

Geoffrey Chaucer’s Description of the Plague from the Pardoner’s Tale (c. 1385)

[Chaucer](#) (1343-1400) was five years old when the Plague reached England. While his parents’ generation bore the full brunt of the plague, he was part of the next generation devastated by its aftermath: a decimated population, social chaos, financial instability, scarcity. Scholars have often speculated on why he did not address more what he had witnessed and experienced. He did, however, imaginatively deployed the Plague in the Pardoner’s Tale. Three “rioters” (heavy partiers without much of a conscience) decide, after a night of drinking, to seek out Death (“a stealthy thief”), who presides over “the pestilence.” Their plan is to kill him.



Chaucer as he appears in the Ellesmere MS of *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1400)

Of course, Death prevails over them in the end.

[You can read the full tale in modern English.](#)

<i>Middle English</i>	<i>Modern translation (with an attempt to preserve the rhyme)</i>
<p>These ryotoures thre of whiche I telle, Longe erst er pryme rong of any belle, Were set hem in a taverne for to drinke; And as they sat, they herde a belle clynke Biforn a cors, was caried to his grave; That oon of hem gan callen to his knave, “Go bet,” quod he, “and axe redily, What cors is this that passeth heer forby; And look that thou reporte his name weel.” “Sir,” quod this boy, “it nedeth never-a-del; It was me toold er ye cam heer two houres; He was, pardee, an old felawe of youres; And sodeynly he was y-slayn to-nyght, For-dronke, as he sat on his bench upright; Ther cam a privee theef men clepeth Deeth, That in this contree al the peple sleeth, And with his spere he smoot his herte atwo, And wente his wey withouten wordes mo.</p>	<p>These three rioters, of whom I tell, Long before prime had rung of any bell, Were sitting in a tavern drinking; And as they sat, they heard a bell clinking Carried before a corpse to his grave; Then one of them called his servant-knave, “Go quickly,” said he, “and ask readily, Whose body it is that now passes by; And look that you report his name well.” “Sir,” quod this boy, “it’s easy, not a big deal. It was told to me, before you came, now two hours; He was, I must say, an old partner of yours; He was slain suddenly this very night, Awfully drunk, as he sat on his bench upright; There came a stealthy thief, men call Death, That in this country all the people he slays,</p>

He hath a thousand slayn this pestilence:
 And, maister, er ye come in his presence,
 Me thynketh that it were necessarie
 For to be war of swich an adversarie.
 Beth redy for to mete him evermore.
 Thus taughte me my dame, I sey namoore."
 "By Seinte Marie," seyde this taverner,
 "The child seith sooth, for he hath slayn this
 year, Henne over a myle, withinne a greet
 village,
 Both man and womman, child and hyne, and
 page.
 I trowe his habitacioun be there.
 To been avysed greet wisdom it were,
 Er that he dide a man a dishonour."
 "Ye, Goddes armes," qoad this ryotour,
 "Is it swich peril with him for to meete?
 I shal him seke by wey and eek by strete,
 I make avow to Goddes digne bones!
 Herkneþ, felawes, we three been al ones;
 Lat ech of us holde up his hond til oother,
 And ech of us bicomen otheres brother,
 And we wol sleen this false traytour Deeth;
 He shal be slayn, which that so manye sleeth,
 By Goddes dignitee, er it be night!"

Spear in hand, he broke your friend's heart in
 two,
 And went his way without saying any words
 mo'.
 He has a thousand murdered with this
 pestilence:
 And, master, before you enter his presence,
 I would think that it would be necessary
 To be fully beware of such an adversary:
 Be ready to meet him at all times, evermore.
 Thus my mother taught me, I say no more."
 "By saint Marie," said the taverner,
 "The child speaks truth, for he hath slain this
 year, Over a mile from here, in a great village,
 Both man and woman, child and worker, and
 page.
 I believe his dwelling is there;
 It would be great wisdom to be forewarned,
 Before he did any a man a dishonor."
 "Ya, god's arms," swore this rioter,
 "Is it such peril with him to meet?
 I shall seek him by way and also by street,
 I make a vow by God's honorable bones!
 Listen, fellows, we three are agreed as one;
 Let each of us hold up his hand to the other,
 And each of us become brother to the other,
 And we will slay this false traitor Death;
 He shall be slain, he who so many slays,
 By God's dignity, before the night!"