

Lecture 5: Chaucer's Pardoner

From the General Prologue (A234-35: 671-711)

With hym [the Summoner] ther rood a gentil pardoner
Of Rouncivale, his freend and his compeer, . . .
This pardoner hadde heer as yelow as wex, 677
But smothe it heeng as dooth a strike of flex; . . .
But thynne it lay, by colpons oon and oon. . . . 681
Swiche glarynge eyen hadde he as an hare. . . . 686
A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot. 690
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. 693

What is being implied about the Pardoner's masculinity?

Then the focus shifts to the Pardoner's skill in preaching
for his own profit:

But of his craft, fro Berwyk into Ware,
Ne was ther swich another pardoner . . . 695
He hadde a croys of latoun ful of stones, 701
And in a glas he hadde pigges bones.
But with thise relikes, whan that he fond
A povre person dwellynge upon lond,
Upon a day he gat hym moore moneye 705
Than that the person gat in monthes tweye;
And thus, with feyned flaterye and japes,
He made the person and the peple his apes. . . .
Wel koude he rede a lessoun or a storie,
But alderbest he song an offertorie. 712

Now what do you think of the pardoner?

Later on, during the Pilgrimage, the Host (much moved by the Physician's "tragic" Tale of injustice and violence) asks the Pardoner to "Tell us some mirthe or japes" (A 285: 30-31). But the general company protests:

“Nay, lat him telle us of no ribaudye.
Tel us som moral thing that we may lere,
Som wit, and thanne wol we gladly heere. (36-38)

So after lubricating his throat, the Pardoner begins to unfold his mystery.

My theme is alway oon, and evere was:
Radix malorum est cupiditas. . . . (45-46)

And in Latin I speke a wordes fewe,
To saffron with my predicacioun,
And for to stire hem to devocioun. (56-58)

Then he tells the pilgrims he has the power to forgive all sins—except:

If any wight be in this chirche now
That hath doon sinne horrible, that he
Dar nat for shame of it yshriven be,
Or any womman, be she yong or old,
That hath ymaked hir housbonde cokewold,
Swich folk shal have no power ne no grace
To offren to my relikes in this place. . . . (90-96)

He delights in revealing his power to manipulate an audience *and* in letting us in on the secret.

. . . it is joye to se my bisynesse.

Of avarice and of swich cursednesse

Is al my prechyng, for to make hem free

To yeven hir pens, and namely unto me.

For myn entente is nat but for to wynne,

And nothyng for correccioun of synne. (111-16)

In the course of deliberate self-disclosure, the Pardoner discovers a very curious fact:

I preche of no thyng but for coveityse. 136

Therefore my theme is yet, and evere was,

Radix malorum est cupiditas.

Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice

Which that I use, and that is avarice. 140

But though myself be gilty in that synne,

Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne

From avarice, and soore to repente.

So he can save others but not himself? Do you see how that works?

He insists that saving souls

. . . is nat my principal entente;

I preche nothyng but for coveitise. 145

. . . I wol drinke licour of the vine 164

And have a joly wenche in every town. . . .

But . . . though myself be a ful vicious man, 166. . . 171

A Moral tale yit I you telle can,

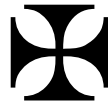
Which **I am wont to preche for to winne.** 173

What do you call someone whose practice contradicts his profession?

A more interesting question: Why is he telling us this about himself?

His tale and the sequel give us further insight into that question.

The story that he tells of the Three Young Men who find Death, is succinctly told in this narrative panel:



[1

The exemplum is prefaced by a diatribe against lechery, gluttony (esp. drunkenness), gambling, and “superfluitee abhominable” (A288: 183). And this curious diatribe is highlighted by some really bad “biblical” theology:

O glotonye, ful of cursednesse! (A289: 210-47)

O cause first of oure confusioun!

O original of oure dampnacioun, . . . 212

Corrupt was al this world for glotonye. 216

Adam oure fader, and his wyf also,

Fro paradys to labour and to wo

Were dryven for that vice, 219

WHY GLUTTONY RATHER THAN AVARICE?

Of this matere, O Paul, wel canstou trete:

“Mete unto wombe, and wombe eek unto mete,

Shal God destroyen bothe.” 235 [2

The Pardoner suffers from a deeply rooted self-loathing, a hatred of his own malformed body that is expressed as a thinly veiled misogyny. He tells us that “the fir of lecherye / . . . is annexed unto glotonye” (A289: 193-94). Railing against those morbid sinners whose “wombe is hir god,” his final denunciation of gluttony is also a cry of anguish:

O wombe, O bely, O stinking cod,

Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun! 247

The Pardoner desperately longs to find what most terrifies him, a womb of his own.

The three young men in the Pardoner’s exemplum fulfill their destiny in a multivalent parable, in which we and the Pardoner may see ourselves reflected in a very dark glass.

[3

On their way to kill Death, they meet an Old Man whom they fail to recognize:

Why artou al forwrapped save thy face?

Why livestou so longe in so greet age? 431

Because he cannot find anyone who wants to trade their youth for his age, he replies.

And “Deeth” has no use for him: [4

Ne Deeth, allas, ne wol nat have my lif.

Thus walke I lik a resteles caitif, 440

And on the ground which is my modres gate

I knocke with my staf bothe erly and late,

And saye, ‘Leve moder, leet me in.’

The three young men, mysteriously enriched beyond their wildest dreams, will swiftly discover that it is not enough to satisfy their boundless greed—their hunger for Deeth.

The Old Man points them to their target:

“Now sires,” quod he, “if that ye be so lief
To finde Deeth, turne up this crooked way,
For in that grove I lafte him, by my fay,
Under a tree, and ther he wol abide.” 475

The thieves, of course, fall out, and the Pardoner draws the obvious moral:

O cursed sinne of alle cursednesse!
O traitours homicide, O wikkednesse!
O glotonye, luxure, and hasardrye! 609

And he concludes with an offer to “assoile” (625) his audience, to absolve them and cleanse them of their sinful nature.

What audience is he talking to? Has he forgotten where he is or what he has already told us about himself and his motives?

First he concludes his sermon—saying, in effect, *this is how I wrap things up*:

Now goode men, God foryeve yow youre trespas,
And ware yow fro the synne of avarice!
Myn hooly pardoun may yow alle warice,
So that ye offre nobles or sterlynges,
Or elles silver broches, spoones, rynges. 620
. . . and lo, sires, thus I preche. 627

But now, having welcomed us to the inner circle of the undeceived, and having told us that he practices only to feed his own avarice, the Pardoner raises the stakes again. He offers to heal us also of our sin:

But, sires, o word forgot I in my tale —
I have relikes and pardoun in my male, 920
As faire as any man in engelond.
Whiche were me yeven by the popes hond.
If any of yow wole, of devocion,
Offren, and han myn absolucion,
Com forth anon, and kneleth heere adoun, 925
And mekely receyveth my pardoun.

He seems almost ready to scoop up the whole pot, but he makes a fatal mistake:

I rede that oure hoost heere shal bigynne,

For he is moost envoluped in synne.

Com forth, sire hoost, and offre first anon . . . 943

The Host calls his bluff:

Nay, nay! quod he, . . . it shal nat be, . . .

Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech,

And swere it were a relyk of a seint,

Though it were with thy fundement depeint! 950

But, by the croys which that seint eleyne fond,

I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond

In stide of relikes or of seintuarie.

Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;

They shul be shryned in an hogges toord! 955

[To] this [the] pardoner answerde nat a word;

So wrooth he was, no word ne wolde he seye.

Why do you suppose the Pardoner chose the Host, of all people, upon whom to practice his “craft”?

NOTES

1] This illustration is reproduced from the *Longman Anthology of British Literature*, Volume IA, 389.

2] 1 Corinthians 6:12-13 = “All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any. Meats for the belly, and the belly for meats: but God shall destroy both it and them. Now the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord : and the Lord for the body.”

3] St. Paul: “For now we see through a glass, darkly: but then face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

4] Who is the Old Man? According to the Authorities:

In his “Explanatory Notes” in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1957 2nd ed.), 731, F. N. Robinson writes: “The old man here described seems to be almost entirely Chaucer’s invention. In the Italian tale in the *Centonovelle Antiche* there is a hermit (‘romito’) represented as fleeing from Death. The figure in Chaucer becomes rather a symbol of Death itself, or possibly of Old Age, conceived as Death’s messenger. Mr. W.J.B. Owen, in *RES* (New Series) II, 49 ff., argues against such symbolistic interpretations. . . . The Wandering Jew is a similar figure and may have furnished hints. . . . Professor Kittredge (*Am. Jour. Philol.*, IX, 84 f.) has pointed out a very probable source in the first elegy of Maximianus, ll. 1-4, 223-28. . . . With the general sentiment may be compared Boethius, I, m. 1, used by Chaucer in *Tr*, iv, 501 ff. See further Miss M.P. Hamilton, *SP*, XXXVI, 571 ff. for a collection of interpretations; Mr. R. Miller, in his recent article in *Spec.*, XXX, 188 ff., would identify the Old Man with St. Paul’s *vetus homo*, the unregenerate image of the fallen Adam.”

Larry D. Benson's *Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1987 3rd ed.), 909, sheds no new light: "The Old Man's desire for death is not found in any of the analogues; it is based on the first elegy of Maximian, in which the aged man knocks on the ground and pleads, "Receive me, mother, take pity on the hardships of age; I seek to warm my tired bones in your bosom" (vv. 227-28; S[ources] & A[nalogues], 437).

Meanwhile, Talbot Donaldson, ed. *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1958), 930, offers suggestive "Commentary": "In the monologue of the strange old man who directs the youths to their death, the ultimate mysteries of human life are treated with the familiarity we accord homely, everyday things. And Death in the end turns out to be someone who, if not a rural bully dwelling in the next village, is equally close at hand. Out of the miasma that hangs invisible just above the heads of the revelers, Death reaches with sure hand to claim those who so arrogantly started out to slay him. Nevertheless, despite the strong aura of the supernatural, the entire action is restricted to a purely natural sequence of events. ¶ "The ending Chaucer has assigned to the Pardoner himself makes his exemplum even more brilliant. The man who, like the revelers in his story, seems so firmly in control of his destiny, has in his sermon eloquently demonstrated that avenging powers dwell close to a man's own home. If it is not the supernatural, it is at least an ironic destiny working through his own nature that impels the Pardoner to provoke his own social destruction among the pilgrims."

I have not consulted D.W. Robertson (who, I suspect, would probably not agree), but I believe the Pardoner, who is also Death, is driven by a desperate hunger, which is spiritual but not necessarily "supernatural."