Here follows the Prologue of the Pardoner’s Tale.

Radix malorum est cupiditas; Ad Thimotheum, sexto.

“Gentle people,” he said, “when I preach in churches, I strive for a resounding voice, and I ring it out as round as a bell, for I know by heart all that I say. My theme is and always was one and the same: Radix malorum est cupiditas. 334

“First I pronounce where I come from, and then I show my bulls2, one and all, but first the seal of our liege lord the king on my patent3. I show that first to secure my body, lest any man, priest, or clerk would be so bold as to disturb me in Christ’s holy labors. After that I then proceed with my tales, and show bulls of popes and cardinals and patriarchs and bishops, and I speak a few words in Latin to give a flavor to my preaching and to stir men to devotion. Then I show forth my long glass cases, crammed full of cloths and bones: all the people believe that they are holy relics4. I have a shoulder-bone set in brass which came from a holy Jew’s sheep5. 352

“‘Good men,’ I say, ‘mark my words; wash this bone in any spring, and if a cow or calf or sheep or ox swell up that has been stung or bitten by any serpent, take water from this spring and wash its tongue and it will be healthy then. And moreover, every sheep that drinks a draught from this spring shall be cured of pox or scabs or sores. And mark what I say. 360

“‘If the man of the house who owns the beasts will, while fasting, drink a draught from this spring every week before cock-crow (as this holy Jew6 taught our forefathers), his beasts and his stock shall multiply. And sirs, it will cure jealousy also; though a man be fallen into a jealous fury, mix his broth with this water and he will never mistrust his wife again, even if he knows the very truth of her fault--although she has taken two or three priests. 371

“‘Here is a glove also. He who will put his hand in this glove shall see his grain multiply, whether it is wheat or barley; so he will offer pence, or else groats7. 376

“‘But, good men and women, I warn you of one thing; if any person is now in this church who has committed a horrible sin and dares not to be confessed of it because of shame, or if any woman, old or young, has made her husband a cuckold, such people shall have no power or grace to make offerings here to my relics. But whoever knows himself to be free from such fault, let him come up and make an offering in the name of God, and I will absolve him by the authority granted me by bull.’ 388

“With this trickery I have won a hundred marks, year by year, since I have been a pardoner. I stand like a cleric in my pulpit, and when the lay people are seated I preach as you have heard and tell a hundred more false stories. Then I take pains to stretch out my neck and bob my head east and west over the people, like a dove perched upon a barn. My hands and tongue move so briskly that it is a joy to see my movement. 399

“All my preaching is about avarice and such cursed things, to make them generous in giving their pence and especially to me. My aim is all for gain and not at all for the correction of sin. I do not care, when they are buried, even if their souls have gone blackberried8! 406

“Surely, many sermons arise from an evil intention, how to please and flatter people, to aim for promotion through hypocrisy, from vain glory and some from hate. For when I dare not otherwise

1 Radix malorum est cupiditas. Desire for earthly things is the root of evil. I Timothy 6.10.
2 Bulls. Letters of authorization from the pope and other high-ranking officials.
3 Patent. Leather patent, indicating his authority to sell pardons.
4 Relics. Relics, any materials directly related to the physical presence of a holy person, were believed to have special powers of healing and were therefore valuable. The Pardoner’s relics, of course, are not.
5 Holy Jew’s sheep. He may have Jacob in mind, but the reference may be more general, based on the belief that Jews often worked magic.
6 Holy Jew. Again, the reference may be to Jacob, but without substantiation.
7 Pence . . . groats. I.e., one small coin or another.
8 Blackberried. Though this phrase is usually glossed as “going blackberry picking,” the phrase clearly means more. The Pardoner does not care about the condition of their souls after death, whether they are pure white or black as a blackberry.
dispute with someone, then I sting him with my bitter
tongue as I preach, so that he cannot escape being
falsely defamed, if he has trespassed against me or
my brethren. For though I do not mention his name,
people shall know whom I mean by hints and other
circumstances. Thus I pay back people who do
unpleasant things to us, and thus I spit out my venom
under the guise of holiness, seeming holy and
faithful. I say again, in a few words, I preach for no
motive but avarice from which my theme is and
always was, Radix malorum est cupiditas. Thus can I
preach against that same vice which I practice,
avarice. But though I may be guilty of it, I can make
other people depart from avarice and repent sorely.
But that is not my primary purpose; I preach for
nothing but greed; and this should suffice for this
matter. 434

“Then I tell them many examples from old stories of
long ago. For simple people love old tales; such
things they can well remember and repeat. 438

“What! Do you think that so long as I can preach and
gain gold and silver through my teaching that I shall
live in poverty willingly? 441

“Nay, nay, truly I never thought of it! I will preach
and beg everywhere I go; I will not labor with my
hands nor make baskets to live by, only because I
will not be an idle beggar. I will imitate none of the
apostles. I will have wool, wheat, cheese, and money,
even if it is given by the poorest page or the poorest
widow in a village, and even if her children are dying
of starvation! I will drink liquor from the vine and
have a merry wench in every town. 453

“But listen, gentle people, in conclusion. Your will is
that I tell a tale. Now that I have drunk a good
draught of malty beer, by the Lord I hope I shall tell
you a thing that ought by reason to be to your liking.
For though myself be a vicious man, yet I know how
to tell you a moral tale which I am accustomed to tell
in my money-getting homilies. Now hold your peace,
and I will begin.” 462

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