

*The
Pardoner's
Tale*

By

Geoffrey Chaucer

Department of English
Basudev Godabari Degree College
Kesaibahal, Sambalpur

The Canterbury Tales - Analysis

The Canterbury Tales is at once one of the most famous and most frustrating works of literature ever written. Since its composition in late 1300s, critics have continued to mine new riches from its complex ground, and started new arguments about the text and its interpretation. Chaucer's richly detailed text, so Dryden said, was "God's plenty", and the rich variety of the Tales is partly perhaps the reason for its success. It is both one long narrative (of the pilgrims and their pilgrimage) and an encyclopedia of shorter narratives; it is both one large drama, and a compilation of most literary forms known to medieval literature: romance, fabliau, Breton lay, moral fable, verse romance, beast fable, prayer to the Virgin... and so the list goes on. No single literary genre dominates the Tales. The tales include romantic adventures, fabliaux, saint's biographies, animal fables, religious allegories and even a sermon, and range in tone from pious, moralistic tales to lewd and vulgar sexual farces. More often than not, moreover, the specific tone of the tale is extremely difficult to firmly pin down.

This, indeed, is down to one of the key problems of interpreting the Tales themselves - voice: how do we ever know who is speaking? Because Chaucer, early in the Tales, promises to repeat the exact words and style of each speaker as best he can remember it, there is always a tension between Chaucer and the pilgrim's voice he ventriloquises as he re-tells his tale: even the "Chaucer" who is a character on the pilgrim has a distinct and deliberately unChaucerian voice. Is it the Merchant's voice – and the Merchant's opinion – or Chaucer's? Is it Chaucer the character or Chaucer the writer? If it is Chaucer's, are we supposed to take it at face value, or view it ironically? It is for this reason that, throughout this ClassicNote, a conscious effort has been made to refer to the speaker of each tale (the Merchant, in the Merchant's Tale, for example) as the "narrator", a catch-all term which represents both of, or either one of, Chaucer and the speaker in question.

No-one knows for certain when Chaucer began to write the Tales – the pilgrimage is usually dated 1387, but that date is subject to much scholarly argument – but it is certain that Chaucer wrote some parts of the Tales at different times, and went back and added Tales to the melting pot. The Knight's Tale, for example, was almost certainly written earlier than the Canterbury project as a separate work, and then adapted into the voice of the Knight; and the Second Nun's Tale, as well as probably the Monk's, probably have a similar compositional history.

Chaucer drew from a rich variety of literary sources to create the Tales, though his principal debt is likely to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, in which ten nobles from Florence, to escape the plague, stay in a country villa and amuse each other by each telling tales. Boccaccio likely had a significant influence on Chaucer. The Knight's Tale was an English version of a tale by Boccaccio, while six of Chaucer's tales have possible sources in the *Decameron*: the Miller's Tale, the Reeve's, the Clerk's, the Merchant's, the Franklin's, and the Shipman's. However, Chaucer's pilgrims to Canterbury form a wider range of society compared to Boccaccio's elite storytellers, allowing for greater differences in tone and substance.

The text of the Tales itself does not survive complete, but in ten fragments (see 'The texts of the Tales' for further information and specific orders). Due to the fact that there are no links made between these ten fragments in most cases, it is extremely difficult to ascertain precisely in which order Chaucer wanted the tales to be read. This ClassicNote corresponds to the order followed in

Larry D. Benson's "Riverside Chaucer", which is undoubtedly the best edition of Chaucer currently available.

The Pardoner's Tale

The Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale

Following the Physician's Tale, the Host began to swear as if he were mad, wishing a shameful death on the judge and his advocates, and concluding that the cause of the maiden's death was her "beautee". The Host pronounced the tale a piteous one to listen to, and prayed to God that he protect the Physician's body.

The Host, concluding that he has almost "caught a cardynacle" (had a heart attack) after the brutality of the Physician's Tale, decides that he must have medicine in the form of a merry tale, in order to restore his heart. Turning to the Pardoner, he asks for some "myrthe or japes right anon", and the Pardoner agrees, though, before he begins, he stops at an alehouse to "drynke and eten of a cake". The company protests that the Pardoner not be allowed to tell them a ribald tale, but insists instead on "som moral thyng" - a request which the Pardoner also grants.

The Pardoner's Prologue

Radix malorum est Cupiditas (Greed is the root of all evil)

The Pardoner begins by addressing the company, explaining to them that, when he preaches in churches, his voice booms out impressively like a bell, and his theme is always that greed is the root of all evil. First, the Pardoner says, he explains where has come from, and shows his papal bulls, indulgences, and glass cases crammed full of rags and bones, which he claims (to the congregation, at least) are holy relics with magical properties.

Then, the Pardoner invites anyone who has sinned to come and offer money to his relics, and therefore to be absolved by the Pardoner's power. This trick, the Pardoner says, has earned him at least a hundred marks since he was made a pardoner - and when the "lewd people" are seated, he continues to tell them false trickeries and lies. His intention, he says, is simply "for to wynne" (to profit), and "nothyng for correccioun of synne" (and nothing to do with the correction of sin); the Pardoner doesn't care whether, after burial, his congregation's souls go blackberry picking. Thus, the Pardoner says, he spits out his venom under the pretense of holiness, seeming holy, pious, and "trewe". "Greed is the root of all evils", the Pardoner quotes again, explaining that he preaches against the same vice which he himself is guilty of. Yet, although he knows he is guilty of the sin, he can still make other people turn away from it.

Next, the Pardoner tells the company how he tells his congregation "olde stories" from long ago, "for lewed peple loven tales olde". He will not, he says, work with hands and make baskets, but get money, wool, cheese and wheat for himself, even if it is from the poorest page or poorest widow in a village. He will drink "licour of the vyne", and have a "joly wenche" in every town. "Now hold your pees!" he shouts to the company, and begins his tale.

The Pardoner's Tale

There once lived in Flanders a company of three rioters who did nothing but engage in irresponsible and sinful behavior. At this point, the narrator interrupts the tale itself to launch a

lengthy diatribe against drunkenness - mentioning Herod, Seneca, Adam, Sampson, Attila the Hun and St. Paul as either sources or famed drunkards. This in turn oddly becomes a diatribe against people whose stomachs are their gods (their end, we are told, is death), and then a diatribe against the stomach, called, at one point a “stynkyng cod, fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun” (a stinking bag, full of dung and decayed matter). This distraction from the story itself ends with an attack on dice-playing (dice here called “bicched bones”, or cursed dice).

The three drunkards were in a tavern one night, and, hearing a bell ring, looked outside to see men carrying a corpse to its grave. One of them called to his slave to go and ask who the corpse was: he was told by a boy that the corpse was an old fellow whose heart was smashed in two by a secret thief called Death. This drunkard agreed, and discussed with his companions how this “Death” had indeed slain many people, of all ranks, of both sexes, that very year. The three then made a vow (by “Goddes digne bones”) to find Death and slay him.

When they had gone not even half a mile, they met an old, poor man at a stile, who greeted them courteously. The proudest of the drunkards responded rudely, asking the man why he was still alive at such a ripe age. The old man answered that he was alive, because he could not find anyone who would exchange their youth for his age - and, although he knocked on the ground, begging it to let him in, he still did not die. Moreover, the old man added, it was not courteous of the drunkards to speak so rudely to an old man.

One of the other drunkards responded still more rudely that the old man was to tell them where Death was, or regret not telling them dearly. The old man, still polite, told the drunkards they could find Death up the crooked way and underneath an oak tree.

The drunkards ran until they came to the tree, and, underneath it, they found eight bushels of gold coins. The worst one of them spoke first, arguing that Fortune had given them the treasure to live their life in happiness - but realizing that they could not carry the gold home without people seeing them and thinking them thieves. Therefore, he suggested, they should draw lots, and one of them should run back to the town to fetch bread and wine, while the other two protected the treasure. Then, at night, they could agree where to take the treasure and carry it safely. This was agreed, and lots were drawn: the youngest of them was picked to go to the town.

However, as soon as he had gone to the town, the two remaining drunkards plotted amongst themselves to stab him upon his return, and then split the gold between them. While he was in the town, the youngest thought of the beauty of the gold coins, and decided to buy some poison in order to kill the other two, keeping the gold for himself. Thus, he went to an apothecary, bought some “strong and violent” poison, poured it into two of three wine bottles (the third was for him to drink from), topped them up with wine, and returned to his fellows.

Exactly as the other two had planned it, it befell. They killed him on his return, and sat down to enjoy the wine before burying his body – and, as it happened, drank the poison and died. The tale ends with a short sermon against sin, asking God to forgive the trespass of good men, and warning them against the sin of avarice, before (this, we can presume narrated in the Pardoner’s voice) inviting the congregation to “come up” and offer their wool in return for pardons.

The tale finished, the Pardoner suddenly remembers that he has forgotten one thing - that he is carrying relics and pardons in his "male" (pouch, bag) and begins to invite the pilgrims forward to receive pardon, inciting the Host to be the first to receive his pardon. "Unbokele anon thy purs", he says to the Host, who responds that the Pardoner is trying to make him kiss "thyn old breech" (your old pants), swearing it is a relic, when actually it is just painted with his shit. I wish, the Host says, I had your "coillons" (testicles) in my hand, to shrine them in a hog's turd.

The Pardoner is so angry with this response, he cannot speak a word, and, just in time, the Knight steps in, bringing the Pardoner and the Host together and making them again friends. This done, the company continues on its way.

Analysis

The Pardoner has – in recent years – become one of the most critically discussed of the Canterbury pilgrims. His tale is in many ways the exemplar of the contradiction which the structure of the Tales themselves can so easily exploit, and a good touchstone for highlighting precisely how Chaucer can complicate an issue without ever giving his own opinion.

Thus the Pardoner embodies precisely the textual conundrum of the Tales themselves - he utters words which have absolutely no correlation with his actions. His voice, in other words, is entirely at odds with his behavior. The Pardoner's voice, at the beginning of his tale, rings out "as round as gooth a belle", summoning his congregation: and yet his church is one of extreme bad faith. There is a genuine issue here about whether the Pardoner's tale, being told by the Pardoner, can actually be the "moral" (325) tale it claims to be. For, while the tale does indeed demonstrate that money is the root of all evil, does it still count when he is preaching "agayn that same vice / Which that I use, and that is avarice" (against the very vice I commit: avarice"). How far, in other words, can the teller negate his own moral?

Yet the real problem is that the Pardoner is a successful preacher, and his profits point to several people who do learn from his speeches and repent their sin. His Tale too is an accurate demonstration of the way greed and avarice lead to evil. Hollow execution nevertheless, the Pardoner is an excellent preacher against greed. His voice, in short, operates regardless of his actions. Hollow sentiments produce real results.

This is also reflected in the imagery of the tale itself. The Pardoner hates full stomachs, preferring empty vessels, and, though his "wallet" may well be "bretful of pardoun comen from Rome" (687) but the moral worth of this paper is nil: the wallet, therefore, is full and empty at the same time – exactly like the Pardoner's sermon.

In just the same way Chaucer himself in the Tales can ventriloquize the sentiments of the pilgrim – the Reeve, the Pardoner, the Merchant – and so on, without actually committing to it. Because the Tales themselves, in supposedly reproducing the "telling" of a certain pilgrim, actually do enact precisely the disembodied voice which the Pardoner represents. The moral paradox of the Pardoner himself is precisely the paradox of the Tales and their series of Chaucer-ventriloquized disembodied voices.

There is a doubleness, a shifting evasiveness, about the Pardoner's double audience: the imaginary congregation he describes, and the assembled company to whom he preaches, and tells his "lewed tales", even calling them forth to pardon at the end. The point is clear: even though they know it is insincere, the Pardoner's shtick might still work on the assembled company.

The imagery of the Pardoner's Tale also reflects this fundamental hollowness. The tale itself is strewn with bones, whether in the oath sworn "by Goddes digne bones", whether in the word for cursed dice ("bones") or whether in the bones which the Pardoner stuffs into his glass cases, pretending they are relics. The literary landscape is strewn with body parts, and missing, absent bodies: beginning with the anonymous corpse carried past at the beginning of his tale. Bones, stomachs, coillons – words for body parts cover the page, almost as a grim reminder of the omnipresence of death in this tale.

The General Prologue, suggesting that the Pardoner resembles a "gelding or a mare", hints that the Pardoner may be a congenital eunuch or, taken less literally, a homosexual, and, as the Host seems to suggest at the end, might well be without his "coillons", a Middle English word meaning both "relics" and "testicles". All of the "relics" in this Tale, including the Pardoner's, evade the grasp of the hand. The Pardoner thus can be categorized along with the other bizarrely feminized males in the Tales, including Absolon, Sir Thopas, and, if we believe the Host, Chaucer (the character).

And of course, at the center of the tale, there is a search for somebody called "Death" which, naturally, does not find the person "Death", but death itself. It is a successful – but ultimately unsuccessful – search. All that is left over at the center of the Tales is the bushels of gold, sitting under a tree unclaimed. The root of the tale, as its moral similarly suggests about the root of evil, is money: and money was, to a medieval reader, known to be a spiritual "death". Notably, moreover, in the tale, both "gold" and "death" shift from metaphor to reality and back again; a neat reminder of the ability of the Tales to evade our grasp, raising difficult questions without ever answering them.

Character Analysis Pardoner

In his descriptions of the pilgrims in *The Prologue*, Chaucer begins with a description of the most noble, the Knight, and then includes those who have pretensions to the nobility, such as the Squire, and those whose manner and behavior suggest some aspects of nobility, such as the Prioress. Then he covers the middle class (the Merchant, the Clerk, and the Man of Law, for example) and ultimately descends to the most vulgar (the Miller and the Reeve). The reader must ask why the Pardoner is placed at the very end of the descending order.

From his prologue and tale, the reader discovers that the Pardoner is well read, that he is psychologically astute, and that he has profited significantly from his profession. Yet Chaucer places him at the very bottom of humanity because he uses the church and holy, religious objects as tools to profit personally. In the other great classic of the Middle Ages, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Dante arranges hell into nine concentric circles. The first circle is reserved for the least offensive sinner, with each subsequent circle holding ever more evil sinners, finally ending in the most pernicious and vicious sinners, including betrayers such as Judas Iscariot and Brutus.

In the ninth circle of Dante's *Inferno*, the circle just above the betrayers, are the simonists, those sinners who make a practice of selling holy items, sacraments, or ecclesiastical offices for personal profit. The punishment for such perversion of holy objects was very severe. Consequently, in the hierarchy of the medieval church, the Pardoner and his sin are especially heinous. The other pilgrims recognize the sins of the Pardoner, and their antagonism toward him is expressed by the Host at the end of the Pardoner's tale when the Pardoner has the effrontery and hypocrisy to try to sell one of his "pardons" to the Host.

Thus, while the Pardoner is the most evil of the pilgrims, he is nevertheless the most intriguing. The most provocative thing about the Pardoner is his open revelation about his own hypocrisy and avarice. Some critics have called him the most thoroughly modern character in *The Canterbury Tales*, especially in his use of modern psychology to dupe his victims. Likewise, his self-evaluation makes his character noteworthy: He maintains that, although he is not moral himself, he can tell a very moral tale. This concept alone makes him a character worth noting.

Theme of Pardoner's Tale

Though the Pardoner preaches against greed, the irony of the character is based in the Pardoner's hypocritical actions. He admits extortion of the poor, pocketing of indulgences, and failure to abide by teachings against jealousy and avarice. He also admits quite openly that he tricks the most guilty sinners into buying his spurious relics and does not really care what happens to the souls of those he has swindled.

The Pardoner is also deceptive in how he carries out his job. Instead of selling genuine relics, the bones he carries belong to pigs, not departed saints. The cross he carries appears to be studded with precious stones that are, in fact, bits of common metal. This irony could be an indication to Chaucer's dislike for religious profit—a pervasive late medieval theme hinging on anti-clericalism. Chaucer's use of subtle literary techniques, such as satire, seem to convey this message.

However, the Pardoner might also be seen as a reinforcement of the Apostolic Authority of the priesthood, which, according to the Catholic Church, functions fully even when the one possessing that authority is in a state of mortal sin, which in this case is supported by how the corrupt Pardoner is able to tell a morally intact tale and turn others from his same sin. Thomas Aquinas, an influential theologian of the late medieval period, had a philosophy concerning how God was able to work through evil people and deeds to accomplish good ends. Chaucer may have also been referencing a doctrine of St. Augustine of Hippo concerning the Donatist heresy of fourth and fifth century Northern Africa in which Augustine argued that a priest's ability to perform valid sacraments was not invalidated by his own sin. Thus, it is possible that with the Pardoner, Chaucer was criticising the administrative and economic practices of the Church while simultaneously affirming his support for its religious authority and dogma.

In the General Prologue of the Tales, the Pardoner is introduced with these lines:

With hym ther rood a gentil Pardoner
Of Rouncivale, his freend and his compeer,
That streight was comen fro the court of Rome.

Ful loude he soong "Com hider, love, to me!"
This Somonour bar to hym a stif burdoun ...
A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot.
No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;
As smothe it was as it were late shave.
I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare.

The last three lines indicate that the narrator thought the Pardoner to be either a eunuch ("geldyng") or a homosexual.