

# Keep well your tongue

*from the MANCIPLE'S TALE*

*by GEOFFREY CHAUCER*

*translated by ADAM F MCCUNE*

## *Original Middle English*

My sone, keep wel thy tonge, and keep thy freend.  
A wikked tonge is worse than a feend;  
My sone, from a feend men may hem blesse.  
My sone, God of his endeles goodnesse  
Walled a tonge with teeth and lippes eke,  
For man sholde hym avyse what he speeke.  
My sone, ful ofte, for to muche speche  
Hath many a man been spilt, as clerkes teche,  
But for litel speche avysely  
Is no men shent, to speke generally.  
My sone, thy tonge sholdestow restreyne  
At alle tymes, but whan thou doost thy peyne  
To speke of God, in honour and preyere.  
The firste vertu, sone, if thou wolt leere,  
Is to restreyne and kepe wel thy tonge;  
Thus lerne children whan that they been yonge.  
My sone, of muchel spekyng yvele avysed,  
Ther lasse spekyng hadde ynough suffised,  
Comth muchel harm; thus was me toold and taught.  
In muchel speche synne wanteth naught.  
Wostow wherof a rakel tonge serveth?  
Right as a swerd forkutteth and forkerveth  
An arm a-two, my deere sone, right so  
A tonge kutteth freendship al a-two.

## *Modern English Translation*

My son, keep well your tongue, and keep your friend.  
My son, our God whose goodness has no end  
Walled round a tongue with tooth and lip and cheek,  
For man should first consider what he'll speak.  
A fiend is bad; a wicked tongue is worse,  
For men may bless against a fiendish curse.  
Often, my son, because of too much speech  
Has many a man been wrecked, as clerics teach;  
But for a little, said advisedly,  
No man is shamed, to say it generally.  
My son, know that your tongue you should restrain  
At all times but when you are taking pains  
To speak of God in honor, and to pray.  
The first virtue, if you'll learn what I say,  
Is to restrain and to keep well your tongue;  
That is what children learn when they are young.  
My son, from too much speaking ill-advised,  
Where much less speech would have enough sufficed,  
Comes so much harm; so I was told and taught.  
In that much speech, is sin far off? It's not.  
And do you know the way a rash tongue serves?  
Just like a sword that cleaves and cuts and carves  
An arm in two, just so a tongue can do:  
A tongue can cut a friendship up in two.