

The Self-Revelatory Tendencies of The Pardoner in the *Canterbury Tales*

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The Pardoner is the last of the pilgrims to be described in *the General Prologue*. Although Chaucer asks for forgiveness for not placing the pilgrims in their proper degree, this has some humiliating connotations to the minds of the readers. Putting the Pardoner last in *the General Prologue*, Chaucer suggests that he is like an unpleasant thought coming into existence slowly in the minds referring to his being narrated as one of the most wicked characters of all.¹ There might also be literary and artistic reasons for mentioning the Pardoner at the end of the character list. It is clear that Chaucer has been particularly interested in him in the *Pardoner's Prologue* and *Epilogue* and he reveals more about him than about any other pilgrims except the Wife of Bath.

The Pardoner and the other pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* are primary types representative of their estates or positions in society. Chaucer relies on preconceived ideas about the pardoners, and much of what he tells us gives the details of the examples of malpractice of the profession. In the Middle Ages, a pardoner was an official of the church whose duty was to collect charitable offerings for religious purposes on behalf of some ecclesiastical institution. The Christian Church was a keeper of the treasury of grace which had been gathered by Christ and the saints. Some of that grace was distributed by authorized people who would collect in return money and possessions which were needed for building and equipping churches and hospitals. This system, in theory a means by which sinners could gain access to the Church's 'treasury of grace', was in practice open to gross corruption.²

After a while, this system became associated with the rooted practice that allows penitents to atone for their sins by making a money payment instead of being subjected to stricter forms of penance, such as fasting or reading out loud hundreds of prayers. No

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1. Harold Bloom, *Geoffrey Chaucer's the Pardoner's Tale*. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), p.46.
 2. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.201.

pardoner was ever entitled to offer a real pardon for a payment of money or goods. The real ceremony of achieving a pardon was through the sacrament of penance, in which a priest or someone of similar status went through carefully defined stages of hearing confessions, assuring himself of the truthfulness of the repentance, prescribing penance, and pronouncing absolution. Chaucer's pardoner is, of course, not acting like a real pardoner and is claiming more than he should:

“Ther preched a pardoner as he a prest were:
 Broughte forth a bulle with bisshopes seles,
 And seide that himself myghte assoillen hem alle
 Of falskede of fastynge, of avowes ybroken.
 Lewed men leved hym wel and liked hise wordes,
 Comen up knelynge to kissen his bulle.”³

The Pardoner is among the most disreputable pilgrims and in these lines, he is mentioned as someone who is preaching as if he were a priest. He claims that he has the power to pardon everyone for failure to keep fasts and for broken vows. He mentions the licence sealed with bishops' seals. He might possibly have had a genuine licence from 'oure lige lord', the local bishop, but only the very simple could expect him to be authorized by 'popes', 'cardinales', 'patriarkes' and 'bishops'.⁴ It is obvious that most of his documents are fake and although everything he says is just a part of his trickery, the audience, mostly uneducated, believes every word of the Pardoner affected by his preaching skills and is very delighted with what he claims. These lines show his avarice of earning money by using religion deceptively and perverting in particular the doctrine of forgiveness of sins that gives people their chance of eternal life.⁵ He wittily points out that he can offer no help to those who have on their consciences sins so appalling that they have not dared to confess them.⁶ Therefore, with this trick he manages to force his audience to come up and kneel to kiss his licence and buy them. His purpose in preaching is to gain money. In this instance he is supposed to be 'of Rouncivale', that necessitates that he act on behalf of the hospital of the Blessed Mary of Rouncivale at Charing Cross in London.⁷ Also, the lengthy Prologue to the tale is designed not only to reveal his true motives to us but also to show that he achieves his ends by means of a systematic exploitation of superstition

3. A. C. Spearing, *The Pardoner's Prologue & Tale* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.68-73.

4. A. C. Spearing, *The Pardoner's Prologue & Tale*, p.8.

5. Helen Phillips, *An Introduction to the Canterbury Tales* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p.149.

6. A. C. Spearing, *The Pardoner's Prologue & Tale*, p.8.

7. Geoffrey Lester, *Macmillan master guides the Pardoner's Tale by Geoffrey Chaucer* (Houndmills: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1987), p.28.

and human sinfulness.⁸ However, we have no doubt that the money he collects from people goes into his own pocket directly:

“By this gaude have I wonne, yeer by yeer,
An hundred mark sith I was pardoned.”⁹

The Pardoner, therefore, is definitely the representative of the corruption of the church and the malpractice of pardoning. The first impression is he is the exact person as was defined by Pope Boniface IX:

“Certain churchmen...claim they are sent by us...to receive money for us and for the Roman Church, and they go about the country under these pretexts. In this way they announce to the faithful and simple people the real or claimed licence which they have received, and, irreverently abusing those which are real, in pursuit of vile and hateful gain, add to their impudence by claiming false and pretended authorisations of this kind.”¹⁰

When introducing the Pardoner, Chaucer uses lots of signs that his Pardoner will also be as vicious as the stereotype mentioned by Pope Boniface IX:

“This Pardoner hadde heer as yelow as wex,
But smothe it heeng, as dooth a strike of flex;
By ounces henge his lokkes that he hadde,
And therwith he hise shuldres overspradde;
But thynne it lay by colpons oon and oon,
But hood for jolitee, wered he noon,
For it was trussed up in his walet.
Hym thoughte he rood al of the newe jet;
Discheveele, save his cappe, he rood al bare.
Swiche glarynge eyen hadde he as an hare.”¹¹

Chaucer is attributing corruption to his Pardoner through physiognomy in these lines. In Chaucer's time, physiognomy was a well-known science of interpreting a man's character from a study of his features. Certain stereotypes concerning physical features were understood by all people of his time. So, Chaucer used these stereotypes as symbolism in his work. Chaucer loaded this passage with physiognomy to let his readers know what type of man this pardoner was. Having long thin yellow hair and high-pitched

8. Gerald Morgan, “*The Self-Revealing Tendencies of Chaucer's Pardoner*,” *Modern Language Review*, 71(1976), p.253.

9. A. C. Spearing, *The Pardoner's Prologue & Tale*, pp.101-102.

10. Geoffrey Lester, *Macmillan master guides the Pardoner's Tale by Geoffrey Chaucer*, pp.28-29.

11. A. C. Spearing, *The Pardoner's Prologue & Tale*, pp.675-684.

voice used to be considered as lack of manhood. The wide glittering eyes were symbols of shamelessness and pride and the fact that he had no facial hair was a symbol of lack of manhood and sly cleverness. In addition to his physical description as an obnoxious man, his speeches full of confession and self-exposure were also considered as the indicators of the Pardoner's wickedness and his being duplicity:

"As long ago as 1914, Kittredge claimed, "The Pardoner is an abandoned wretch" characterized by "cynicism". He is "the most abandoned character among the Canterbury Pilgrims", "the one lost soul among the Canterbury Pilgrims" and following George Lyman Kittredge, Chaucerians have uniformly taken the Pardoner's words at face value, condemning him as a hypocrite."¹²

For some Chaucerians, the Pardoner was regarded as an abuser of faith and a typical evil-minded churchman as also defined by Pope Boniface IX. However, what is not typical of a pardoner of that age is confessing his act of misusing of the faith and naivety to his audience. When at line 429 he says that he himself is a cynical hypocrite but he may still be the ambassador of salvation for others, he implies that good sermons can be delivered for bad reasons, too:

"But though my self be gilty in that synne,
Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne
From avarice, and soore to repente.
But that is nat my principal entente:
I preche no thyng but for coveitise.
Of this matere it oghte ynow suffise"¹³

He says he preaches for no motive but avarice and he is also guilty of this sin. Then, he adds he can make other people depart from avarice and repent sorely. However, he frankly admits that that is not his primary purpose, because he preaches for nothing but greed. Surprisingly, the confession in his speech is not judged as being absurd or confusing for his audience. On the contrary, they are hooked just like children watching a magician performing in a party. It is also understood from lines that "the Pardoner is explicitly telling the pilgrims that although he is a wretched, thieving hypocrite, he knows that his sermon is good and true and that they should note what he says, not what he does."¹⁴ He is being perfectly honest about himself. His covetousness is always apparent:

12. Robert Boenig, "The Pardoner's Hypocrisy and His Subjectivity," ANQ, 13 (2000), p.11.

13. A. C. Spearing, *The Pardoner's Prologue & Tale*, pp.429-434.

14. Edmund Reiss, "The Final Irony of the Pardoner's Tale, *College English*," 25(1964), p.262.

“I preche, so as ye han herd bifore
And telle an hundred false japes more.”¹⁵

He courageously plays on his trusting congregation, but at the same time he is being self-revealing and explains how he tells his “japes” artlessly. His obvious enthusiasm in revealing his sins is actually an evidence that he is deceiving no one: neither himself nor his audience:

“First I pronounce whennnes that I come
And thanne my bulles shewe I, alle and some.”¹⁶

Here we see that he is pronouncing where he comes from before the time he starts preaching, and then he shows his bulls to his audience. This shocking confession can actually be regarded as his revealing himself too much but no one is able to see the full meaning of what he says.¹⁷

“As dooth a downe sitting on a berne.
Myne handes and my tonge goon so yerne
That it is joye to se my bisynesse
Is al my prechyng, for to make hem free
To yeven hir pens, and namely un to me.
For myn entente is nat but for to wynne,
And no thyng for correceioun of synne.
I rekke nevere whan that they been beryed,
Thogh that hir soules goon a blakeberied!”¹⁸

His likening himself to a dove that is sitting on a barn is definitely not a very religious action and the dove mentioned in line 307 is not a religious symbol. It is totally worldly. He says all his preaching is about avarice and such cursed things to make the audience generous in giving their pence. So, his aim is all for gain and not at all for the correction of sin. In these lines, the Pardoner again fails to hide his supposed hypocrisy, declaring his intentions to all pilgrims. Kittredge indicates that:

“The Pardoner has not always been an assassin of souls. He is a renegade, perhaps, from some holy order. Once he preached for Christ’s sake; and now under the spell of the wonderful story he has told and of recollections that stir within him, he suffers a very paroxysm of agonized sincerity. It can last but a moment.”¹⁹

15. A. C. Spearing, *The Pardoner’s Prologue & Tale*, pp.107-108.

16. A. C. Spearing, *The Pardoner’s Prologue & Tale*, pp.47-48.

17. Edmund Reiss, “*The Final Irony of the Pardoner’s Tale*. *College English*,” p.263.

18. A. C. Spearing, *The Pardoner’s Prologue & Tale*, pp.307-314.

19. A. C. Spearing, *The Pardoner’s Prologue & Tale*, p.216.

For Kittredge, the Pardoner is overwhelmed with a heavy burden of remorse caused by his sins which paves the way for his self-confessions. He believed that this was actually a moment of true sincerity by the Pardoner, and he was genuinely concerned about the well being of the other pilgrims. Chaucer, however, is just showing how accustomed the Pardoner is with using this tale to sell his pardons in *Pardoner's Prologue*. With the 'venym' he spits and glaring eyes he has, he fixes his audience and draws them into his own evil.²⁰ He preaches only about covetousness and it sounds like he is simply reciting a memorized sermon:

"Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe,
Of holynesse, to seme holy and trewe
But shorlty myn entente I wol devyse;
I preche of no thyng but for coveityse."²¹

When Chaucer introduces the Pardoner in the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*, he makes it clear that we should pay special attention to the Pardoner's relics. A relic is frequently identified as a sign of holiness in those times. However, such an operation depended in part upon the regulation of when and by whom a relic could be accessed. In the Pardoner's case, the relics are not even covered by their shrines which makes the reader question the holiness of them. *The General Prologue* portrait affiliates the Pardoner with relic cults and pilgrimages by the pilgrim souvenir he wears, but even more so by the relics he carries.²²

"For in his male he hadde a pilwe-beer,
Which that he seyde was Oure Lady veyl;
He seyde he hadde a gobet of the seyl
That Seint Peter hadde, whan that he wente
Upon the see, til Jhesu Crist hym hente.
He hadde a croys of latoun ful of stones,
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
Than that the person gat in monthes tweye;
And thus, with feyned flaterye and japes,
He made the person and the peple his apes."²³

20. A. C. Spearing, *The Pardoner's Prologue & Tale*, p.25.

21. A. C. Spearing, *The Pardoner's Prologue & Tale*, pp.135-138.

22. Robyn Malo, "The Pardoner's Relics (and why they matter the most)," *The Chaucer Review*, 43 (2008), p.82.

23. A. C. Spearing, *The Pardoner's Prologue & Tale*, pp.694-706.

Although the unresponsiveness of the audience to the Pardoner's speech full of confession is bewildering, it is an indication of the unquestioned obedience to someone who claims to find solutions for the irredeemable. The audience is influenced by the rags and bones he calls relics as he has elaborate methods of displaying his relics. The amount of space allocated to relics clearly shows their importance to Chaucer's conception of the Pardoner and he manipulates his relics in order to make a living.²⁴

In the beginning of *Pardoner's Prologue*, we see that the Pardoner announces his theme in Latin '*Radix malorum est Cupiditas*', 'the root of all evil is the love of money'. Then he continues in *the Prologue*:

"Lordynges," quod he, "in chirches whan I preche,
I peyne me to han an hauteyn speche,
And ryngge it out as round as gooth a belle."²⁵

He says that when he preaches in churches, he strives for a resounding voice and he rings it out as round as a bell, for he knows by heart what he says. He takes pleasure in his own skill in projecting himself, and in using his voice to best effect. However, as a preacher and a churchman, he is not supposed to show his feeling of satisfaction about his own skills, which are in this case totally irrelevant to the religious practice. The repetition of the lines '*Radix malorum est cupiditas*' emphasizes the theme and ironically refers to the Pardoner's love of money. So, the Pardoner's 'cupiditas' is avarice and he offers a short cut to salvation.²⁶ However, the mention of the seven deadly sins, all of which are embodied by the Pardoner himself, throughout the poem indicates that the word 'cupiditas' does not only have the meaning of 'love of money', but it is covering all kinds of greed than would cover mere financial greed:

"The Pardoner not only exemplifies avarice, for this is merely the most obvious of his wickednesses; but in terms of the of the church's teaching on the seven deadly sins he appears to encompass them all."²⁷

It seems to be ironic for a pardoner to be a hypocrite. It also seems to be ironic that the sins the Pardoner preaches about in his sermon- gluttony, lechery, drunkenness, and swearing- are actually his own sins. He states that they are his own sins. He never denies that he likes to:

24. Robyn Malo, "The Pardoner's Relics (and why they matter the most)," p.84.

25. A. C. Spearing, *The Pardoner's Prologue & Tale*, pp.329-331.

26. Steve Ellis (ed.), *Chaucer an Oxford Guide* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.87

27. Geoffrey Lester, *Macmillan master guides the Pardoner's Tale by Geoffrey Chaucer*, p.51.

“drynke licour of the vyne,
And have a joly wenche in every toun.”²⁸

There is no denial in his words. His motives may not be good, but he is a perfect teacher. His sermon is powerful. The good words he speaks may not, because of his sinful state, help him. However, the words are still good. Though the teacher may be a sinner, his words may still be helpful. Chaucer has put on the shoulders of the Pardoner the sins of the world in general and of the other Pilgrims in particular and has then had the man show these sins in, as it were, a glaring light.²⁹ As a result, although many of his audience listen to him carefully, his wicked character is not pardoned by others.

He confesses all his sins and explains the real motives of his actions explicitly. As Reiss indicates, one may feel the need to justify his performance by saying that the man is drunk and unknowingly revealing himself.³⁰ However, the Pardoner would seem to be wholly candid. Looking at him, we can see a man apparently wholly conscious of what he is saying and doing. He is a self-exposing and skillful pardoner who preaches anti-sermons to people mesmerised by his influence that is not easy to ignore.

It seems to be that irony certainly does exist in the work for many and that the Pardoner is a living lie and a hypocrite committing those sins he preaches against, but he is conscious of these incongruities. He is fully aware of his hypocrisy and he knows that covetousness is both the theme of his sermon and the basis of his life. We might consequently be tempted to conclude that the Pardoner’s conscious revelations of his hypocrisy showing what he is and that he knows what he is cause the work gain a shock effect but lose its dramatic irony.

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28. A. C. Spearing, *The Pardoner’s Prologue & Tale*, pp.452-453.

29. Edmund Reiss, “*The Final Irony of the Pardoner’s Tale. College English*,” p.264.

30. Edmund Reiss, “*The Final Irony of the Pardoner’s Tale. College English*,” p.262.

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