HAVEPOETRY.COM

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

THE REEVE'S TALE

THE PROLOGUE.

WHEN folk had laughed all at this nice case
Of Absolon and Hendy Nicholas,
Diverse folk diversely they said,
But for the more part they laugh'd and play'd;* *were diverted
And at this tale I saw no man him grieve,
But it were only Osewold the Reeve.
Because he was of carpenteres craft,
A little ire is in his hearte laft*; *left
He gan to grudge* and blamed it a lite.** *murmur **little.
"So the* I," quoth he, "full well could I him quite** *thrive **match
With blearing* of a proude miller's eye, *dimming <1>
If that me list to speak of ribaldry.
But I am old; me list not play for age; <2>
Grass time is done, my fodder is now forage.
This white top* writeth mine olde years; *head
Mine heart is also moulded* as mine hairs; *grown mouldy
And I do fare as doth an open-erse*; *medlar <3>
That ilke* fruit is ever longer werse, *same
Till it be rotten *in mullok or in stre*. *on the ground or in straw*
We olde men, I dread, so fare we;
Till we be rotten, can we not be ripe;
We hop* away, while that the world will pipe; *dance
For in our will there sticketh aye a nail,
To have an hoary head and a green tail,
As hath a leek; for though our might be gone,
Our will desireth folly ever-in-one*: *continually
For when we may not do, then will we speak,
Yet in our ashes cold does fire reek.* *smoke<4>
Four gledes* have we, which I shall devise**, *coals ** describe
Vaunting, and lying, anger, covetise*. *covetousness
These foure sparks belongen unto eld.
Our olde limbes well may be unweld*, *unwieldy
But will shall never fail us, that is sooth.
And yet have I alway a coltes tooth,<5>
As many a year as it is passed and gone
Since that my tap of life began to run;
For sickerly*, when I was born, anon *certainly

Death drew the tap of life, and let it gon:
And ever since hath so the tap y-run,
Till that almost all empty is the tun.
The stream of life now droppeth on the chimb.<6>
The silly tongue well may ring and chime
Of wretchedness, that passed is full yore*: *long
With olde folk, save dotage, is no more. <7>
When that our Host had heard this sermoning,
He gan to speak as lordly as a king,
And said; "To what amounteth all this wit?
What? shall we speak all day of holy writ?
The devil made a Reeve for to preach,
As of a souter* a shipman, or a leach**. *cobbler <8>
Say forth thy tale, and tarry not the time: **surgeon <9>
Lo here is Deptford, and 'tis half past prime:<10>
Lo Greenwich, where many a shrew is in.
It were high time thy tale to begin."
"Now, sirs," quoth then this Osewold the Reeve,
I pray you all that none of you do grieve,
Though I answer, and somewhat set his hove*, *hood <11>
For lawful is *force off with force to shove.* *to repel force
This drunken miller hath y-told us here by force*
How that beguiled was a carpentere,
Paraventure* in scorn, for I am one: *perhaps
And, by your leave, I shall him quite anon.
Right in his churlish termes will I speak,
I pray to God his necke might to-break.
He can well in mine eye see a stalk,
But in his own he cannot see a balk."<12>
Notes to the Prologue to the Reeves Tale.
1. "With blearing of a proude miller's eye": dimming his eye; playing off a joke on him.
2. "Me list not play for age": age takes away my zest for drollery.
3. The medlar, the fruit of the mespilus tree, is only edible when rotten.
4. Yet in our ashes cold does fire reek: "ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires."
5. A colt's tooth; a wanton humour, a relish for pleasure.
6. Chimb: The rim of a barrel where the staves project beyond the head.
7. With olde folk, save dotage, is no more: Dotage is all that is left them; that is, they can only dwell fondly, dote, on the past.
8. Souter: cobbler; Scottice, "sutor;"' from Latin, "suere," to sew.
9. "Ex sutore medicus" (a surgeon from a cobbler) and "ex sutore nauclerus" (a seaman or pilot from a cobbler) were both proverbial expressions in the Middle Ages.
10. Half past prime: half-way between prime and tierce; about half-past seven in the morning.
11. Set his hove; like "set their caps;" as in the description of the Manciple in the

Prologue, who "set their aller cap". "Hove" or "houfe," means "hood;" and the phrase signifies to be even with, outwit.
12. The illustration of the mote and the beam, from Matthew.
THE TALE.<1>
At Trompington, not far from Cantebrig,* *Cambridge
There goes a brook, and over that a brig,
Upon the whiche brook there stands a mill:
And this is *very sooth* that I you tell. *complete truth*
A miller was there dwelling many a day,
As any peacock he was proud and gay:
Pipen he could, and fish, and nettes bete*, *prepare
And turne cups, and wrestle well, and shete*. *shoot
Aye by his belt he bare a long pavade*, *poniard
And of his sword full trenchant was the blade.
A jolly popper* bare he in his pouch; *dagger
There was no man for peril durst him touch.
A Sheffield whittle* bare he in his hose. *small knife
Round was his face, and camuse* was his nose. *flat <2>
As pilled* as an ape's was his skull. *peeled, bald.
He was a market-beter* at the full. *brawler
There durste no wight hand upon him legge*, *lay
That he ne swore anon he should abegge*. *suffer the penalty
A thief he was, for sooth, of corn and meal,
And that a sly, and used well to steal.
His name was *hoten deinous Simekin* *called "Disdainful Simkin"*
A wife he hadde, come of noble kin:
The parson of the town her father was.
With her he gave full many a pan of brass,
For that Simkin should in his blood ally.
She was y-foster'd in a nunnery:
For Simkin woulde no wife, as he said,
But she were well y-nourish'd, and a maid,
To saven his estate and yeomanry:
And she was proud, and pert as is a pie*. *magpie
A full fair sight it was to see them two;
On holy days before her would he go
With his tippet* y-bound about his head; *hood
And she came after in a gite* of red, *gown <3>
And Simkin hadde hosen of the same.
There durste no wight call her aught but Dame:
None was so hardy, walking by that way,
That with her either durste *rage or play*, *use freedom*
But if he would be slain by Simekin *unless
With pavade, or with knife, or bodekin.

For jealous folk be per'lous evermo':
Algate* they would their wives *wende so*. *unless *so behave*
And eke for she was somewhat smutterlich*, *dirty
She was as dign* as water in a ditch, *nasty
And all so full of hoker*, and bismare**. *ill-nature **abusive speech
Her thoughte that a lady should her spare*, *not judge her hardly
What for her kindred, and her nortelrie* *nurturing, education
That she had learned in the nunnery.
One daughter hadde they betwixt them two
Of twenty year, withouten any mo,
Saving a child that was of half year age,
In cradle it lay, and was a proper page.* *boy
This wenche thick and well y-growen was,
With camuse* nose, and eyen gray as glass; *flat
With buttocks broad, and breastes round and high;
But right fair was her hair, I will not lie.
The parson of the town, for she was fair,
In purpose was to make of her his heir
Both of his chattels and his messuage,
And *strange he made it* of her marriage. *he made it a matter
His purpose was for to bestow her high of difficulty*
Into some worthy blood of ancestry.
For holy Church's good may be dispended* *spent
On holy Church's blood that is descended.
Therefore he would his holy blood honour
Though that he holy Churche should devour.
Great soken* hath this miller, out of doubt, *toll taken for grinding
With wheat and malt, of all the land about;
And namely* there was a great college *especially
Men call the Soler Hall at Cantebrege,<4>
There was their wheat and eke their malt y-ground.
And on a day it happed in a stound*, *suddenly
Sick lay the manciple* of a malady, *steward <5>
Men *weened wisly* that he shoulde die. *thought certainly*
For which this miller stole both meal and corn
An hundred times more than beforn.
For theretofore he stole but courteously,
But now he was a thief outrageously.
For which the warden chid and made fare*, *fuss
But thereof *set the miller not a tare*; *he cared not a rush*
He *crack'd his boast,* and swore it was not so. *talked big*
Then were there younge poore scholars two,
That dwelled in the hall of which I say;
Testif* they were, and lusty for to play; *headstrong <6>

And only for their mirth and revelry
Upon the warden busily they cry,
To give them leave for but a *little stound*, *short time*
To go to mill, and see their corn y-ground:
And hardily* they durste lay their neck, *boldly
The miller should not steal them half a peck
Of corn by sleight, nor them by force bereave* *take away
And at the last the warden give them leave:
John hight the one, and Alein hight the other,
Of one town were they born, that highte Strother,<7>
Far in the North, I cannot tell you where.
This Alein he made ready all his gear,
And on a horse the sack he cast anon:
Forth went Alein the clerk, and also John,
With good sword and with buckler by their side.
John knew the way, him needed not no guide,
And at the mill the sack adown he lay'th.
Alein spake first; "All hail, Simon, in faith,
How fares thy faire daughter, and thy wife."
"Alein, welcome," quoth Simkin, "by my life,
And John also: how now, what do ye here?"
"By God, Simon," quoth John, "need has no peer*. *equal
Him serve himself behoves that has no swain*, *servant
Or else he is a fool, as clerkes sayn.
Our manciple I hope* he will be dead, *expect
So workes aye the wanges* in his head: *cheek-teeth <8>
And therefore is I come, and eke Alein,
To grind our corn and carry it home again:
I pray you speed us hence as well ye may."
"It shall be done," quoth Simkin, "by my fay.
What will ye do while that it is in hand?"
"By God, right by the hopper will I stand,"
Quoth John, "and see how that the corn goes in.
Yet saw I never, by my father's kin,
How that the hopper wagges to and fro."
Alein answered, "John, and wilt thou so?
Then will I be beneathe, by my crown,
And see how that the meale falls adown
Into the trough, that shall be my disport*: *amusement
For, John, in faith I may be of your sort;
I is as ill a miller as is ye."
This miller smiled at their nicety*, *simplicity
And thought, "All this is done but for a wile.
They weenen* that no man may them beguile, *think

But by my thrift yet shall I blear their eye,<9>
For all the sleight in their philosophy.
The more *quainte knackes* that they make, *odd little tricks*
The more will I steal when that I take.
Instead of flour yet will I give them bren*. *bran
The greatest clerks are not the wisest men,
As whilom to the wolf thus spake the mare: <10>
Of all their art ne count I not a tare."
Out at the door he went full privily,
When that he saw his time, softely.
He looked up and down, until he found
The clerkes' horse, there as he stood y-bound
Behind the mill, under a levesell:* *arbour<11>
And to the horse he went him fair and well,
And stripped off the bridle right anon.
And when the horse was loose, he gan to gon
Toward the fen, where wilde mares run,
Forth, with "Wehee!" through thick and eke through thin.
This miller went again, no word he said,
But did his note*, and with these clerkes play'd, *business <12>
Till that their corn was fair and well y-ground.
And when the meal was sacked and y-bound,
Then John went out, and found his horse away,
And gan to cry, "Harow, and well-away!
Our horse is lost: Alein, for Godde's bones,
Step on thy feet; come off, man, all at once:
Alas! our warden has his palfrey lorn.*" *lost
This Alein all forgot, both meal and corn;
All was out of his mind his husbandry*. *careful watch over
"What, which way is he gone?" he gan to cry. the corn*
The wife came leaping inward at a renne*, *run
She said; "Alas! your horse went to the fen
With wilde mares, as fast as he could go.
Unthank* come on his hand that bound him so *ill luck, a curse
And his that better should have knit the rein."
"Alas!" quoth John, "Alein, for Christes pain
Lay down thy sword, and I shall mine also.
I is full wight*, God wate**, as is a roe. *swift **knows
By Godde's soul he shall not scape us bathe*. *both <13>
Why n' had thou put the capel* in the lathe**? *horse<14> **barn
Ill hail, Alein, by God thou is a fonne.*" *fool
These silly clerkes have full fast y-run
Toward the fen, both Alein and eke John;
And when the miller saw that they were gone,

He half a bushel of their flour did take,
And bade his wife go knead it in a cake.
He said; I trow, the clerkes were afeard,
Yet can a miller *make a clerkes beard,* *cheat a scholar* <15>
For all his art: yea, let them go their way!
Lo where they go! yea, let the children play:
They get him not so lightly, by my crown."
These silly clerkes runnen up and down
With "Keep, keep; stand, stand; jossa*, warderere. *turn
Go whistle thou, and I shall keep* him here." *catch
But shortly, till that it was very night
They coulde not, though they did all their might,
Their capel catch, he ran alway so fast:
Till in a ditch they caught him at the last.
Weary and wet, as beastes in the rain,
Comes silly John, and with him comes Alein.
"Alas," quoth John, "the day that I was born!
Now are we driv'n till hething* and till scorn. *mockery
Our corn is stol'n, men will us fonnes* call, *fools
Both the warden, and eke our fellows all,
And namely* the miller, well-away!" *especially
Thus plained John, as he went by the way
Toward the mill, and Bayard* in his hand. *the bay horse
The miller sitting by the fire he fand*. *found
For it was night, and forther* might they not, *go their way
But for the love of God they him besought
Of herberow* and ease, for their penny. *lodging
The miller said again," If there be any,
Such as it is, yet shall ye have your part.
Mine house is strait, but ye have learned art;
Ye can by arguments maken a place
A mile broad, of twenty foot of space.
Let see now if this place may suffice,
Or make it room with speech, as is your guise.*" *fashion
"Now, Simon," said this John, "by Saint Cuthberd
Aye is thou merry, and that is fair answer'd.
I have heard say, man shall take of two things,
Such as he findes, or such as he brings.
But specially I pray thee, hoste dear,
Gar <16> us have meat and drink, and make us cheer,
And we shall pay thee truly at the full:
With empty hand men may not hawkes tull*. *allure
Lo here our silver ready for to spend."
This miller to the town his daughter send

For ale and bread, and roasted them a goose,
And bound their horse, he should no more go loose:
And them in his own chamber made a bed.
With sheetes and with chalons* fair y-spread, *blankets<17>
Not from his owen bed ten foot or twelve:
His daughter had a bed all by herselve,
Right in the same chamber *by and by*: *side by side*
It might no better be, and cause why,
There was no *roomer herberow* in the place. *roomier lodging*
They suppen, and they speaken of solace,
And drinken ever strong ale at the best.
Aboute midnight went they all to rest.
Well had this miller varnished his head;
Full pale he was, fordrunken, and *nought red*. *without his wits*
He yoxed*, and he spake thorough the nose, *hiccuped
As he were in the quakke*, or in the pose**. *grunting **catarrh
To bed he went, and with him went his wife,
As any jay she light was and jolife,* *jolly
So was her jolly whistle well y-wet.
The cradle at her beddes feet was set,
To rock, and eke to give the child to suck.
And when that drunken was all in the crock* *pitcher<18>
To bedde went the daughter right anon,
To bedde went Alein, and also John.
There was no more; needed them no dwale.<19>
This miller had, so wisly* bibbed ale, *certainly
That as a horse he snorted in his sleep,
Nor of his tail behind he took no keep*. *heed
His wife bare him a burdoun*, a full strong; *bass <20>
Men might their routing* hearen a furlong. *snoring
The wenche routed eke for company.
Alein the clerk, that heard this melody,
He poked John, and saide: "Sleepest thou?
Heardest thou ever such a song ere now?
Lo what a compline<21> is y-mell* them all. *among
A wilde fire upon their bodies fall,
Who hearken'd ever such a ferly* thing? *strange <22>
Yea, they shall have the flow'r of ill ending!
This longe night there *tides me* no rest. *comes to me*
But yet no force*, all shall be for the best. *matter
For, John," said he, "as ever may I thrive,
If that I may, yon wenche will I swive*. *enjoy carnally
Some easement* has law y-shapen** us *satisfaction **provided
For, John, there is a law that sayeth thus,

That if a man in one point be aggriev'd,
That in another he shall be relievd.
Our corn is stol'n, soothly it is no nay,
And we have had an evil fit to-day.
And since I shall have none amendement
Against my loss, I will have easement:
By Godde's soul, it shall none, other be."
This John answer'd; Alein, *avise thee*: *have a care*
The miller is a perilous man," he said,
"And if that he out of his sleep abraid*, *awaked
He mighte do us both a villainy*." *mischief
Alein answer'd; "I count him not a fly.
And up he rose, and by the wench he crept.
This wenche lay upright, and fast she slept,
Till he so nigh was, ere she might espy,
That it had been too late for to cry:
And, shortly for to say, they were at one.
Now play, Alein, for I will speak of John.
This John lay still a furlong way <23> or two,
And to himself he made ruth* and woe. *wail
"Alas!" quoth he, "this is a wicked jape*; *trick
Now may I say, that I is but an ape.
Yet has my fellow somewhat for his harm;
He has the miller's daughter in his arm:
He auntred* him, and hath his needes sped, *adventured
And I lie as a draff-sack in my bed;
And when this jape is told another day,
I shall be held a daffe* or a cockenay <24> *coward
I will arise, and auntre* it, by my fay: *attempt
Unhardy is unsely, <25> as men say."
And up he rose, and softely he went
Unto the cradle, and in his hand it hent*, *took
And bare it soft unto his beddes feet.
Soon after this the wife *her routing lete*, *stopped snoring*
And gan awake, and went her out to piss
And came again and gan the cradle miss
And groped here and there, but she found none.
"Alas!" quoth she, "I had almost misgone
I had almost gone to the clerkes' bed.
Ey! Benedicite, then had I foul y-sped."
And forth she went, till she the cradle fand.
She groped alway farther with her hand
And found the bed, and *thoughte not but good* *had no suspicion*
Because that the cradle by it stood,

And wist not where she was, for it was derk;
But fair and well she crept in by the clerk,
And lay full still, and would have caught a sleep.
Within a while this John the Clerk up leap
And on this goode wife laid on full sore;
So merry a fit had she not had *full yore*. *for a long time*
He pricked hard and deep, as he were mad.
This jolly life have these two clerkes had,
Till that the thirde cock began to sing.
Alein wax'd weary in the morrowing,
For he had swonken* all the longe night, *laboured
And saide; "Farewell, Malkin, my sweet wight.
The day is come, I may no longer bide,
But evermore, where so I go or ride,
I is thine owen clerk, so have I hele.*" *health
"Now, deare leman*," quoth she, "go, fare wele: *sweetheart
But ere thou go, one thing I will thee tell.
When that thou wendest homeward by the mill,
Right at the entry of the door behind
Thou shalt a cake of half a bushel find,
That was y-maked of thine owen meal,
Which that I help'd my father for to steal.
And goode leman, God thee save and keep."
And with that word she gan almost to weep.
Alein uprose and thought, "Ere the day daw
I will go creepen in by my fellaw:"
And found the cradle with his hand anon.
"By God!" thought he, "all wrong I have misgone:
My head is *totty of my swink* to-night, *giddy from my labour*
That maketh me that I go not aright.
I wot well by the cradle I have misgo';
Here lie the miller and his wife also."
And forth he went a twenty devil way
Unto the bed, there as the miller lay.
He ween'd* t' have creeped by his fellow John, *thought
And by the miller in he crept anon,
And caught him by the neck, and gan him shake,
And said; "Thou John, thou swines-head, awake
For Christes soul, and hear a noble game!
For by that lord that called is Saint Jame,
As I have thries in this shorte night
Swived the miller's daughter bolt-upright,
While thou hast as a coward lain aghast*." *afraid
"Thou false harlot," quoth the miller, "hast?

Ah, false traitor, false clerk," quoth he,
"Thou shalt be dead, by Godde's dignity,
Who durste be so bold to disparage* *disgrace
My daughter, that is come of such lineage?"
And by the throate-ball* he caught Alein, *Adam's apple
And he him hent* dispiteously** again, *seized **angrily
And on the nose he smote him with his fist;
Down ran the bloody stream upon his breast:
And in the floor with nose and mouth all broke
They wallow, as do two pigs in a poke.
And up they go, and down again anon,
Till that the miller spurned* on a stone, *stumbled
And down he backward fell upon his wife,
That wiste nothing of this nice strife:
For she was fall'n asleep a little wight* *while
With John the clerk, that waked had all night:
And with the fall out of her sleep she braid*. *woke
"Help, holy cross of Bromeholm," <26> she said;
"In manus tuas! <27> Lord, to thee I call.
Awake, Simon, the fiend is on me fall;
Mine heart is broken; help; I am but dead:
There li'th one on my womb and on mine head.
Help, Simkin, for these false clerks do fight"
This John start up as fast as e'er he might,
And groped by the walles to and fro
To find a staff; and she start up also,
And knew the estres* better than this John, *apartment
And by the wall she took a staff anon:
And saw a little shimmering of a light,
For at an hole in shone the moone bright,
And by that light she saw them both the two,
But sickerly* she wist not who was who, *certainly
But as she saw a white thing in her eye.
And when she gan this white thing espy,
She ween'd* the clerk had wear'd a volupere**; *supposed **night-cap
And with the staff she drew aye nere* and nere*, *nearer
And ween'd to have hit this Alein at the full,
And smote the miller on the pilled* skull; *bald
That down he went, and cried," Harow! I die."
These clerkes beat him well, and let him lie,
And greithen* them, and take their horse anon, *make ready, dress
And eke their meal, and on their way they gon:
And at the mill door eke they took their cake
Of half a bushel flour, full well y-bake.

Thus is the proude miller well y-beat,
And hath y-lost the grinding of the wheat;
And payed for the supper *every deal* *every bit
Of Alein and of John, that beat him well;
His wife is swived, and his daughter als*; *also
Lo, such it is a miller to be false.
And therefore this proverb is said full sooth,
"*Him thar not winnen well* that evil do'th, *he deserves not to gain*
A guiler shall himself beguiled be:"
And God that sitteth high in majesty
Save all this Company, both great and smale.
Thus have I quit* the Miller in my tale. *made myself quits with

Notes to the Reeve's Tale

1. The incidents of this tale were much relished in the Middle Ages, and are found under various forms. Boccaccio has told them in the ninth day of his "Decameron".
2. Camuse: flat; French "camuse", snub-nosed.
3. Gite: gown or coat; French "jupe."
4. Soler Hall: the hall or college at Cambridge with the gallery or upper storey; supposed to have been Clare Hall. (Transcribers note: later commentators identify it with King's Hall, now merged with Trinity College)
5. Manciple: steward; provisioner of the hall. See also note 47 to the prologue to the Tales.
6. Testif: headstrong, wild-brained; French, "entete."
7. Strother: Tyrwhitt points to Anstruther, in Fife: Mr Wright to the Vale of Langstroth, in the West Riding of Yorkshire. Chaucer has given the scholars a dialect that may have belonged to either district, although it more immediately suggests the more northern of the two. (Transcribers note: later commentators have identified it with a now vanished village near Kirknewton in Northumberland. There was a well-known Alein of Strother in Chaucer's lifetime.)
8. Wanges: grinders, cheek-teeth; Anglo-Saxon, "Wang," the cheek; German, "Wange."
9. See note 1 to the Prologue to the Reeves Tale
10. In the "Cento Novelle Antiche," the story is told of a mule, which pretends that his name is written on the bottom of his hind foot. The wolf attempts to read it, the mule kills him with a kick in the forehead; and the fox, looking on, remarks that "every man of letters is not wise." A similar story is told in "Reynard the Fox."
11. Levesell: an arbour; Anglo-Saxon, "lefe-setl," leafy seat.
12. Noth: business; German, "Noth," necessity.
13. Bathe: both; Scottice, "baith."
14. Capel: horse; Gaelic, "capall;" French, "cheval;" Italian, "cavallo," from Latin, "caballus."
15. Make a clerkes beard: cheat a scholar; French, "faire la barbe;" and Boccaccio uses the proverb in the same sense.
16. "Gar" is Scotch for "cause;" some editions read, however, "get us some".
17. Chalons: blankets, coverlets, made at Chalons in France.

18. Crock: pitcher, cruse; Anglo-Saxon, "crocca;" German, "krug;" hence "crockery."
19. Dwale: night-shade, Solanum somniferum, given to cause sleep.
20. Burdoun: bass; "burden" of a song. It originally means the drone of a bagpipe; French, "bourdon."
21. Compline: even-song in the church service; chorus.
22. Ferly: strange. In Scotland, a "ferlie" is an unwonted or remarkable sight.
23. A furlong way: As long as it might take to walk a furlong.
24. Cockenay: a term of contempt, probably borrowed from the kitchen; a cook, in base Latin, being termed "coquinarius." compare French "coquin," rascal.
25. Unhardy is unsely: the cowardly is unlucky; "nothing venture, nothing have;" German, "unselig," unhappy.
26. Holy cross of Bromeholm: A common adjuration at that time; the cross or rood of the priory of Bromholm, in Norfolk, was said to contain part of the real cross and therefore held in high esteem.
27. In manus tuas: Latin, "in your hands".