

The Reeve's Tale

by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, 1892-1973

Published: 1939

Version Prepared for Recitation at the »Summer Diversions«



[**Editors' note:** In August 1938, Tolkien took part in the Oxford »Summer Diversions« organized by John Masefield and Nevill Coghill. He impersonated Chaucer and recited, from memory, »The Nun's Priest's Tale«. In the following year, on 28 July 1939, Tolkien returned with a similar performance of a slightly abridged version of »The Reeve's Tale«. For this occasion a pamphlet was issued, containing Tolkien's prefatory remarks and his version of »The Reeve's Tale«. Although prepared for a general audience, it nevertheless was compiled with Tolkien's usual care and skill, and *Tolkien Studies* is pleased to reprint the text of this rare pamphlet as a companion to his scholarly essay on the same subject. Tolkien later noted that "The recitation [in] 1939 of Reeve's Tale was swamped by war and though successful was not noticed."]]

Among Chaucer's pilgrims was a reeve, Oswold of Baldeswell in Norfolk. The miller had told a story to the discredit of an Osney carpenter and Oxford clerks, and Oswold, who practised the craft of carpentry, was offended. In this tale he

has his revenge, matching the miller's story with one to the discredit of a Trumpington miller and clerks of Cambridge.

The story is comic enough even out of this setting, but it fits the supposed narrator unusually well. Nonetheless, 'broad' as it is, it probably fits the actual author, Chaucer himself, well enough to justify the representation of him as telling it in person. Apart from its merits as a comic tale of 'lewed folk,' this piece has a special interest. Chaucer seems to have taken unusual pains with it. He gave new life to the *fabliau*, the plot of which he borrowed, with the English local colour that he devised; and he introduced the new joke of comic dialect. This does not seem to have been attempted in English literature before Chaucer, and has seldom been more successful since.

Even in the usual printed texts of Chaucer the northern dialectal character of the speeches of Alain and John is plain. But a comparison of various manuscripts seems to show that actually Chaucer himself went further: the clerks' talk, as he wrote it, was probably very nearly correct and pure northern dialect, derived (as usual with Chaucer) from books as well as from observation. A remarkable feat at the time. But Chaucer was evidently interested in such things, and had given considerable thought to the linguistic situation in his day. It may be observed that he presents us with an *East-Anglian* reeve, who is amusing *southern*, and largely London, folk with imitations of *northern* speech brought southward by the attraction of the *universities*. This is a picture in little of the origins of literary and London English. East-Anglia played an important part in transmitting to the capital northerly features of language—such as *ill*, *their* and the inflexion in *brings*, which are in this tale used as dialectalisms, but have since become familiar. The East-Anglian reeve is a symbol of this process, and at the same time in real contemporary life a not unlikely person to have negotiated the dialect in such a tale. The whole thing is very ingenious.

The dialect is, of course, meant primarily to be funny. Chaucer relied for his principal effect on the long *ā*, preserved in the north in many words where the south had changed to *ō*: as in *haam*, *bānes*, *naa*, for 'home, bones, no.' But in these short speeches there are many minor points of form and vocabulary which are finer than was necessary for the easy laugh, and show that Chaucer had a personal interest in linguistic detail. For instance: the phrase *dreven til hething* is typically northern in the form *dreven* for *driven*; in the use of *driven* for *put* in this expression; in the substitution of *til* for *to*; and in the use of the Scandinavian word *hething*, 'mockery.' Other marked dialectalisms are *slik* 'such,' *imell* 'among,' *bōs* 'behoves.' Chaucer makes the Reeve disclaim any accurate knowledge of the locality—it is *fer in the north*, *I can nat telle where*. But Chaucer himself seems to have been less vague: he was thinking of the northernmost parts of England, now Northumberland and Durham. Strother is a genuine village name in that region. The clerk John swears by Saint Cuthbert, just as the Osney carpenter swore by Saint Frideswide. Saint Cuthbert was the patron of Durham, the *terra sancti Cuthberti*, and his name, not elsewhere mentioned by Chaucer, is here certainly a final touch of local colour.

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The text given here is slightly abbreviated. Only in the words of the clerks is there any material departure from the text as printed by Skeat. These words are presented here in a more marked and consistently northern form—in nearly every case with some manuscript authority. A star * is prefixed to the two or three lines that the process of abbreviation made it necessary to alter. Unlike

many of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, the Reeve's tale is neither easy to shorten nor improved by the process.

At Trumpingtōn nat fer fro Cantebrigge
ther gooth a brook and over that a brigge,
upon the whichē brook ther stant a melle.
And this is verray sooth that I yow telle:
a Miller was theer dwelling many a day;
as any peecok he was proud and gay.
Pipen he couthe, and fische, and nettēs bete,
and turnen cuppēs, and wel wrastle and schete;
and by his belt he bar a long panade,
and of a swerd ful trenchant was the blade.
A joly popper bar he in his pouche;
ther nas no man for peril dorste him touche;
a Scheffeld thwitel bar he in his hose.
Round was his face and camus was his nose;
as pilēd as an apē was his skulle.
He was a market-beter attē fulle.
Ther dorstē no wight hond upon him legge,
that he ne swoor he scholde anoon abegge.
A theef he was for sothe of corn and mele,
and that a sligh, and usaunt for to stele.
His namē was hoten deignous Simkin.
A wif he hadde, ycōmen of noblē kin:
the persoun of the toun hir fader was.
With hir he yaf ful many a panne of bras,
for that Simkin scholde in his blood allie.
Sche was yfostrēd in a nōnnerie;
for Simkin noldē no wif, as he saide,
but sche were wel y-norissed and a maide,
to saven his estat of yomanrie;
and schee was proud, and pert as is a pie.
A ful fair sightē was it on hem two!
on halidaies beforn hir wolde he go
with his tipet bounden aboute his heed,
and sche coom after in a gite of reed,
and Simkin haddē hosen of the same.
Ther dorstē no wight clepen hir but *dame*;
nas noon so hardy that wentē by the weye
that with hir dorstē rage or ones pleye,
but if he woldē be slain of Simkin
with panade or with knif or boidēkin.
For jalous folk been perilous euermo;
algate thay wolde hir wiues weenden so!
A doghter haddē thay betwixe hem two
of twenty yeer, withouten any mo
sauinge a child that was of half-yeer age:
in cradel it lay and was a proprē page.

This wenchë thikke and well ygrowen was,
with camus nose and yën greye as glas,
with buttokes brode and breestës rounde and hie;
but right fair was hir heer, I nil nat lie.
Greet sokene hath this miller, out of doute,
with whete and malt of al the lond aboute;
and namëliche ther was a greet collegge
men clepen the Soler-halle at Cantëbregge,
ther was hir whete and eek hir malt ygrounde.
And on a day it happed in a stounde,
seek lay the maunciple on a maladie:
men weenden wisly that he scholdë die.
For which this miller stal bothe mele and corn
an hundred timë morë than beforñ;
for ther-beforn he stal but curteisly,
but now he was a theef outrageously.
For which the wardain chidde and madë fare;
but ther-of sette the miller nat a tare:
he craketh boost and swear it nas nat so.
Than were ther yöngë pourë clerkes two
that dwelten in this halle of which I seye:
testif thay were and lusty for to pleye;
and only for hir mirthe and reuelrie
upon the wardain bisily thay crie
to yeue hem leuë but a litel stounde
to goon to mille and seen hir corn ygrounde—
and, hardily, thay dorstë leye hir nekke
the miller scholde nat stele hem half a pekke
of corn by sleightë, ne by force hem reue;
and attë laste the wardain yaf hem leue.
Jon highte that oon, and Alain highte that other.
Of o toun where thay born that hightë Strother:
fer in the north—I can nat tellë where.
This Alain maketh redy al his gere,
and on an hors the sak he caste anoon.
Forth gooth Alain the clerk and also Jon,
with good swerd and with bukeler by hir side.
Jon knew the wey, hem nededë no guide,
And attë mille the sak adoune he leith.
Alain spak first: “Al hail! Simond, i faith!
How faris thy fair doghter and thy wif?”
“Alain! Welcöme!” quoth Simkin, “by my lif!
And Jon also! How now? What do ye heer?”
“Simond!” quoth Jon, “by god, need has na peer!
Him bos himseluen serue at has na swain,
or els he es a folt, as clerkis sain.
Our manciple, I hope he wil be deed,
swa werkis ay the wangis in his heed.
And for-thy es I cum, and als Alain,
til grind our corn and carie it haam again.

I pray yow, spedis us hethen as ye may!"
"It schal be doon," quoth Simkin, "by my fay!
What wöl ye doon whil that it is in hand?"
"By god, right by the hoper wil I stand,"
quoth Jon, "and see hougat the corn gaas in!
Yit sagh I neuer, by my fader kin,
hougat the hoper waggis til and fra."
Alain answerdē: "Jon! and wiltu swa,
then wil I be binethen, by my croune,
and see hougat the melē fallis doune
in til the trogh. That sal be my desport.
For Jon, i faith, I es al of your sort:
I es as il a miller as er ye!"
This miller smilēde of hir nicētee,
and thoghte: "Al this nis doon but for a wile:
thay wenen that no man may hem beguile.
But, by my thrift, yet schal I blere hir yē
for at the sleighte in hir philosophie.
The morē queintē crekēs that they make,
the morē wöl I stelē whan I take.
In stede of flour yet wöl I yeue hem bren.
'The gretteste clerkēs been noght the wiseste men,'
as whilōm to the wolf thus spak the mare.
Of al hir art I countē noght a tare."
Oute attē dore he gooth ful priuēly,
whan that he sagh his timē; softēly
he loketh up and doune til he hath founde
the clerkēs hors, ther-as it stood ybounde
behindē the mille under a leafsel;
and to the hors he gooth him faire and wel.
He strepeth of the bridel right anoon;
and whan the hors was loos, he ginneth goon
toward the fen, ther wildē mares renne,
forth with wee-hee thurgh thikke and thurgh thenne.
This miller gooth ayein; no word he seide,
but dooth his note, and with the clerkēs pleide,
til that hir com was faire and wel ygrounde.
And whan the mele is sakkēd and ybounde,
this Jon gooth out, and fint his hors away,
and gan to crie: "Harrow!" and "weilawey!
our hors es lost! Alain, for goddis banis,
step on thy feet! Cum of, man, al at anis!
Alas! our wardain has his palfray lorn."
This Alain al forgat bothe mele and corn,
al was out of his minde his husbandrie.
"Quat! Quilk way es he gaan?" he gan to crie.
The wif coom lepinge inward with a ren;
sche saide: "Alas! you hors gooth to the fen
with wildē mares, as faste as he may go!
Unthank cōme on his hond that bond him so,

and he that bettrë scholde han knit the reine!”
“Alas!” quoth Jon, “Alain, for Christis peine,
lay doun thy swerd, and I sal min alswa.
I es ful wight, god waat, as es a raa;
By goddis herte, he sal nat scape us bathe!
Quy nadde thu pit the capil in the lathe?
Il hail! By god, Alain, thow es a fonne!”
Thise sely clerkës han ful faste yrönne
toward the fen, bothe Alain and eek Jon.
And whan the miller sagh that thay were goon,
he half a busschel of hir flour hath take,
and bad his wif go knede it in a cake.
He saide: “I trowe the clerkës were afeerd.
Yet can a miller make a clerkës beard
for al his art. Now lat hem goon hir weye!
Lo, wheer thay goon! Yee, lat the children pleye!
Thay gete him nat so lightly, by my croune!”
Thise sely clerkës rennen up and doune,
with: “Keep! keep! stand! stand! jossa! warderere!
gaa quistel thow, and I sal keep him here!”
But, schortly, til that it was verray night,
thay couthë nat, thogh thay doon al hir might,
hir capel cacche, he ran alwey so faste,
til in a diche thay caghte him attë laste.
Wery and weet, as beest is in the rein,
cömth sely Jon, and with him cömth Alain.
“Alas!” quoth Jon, “the day that I was born!
Now er we dreuen til hething and to scorn.
Our corn is stoln. Men wil us folis calle,
bathë the wardain and our felaus alle,
and namëly the miller. Wailaway!”
Thus plaineth Jon, as he gooth by the wey
toward the mille, and Bayard in his hond.
The miller sittinge by the fir he fond.
For it was night, and further mighte thay noight,
thay for the löue of god han him besoght
of herberghe and of ese as for hir peny.
The miller saide ayein: “If ther be eny,
swich as it is, yet schul ye han your part.
Min hous is streit, but ye han lernëd art:
ye cönne by argumentës make a place
a milë brood of twenty-foot of space.
Lat see now if this placë may suffise!
Or make it roum with speche, as is your guise!”
“Now, Simond,” saidë Jon, “by saint Cudbert,
ay es thow mery, and this es faire answerd!
I haf herd say ‘man suld taa of twaa thingis
slik as he findis, or taa slik as he bringis.’
But specially, I pray yow, hostë dere,
get us sum mete and drink, and mak us chere;

and we wil payë treuly at thy wille.
With empty hand men may na haukis tille—
lo, heer our siluer redy for til spende!”
This miller in to toune his doghter sende
for ale and breed, and rostede hem a goos,
and bond hir hors, it scholdë nat goon loos;
and in his owne chambre hem made a bed
with schetës and with chalons faire yspred,
nought from his ownë bed ten foot or twelue.
His doghter hadde a bed al by hirselve
right in the samë chambrë, by and by:
it mightë been no bet—and causë why:
ther nas no roumer herberghe in the place.
Thay soupen and they speke hem to solace,
and drinken ever strong ale attë beste.
Aboutë midnight wentë thay to reste.
Wel hath this miller vernischëd his heed;
ful pale he was fordrönken, and nat reed.
He yexeth, and he speketh thurgh the nose,
as he were on the quakke or on the pose.
To bed he gooth, and with him gooth his wif;
as any jay sche light was and jolif,
so was hir joly whistel wel ywet.
The cradel at hir beddës feet is set.
To beddë wente the doghter right anoon;
to beddë gooth Alain and also Jon.
Ther was namore, hem nedëdë no dwale.
This miller hath so wisly bibbëd ale
that as an hors he snorteth in his sleep,
ne of his tail behinde he took no keep.
His wif bar him a burdon, a ful strong:
men mighte hir routinge herë two furlong;
the wenchë routeth eek *par cōpanie*.
Alain the clerk, that herde this melodie,
he pokëde Jon, and saidë: “Slepis thow?
Herdë thow euer slik a sang ar now?
Lo! quilk a cumplin es imell thaim alle!
A wildë fir upon thair bodis falle!
Qua herknëde euer slik a ferly thing?
Ya, thay sal haf the flour of it ending!
This langë night ther tidis me na reste;
but yit, naa fors, al sal be for the beste.
Sum esëment has lawë schapen us.
For, Jon, ther es a lawë that sais thus:
that gif a man in aa point be agreued,
that in another he sal be releued.
Our corn is stoln, sothly it es naa nay,
and we haf had an il fit al this day;
and sen I sal haf naan amendëment
again my los, I wil haf esëment.

By goddis saule, it sal naan other be!”
This Jon answerde : “Alain auisë thee!
the miller es a parlous man,” he saide,
“and gif that he out of his sleep abraide,
he mighte do us bathe a vilainie.”
Alain answerde: “ I counte him nocht a flie!”
And up he rist, and by the wenche he crepte,
*ther-as sche lay al stille, and fastë slepte,
til he so nigh was, er sche mighte espie,
that it hadde been to latë for to crie.
This Jon lith stille a furlong-wey or two,
and to himself he maketh routhe and wo.
“Alas!” quoth he, “this es a wikkid jape!
Now may I say that I es but an ape;
and quen this jape es tald an other day,
I sal been halden daf, a cokenay.
I wil aris, and auntre it, by my fay!
‘Unhardy es unsely,’ thus men say.”
And up he roos, and softëly he wente
unto the cradel, and in his hond it hente,
*and bar it softe, and by his bed it sette.
*[I can nat tellë dremes that hem mette,]
til that the thriddë cok began to singe.
*Alain aroos thanne in the daweninge,
*when attë laste ypassed was the night;
he saidë: “Far wel, Maline, swetë wight!
The day es cum, I may naa lenger bide;
but euermaa, quar-sa I gaa or ride,
I es thin awen clerk, swa haf I seel!”
“Now, derë lemman,” quoth sche, “go, far weel!
But er thow go, oo thing I wöl the telle:
whan that thaw wendest homward by the melle,
right attë entree of the dore behinde
thow schalt a cake of half a busschel finde
that was ymaked of thin ownë mele,
which that I heelp my fader for to stele.
Now godë lemman, god the saue and kepe!”
And with that word almoost she gan to wepe.
Alain uprist, and thoghte: “Ar that it dawë,
I wil gaa crepen in by my felawe”;
and fond the cradel with his honde anan.
“By god!” thoghte he, “al wrang I haf misgaan!
Min heed es toty of my drink to-night,
that makës me that I gaa nocht aright.
I waat wel by the cradel I misgaa:
heer lis the miller and his wif alswa!”
And forth he gooth a twenty-deuel wey
unto the bed ther-as the miller lay.
He weende han copen by his felawe Jon;
and by the miller in he creep anoon,

and caghte him by the nekke, and softe he spak.
He saide: “Jon, thow swinis-heed, awak!
for goddis saule, and heer a noblë game!
*For I haf had this gracë, by saint Jame ...
quils thow has as a coward been agast!”
“Yee, falsë harlot!” quoth the miller. “Hast?
A! false traitour! falsë clerk!” quoth he,
“thow schalt be deed, by goddes dignitee!”
And by the throtë-bolle he caghte Alain;
and hee hente him despitously ayein,
and on the nose he smoot him with the feest.
Doune ran the bloody streem upon his breest;
and in the floor with nose and mouth to-broke
thay walwe as doon two piggës in a poke.
And up thay goon, and doune ayein anoon,
til that the miller spurnëde at a stoon;
and doune he fil, bakward upon his wif,
that niste nothing of this nicë strif.
And with the fal out of hir sleep sche breide.
“Help, holy crois of Bromëholm!” sche seide.
“*In manus tuas!* lord, to the I calle.
Awak, Simond! The feend is on us falle!
Min herte is broken. Help! I nam but deed.
Ther lith oon up my wombe and up min heed.
Help, Simkin! for the falsë clerkës fighte.”
This Jon sterte up as faste as euer he mighte,
and graspeth by the wallës to and fro
to finde a staf; and sche sterte up also,
and knew the estrës bet than dide this Jon,
and by the wal a staf sche fond anoon,
and sagh a litel schimmeringe of a light;
for at an hole in schoon the monë bright.
And by that light sche sagh hem bothë two,
but sikerly sche nistë who was who,
but as sche sagh a whit thing in hir yë;
and whan sche gan the whitë thing espie,
sche weende the clerk hadde wered a volupeer;
and with the staf sche drogh ay neer and neer,
and weende han hit this Alain attë fulle—
and smoot the miller on the pilëd skulle.
Than doune he gooth, and cride: “Harrow! I die!”
Thise clerkës bete him wel and lete him lie,
And graithen hem, and toke hir hors anoon,
and eek hir mele, and on hir wey thay goon.
And attë millë yet thay toke hir cake
of half a bussehel flour ful wel ybake.
Thus is the proudë miller wel ybete,
and hath ylorn the grindinge of the whete,
and payëd for the souper euerly deel
of Alain and of Jon, that bete him weel.

And therefore this prouerbe is said ful sooth:
“him thar nat wenē wel that yuel dooth”;
a guilour schal himself beguiled be.
And God that sitteth high in magestee
saue al this cumpaniē, grete and smale;
*for al is doon; thus endeth now my tale.

