

JOHN GOWER

The Tale of Phoebus and Cornide†

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- 775 And over this, my sone diere,
 Of^o othre men, if thou might hierē,
 In private^o what thei have wrought,^o
 Hold conseil^o and descoevere^o it noght,
 For Cheste^o can no conseil hele^o
 Or be it wo or be it wele.^o
 780 And tak a tale into thi mynde,
 The which of olde ensample I finde.^o
 Phebus,^o which makth the daies lihte,
 A love he hadde, which tho hihte^o
 785 Cornide,^o whom aboven alle
 He pleseth. Bot^o what schal befalle^o
 Of^o love ther is noman^o knoweth,
 Bot^o as fortune hire happes throweth.^o
 So it befell upon a chaunce^o
 790 A yong kniht^o tok hire aqueintance^o
 And hadde of hire al that he wolde;^o
 Bot a fals bridd,^o which sche hath holde
 And kept in chambre of pure yowthe,^o
 Discovereth^o all that ever he cowthe.^o
 795 This briddes name was as tho^o
 Corvus,^o the which was thanne also
 Welmore^o whyt than eny swan,
 And he, that schrewe,^o al that he can^o
 Of^o his ladi to Phebus seide.^o
 800 And he for wraththe^o his swerd outbreide,^o
 With which Cornide anon^o he slowh.^o
 Bot after him was wo ynowh,^o
 And tok a full gret repentance,
 Wherof—in tokne^o and remembrance
 805 Of hem whiche usen wicke speche^o—
 Upon this bridd he tok this wreche.^o
 That ther^o he was snow whyt tofore,^o

† *Confessio Amantis* 3.775–835. Text based on *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay EETS s. s. 81–82 (London, 1900–1901; rpt. 1969), 1.247–48. Reprinted with permission of the Council of the Early English Text Society. The speaker of this passage is the priest and counsellor Genius, who instructs his “son” Amans, the lover-protagonist, about the sins he should avoid. Here Genius discusses a subdivision of the sin of wrath, Cheste (chiding, contentiousness), personified as a creature whose mouth is always open, spewing forth whatever bad things he knows, fomenting strife. After telling the story of the raven, Genius adds a second short example of ill-fated tale-bearing (ll. 818–27), drawn from Ovid’s *Fasts* 2.585–616. On the *Confessio* see further the note on p. 386, and on Chaucer’s relationship to Gower see the note on p. 337. It is not certain that Chaucer knew Gower’s advice, though some critics think that the Manciple’s repetitious invocation of his mother’s advice to “my sone” is a parody of the way Genius addresses Amans throughout the *Confessio* and, by implication, of an approach to fiction that is purely instructional.

- Ever afterward colblak^o therfore
 He was transformed, as it scheweth.^o
 810 And many a man yif^o him beschreweth^o
 And clepen^o him into^o this day
 A raven, be^o whom yif^o men mai
 Take evidence^o whan he crieth
 That som mishapp it signefieth.^o
 815 Be war^o therfore and sei^o the beste
 If thou wolt be thiself^o in reste,
 My goode sone, as I the rede.^o
 For in an other place I rede^o
 Of thilke Nimphe which Laar hihte.^o
 820 For^o sche the private be nyghte^o
 (How Jupiter lay be Jutorme^o)
 Hath told, god^o made hire overforme.^o
 Hire tunge he kutte, and into helle
 For evere he sende^o hir forto duelle,
 825 As sche that was noght worthi hierē^o
 To ben of love a chamberere,^o
 For sche no conseil couwthe hele.^o
 And suche adaises be now fele^o
 In loves court, as it is seid,
 830 That lete here tungen gon unteid.^o
 Mi sone, be thou non of tho^o
 To jangle^o and telle tales so,
 And namely that thou ne chyde,^o
 For Cheste^o can no conseil hide,
 835 For Wraththe seide nevere wel.^o

coal black

is evident

still / curses

call(s) / to

by / still

Take as a sign

it signifies some misfortune

Be careful / speak

keep thyself

advise thee

read

that nymph called Lara

Because / the nighttime secret

with Juturna (a naiad)

i. e., Jupiter / come to grief

sent

here (on earth)

chambermaid, servant

could keep no secret

(there) are many such nowadays

let their tongues go untied, loose

do not be one of those

speak indiscreetly / in such a way

chide, reproach (someone else)

Chiding

Since Anger never spoke well (of another)

struck home, Coronis groaned; when she drew it out, scarlet blood welled over her fair white limbs. "O Phoebus," she cried, "you could have let me bear your child, and then have punished me. Now, in my one person, two will perish." That was all she said, before her spirit ebbed out with her blood. A deathly chill crept over her lifeless body.

Too late, the lover repented of the cruel punishment he had exacted, and hated himself for listening to the tale, for allowing his anger to blaze up in such a way. He hated the bird, whose officiousness had forced him to learn of Coronis' guilt, forced him to know that he had cause for indignation; and no less did he hate his bow, his hands, his arrows too, shafts he had so rashly launched. Fondling her lifeless frame, he tried to thwart the fates, but he employed his healing art without avail: his aid came too late.

When he saw that his attempts were vain, that the pyre was being got ready, and that her limbs were about to be consumed by the funeral fires, then indeed Apollo groaned from the very depths of his heart—tears are forbidden to the gods. Even so does a heifer mourn when, before her eyes, the mallet is poised close to the slaughterer's right ear, and then brought crashing down with a resounding blow upon the hollow forehead of her unweaned calf. Then he poured upon Coronis' breast perfumes which she could never enjoy, clasped her to him for the last time, and performed all too soon the rites that death demands.

That his own seed should perish in those same ashes was more than he could bear. He snatched his son from his mother's womb, saved him from the flames, and carried him to the cave of Chiron, the centaur.

As for the raven, which was hoping for a reward for revealing the truth, Phoebus decreed that never again should it be numbered among white birds.

The Manceplé's Prologue and Tale

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is the most important source for western medieval versions of the story about the punishment of a truth-telling bird. We print a translation of Ovid's story of Phoebus, Coronis, and the raven. The *Metamorphoses* was widely translated, adapted, and commented on in the Middle Ages; these texts usually treat the story of Phoebus and Coronis as a lesson about the dangers of indiscreet speech. It is not certain which, if any, of these medieval versions Chaucer relied on. We include a brief adaptation by his acquaintance John Gower as an example of how the tale could be reworked for didactic purpose.

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[The Story of Phoebus and Coronis] †

[At that time] the shining white wings of the chattering raven had been suddenly changed to dusky black.

This bird was once of a silvery hue, with such snowy feathers that it could rival any spotless dove. It was no less white than the geese who were one day to save the Capitol with their wakeful voices, as white as the swan that haunts rivers. But its tongue brought about the raven's downfall. Thanks to its chattering tongue, its plumage, once white, is now the very opposite.

In all Thessaly there was no one lovelier than Coronis of Larissa. At any rate, she won the heart of the god of Delphi [i.e., Phoebus Apollo], while she remained true to him, or at least while her faults passed unobserved. But the bird of Phoebus detected her in wrongdoing, and, a pitiless informer, hurried to its master, determined to reveal her guilt. . . . [It] went and told its master, Phoebus, that it had seen Coronis lying with a young Thessalian.

When her lover heard this charge against Coronis, the wreath of laurel slipped from his head, his face changed, his colour ebbed away, and the plectrum fell from his fingers. His heart was in a fever of swelling rage. Seizing his customary weapons, he strung his bow, bending it from its horns, and, with the arrow that none can avoid, pierced the breast he had so often clasped to his own. As the shaft

† *Metamorphoses* 2, 534–57, 598–632. From *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. Mary M. Innes (London: Penguin Books Ltd.) pp. 64–67. © Mary M. Innes, 1955. We have omitted a tale embedded within the story of Phoebus and Coronis that includes another instance of a truthful revelation angrily received.