
The Morality In The Pardoner's Tale

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* depicts the journey of a group of individuals on a religious pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Thomas Beckett. Chaucer uses a frame narrative in his satirical poem to convey his stories through the pilgrims. The outer frame begins with all his characters meeting at the Tabard Inn in Southwark to gather before they depart. The group amounts to thirty pilgrims, including Chaucer's mouthpiece within the story, Chaucer the Pilgrim, who represent a cross section of fourteenth century England. Each socioeconomic class is represented apart from royalty and serfs. Here, they meet the Host, Harry Bailly, who prompts the crowd with a story-telling contest to keep the travelers entertained throughout their journey. Bailly suggests that the person who can tell the most moral yet most entertaining story within the duration of their pilgrimage will win the contest. Bailly will serve as the judge, and the teller of whichever tale he chooses will earn a meal bought by all his fellow travelers upon their return to the Tabard Inn at the conclusion of their excursion. Precisely, each individual must tell two tales on the journey to and from Canterbury. With this challenge in mind, the pilgrims set out on their adventure to the shrine. Throughout the trip, each tale creates the inner frame of the story. While four stories from each of the thirty pilgrims would have amassed 120 total tales, Chaucer only wrote a total of twenty-four tales, two of which are fragments. Of the twenty-four existing tales, the Pardoner's is one of the most intriguing. While he himself is an entirely immoral character, he tells an entertaining and very moral tale. The Pardoner's moral tale, while he is immoral, is a true example of Chaucer's ability to match tale to teller.

The Pardoner is introduced toward the end of the General Prologue in *The Canterbury Tales*; within this introduction, his physical attributes are described in detail. He has "hair as yellow as wax" (Chaucer 21) hanging off his head "like rat tails" (21). Chaucer also describes his eyes as bulging, and his chin, having no beard, "smoother than ever chin was left by barber" (21). These qualities and his high, shrill voice have brought into question the Pardoner's sexuality and earned him the reputation of "a figure debated in gender and queer studies" (Kern-Stähler par. 4). Through the characterization of the Pardoner, Chaucer has been credited with originally creating an openly homosexual character (par. 16). The Pardoner's looks, sound, and acts leave the narrator questioning whether he is "a gelding, or a mare" (Chaucer, GP 21), and suggest that he is likely a eunuch, an effeminate male, or an effeminate homosexual (Kern-Stähler par. 4).

Alongside his physical attributes, the phrase "honey tongue" (Chaucer, GP 22) suggests that the Pardoner is witted and able to convince people of incredible ideas with his words. As a pardoner and preacher "he must sing well, and the addresses which win him silver take the form of either a homiletic 'lessoun' or a moral story" (Bloom 59). He uses such talent to sell the people relics and pardons, such as the pillowcase he brings along, "which he asserted was Our Lady's veil" (Chaucer, GP 22). The holy objects he sells are purely for profit and of no spiritual value, but with his careful tongue and skilled words, he can talk the naïve townsfolk into purchasing anything that he offers. The Pardoner's ease of misleading the common people and desire for money portray his corruption.

While "a pardoner was an ecclesiastical official who was licensed to dispense pardons ... and sell relics" (Sauer par. 21), Chaucer's Pardoner reflects the true corruption of the Church at the

time when he uses his religious authority for his own personal gain. The Pardoner's description, as well as his role in society, provides background for the Prologue and the Tale that he tells, which evince Chaucer's ability to match tale to teller.

The Pardoner reveals his self-awareness in his Prologue when he "prefaces his tale with the long piece of self-characterization" (Malone 211). He describes the means by which he entrances commoners with "a haughty kind of speech" (Chaucer, PardP 241) and the "saffron tinge" (241) of his preaching, using Latin phrases to make himself seem more educated. His following words describe the relics he sells, such as the shoulder bone of a sheep which he claims will cure livestock of their ailments when dipped in a well (241). With the declaration, "The curse of avarice and cupidity / Is all my sermon..." (243), the Pardoner shares with his comrades that he preaches against the exact vice in which he himself indulges. His outright hypocrisy implies that the relics he distributes and the lessons he preaches are equally false. He admits to his fellow pilgrims that "he does not care at all about the spiritual well-being of those to whom he sells them" (Rossignol 270). They do not come from any divine inspiration, but rather the inspiration of greed and corruption. In saying, "And thus I preach against the very vice / I make my living out of—avarice," (Chaucer, PardP 243) the Pardoner is recognizing and stating his own fault. He then goes on to denounce other sins such as gluttony, gambling, lust, and drunkenness, while the Pardoner himself is "Ironically... under the influence of alcohol and has just admitted to enjoying these vices" (Sauer par. 9). The Pardoner's Prologue is, in essence, a confession of the way in which the Pardoner, while claiming to be a holy and God-fearing man, has prospered through taking from anyone who will pay. As Michelle Sauer writes, "it is confessional in nature and very revealing..." and "...attests to the Pardoner's love of deception" (par. 31). He uses the talents of his voice to deceive others because "he must sing well..." (Bloom 59) in order to lure unsuspecting listeners into his trap. In his sermons, the Pardoner calls those who listen to shy away from temptation and greed yet "is not at all ashamed to say he does not care a fig about the state of their souls, but only about their pocketbooks" (Rossignol 268). Serving as the introduction to the Pardoner's Tale, this Prologue is the Pardoner's acknowledging of the pure hypocrisy which he will be sharing when contradicting himself in the tale to come.

The Pardoner swiftly rises to the challenge of telling the most moral yet entertaining Tale because as a preacher he is well versed in the type of tale necessary. He launches into a sermon which is "... unmistakably ... a picture of him at work ..." (Malone 213) and represents the type of sermon that he would preach to those around him. Specifically, the Pardoner's Tale falls under the category of exemplum, meaning "example" (Sauer par. 24). The Pardoner uses his story to make an example of those who fall into the vices of greed and "... the preacher exhorts his congregation to beware of the sin or avarice ..." (Malone 213). The characters in his story find adventure in searching for revenge for their comrade, who, as they have been told, was murdered by Death (CITATION). However, their toils only lead them to discover gold. Out of sheer greed, the three thieves formulate a plot through which they will steal the treasure. Their plan must take place at night, so they split up and send the youngest to collect food and water for the time being. Not only have they forgotten the entire plan to avenge their friend, the thieves also fall into their own avarice, each plotting to kill another to take the money all for himself. However, they all die by the conclusion of the story, and the Pardoner has completed his task of warning the crowd of greed. Through his characters' drunkenness, he is also preaching against the sin of gluttony and the dangers of drinking in excess. The Tale is a noticeable portion of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* "... because of the context within which it is set as the tale told by the Pardoner" (Rossignol 270). Kemp Malone acknowledges that "the stories in the

Canterbury collection are not there for their own sakes, so to speak, but for the use in characterizing the persons who tell them” (211). Chaucer uses the Pardoner’s Tale to characterize its teller because of the subsequent denouncement of avarice. As the Pardoner’s Prologue reveals, the Pardoner is hypocritically greedy but ironically continues to preach against greed. Rosalyn Rossignol concurs, stating, “The reason that this tale suits the Pardoner so well is because of the way it plays off the man’s occupation and those who buy his wares” (270). In regard to those purchasing his items, the Tale pushes them also toward his sales in order to find material solace in death as opposed to the characters who meet their demise in the Tale (270). The Pardoner’s Tale is appropriate to the Pardoner because of the strong ties to vices in which the Pardoner indulges so frequently. He even again pauses the main storyline and “proceeds to rail against drunkenness as a shameful vice even though he is drunk while telling the tale” (Sauer par. 3). Chaucer writes the characterization of the Pardoner directly into the Tale that he shares. Thus, the tale perfectly aligns with the Pardoner because of the direct parallel of every sin in which he partakes, denounced in his own words.

However, immediately after sharing his sermon with his fellow travelers, he implores them to buy into his preaching, saying, “Dear people. I’ve some relics in my bale / And pardons too, as full and fine I hope, / As any in England, given me by the Pope” (Chaucer, PardT 257) and consequently asking, “If there be one among you that is willing / To have my absolution for a shilling” (257). He is boasting again about having relics and pardons for sale then asking his fellow travelers to pay for them. In his drunkenness, the Pardoner gets incredibly arrogant and believes that even knowing how corrupt he is, the others will pay for his goods. Specifically, he calls the Host, Harry Bailly, out as needing his holy forgiveness the most, begging, “Come forward, Host, you shall be the first to pay, / And kiss my holy relics right away” (257). “Harry Bailly’s response is a violent verbal attack” (Bloom 59), as he replies in anger saying, “You’ll have me kissing your old breeches too / And swear they were the relic of a saint” (257). The Pardoner finds himself, once so vocal, left speechless (Rossignol 269). The commotion is only quelled when the Knight intercedes and facilitates the forgiveness between the Pardoner and Host. The Host’s angry reaction can be expected because while the Pardoner would typically receive numerous sales after his sermons, “he has defeated any attempt to gull his companions by exposing his avarice before the tale is told” (Bloom 59). This again proves the pardoner’s “love of deception” (Sauer par. 25). He cannot resist any opportunity to gain wealth and even asks those around him “Do you think, as long as I can preach / And get their silver for the things I teach, / That I will live in poverty, from choice?” (Chaucer, PardP 244). The strong parallel between the Pardoner and his tale reinforces Chaucer’s perfect pairing of tale to teller in *The Canterbury Tales*.

The *Canterbury Tales* follows the story of thirty individuals on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Thomas Beckett. This collection of poetic tales highlights Geoffrey Chaucer’s uncanny ability to match tale to teller. Through the narration of Chaucer the Pilgrim, Geoffrey Chaucer conveys a detailed description of each character, as well as an account of the happenings which occur throughout the pilgrimage. He expertly represents each social class of the time, excluding the royalty and the serfs. Chaucer’s renowned literary piece is a work which has been revered for its incredible storytelling and characterization. As all the thirty travelers relay their tales, the parallels and symbolism are evident when compared to their character. The Pardoner, a representative of the clergy, is described as a fraud and later reveals his own avarice in selling relics and preaching sermons. In fact, the tale he tells is a sermon instructing the listener to avoid the very vices which the Pardoner himself partakes in. Thus, the Pardoner is a critical example of Chaucer’s genius ability to match tale to teller in his acclaimed work, *The*

Canterbury Tales.

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