Here begins the Manciple's Tale of the Crow.

When Phoebus dwelt down here on this earth, as old books make mention, he was the hardiest young knight in this entire world, and the best archer as well. He slew Python, the serpent, one day as he lay sleeping in the sunshine; and he completed many other noble worthy achievements with his bow, as one may read.

He could play on every type of instrument, and sing in such a way that it was a heavenly melody to hear the sound of his clear voice. Surely Amphion, king of Thebes, who walled that city by his singing, could never sing half so well as he. And he was the most attractive man that is or was since the world was made. What need is there to describe his features? For no man so handsome lived in this world. Likewise, he was full of gentle manners, of honor and of perfect worthiness.

This Phoebus, flower of all young men in both chivalry and in generosity, for his sport and also in sign of his victory over Python, as the history tells us, was accustomed to bear a bow in his hand. Now this Phoebus had in his house a crow, which he fostered for a long time in a cage and taught to speak, as one may teach a jay. This crow was white as a snow-white swan, and when he was to tell a tale, could counterfeit the speech of every man. And no nightingale in this entire world could sing one hundred thousandth as merrily or well.

Now this Phoebus had in his house a wife whom he loved more than his soul, and was ever busy night and day to please her and treat her with respect, except only, if I am to tell the truth, that he was jealous and anxious to guard her well; for he hated to be tricked. And so is every creature in this case, but all in vain; it does not help. A good wife, clean in deed and thought, should not be watched, in truth; and truly the labor is in vain to watch an evil one, for that can not be done. This I believe to be true folly, to waste labor in watching wives; thus write old scholars.

But now to my purpose, as I first began. This worthy Phoebus did all he could to please her, thinking that with such pleasure and with his manhood and handsome looks nobody should remove him from her grace. But this, God knows, no man can control; to constrain a thing that Nature has placed in a creature's very being.

Take any bird, put it in a cage, and set your mind and heart all on fostering it tenderly with food and drink, with all dainty things you can imagine, and keep it as cleanly as you can; even if its cage may be ever so delightful with gold, this bird would still twenty thousand times rather go eat worms and other such wretched things from the cold and crude forest. For he will do his best at all times to escape from his cage, if he can; this bird always desires his freedom.

Take a cat, and foster him well with cream and tender meat and make him a silken couch; and let a mouse run by the wall. At once he forgets cream and fine meat and every dainty thing in that place, as he has such an appetite to eat a mouse. Desire will win out every time. You cannot trap a creature, give it all luxuries, and then think to yourself that this creature chooses to stay with you.

A she-wolf also has a villainous low nature; at the time when she wishes to have a mate, she will take the most scurvy wolf she can find, or the one of least honor.

This Phoebus thought of no deceit, and was deceived for all his good-heartedness; for behind his back she had another, a man of small reputation, worth nothing in comparison to Phoebus, which made it more painful! Thus it often happens, and much harm and sadness comes from it.

And so it happened when Phoebus was away that his wife sent then after her lover. When Phoebus' wife had sent for her lover, the white crow, which always hung in the cage, watched them, and never said a word. And when Phoebus the lord had come home, this crow sang "Cuckoo! cuckoo! cuckoo!"

"What, bird!" said Phoebus. "What song are you singing? Were you not accustomed to sing so merrily that it was a joy to my heart to hear your voice? Alas, what song is that?"

"I am not singing the wrong thing. Phoebus," he said, "despite all your worth, your beauty and your noble birth, despite all your sweet singing and all your melody, and despite all your vigilance, you have been tricked by a man of small reputation, not worth an insect alongside you, by my head!"

Soon the crow told him how his wife had sinned, to his great shame and reproach; and told him once and again that he had seen it with his eyes.

This Phoebus turned away; it seemed to him his sorrowful heart would burst in two. He bent his bow and set an arrow in it, and then in his rage he slew his wife. This is the conclusion; there is no more to say. And for sorrow of this he broke his instruments of music, his harp, lute, gittern, and psaltery; and he broke also his arrows and bow.

And after that he spoke thus to the bird: "Traitor," he said, "with a scorpion's tongue you have brought me to destruction. Alas that I was ever created! Why am I not dead? O dear wife, gem of delight, who was so constant to me and so faithful, now you lie dead with face pale of hue, so guiltless, that I dare truly swear! O rash hand, to do so foul a wrong! O troubled mind, O reckless anger, that heedlessly strikes the guiltless! O distrust, full of false suspicion, where was your wisdom and discernment? Let every man beware of rashness, and believe nothing without strong testimony; do not strike too soon, before you know why, and consider soberly and well before in wrath you execute anything upon suspicion. Alas! Rash anger has fully destroyed a thousand people, and brought them to the dust. Alas! I will slay myself for sorrow!"

And to the crow he said, "O false thief, from this point I will pay you back you for your false talk! You sang once like a nightingale; now, false thief, you shall forego your song and all your white feathers as well, and never in all your life shall you speak again. Thus shall men be avenged on a traitor; you and your offspring shall forever be black, and shall never make sweet sound but always cry before the tempest and rain, as a sign that through your fault my wife is dead."

And he rushed upon the crow, and swiftly plucked out every one of his white feathers and made him black, and took away his song and his speech as well, and slung him out the door to the Devil, to whom I commit him! And for this cause all crows are black.

Gentle people, by this example I pray you to take heed, and mark what I say: as long as you live never tell a man of his wife's frailty; in truth he will mortally hate you. Sir Solomon, as wise scholars say, teaches a man to guard his tongue well.