm-worker and menial. I believe his
 dwelling is there. It would be very sensible to be forewarned
 before he harms someone.'

'Oh yes? By God's arms!' said this rioter; 'Is it so dangerous
 to meet him? I'll look for him along byway and highway. I
 swear on God's noble bones! Listen, lads, we three are mates;
 let each hold up his hand to the others, and become the others'
 brother, and we'll kill this false traitor Death. By God's honour,
 before it is night, he who has killed so many will be killed!'

The three of them pledged their word to one another to live
 and die each for the other, as if he were his own born brother.
 And up they jumped in this completely drunk, mad mood, and
 off they went to that village the innkeeper had mentioned
 earlier. Then they swore many a terrible oath, ripping apart the
 blessed body of Christ. Death will be dead, if they can catch
 him!

When they had gone scarcely half a mile, just as they were
 about to climb over a stile, a poor old man encountered them.
 This old man greeted them very humbly, and said, 'Now, gentle-
 men, may God watch over you.'

The proudest of these three rioters replied, [. . .]

16. See *General Prologue*, n. 15.

Answerde agayn, 'What, carl, with sory grace!
Why artow al forwrapped save thy face?
Why lyvestow so longe in so greet age?'

720 This olde man gan looke in his visage,
And seyde thus: 'For I ne kan nat fynde
A man, though that I walked into Ynde,
Neither in citee ne in no village,
That wolde chaunge his youthe for myn age;
725 And therefore moot I han myn age stille,
As longe tyme as it is Goddes wille.
Ne Deeth, allas, ne wol nat han my lyf.
Thus walke I, lyk a resteles kaityf,
And on the ground, which is my moodres gate,
730 I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late,
And seye "Leeve mooder, leet me in!
Lo how I varysshe, flessh, and blood, and skyn!
Allas, whan shul my bones been at reste?
Mooder, with yow wolde I chaunge my cheste
735 That in my chambre longe tyme hath be,
Ye, for an heyre clowt to wrappe me!"
But yet to me she wol nat do that grace,
For which ful pale and welked is my face.

'But, sires, to yow it is no curteisye
740 To speken to an old man vileynye,
But he trespasse in word or elles in dede.
In Hooly Writ ye may yourself wel rede:
"Agayns an oold man, hoor upon his heed,
Ye sholde arise;" wherfore I yeve yow reed,
745 Ne dooth unto an oold man noon harm now,
Namooore than that ye wolde men did to yow
In age, if that ye so longe abyde.
And God be with yow, where ye go or ryde!
I moot go thider as I have to go.'

750 'Nay, olde cherl, by God, thou shalt nat so,
Seyde this oother hasardour anon;
'Thou partest nat so lightly, by Seint John!
Thou spak right now of thilke traytour Deeth.
That in this contree alle oure freendes sleeth.

'What, you wretch, curse you! Why are you all wrapped up
apart from your face? Why are you living so long, to such great
age?'

The old man looked into his face, and said thus, 'Because I
can't find anyone, even if I walked from here to India, in city
or in village, who wants to exchange his youth for my age.
Consequently, I have to retain my age still for as long as God
wills. Nor will Death, alas, take my life. So I walk like a restless
wretch, and on the ground, which is the gateway to my mother,
I knock with my stick, morning and night, and say, "Dear
mother, let me in! See how I shrink away, flesh, blood and skin!
Alas, when shall my bones be, at rest? Mother, I would willingly
exchange with you the treasure-chest, which has long been in
my room, just for a haircloth to wrap round myself." But she
will not do that kind act for me; consequently my face is so
pale and withered.

'But, gentlemen, it is discourteous to speak churlishly to an
old man, unless he harms you in word or deed. You yourselves
may truly read in the Holy Bible, "At the arrival of an old,
white-headed man you should stand up."¹⁷ So I give you this
advice: don't hurt an old man now, any more than you would
like it done to you when you are old, if you live so long. And
may God be with you, wherever you may be.¹⁸ I must go where
I must go.'

'No, you old wretch, by God you won't!' said another of
these gamblers straight away. 'You don't get away so easily, by
St John! Just now, you spoke about that traitor Death, who
kills all our friends in this district. [. . .]

17. Leviticus 19:32.

18. *where ye go or ryde* [748]: literally, 'wherever you go or ride', a tag
meaning 'wherever you may be'.

755 Have heer my trouthe, as thou art his espye,
 Telle where he is or thou shalt it abyde,
 By God and by the hooly sacrament!
 For soothly thou art oon of his assent
 To sleen us yonge folk, thou false thief!

760 'Now, sires,' quod he, 'if that yow be so leef
 To fynde Deeth, turne up this croked wey,
 For in that grove I lasfe hym, by my fey,
 Under a tree, and there he wole abyde;
 Noght for youre boost he wole him no thyng hyde.

765 Se ye that ook? Right there ye shal hym fynde.
 God save yow, that boghte agayn mankynde,
 And yow amende!' Thus seyde this olde man;
 And everich of these riotoures ran
 Til he cam to that tree, and ther they founde

770 Of floryns fyne of gold ycoyned rounde
 Wel ny an eighte busshels, as hem thoughte.
 No lenger thanne after Deeth they soughte,
 But ech of hem so glad was of that sighte,
 For that the floryns been so faire and brighte,

775 That down they sette hem by this precious hoord.
 The worste of hem, he spak the firste word.
 'Bretheren,' quod he, 'taak kep what that I seye;
 My wit is greet, though that I bourde and pleye.
 This tresor hath Fortune unto us yiven

780 In myrthe and joliftee oure lyf to lyven,
 And lightly as it comth, so wol we spende.
 Ey, Goddes precious dignitee! Who wende
 To-day that we sholde han so fair a grace?
 But myghte this gold be caried fro this place

785 Hoom to myn hous, or elles unto youres –
 For wel ye woot that al this gold is oures –
 Thanne were we in heigh felicitee.
 But trewely, by daye it may nat bee.
 Men wolde seyn that we were theves stronge,
 And for oure owene tresor doon us honge.

790 This tresor moste ycaried be by nyghte
 As wisely and as slyly as it myghte.

It's my belief you're his spy. You tell me where he is or you'll pay for it, by God and by the Holy Sacrament! You've clearly ganged up with him to kill us young people, you lying thief!

'Now, gentlemen,' he said, 'if you are so keen to find Death, turn up this twisting path, because, on my word of honour, I left him in that little woodland, under a tree. He'll stay there; he won't hide away on account of your boast. Do you see that oak-tree? You'll find him just there. God, who redeemed mankind, save you and reform you!' So spoke this old man, and each of the rioters ran till he came to that tree, and there they found what appeared to them to be almost eight bushels of fine gold circular minted florins.¹⁹ They didn't look for Death any more then, but each of them was so happy at that sight, because the florins were so beautiful and shining, that they sat themselves down by this precious hoard. The wickedest of them spoke the first word.

'Brothers,' he said, 'listen carefully to what I'm saying; I'm very smart, even if I joke and lark around. Fortune has given us this treasure so that we can live our lives in fun and amusement, and what's come easily, we'll spend easily. Oh, by God's precious worthiness, who would believe that today we'd have such a lovely blessing? But, if only this gold could be transported from here, back to my house, or else to yours – because you know full well that all this gold is ours – then we'd be very happy. But, to be honest, that can't be done by daylight. People would say we're tough thieves and have us hanged because of our own treasure. The treasure has to be transported at night, as discreetly and cunningly as possible. [...]

19. A bushel is a measure of capacity for grain, fruit, etc., equivalent to 8 gallons. A florin as an English coin was worth one third of a pound. For its relative value, see n. 6, above.

Wherefore I rede that cut among us alle
 Be drawe, and lat se wher the cut wol falle;
 795 And he that hath the cut with herte blithe
 Shal renne to the town, and that ful swithe,
 And brynge us breed and wyn ful prively.
 And two of us shul kepen subtilly
 This tresor wël; and if he wol nat tarie,
 800 Whan it is nyght, we wol this tresor carie,
 By oon assent, where as us thynketh best.
 That oon of hem the cut broghte in his fest,
 And bad hem drawe and looke where it wol falle;
 And it fil on the yongeste of hem alle,
 805 And forth toward the toun he wente anon.
 And also soone as that he was gon,
 That oon of hem spak thus unto that oother:
 'Thow knowest wel thou art my sworn brother;
 Thy profit wol I telle thee anon.
 810 Thou woost wel that oure felawe is agon.
 And heere is gold, and that ful greet plentee,
 That shal departed been among us thre.
 But nathelees, if I kan shape it so
 That it departed were among us two,
 815 Hadde I nat doon a freendes torn to thee?'
 That oother answerde, 'I noot hou that may be.
 He woot that the gold is with us tweye;
 What shal we doon? What shal we to hym seye?'
 'Shal it be conseil?' seyde the firste shrewe,
 820 'And I shal tellen in a wordes fewe
 What we shal doon, and brynge it wël aboute.'
 'I graunte,' quod that oother, 'out of doute,
 That, by my trouthe, I wol thee nat biwreye.'
 'Now,' quod the firste, 'thou woost wel we be tweye,
 825 And two of us shul strengre be than oon.
 Looke whan that he is set, that right anon
 Arys as though thou woldest with hym pleye,
 And I shal ryve hym thurgh the sydes tweye
 Whil that thou strogelest with hym as in game,
 830 And with thy daggere looke thou do the same;

So I suggest that we draw straws between us, and let's see
 who gets the short straw. Whoever draws the short straw will
 cheerfully run to the town, as fast as possible, and, without
 giving the game away, fetch us bread and wine. Two of us must
 maintain a careful watch over the treasure, and, provided he
 hurries up, we'll carry this treasure at nightfall wherever seems
 best by common consent.' One of them held the straws in his
 fist, and told them to choose and see where the short straw
 ended up. It fell to the youngest of them, and off he went
 straight away to the town. As soon as he had left, one of them
 spoke to the other thus: 'You know very well that you are my
 sworn brother. I'm going to tell you something for your profit.
 You see that our companion has left, and here is gold and plenty
 of it, which will be split between the three of us. However, if
 I could so fix it that it would be divided between us two,
 wouldn't I have done you a friendly turn?'

The other man replied, 'I don't see how that can be. He
 knows that we two have the gold. What shall we do? What
 shall we tell him?'

'Can you keep a secret?' said the first rogue, 'and I'll tell you
 briefly what we'll do, and successfully bring it about.'

'All right,' said the other man, 'no messing about, I give you
 my word I won't betray you.'

'Now,' said the first one, 'you know very well that there are
 two of us, and two are stronger than one. Look to it that when
 he has sat down you get up straight away as if you're larking
 around with him, and while you're wrestling as if in play, I'll
 stick a dagger through both his sides, and you see that you do
 the same with your dagger. [...]

And thanne shal al this gold departed be,
 My deere freend, bitwixen me and thee.
 Thanne may we bothe oure lustes all fulfille,
 And pleye at dees right at oure owene wille.'
 835 And thus a-corded been thise shrewes tweye
 To sleen the thridde, as ye han herd me seye.

This yongeste, which that wente to the toun,
 Ful ofte in herte he rolleth up and doun
 The beautee of thise floryns newe and brighte.
 840 'O Lord!' quod he, 'if so were that I myghte
 Have al this tresor to myself allone,
 Ther is no man that lyveth under the trone
 Of God that sholde lyve so murye as I!
 And atte laste the feend, oure enemy,
 845 Putte in his thought that he sholde poyson beye,
 With which he myghte sleen his felawes tweye;
 For-why the feend foond hym in swich lvyng
 That he hadde leve him to sorwe bryng.
 For this was outrely his fulle entente,
 850 To sleen hem bothe and nevere to repente.
 And forth he gooth, no lenger wolde he tarie,
 Into the toun, unto a pothecarie,
 And preyde hym that he hym wolde selle
 Som poyson, that he myghte his rattes quelle;
 855 And eek ther was a polcat in his hawe,
 That, as he seyde, his capouns hadde yslawe,
 And fayn he wolde wreke hym, if he myghte,
 On vermyn that destroyed hym by nyghte.

The pothecarie answerde, 'And thou shalt have
 860 A thyng that, also God my soule save,
 In al this world ther is no creature
 That eten or dronken hath of this confiture
 Noght but the montance of a corn of whete,
 That he ne shal his lif anon forlete;
 865 Ye, sterve he shal, and that in lasse while
 Than thou wolt goon a pass nat but a mile,
 This poysoun is so strong and violent.'

This cursed man hath in his hond yhent

Then all this gold will be split, my dear friend, between you and me. Then we can do whatever we wish, and play at dice as much as we want.' And so those two rogues agreed to kill the third one, in the way you've heard me describe.

The youngest, who departed to the town, frequently rolled up and down in his heart the beauty of these new, shiny florins. 'O Lord!' he said, 'if only I could have all this treasure just for myself, there's not a single person beneath the throne of God who could be as happy as me!' And, in due course, the devil, our foe, suggested to him that he could buy poison with which to kill his two friends, because the devil found him living such a life that he had permission to bring sorrow upon him, as it was his absolutely firm intention to kill them both and to have no misgivings about it ever. And on he went, without further delay, to a chemist in the town, and asked him to sell him some poison so that he could kill his rats; and, furthermore, there was a polecat in his yard which, so he said, had killed his chickens, and he'd happily take his revenge, if he could, on the vermin which came at night and ruined him.

The chemist replied; 'And you're going to get something which, so God save me, no creature that has eaten or drunk of this concoction, even if only the amount of a grain of wheat, won't instantly lose its life. Yes, it will certainly die, and in a shorter time than you could cover just one mile at walking speed, so strong and violent is this poison.'

This wicked man took into his hand [. . .]

870 This poyson in a box, and sith he ran
 Into the nexte strete unto a man,
 And borwed [of] hym large botelles thre,
 And in the two his poyson poured he;
 The thridde he kepte clene for his drynke.
 For al the nyght he shoop hym for to swynke
 875 In carynge of the gold out of that place.
 And whan this riotour, with sory grace,
 Hadde filled with wyn his grete botels thre,
 To his felawes agayn repaireth he.

What nedeth it to sermone of it moore?
 880 For right as they hadde cast his deeth bifoore,
 Right so they han hym slayn, and that anon.
 And whan that this was doon, thus spak that oon:
 'Now lat us sitte and drynke, and make us merie,
 And afterward we wol his body berie.'
 885 And with that word it happed hym, par cas,
 To take the botel ther the poyson was,
 And drank, and yaf his felawe drynke also,
 For which anon they storven bothe two.

But certes, I suppose that Avycen
 890 Wroot nevere in no canon, ne in no fen,
 Mo wonder signes of empoisonyng
 Than hadde these wrecches two, er hir endyng.
 Thus ended been these homycides two,
 And eek the false empoisonere also.

895 O cursed synne of alle cursednesse!
 O traytours homycide, O wikkednesse!
 O glotonye, luxurie, and hasardrye!
 Thou blasphemour of Crist with vileynye
 And othes grete, of usage and of pride!
 900 Allas, mankynde, how may it bitide
 That to thy creatour, which that the wroghte
 And with his precious herte-blood thee boghte,
 Thou art so fals and so unkynde, allas?

Now, goode men, God foryeve yow youre trespas,
 905 And ware yow fro the synne of avarice!
 Myn hooly pardoun may yow alle warice,

the poison in a box, and afterwards he ran to a man in the next street, and borrowed three large bottles from him. Into two of them he poured his poison. The third he left pure for his own drink. He planned to work for the whole night carrying the gold from there. And when this accursed rioter had filled the three bottles with wine, he went back to his companions.

What's the point of making a long sermon about it, because, just as they had planned his death before, it was exactly how they killed him, without the slightest hesitation? And when this was accomplished, one of them said, 'Now let's sit and drink and celebrate, and afterwards we'll bury his body.' And as he spoke, it so turned out that he took the bottle that had poison in it, and he offered his companion some drink, too. Thus the two of them died immediately.

But, indeed, I imagine that Avicenna²⁰ didn't write in any set of principles or section in his book more terrible manifestations of poisoning than these two suffered before they died. So died the two murderers, and the wicked poisoner too.

O cursed sin of all that can be cursed! O treacherous murderer! O wickedness! O gluttony, lust and gambling! You, blasphemer of Christ, with your shameful behaviour, and habitual, appalling swearing and your pride! Alas, mankind, how can it be that you are, alas, so false and unnatural to your creator who formed you and redeemed you with the precious blood of his heart?

Now, good people, God forgive you your sins, and beware of the sin of greed! My holy pardon can save you all, [. . .]

20. An eleventh-century Arabic, medical authority, who, in one section of his work, discusses poisons. See *General Prologue*, 432.

So that ye offre nobles or sterlynges,
 Or elles silver broches, spoones, rynges.
 Boweth youre heed under this hooly bulle!
 910 Cometh up, ye wyves, offreth of youre wolle!
 Youre names I entre heer in my rolle anon;
 Into the blisse of hevene shul ye gon.
 I yow assoille, by myn heigh power,
 Yow that wol offre, as clene and eek as cleer
 915 As ye were born. – And lo, sires, thus I preche.
 And Jhesu Crist, that is oure soules leche,
 So graunte yow his pardoun to receyve,
 For that is best; I wol yow nat deceyve.

‘But, sires, o word forgat I in my tale:
 920 I have relikes and pardoun in my male,
 As faire as any man in Engelond,
 Whiche were me yeven by the popes hond.
 If any of yow wole, of devocion,
 Offren and han myn absolucion,
 925 Com forth anon, and kneleth heere adoun,
 And mekely receyveth my pardoun;
 Or elles taketh pardoun as ye wende,
 Al newe and fressh at every miles ende,
 So that ye offren, alwey newe and newe,
 930 Nobles or pens, whiche that be goode and trewe.
 It is an honour to everich that is heer
 That ye mowe have a suffisant pardoneer
 T’assoille yow in contree as ye ryde,
 For adventures whiche that may bityde.
 935 Paraventure ther may fallen oon or two
 Doun of his hors and breke his nekke atwo.
 Looke which a seuretee is it to yow alle
 That I am in youre felaweshipe yfalle,
 That may assoille yow, bothe moore and lasse,
 940 Whan that the soule shal fro the body passe.
 I rede that oure Hoost heere shal bigynne,
 For he is moost enveloped in synne.

provided that you offer nobles²¹ or pennies, or else silver brooches, spoons or rings. Bow your head beneath the holy papal-bull!²² Come up, you wives, offer some of your wool! I'll enter your names straight away in my document; you will go into the bliss of heaven. I absolve by my great authority those of you who offer, and [make you] as pure and innocent, too, as the day you were born. And thus, gentlemen, I preach. And Jesus Christ, physician to our souls, so grant you to receive his pardon, because that is the best of all, I won't deceive you.

‘But, gentlemen, I forgot one matter in my tale: I have relics and pardons in my bag, as good as has any man in England, which were presented to me by the pope's own hand. If, out of a sense of devotion, any of you would like to offer and receive my absolution, come forward at once and kneel down here and humbly receive my pardon; or, alternatively, as you're travelling along, after you've covered each mile, get the pardon, nice and new and fresh, so long as you each time offer valid, genuine nobles or pence. It's an honour to everyone here to have such a competent pardoner to absolve you as you ride along in the countryside, in case of accidents that might occur. Conceivably, one or two could fall from a horse and break their necks in two. See what an insurance it is for all of you that I've joined your company – I who can absolve any of you when the soul passes from the body. I recommend that our Host should begin, because he's the most covered in sin. [. . .]

21. A noble was worth 6 shillings and 8 pence, i.e., a third of a pound. There were 12 pennies in 1 shilling, and 20 shillings in a pound.

22. A document signed by the pope.

Com forth, sire Hoost, and offre first anon,
And thou shalt kisse the relikes everychon,
945 Ye, for a grote! Unbokele anon thy purs.'

'Nay, nay!' quod he, 'thanne have I Cristes curs!
Lat be,' quod he, 'it shal nat be, so theeche!
Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech,
And swere it were a relyk of a seint,
950 Though it were with thy fundement depeint!
But, by the croys which that Seint Eleyne fond,
I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond
In stide of relikes or of seintuarie.

Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;
955 They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!'

This Pardoner answerde nat a word;
So wrooth he was, no word ne wolde he seye.

'Now,' quod oure Hoost, 'I wol no lenger pleye
960 With thee, ne with noon oother angry man.'

But right anon the worthy Knyght bigan,
Whan that he saugh that al the peple lough,
'Namooore of this, for it is right ynough!
Sire Pardoner, be glad and myrie of cheere;
And ye, sire Hoost, that been to me so deere,
965 I prey yow that ye kisse the Pardoner.

And Pardoner, I prey thee, drawe thee neer,
And, as we diden, lat us laughe and pleye.'
Anon they kiste, and ryden forth hir weye.

Heere is ended the Pardoners Tale

Come out straight away, sir Host, and offer first, and you must
kiss each of the relics, yes, for a four-penny piece. Open you
purse, now!'

'Oh no,' he said, 'then I would have the condemnation of
Christ! Forget it,' he said, 'that's certainly²³ not going to be
done! You'd have me kiss your old underpants and swear they
were the relic of a saint, even if they were stained with your
bottom! But, by the cross St Helen found,²⁴ I wish I had your
testicles in my hand, instead of relics or a box for them, I'd cut
them off and help you cart them around; they could be
enshrined in a lump of hog's shit!'

This Pardoner didn't answer a word; he was so angry that he
wouldn't speak a syllable.

'Now,' said our Host, 'I'm not going to amuse myself with
you or anyone else who has lost his temper.' But the worthy
Knight immediately said, as soon as he saw everyone laughing,
'No more! That's quite enough now! Pardoner, sir, cheer up.
And you, sir, my very dear Host, I beg you, kiss the Pardoner;
and you, Pardoner, I ask you; come back close, and, as we
were, let's laugh and be merry.' Straight away, they kissed and
rode on.

Here ends the Pardoner's Tale

23. *so theeche* [947, an elision of *so thee ich*]: literally, 'so may I thrive', a common tag for 'certainly'.

24. Helena (246-328) was the mother of Constantine I, and was reputed to have found a relic of the cross on which Christ was crucified.