

*The
Pardoner's
Tale*

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The Pardoner's Tale

IN FLANDERS, once, there was a company
 Of young companions given to folly,
 Riot and gambling, brothels and taverns;
 And, to the music of harps, lutes, gitterns,
 They danced and played at dice both day and night,(5)
 And ate also and drank beyond their might,
 Whereby they made the devil's sacrifice
 Within that devil's temple, wicked wise,
 By superfluity both vile and vain.
 So damnable their oaths and so profane(10)
 That it was terrible to hear them swear;
 Our blessed Saviour's Body did they tear;
 They thought the Jews had rent Him not enough;
 And each of them at others' sins would laugh.
 Then entered dancing-girls of ill repute,(15)
 Graceful and slim, and girls who peddled fruit,
 Harpers and bawds and women selling cake,
 Who do their office for the Devil's sake,
 To kindle and blow the fire of lechery,
 Which is so closely joined with gluttony;(20)
 I call on holy writ, now, to witness
 That lust is in all wine and drunkenness.
 O gluttony, of you we may complain!
 Oh, knew a man how many maladies
 Follow on excess and on gluttonies,(25)
 Surely he would be then more moderate
 In diet, and at table more sedate.
 Alas! A foul thing is it, by my fay,
 To speak this word, and fouler is the deed,
 When man so guzzles of the white and red(30)
 That of his own throat makes he his privy,
 Because of this cursed superfluity.
 But truly, he that such delights entice
 Is dead while yet he wallows in this vice.
 A lecherous thing is wine, and drunkenness(35)
 Is full of striving and of wretchedness.
 O drunken man, disfigured is your face,
 Sour is your breath, foul are you to embrace,
 You fall down just as if you were stuck swine;
 Your tongue is loose, your honest care obscure;(40)
 For drunkenness is very sepulture
 Of any mind a man may chance to own.
 In whom strong drink has domination shown

He can no counsel keep for any dread.
Now keep you from the white and from the red.(45)
And now that I have told of gluttony,
I'll take up gambling, showing you thereby
The curse of chance, and all its evils treat;
From it proceeds false swearing and deceit,
Blaspheming, murder, and—what's more—the waste(50)
Of time and money; add to which, debased
And shamed and lost to honour quite is he,
Who once a common gambler's known to be.
And ever the higher one is of estate,
The more he's held disgraced and desolate.(55)
And if a prince plays similar hazardry
In all his government and policy,
He loses in the estimate of men
His good repute, and finds it not again.
Now these three roisterers, whereof I tell,(60)
Long before prime was rung by any bell,
Were sitting in a tavern for to drink;
And as they sat they heard a small bell clink
Before a corpse being carried to his grave;
Whereat one of them called unto his knave:(65)
“Go run,” said he, “and ask them civilly
What corpse it is that's just now passing by,
And see that you report the man's name well.”
“Sir,” said the boy, “it needs not that they tell.
I learned it, ere you came here, full two hours;(70)
He was, by gad, an old comrade of yours;
And he was slain, all suddenly, last night,
When drunk, as he sat on his bench upright;
An unseen thief, called Death, came stalking by,
Who hereabouts makes all the people die,(75)
And with his spear he clove his heart in two
And went his way and made no more ado.
He's slain a thousand with this pestilence;
And, master, ere you come in his presence,
It seems to me to be right necessary(80)
To be forewarned of such an adversary:
Be ready to meet him for evermore.
My mother taught me this, I say no more.”
“By holy Mary,” said the innkeeper,
“The boy speaks truth, for Death has slain, this year,(85)
A mile or more hence, in a large village,
Both man and woman, child and hind and page.

I think his habitation must be there;
To be advised of him great wisdom 'twere,
Before he did a man some dishonour.”(90)
“Yea, by God’s arms!” exclaimed this roisterer,
“Is it such peril, then, this Death to meet?
I’ll seek him in the road and in the street,
As I now vow to God’s own noble bones!
Hear, comrades, we’re of one mind, as each owns;(95)
Let each of us hold up his hand to other
And each of us become the other’s brother,
And we three will go slay this traitor Death;
He shall be slain who’s stopped so many a breath,
By God’s great dignity, ere it be night.”(100)
Together did these three their pledges plight
To live and die, each of them for the other,
As if he were his very own blood brother.
And up they started, drunken, in this rage,
And forth they went, and towards that village(105)
Whereof the innkeeper had told before.
And so, with many a grisly oath, they swore
And Jesus’ blessed body once more rent—
“Death shall be dead if we find where he went.”
When they had gone not fully half a mile,(110)
Just as they would have trodden over a stile,
An old man, and a poor , with them did meet.
This ancient man full meekly them did greet,
And said thus: “Now, lords, God keep you and see!”
The one that was most insolent of these three(115)
Replied to him: “What? Churl of evil grace,
Why are you all wrapped up, except your face?
Why do you live so long in so great age?”
This ancient man looked upon his visage
And thus replied: “Because I cannot find(120)
A man, nay, though I walked from here to Ind,
Either in town or country who’ll engage
To give his youth in barter for my age;
And therefore must I keep my old age still,
As long a time as it shall be God’s will.(125)
Not even Death, alas! my life will take;
Thus restless I my wretched way must make
But, sirs, in you it is no courtesy
To speak to an old man despitefully,
Unless in word he trespass or in deed.(130)
In holy writ you may, yourselves, well read

‘Before an old man, hoar upon the head,
You should arise.’ Which I advise you read,
Nor to an old man any injury do
More than you would that men should do to you(135)
In age, if you so long time shall abide;
And God be with you, whether you walk or ride.
I must pass on now where I have to go.”
“Nay, ancient churl, by God it sha’n’t be so,”
Cried out this other hazarder, anon;(140)
“You sha’n’t depart so easily, by Saint John!
You spoke just now of that same traitor Death,
Who in this country stops our good friends’ breath
Hear my true word, since you are his own spy,
Tell where he is or you shall rue it, aye(145)
By God and by the holy Sacrament!
Indeed you must be, with this Death, intent
To slay all us young people, you false thief.”
“Now, sirs,” said he, “if you’re so keen, in brief,
to find out Death, turn up this crooked way,(150)
For in that grove I left him, by my fay,
Under a tree, and there he will abide;
Nor for your boasts will he a moment hide.
See you that oak? Right there you shall him find.
God save you, Who redeemed all humankind,(155)
And mend your ways!”—thus said this ancient man.
And every one of these three roisterers ran
Till he came to that tree; and there they found,
Of florins of fine gold, new-minted, round,
Well-nigh eight bushels full, or so they thought.(160)
No longer, then, after this Death they sought,
But each of them so glad was of that sight,
Because the florins were so fair and bright,
That down they all sat by this precious hoard.
The worst of them was first to speak a word.(165)
“Brothers,” said he, “take heed to what I say;
My wits are keen, although I mock and play.
This treasure here Fortune to us has given
That mirth and jollity our lives may liven,
And easily as it’s come, so will we spend.(170)
But might this gold be carried from this place
Home to my house, or if you will, to yours—
For well we know that all this gold is ours—
Then were we all in high felicity.
But certainly by day this may not be;(175)

For men would say that we were robbers strong,
And we'd, for our own treasure, hang ere long.
This treasure must be carried home by night
All prudently and slyly, out of sight.
So I propose that cuts among us all(180)
Be drawn, and let's see where the cut will fall;
And he that gets the short cut, blithe of heart
Shall run to town at once, and to the mart,
And fetch us bread and wine here, privately.
And two of us shall guard, right cunningly,(185)
This treasure well; and if he does not tarry,
When it is night we'll all the treasure carry
Where, by agreement, we may think it best.”
That one of them the cuts brought in his fist
And bade them draw to see where it might fall;(190)
And it fell on the youngest of them all;
And so, forth toward the town he went anon.
And just as soon as he had turned and gone,
That one of them spoke thus unto the other:
“You know well that you are my own sworn brother,(195)
So to your profit I will speak anon.
You know well how our comrade is just gone;
And here is gold, and that in great plenty,
That's to be parted here among us three.
Nevertheless, if I can shape it so(200)
That it be parted only by us two,
Shall I not do a turn that is friendly?”
The other said: “Well, now, how can that be?
He knows well that the gold is with us two.
What shall we say to him? What shall we do?”(205)
“Shall it be secret?” asked the first rogue, then,
“And I will tell you in eight words, or ten,
What we must do, and how bring it about.”
“Agreed,” replied the other, “Never doubt,
That, **on my word**, I nothing will betray.”(210)
“Now,” said the first, “we're two, and I dare say
The two of us are stronger than is one.
Watch when he sits, and soon as that is done
Arise and make as if with him to play;
And I will **thrust him through the two sides**, yea,(215)
The while you romp with him as in a game,
And with your dagger see you do the same;
And then shall all this gold divided be,
My right dear friend, just between you and me;

Then may we both our every wish fulfill(220)
And play at dice all at our own sweet will.”
And thus agreed were these two rogues, that day,
To slay the third, as you have heard me say.
This youngest rogue who'd gone into the town,
Often in fancy rolled he up and down(225)
The beauty of those florins new and bright.
“O Lord,” thought he, “if so be that I might
Have all this treasure to myself alone,
There is no man who lives beneath the throne
Of God that should be then so merry as I.”(230)
And at the last the Fiend, our enemy,
Put in his thought that he should poison buy
With which he might kill both his fellows; aye,
The Devil found him in such wicked state,
He had full leave his grief to consummate;(235)
For it was utterly the man's intent
To kill them both and never to repent.
And on he strode, no longer would he tarry,
Into the town, to an apothecary,
And prayed of him that he'd prepare and sell(240)
Some poison for his rats, and some as well
For a polecat that in his yard had lain,
The which, he said, his capons there had slain,
And fain he was to rid him, if he might,
Of vermin that thus damaged him by night.(245)
The apothecary said: “And you shall have
A thing of which, so God my spirit save,
In all this world there is not live creature
That's eaten or has drunk of this mixture
As much as equals but a grain of wheat,(250)
That shall not sudden death thereafter meet;
Yea, die he shall, and in a shorter while
Than you require to walk but one short mile;
This poison is so violent and strong.”
This wicked man the poison took along(255)
With him boxed up, and then he straightway ran
Into the street adjoining, to a man,
And of him borrowed generous bottles three;
And into two his poison then poured he;
The third one he kept clean for his own drink.(260)
For all that night he was resolved to swink
In carrying the florins from that place.
And when this roisterer, with evil grace,

Had filled with wine his mighty bottles three,
Then to his comrades forth again went he.(265)
What is the need to tell about it more?
For just as they had planned his death before,
Just so they murdered him, and that anon.
And when the thing was done, then spoke the one:
“Now let us sit and drink and so be merry,(270)
And afterward we will his body bury.”
And as he spoke, one bottle of the three
He took wherein the poison chanced to be
And drank and gave his comrade drink also,
For which, and that anon, lay dead these two.(275)
Thus ended these two homicides in woe;
Died thus the treacherous poisoner also.
O cursed sin, full of abominableness!
O treacherous homicide! O wickedness!
O gluttony, lechery, and hazardry!(280)
O blasphemmer of Christ with villainy,
And with great oaths, habitual for pride!
Alas! Mankind, how may this thing betide
That to thy dear Creator, Who thee wrought,
And with His precious blood salvation bought,(285)
Thou art so false and so unkind, alas!
Now, good men, God forgive you each trespass,
And keep you from the sin of avarice.
My holy pardon cures and will suffice,
So that it brings me gold, or silver brings,(290)
Or else, I care not—brooches, spoons or rings.
Bow down your heads before this holy bull!
Come up, you wives, and offer of your wool!
Your names I’ll enter on my roll, anon,
And into Heaven’s bliss you’ll go, each one.(295)
For I’ll absolve you, by my special power,
You that make offering, as clean this hour
As you were born.
And lo, sirs, thus I preach.
And Jesus Christ, who is our souls’ great leech,(300)
So grant you each his pardon to receive;
For that is best; I will not you deceive.
But, sirs, one word forgot I in my tale;
I’ve relics in my pouch that cannot fail,
As good as England ever saw, I hope,(305)
The which I got by kindness of the pope.
If gifts your change of heart and mind reveal.

You'll get my absolution while you kneel.
Come forth, and kneel down here before, anon.
And humbly you'll receive my full pardon;(310)
Or else receive a pardon as you wend,
All new and fresh as every mile shall end,
So that you offer me each time, anew,
More gold and silver, all good coins and true.
It is an honour to each one that's here(315)
That you may have a competent pardoner
To give you absolution as you ride,
For all adventures that may still betide.
Perchance from horse may fall down one or two,
Breaking his neck, and it might well be you.(320)
See what insurance, then, it is for all
That I within your fellowship did fall,
Who may absolve you, both the great and less,
When soul from body passes, as I guess.
I think our host might just as well begin,(325)
For he is most enveloped in all sin.
Come forth, sir host, and offer first anon,
And you shall kiss the relics, every one,
Aye, for a groat! Unbuckle now your purse."
"Nay, nay," said he, "then may I have Christ's curse!(330)
Why, you would have me kissing your old breeches,
And swear they were the relics of a saint,
Though with your excrement 'twere dabbed like paint.
By cross Saint Helen found in Holy Land,
I would I had your ballocks in my hand(335)
Instead of relics in a reliquary;
Let's cut them off, and them I'll help you carry;
They shall be shrined within a hog's fat turd."
This pardoner, he answered not a word;
So wrathful was he no word would he say.(340)
"Now," said our host, "I will no longer play
With you, nor any other angry man."
But at this point the worthy knight began,
When that he saw how all the folk did laugh:
"No more of this, for it's gone far enough;(345)
Sir pardoner, be glad and merry here;
And you, sir host, who are to me so dear,
I pray you that you kiss the pardoner.
And, pardoner, I pray you to draw near,
And as we did before, let's laugh and play."(350)
And then they kissed and rode forth on their way.

Footnotes

1

The "Pardoner's Tale" takes the form of an *exemplum*, a moral anecdote that emphasized binary character traits in order to make a point. Preachers used exempla to punctuate their sermons with vivid stories that would illustrate the point of church doctrine. Often these stories would be put into collections of exempla that preachers could copy into their sermons. The Pardoner's use of exemplum indicates that this story is not his own but rather taken from another source.

— Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff

2

Rent in this context means to tear apart, separate by parts, or divide. The three main characters tear apart the body of Christ with their blasphemous words and actions. The Pardoner compares them to "Jews" who are blamed for the crucifixion of Christ in the New Testament. In this way, the Pardoner implies that swearing and crucifying Christ are the same thing. The antisemitism imbedded in the comparison also demonstrates the church context in which the Pardoner operates.

— Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff

3

Notice that it takes the Pardoner sixty lines to get to his story. Up until this point he has been giving a sermon on vice and moral depravity. Remember that the Pardoner is someone who sells *indulgences* and was depicted in the General Prologue as an especially heinous person that manipulated people's faith in order to personally profit. The ironic presence of this moral sermon in a story told by an immoral man points again at the hypocrisy within the church.

— Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff

4

The personification of Death in the Middle Ages was a popular image in literature, poetry, and paintings, and would have been recognizable to Chaucer's audience. He was widely feared especially in the context of the Black Plague. Because the religious and scientific knowledge of the time could not explain the plague, this personified Death became an explanation for the seemingly meaningless and random deaths of many people.

— Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff

5

The Pardoner juxtaposes the kind, meek old man with this excessively rude response from the rioters. With this juxtaposition, the rioters are seen as both disrespectful and arrogant men. The Pardoner uses this comparison to conflate actions with personality: the rioters are rude to someone so kind because they are morally decrepit people.

— Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff

6

Notice how quickly the rioters forget their vow to kill death in the presence of money. Their willingness to abandon their noble (if not foolish) quest demonstrates the weakness of their moral characters. This foreshadows their downfall and the Pardoner's ultimate theme that greed is the most dangerous vice of men.

— Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff

7

The second man promises to keep the first man's secret. However, throughout the story the rioters have not been good about keeping their promises. They abandoned their vow to kill death, claimed gold that was not

theirs, and are now conspiring to break their vow to divide the money evenly. In this context, "On my word" becomes a statement of *dramatic irony*. The audience knows that this man's word means nothing and can guess that his inability to keep his word will cause the men's plans to unravel.

— *Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*

8

With this euphemism, the first man suggests that he will stab their third companion so that they do not have to share the gold with him. Notice that the men went looking for Death and are now plotting to murder their comrade. They are bringing about the very thing they set out to vanquish. The Pardoner uses this ironic turn to demonstrate the dangers of greed.

— *Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*

9

Notice that the incentive for murdering their friend and stealing his money has no greater aim than "playing at dice." In other words, the men plot to murder in order to continue engaging in their vices. Their actions are not only immoral, but also justified by immoral motivations.

— *Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*

10

Notice that the Pardoner has changed the descriptive adjective he uses to indicate the rioter. Now he is not only a rioter, comrade, or drunk, but a "wicked" man. His choices have fundamentally changed who he is so that this wickedness is now part of his identity. In this way, the Pardoner implicitly shows his audience that some decisions are irreversible stains upon the soul. It is another way in which he uses his rhetoric to convince the audience of his moral.

— *Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*

11

Until this point, the Pardoner has told a straight forward exempla that demonstrates the slippery slope of indulging in one's vices and teaches a moral tale. However, rather than concluding in a moral message that will help his listeners live more virtuous lives, the Pardoner concludes his tale by telling his listeners that the only way they can avoid this fate is by buying an indulgence from him. This turn demonstrates the Pardoner's hypocrisy and demonstrates Chaucer's larger theme that church officials are corrupt.

— *Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*

12

Notice that there are two voices operating in this story. There is the Pardoner who uses his rhetorical appeal to craft a moral which will scare his audience into buying his indulgences. And there is the larger frame of Chaucer writing this character to critique the church. By ending this story with the Pardoner asking for money, the frame becomes evident behind the story.

— *Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*

13

In the Roman Catholic Church it is believed that if one does not repent before they die, they will go to hell. If they repent they will be able to go to purgatory and once there earn the chance to go to heaven. The Pardoner uses this threat to scare his fellow pilgrims into buying his indulgences.

— *Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*

14

Notice how the Pardoner's rhetoric tries to transform the action of the pilgrims giving him money into a favor that he does for them. This rhetorical appeal seems to fail because it is obviously an attempt to profit off of them

rather than save their souls. In this way, Chaucer's larger rhetorical strategy comes through: in making the Pardoner an unsuccessful and transparently greedy character, Chaucer is able to show his audience church hypocrisy and reinforce his theme.

— *Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*

15

Wrath is one of the seven deadly sins in the Christian tradition. Using this adjective to describe the Pardoner, Chaucer is able to demonstrate the immorality and hypocrisy of this character. He uses this subtle rhetorical device to cause the audience to dislike and distrust this character, and to undermine the moral credibility of his story.

— *Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*

16

The Knight's ability to save this situation at the end of the tale reinforces the image of him presented in the General Prologue. He seems to be one of the only pilgrims who is true to his nature and rank. The favoring of this Knight and the depiction of this church official as vile suggest a very strong social critique theme.

— *Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*