

**THE PARDONER'S PROLOGUE AND TALE:
A STUDY IN THE ART OF CHAUCER'S IRONY**

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摘 要

在康城故事中，赦罪修士的序言和故事雖代表極端的異教思想，却也是朝聖途中最富智慧，最具煽動力，最有戲劇性的一場表演，然以下幾個棘手的問題懸之已久：在整個敘述表演過程中，赦罪修士是否早有預謀？他的一言一行是否可信？他為何在開場白中大放厥辭，出乖露醜，揭揚自己邪惡貪婪的本性？為何故事以嚴肅的祝禱和旅店主人嚴苛的反擊為終？故事中的老者又為何許人？本文旨在探討赦罪修士在表演過程中的反諷意義和戲劇關係，尤其偏重序言和故事之間的關係，藉以說明作品具有首尾一貫，前呼後應的緊密性，並儘可能為上述幾個困擾已久的問題提出新的看法。

“... Alas, thou eccho'st me;
As if there were some monster in thy thought Too
hideous to be shewne.” (*Othello*, III, iii)

The gentil Pardoner of Rouncivale should receive his free supper if the group of twenty-nine pilgrims ever makes its way back to Southwerk. In its given context, the *Prologue* and *Tale* of this man represent albeit the most unorthodox, but also the most intellectually and dramatically provoking performance on the way to Canterbury. Critics since Ten Brink and Jusserand have praised its enigmatic brilliance.¹ But they have also had a difficult time with the work. Is the Pardoner in conscious control throughout his performance? Is he a credible figure for that matter? Why does he present the strange introductory sermon in which he parades his own viciousness? Why end with the solemn benediction and the disastrous entreatment of the Host? And just who is the Old Man in the Tale? Great scholarly debates wax and wane over these questions. And a myriad of interpretations has been begotten of them, ranging from physiognomical diagnosis to Scriptural exegesis,² from the paroxysmally imaginative to the deplorably unimaginative.³ Much of the difficulty can be said to derive from a misreading of the “letter” for the “spirit.” For this is a work whose sources and references are only implemental to an artistic coherence that is self-sufficient. It is a work whose complexities are enigmatic rather than problematic, and whose ambiguity is of a piece. Moreover, it is a work which demonstrates a correlation between teller and tale unlike any of the other *Canterbury*

Tales. It is with these thoughts in mind that we embark on the present discussion. Our emphasis will be on the ironic and dramatic aspects of the Pardoner's performance, particularly those which result from the complex relationship between the Pardoner's self-expose in his prologue and the tale which he later presents. Our conclusions will hopefully answer the question of the artistic coherence of the work as a whole and offer a more enlightened view of those issues, mentioned above, that have been a perennial source of scholarly controversy.

The Pardoner has sometimes been referred to as "the one lost soul" on the Canterbury Pilgrimage.⁴ He appears at the opposite end of *The General Prologue* in relation to the worthy Knight, and is juxtaposed with the loathesome Summoner as his riding companion. There is little question about his extreme moral depravity. It is, however, the equally extreme ingenuity and zest with which he pursues expression of this depravity that distinguishes him from his run-of-the-mill "false ecclesiaste" counterparts,⁵ and gives eloquence to his challenge of amorality and counterexistence. Into view he rides, collaborating with the lecherous Summoner on an obscene rendition of an offertory he was no doubt familiar with from religious services.⁶ He is effeminate and possibly a castrate, but his well-filled wallet, fecund relics, and stinging tongue function with a kind of perverse virility.⁷ When called on by the pilgrims to tell of "som moral thyng," the Pardoner consents, but asks to "thynk upon som honest thyng" while he drinks his ale.⁸ Then he proceeds, but with a sermon that is strangely lurid, and then with an exemplum that is hauntingly brilliant. Sermon and exemplum have, in effect, been exploited to somewhat unholy ends as the requirement to tell of "som moral thyng" is satisfied with an exposition which creates more moral disturbance than edification.

The Pardoner's verbal art is charged with a strange power. Vivid and graphic descriptions of the tavern sins betray his fascination for the horror of evil.⁹ Passionate apostrophies to "dronkenesse" and "glotonye" blend mordancy with humor.¹⁰ And there is the ringing iteration of his theme, "Radix malorum est cupiditas."¹¹ It is the theme which he usually delivers for edification of his audiences. But it is simultaneously the means by which he wins profits from his audience.¹² And by doing so, he himself is knowingly implicated in the very sin which his theme forbids. The ironies are insidiously complex. Yet their distinctions merge in the trenchant cant of the theme itself.

The Pardoner is presumably of the Austin Canon.¹³ But no deeds could more seriously undermine the spirit of Scripture than those which he describes. Instead of labouring "with his hands . . . that he may have something to give the needy,"¹⁴ he declares, "I wol nat do no labour with myne handes"¹⁵ but rather prey mercilessly

on the "povereste wydwe in a village."¹⁶ Instead of attending to the multiplication of spiritual virtue and of the faithful in the Church,¹⁷ the Pardoner brandishes his fantastic relics. These objects, themselves monstrously blasphemous, are exploited not only for the Pardoner's own earthly increase, but for the fostering of earthly increase in his audience as well. Proper use of the "sholdre-boon" for example, will reward its possessor with the multiplication of "beestes and stoore."¹⁸ His magic "mitten" on the other hand, promises its user the "multiplying of his grain."¹⁹ In one gesture, the Pardoner has subverted spiritual pursuits to earthly ends, and implicated his listeners in this subversion as well.

Such ironic reversals multiply as the Pardoner proceeds. His tale of the three rioters draws upon tragi-comic, humorously grotesque effects for its seductive power. It is an amorally moral tale, a reverse dramatization of Augustine's theme, "the letter killeth, but the spirit quickeneth."²⁰ For the humorously improbable oath to slay Death which sets the plot in motion, and the mordant literal death which concludes it are both symptom and result of a more serious spiritual blindness and death which has already afflicted the rioters. In effect, the same carnality which motivates their intrigue against Death also motivates their abandonment of it at the crucial moment. The result, with a kind of symmetrical development characteristic of the story of Oedipus, is the very fate they had sought to avoid, the very death they had sought to conquer. Throughout the tale, ironies coil and uncoil in the wordplay on "Death."

If there is a metaphorical as well as physiognomical relevance²¹ of the Pardoner's presumed castration and androgyny to his behavior, it resides in the unessential and Protean character of his imagination. True, he is utterly evil and perverse. Yet this conscienceless evil also makes him an artist of sorts. It gives his performance its peculiar brand of parodistic, ambidexterous logic that not only contradicts virtue, but stands outside the finite circle of virtue and vice, commenting upon both. Hence, the remarkable complexity and autonomy of *The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale*, the result being one of the most profound moral statements in all of the *Canterbury Tales*. "The Age's Knave . . . has also his great use and his grand destiny." as Blake was wont to say.²²

There is a provocative air of mystery about the Pardoner's introductory speech which defies rationalization, and which inspired Jusserand to compose his classic fantasy.²³ From the outset, he is a talking paradox whose motives in self-exposure are uncertain, whose sincerity is sinister, and whose intimacy is abhorrent. A better understanding of why this is so requires an examination of the relationship between the Pardoner and his prototype, Jean de Meun's description of Faux Semblant in the

Roman de la Rose. It is a more substantial relationship than the mere textual affinities which Fansler makes note of.²⁴ Both the Pardoner and Faux-Semblant are, for one thing, vice figures called on for edification in a given situation. And the Pardoner, being versed in the pulpit sermon as he is, would be working from his own background. In addition, the quality of "faux-semblant" is inherent in the Pardoner's own character and practice. A quote from Faux-Semblant's self-description reveals just how close the spiritual affinities between the two are:

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| "So sligh is the deceyvynge | Now prelate, and now chapeleyn, |
| That to hard is the aperceyvynge; | Now prest, now clerk, and now scoler |
| For Protheus, that cowde hym chaunge | Now monk, now chanoun, now baily; |
| In every shap, homly and straunge. . . | Whatever myster man am I . . . |
| Ful wel I kan my clothis chaunge, | And kan by herte every langage. |
| Tak oon, and make another straunge. | Som tyme am I hor and old; |
| Now am I knight, now chasteleyn, | Now am I yong, stout, and bold." ²⁵ |

It is this sense of Protean deceptiveness and an almost metaphysical level of omniscience which pervades the Pardoner's performance.

What concerns us here are three aspects of the Pardoner's opening confession which further relate to the adaptation of Faux-Semblant. For Faux-Semblant's exposition is in the medieval tradition of allegorical confessions by personified vice. The method occurs in *Piers Plowman* when Reason's sermon is followed by the successive self-revelations of the Seven Deadly Sins. It is present in the allegory of Langland. And it becomes a standard feature of the morality play which flourished shortly after Chaucer's time. The method is apparent here in the Pardoner's introductory remarks. There are the bragging self-avowals of viciousness:

"Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe
Of hoolynesse, to semen hooly and trewe."²⁶
"Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice
Which that I use, and that is avarice."²⁷
"For though myself be a ful vicious man,
A moral tale yet I yow telle kan."²⁸

(Compare with "Forsothe, I am a fals traitor," "Unlyk is my word to my dede"²⁹ in the *Romaunt of the Rose*.) There is the patterned iteration of vicious practices: "First I pronounce . . . And thanne my bulles shewe I . . . And after that . . ." ³⁰ (Compare with ". . . Another custome use we . . . Another is this . . ." ³¹ in the *Romaunt of the Rose*.) And there is the same brand of profane humor and exhibitionistic flourish: "Thanne peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke . . . Myne hands and my tonge goon so yerne/ That it is a joye to se my bisynesse."³² The conven-

tionally disarming openness of revelation, the exhaustive catalogue of subversive practices, and the exuberant tone of the confession are normally meant to be both entertaining and edifying. Spoken by the real-life figure of the Pardoner however, they tend to become threatening. For if the Pardoner's deception is truly as insidious as he so claims, then his brazen frankness before the pilgrim audience could only belie a more sinister intention. The rapid energy and buoyant enthusiasm of the Pardoner's enumeration of his practices also becomes ambiguous. For the exhaustive account of practices projects an awesome sense of the Pardoner's influence. The presentation of the relics is, moreover, a deception within a deception. Finally, there is the seductive power of the Pardoner's rhetoric which works like a spell in both heightening and suspending our wariness of the man. What his confession amounts to is ambiguous. But there is certainly the sense of a challenge. What the Pardoner is saying, ostensibly, is "Here I show you what I am, a potent deceiver." The tone and manner, however, imply: ". . . and I would not hesitate to deceive you either." And this, ironically, is exactly what happens with the telling of the tale.

The use of the allegorical confession form accounts in another way for the volatile ambivalence of tone in the Pardoner. For the blending of comic banter and mordant seriousness is indigenous to the method of homiletic allegory. Vices rant boastfully and sardonically about themselves in the morality plays. The Seven Deadly Sins in *Piers Plowman* stage a comedy of considerable weakness and degradation. Dante's demons in the Inferno exemplify gross stupidity as well as danger. And there is the undignified devil of the mystery plays, who roars his malice before the audience, then roars his bafflement before the subjugation of God. Apart from motives that are probably deeply grounded in the psychology and theology of the Middle Ages, these highly risible personifications serve didacticism by presenting evil in a form that is amenable to both entertainment and calculated degradation. But this same lightness and humor of presentation can easily shift into something rather ominous. The "universal in re" often renders its subject the more fearful, particularly if it has to do with an unknown and sinister quality. The personifications of the "Danse Macabre," a motif which is utilized throughout the Pardoner's exemplum, are precisely examples of this. The Pardoner is, of course, a non-allegorical, flesh and blood human personality. Yet the manner in which he pursues self-exposure inevitably partakes of these antithetical overtones. Avowals such as "I rekke nevere, whan that they been beryed/ Though that hir souls goon a-blackberied!"²³ and "Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe/ Of hoolynesse, to semen hooly and trewe"³⁴ are, in particular, unmistakably Satanic in their overtones. For the poor pilgrims, who had asked for "som moral thyng," this is all unexpected. One reaction

is, of course, to be amused and entertained. But there is no denying the ominous overtones, the monstrous affront to the moral sensibility which the words of this bare-faced burlesque figure generate. Worse, these overtones are amplified by the ensuing tale. First come the impudent farceurs whose carnality and exhibitionism echo the Pardoner's own. But then a strong undercurrent of the eerie and somber, a mood dominated by the "Danse Macabre," the Old Man, and the specter of Death follows. This prevails in the end, and seems to fill out the implications of the Pardoner's introduction, making the overall tone of the presentation more strange and ominous than ever. Scholars are generally more divided over the question of tone in the Pardoner than anything else. Some emphasize the seriousness of tone, others its jestfulness, others its drunkenness, and still others its total unreality.³⁵ The homiletic connection we have spoke of, the fact that we are dealing here with a kind of comedy of evil, would tend to suggest not only the key to the problem, but also the essence of the Pardoner's theatrical talent. So long as he is in control, his exposition maintains a precarious and inscrutable balance between the comic and serious elements of which it is composed.

The last important effect which relates to the modelling of the Pardoner on Faux-Semblant is the implied didactic intimacy between the Pardoner and his pilgrim audience. When Faux-Semblant comes forth and introduces himself, there is an implicit dramatic rapport between him and the reader. In effect, he is saying, "This is what I am (allegorical nature). Now I'm going to show you what I can do with frail and foolish humanity (allegorical destiny). Watch the performance and be edified at the same time." This histrionic dimension is even more pronounced in the morality play where vice figures are quasi-stage managers who demonstrate their virtuosity by promoting intrigues on ingenuous virtue, but stand back from the play at the same time, commenting on the tricks of their trade and the consequences of their success. The same understanding is implicit in the Pardoner's introductory speech. The curious double-sidedness which makes itself felt from the beginning is the result of the Pardoner's addressing two audiences simultaneously: that of his usual victims, and that of the pilgrim listeners whom he has ostensibly taken into his confidence. But just as in the preceding cases, the razor is double-edged. For even in the introductory speech, distinctions between the two audiences tend to blur. One can envision the gesticulatory flourish with which the Pardoner must have shown his false relics around as he spoke to the pilgrims. And one hears the ringing incantation of the theme, "Radix malorum est cupiditas," in one voice, though it speaks simultaneously to three audiences: the Pardoner's victims (for edification), himself (for profit), and the pilgrims ("This is what I stand for. Beware!"). The

exemplum which follows is normally told to the "lewed peple" which the Pardoner plans to deceive, or so he assures his pilgrim audience.³⁶ Its threat of encroachment upon the pilgrims is, however, most serious. For one thing, it is so fraught with grimness and intensity that the pilgrims lose the detachment with which they began listening to the tale and become identified with the Pardoner's "lewed peple". And in another more subtle way, the Pardoner has broken down the boundaries of his own artifice by the introduction of a mysterious *dramatis personae* figure within the tale itself. This relationship will be more fully discussed in the following section.

III

The movement of our discussion makes inevitable a consideration of the background and significance of the Old Man in the Pardoner's exemplum. Scholars have perhaps generated as much controversy over this figure as the Pardoner himself. First, it was Ten Brink, then Bushnell and Brown, who identified him with the archetypal figure of the Wandering Jew.³⁷ With some reservation, Kittredge and Root associated him with Death itself.³⁸ Manly admitted that the Old Man was mysterious and tragic, but disagreed with either of these views.³⁹ Robinson described the ancient figure as "a symbol of Death itself, or possibly of Old Age as the Harbinger of Death."⁴⁰ Hamilton argued in favor of a similar interpretation.⁴¹ Steadman saw him as representing the medieval notion of "contemptus mundi."⁴² Miller and Robertson adopted a Scriptural approach which sees the Old Man as the "vetus homo" of the Old Law, living in the fallen nature rather than the grace of the New Law.⁴³ Finally, W. J.B Owen rejected all figurative interpretations and insisted that the Old Man could only be, simply, an old man.⁴⁴ The very inability of scholars to discover a single identity for the Old Man may, in itself, suggest a kind of collective and circumambient solution to the problem. For textual evidence would tend to support the validity of each of these readings (perhaps with the exception of Owen's). But the care with which Chaucer has avoided any explicit references or allusions to any of these sources makes it clear that he intended to keep his Old Man as rich and ambiguous a figure as possible.

The advantages of such a strategy become clear upon examination of extant analogues of *The Pardoner's Tale*. In these versions of the tale, there is no Old Man but rather, a hysterical hermit who leads the villains to the treasure, or to a Christ figure who didacticizes the event to his disciples.⁴⁵ By substituting the enigmatic, death-seeking wayfarer for these figures, and by creating an avowed quest for Death where there originally was none, Chaucer provides his plot with a resonant and

cataclysmic symmetry: three bold and sinful rioters who challenge Death are rushing headlong and unawares into its grip while this meek Old Man must wander on in his wretchedness without the gift of oblivion. And with the Old Man, there is now the possibility for the kind of ironic encounter which occurs in *The Friar's Tale*. The hunter becomes the hunted; the hunted turns into the hunter.⁴⁶ Vital clues are given but ignored by the doomed party. Rough insolence is contrasted with insidious reservation. And cleverness is finally seen to outwit itself.

Where *The Pardoner's Tale* differs significantly from a story like *The Friar's Tale* is in the somber and symbolic richness of the Old Man. The Friar's fiend is closer to the kind of allegorical figure which we discussed in connection with the Pardoner's confession. The Old Man is, on the other hand, presented with such eerie vagueness, such unspecificity, and such allusive richness that he seems to stand in quasi-relief from the tale, occupying a kind of frontier region of realism and threatening to become symbolic and metaphysical in dimension. What contributes to the sense of mystery is the fact that we only understand the full import of the Old Man in retrospect. His brief appearance, his oblique manner of speech, his hasty directions, and his sudden exit are all inconsequential at first. It is only as we reach the end of the tale that we remember him, for he was the one who directed the rioters to the treasure and hence, to their death. By logic of association, he becomes a correlative of Death. On the other hand, he was a restless and melancholic figure, much like the Wandering Jew. And he made a gesture of beating his staff against the ground in beseechment of Mother Earth to allow entrance just as Maximian's Old Man.⁴⁷ His misery and resignation betray, indeed, a deep sense of "contemptus mundi." And vainly he seeks Desath, as did the vetus homo of the Old Testament. As in the graveyard scene in Hamlet, the Old Man tends to recede from the foreground of the tale and become a vast repository for all the mysteries of man's existence. In the restive immortality of the Wandering Jew motif is suggested the mystery of evil. In the misery of the Old Man lies the mystery of human infirmity and the grotesque nature of man's petty joys and pursuits. And finally, there is the greatest mystery of all, that of Death itself which the Old Man, and the whole tale, steeped from the beginning in the mood of the "Danse Macabre," partake of. The allusive and evocative nature of the Old Man is, then, central with regard to the thematic richness of the tale. It penetrates the outer limits of the mysterious and unimaginable, and sets before us, an immense and somber mirror, in which nothing save our own condition is reflected.

What concerns us most in this section is the richness of reverberation between the tale and its teller which is the result of this allusive and ambiguous treatment of

the Old Man. We are somewhat relieved when the Pardoner finally begins to tell his tale. His introductory comments have been uncomfortably mysterious and provocative whereas what follows, being an "old tale" told to "lewed peple," would seem to afford us something more innocent and entertaining. Yet it is precisely with the artifice of his tale that the Pardoner continues to play upon the themes which he initiated in his introduction, filling out all their implications at the same time that he extends them. At the end of the tale, there is an unmistakable feeling that the Pardoner has grown more mysterious and that he has extended his influence considerably, perhaps immeasurably, over us. The remainder of this section will examine this phenomenon in more detail in terms of the points already touched on in Section II.

Duplicity through seeming integrity, mendacity through seeming truthfulness: this was the Pardoner's own description of his code of behavior. The parading of false relics, the use of the theme of "*Radix malorum est cupiditas*," were classic examples of this. The very confession which he presented at the outset was in response to the pilgrims' request for "som moral thyng," but which turned out to be an exhaustive revelation and demonstration of his own deceitful practices. Not only was this a most insidious way to fulfill the pilgrims' request, but the basis for further deceitfulness which the Pardoner is about to embark upon. As we begin listening to the tale, we bear the Pardoner's opening remarks in mind. But soon, we find ourselves fully immersed in the powerful drama of the three rioters. Upon reaching the end of the tale, we acquire a more complete perspective on a situation which those critically concerned, the rioters, never really understood. The three rioters, on a quest for Death, have in effect found Death, yet not in a way they envisioned or desired.

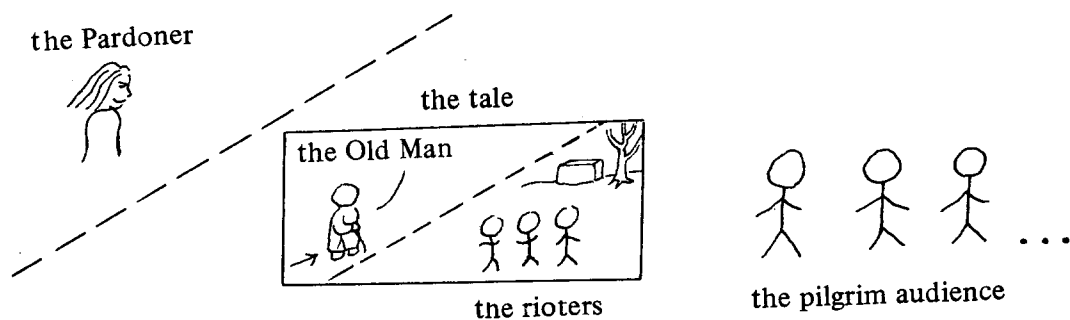
Our ironic apprehension of this is accompanied by a growing appreciation for the role of the Old Man in the tale. We remember him because he is causally linked with the death of the three rioters. In fact, it seems that he knowingly deceived the three rioters by sending them unawares to their death. Yet, when we stop and think about it, he was only doing what the rioters asked of him, and in all honesty of intent. For he allows them to accomplish precisely what he had foretold: to find "Death." The analogies with the Pardoner's opening speech are irresistible. A whole parallelism between the relationships of the Old Man-rioters and the Pardoner-pilgrim audience has been set up—the Pardoner, under the guise of fulfilling the request for "som moral thyng," but reversing expectations at every turn, and the pilgrim audience, anticipating some moral thing, but being drawn into something that is not moral in any way that they could have imagined or desired—and seems to suggest that some monstrous trick is in store, or has been played upon the pilgrims.

The exemplum does indeed function as a kind of sinister dumb show, catching the conscience of its audience. Like the Pardoner's confessional prologue, its mode is that of the comedy of evil which plays upon tensions between comic farce and mordant seriousness. There are the rioter farceurs who tend to dominate the center of action in the exemplum with their improbable quest for death. On the other hand, there is a whole undercurrent of mood and meaning that is quite somber. We have the images of the friend's corpse, the pestilence, and the specter of Death in our mind as the tale draws to a close. These play in an insidious way back upon the tone and expectations of the Pardoner's opening speech. Most ironic of all, there is the looming figure of the Old Man, awesome in moral stature and ominous in his resemblance to the Pardoner. He presents an oblique and paradoxical confession of his restlessness and sin.⁴⁸ And with some unknown purpose in mind, he directs the rioters to the earthly treasure and consequently, their death.⁴⁹ Like the Pardoner, he projects a conscience that is vast and powerful because it is almost as far beyond evil as it is below good. And like the Pardoner, he is ultimately enigmatic and mysterious. From the point of view of the teller, the introduction of the Old Man into the tale is the Pardoner's masterstroke. For here, the Pardoner frees himself of the need for further explicit comment on his own nature and objectifies it in something that is even more potent and mysterious. As we come to the end of the tale, the first wave of revelation is the looming omniscience of the Old Man, ironic enough in itself. The second is even more deadly, for it implies by analogy, the looming omniscience of the Pardoner over us, the listeners.

The third and related aspect has to do with the Pardoner's ironic fulfillment of his dramaturgical designs. In his introductory remarks, the Pardoner made clear his intentions of playing the homiletic showman. The tale, he candidly assures his pilgrim audience, is normally told for the "lewed peple" and need not deceive them. In fact, however, the tale is so grimly moving that the pilgrims lose their sense of detachment in spite of themselves. At the end of the Pardoner's tale, they are as good as won over to the side of the "lewed peple." But more subtly, the Pardoner has succeeded in breaking down the boundaries of his artifice in his treatment of the Old Man. This figure, so unassuming and inconsequential with regard to plot on first appearance, grows immeasurably in significance when, at the end of the tale, the audience comes to understand his role in the rioters' death. In effect, he has been a kind of *dramatis personae* all along who has, by subtle and imperceptible manipulation, caused the rioters to come to their death. But as the pilgrim audience perceives this, they also perceive that they themselves have, in becoming immersed in and captivated by the tale, been similarly manipulated by its teller. Thus, aside from

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being tricked into joining the ranks of the "lewed peple" within the Pardoner's spell, there is a whole sense of confusion of perspective or loss of referential certainty which allows the world of the Pardoner's tale to extend its influence into the real world, and the charisma of the Pardoner and the Old Man to interact and become identified with one another. The crowning blow comes with the Pardoner's entreatment of the pilgrims to accept his blessing and kiss his relics.⁵⁰ All the antithetical elements which we have discussed-sincerity and deceptiveness, burlesque and treachery, and artifice and reality-are brought together in this one gesture. On a most basic level, it can be argued that the Pardoner is simply ending his tale with the habitual motions that accompany his rote sermons for the "lewed peple." At the same time, he is playing upon the duplicity of his opening confession. For if he has told of "som moral thyng" as was initially requested, then this would be the proper and sincere way to end his performance. Yet all that has intervened-the lurid confession, the haunting tale, in particular, the very avowal of "Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice/ Which that I use, and that is coveitise,"⁵¹ would seem to be a mocking contradiction of this. In addition, he is playing upon the brilliance of his artifice, testing his pilgrim audience to see whether any of them, in awe of his tale, has defected to the side of his "lewed" audience. Most insidious of all, he further confounds the distinctions between artifice and reality, between burlesque and treachery, by suggesting in this entreatment, the damnation of the pilgrim audience at his hands. For if they remember the tale, blessings and earthly treasure were much what the rioters received from the Old Man on the way to their ghastly end. Much like Prospero's sudden, about-face self-renunciation following the renunciation of the reality of his masques at the end of *The Tempest*,⁵² this gesture on the part of the Pardoner carries the symbolic effect of dissolving, by analogy, the fictive trappings of his tale, allowing its implications and effects to extend into reality. The following diagram will help to illustrate this relationship:



IV

There will always be an impasse in critical interpretation of *The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale*. In composing this work, Chaucer had himself become so caught up in the complex and occult nature of his creation that it departed significantly from the comic spirit and dramatic decorum which represent the norm of *The Canterbury Tales*. Yet it is important to keep in mind the fact that the Pardoner is also a human individual and not "the concealed springs of the automaton" which Jusserand so ominously described him as.⁵³ For one thing, Chaucer has prepared for both the viability and fallibility of the Pardoner with the suggestive physical-physiognomical detail presented in the Pardoner's portrait in the *General Prologue*.⁵⁴ In addition, it is important to bear in mind that the Pardoner is not in complete control during his performance. Nor is he working with a preconceived plan in mind. Firstly, he is drawing on the oratorical and histrionic conventions of his profession as he goes along, recollecting them from rote and presenting them with slight variations for the purposes of his present audience. Secondly, the "moist ale" which the Pardoner has consumed, though not sufficient in quantity or in view of his habitual intake to justify the opinion that his confession and exemplum result from drunkenness,⁵⁵ do however warm him up to the task of telling "som moral thyng," and contribute to the imaginative daring and vigor which characterize his performance. Thirdly, the Pardoner begins essentially from scratch. His entire performance is developed by improvisation. His opening speech, as consummately brilliant as it may seem, comes in answer to the pilgrims' preference for "som moral thyng" overruling the Host's request for "mirth and japes." And it comes only after some contemplation over a cup of ale. But he is pleased with the results and continues with yet another venture in parody. This is the exemplum, a story which is set in a scene which mirrors the present tavern stop of the Canterbury pilgrims.⁵⁶ Here, he seizes on the opportunity for some ironic rhetoric, launching into his bombastic denunciations of the tavern sins. The exemplum which he eventually returns to after the digression has shifted slightly, whether intentionally or unintentionally,⁵⁷ but it is brilliantly moving, and echoes both the three sins at the end of the rhetorical digression and the beginning theme of "Radix malorum est cupiditas." By his peculiar style of parody, by his agile, ambidextrous intelligence, the Pardoner has forged, under the circumstances, a most coherent, most ironic masterpiece. Under the guise of telling "som moral thyng," he has gotten away with something grossly amoral. He has warned his audience to remain detached from the tale, but tricked them into being his "lewed peple." He has enforced the theme of "Radix malorum est cupiditas." He has dilated

on the tavern sins. And he has effected a self-parody within his tale. What would clinch the effect now with an enormous final bit of irony would be to simply go through with his usual procedure of offering his blessings and relics to his audience. And perhaps with the added appropriateness of choosing one who is himself steeped in the tavern sins, he calls on the Host to be the target of his offering. The rest is history. The Pardoner takes his dreadful fall, and the pilgrimage returns to its orderly and mirthful mode. The irony of all this, however, is that the Pardoner suffers his unexpected and humiliating fall because of the one tactical error of choosing the Host. For Harry Bailey is not one to understand the subtleties of the Pardoner's threat, yet one who, in his inability to do so, would not hesitate to reduce all these subtleties to a blind turd. As in the Summoner's retaliation against the Friar's satire, the trenchant rapier of the one is met and quelled by the other's blunderbuss loaded with filth. And this, as incongruous a denouement as it may seem, is after all, much in the Chaucerian spirit of comic resolution.

Thus does the Pardoner take his fall, but not before having said something profound to his fellow pilgrims. For all the other pilgrims pursue their expositions with a certain blindness. The Miller tells a tale about a foolish carpenter, outraging the Reeve who tells a tale about a foolish miller in retaliation. The Friar and the Summoner exchange broadsides with their stories in an ongoing feud. Even the wonderfully autobiographical tales of the Marriage Group reflect back on their tellers, revealing discrepancies which they themselves were not aware of. The Wife of Bath, judging from her *Prologue* and *Tale*, seems to cherish loving affection and mutual subservience in marriage much more than the female domination which she ostensibly advocates. The senile and selfish character of January in *The Merchant's Tale* is more indicative of the Merchant's disillusionment with himself than with his wife. And the moral shabbiness of the Franklin's characters undercut his theme of "gentillesse," exposing a similar shabbiness in his own character consistent with the description of him as a kind of nouveau riche epicurean in *The General Prologue*. Only the Pardoner entertains no delusions about himself, and yet is ultimately mysterious to us. Only his *Prologue* and *Tale* make no ostensible designs on its listeners, yet ends up serving as an immense mirror which reflects and scrutinizes his audience in its depths. The purpose of this paper has been to describe the artistic process of this accomplishment. The mystery of the Pardoner and the mystery of his *Tale* are ultimately of a piece. The adaptation of the Pardoner and the Old Man from the same allegorical tradition explains the Protean ambiguity and symbolic depth which they exhibit. This is an example of Chaucer's allusive finesse working not, as Bronson says, towards miracle drama and allegory, but away from it in the direction of

symbolism. The concurrent use of this method in both the *Prologue* and the *Tale* is indeed fortunate. For the richness of reverberation between the two is what makes for the peculiar impregnability of the entire performance. For the intelligent, we solve the problem of the Pardoner's charades by inevitably plunging deeper into them. And at the bottom of it all, is the Old Man, himself an inexhaustible enigma.

NOTES

1. Ten Brink, in his *History of English Literature*, notes that the Pardoner "unmasks his trade and practices with that shamelessness which the atmosphere of *The Canterbury Tales* requires." Jussérand, in his *English Wayfaring Life*, indulges in a "classic fantasy" on the Pardoner to the effect that "On the tavern bench the ardoner is seated. There enter Chaucer, the knight, the squire, the friar, the host-old acquaintances. We are by ourselves, no one need be afraid of speaking, the foaming ale renders hearts expansive, and the unseen coils of that torturous soul unfold to view; he gives the summary of a whole life, the theory of his existence, the key to his secrets . . ." (English translation, p. 189)
2. I refer to W. C. Curry's article in *JEGP*, XVIII, titled "The Secret of Chaucer's Pardoner" and R. P. Miller's intelligent work, "Chaucer's Pardoner, The Scriptural Eunuch, and The Pardoner's Tale" in Schoek and Taylor's collection of Chaucer criticism.
3. I refer to G. L. Kittredge's improbable interpretation in *Chaucer and His Poetry*, pp. 212-218, and to readings such as B. H. Bronson's "The Pardoner's Confession" (*In Search of Chaucer*) which attribute inconsistencies to the conditions of composition, or such readings as G. H. Gerould's "The Vicious Pardoner" (*Chaucerian Essays*) which rely heavily on the Pardoner's state of inebriation.
4. See Kittredge's *Chaucer and His Poetry*.
5. The Friar and the Summoner, for example.
6. Collancz suggests *The Song of Solomon* as a source for "Com hider, love, to me." (A. 672) R. P. Miller notes the analogy with the religious offertory. The "stif burdoun" (A. 673) Which the Summoner bears is both "a strong bass part" and an obscene pun on "staff" or "penis."
7. Effeminate and castrate-Chaucer's comment, "I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare." (A. 691) "Walet" is mentioned three times in *The General Prologue* portrait. The Pardoner boasts of the powers of "multiplication" which his relics possess at the beginning of his Prologue. "Stinging tongue"-C. 413. S. Manning suggests that the Pardoner's tools behave like phallic symbols.
8. C. 325-328.
9. C. 463-484.
10. C. 534-572.
11. C. 334. C. 426.

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12. "Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice/ Which that I use, and that is avarice." (C. 427-428)
13. Manly, in *Some New Light on Chaucer*, notes that the Chapel and Hospital of Rouncivale to which the Pardoner presumably belongs (A. 672) were under the Augustinian rule. M. Hamilton attempts to prove that the Pardoner was a bona fide member of the Order of Rouncivale and hence, an Austin canon (*JEGP*, XL). Association with Rouncivale alone, however, is sufficient to make the Pardoner's defiance of certain Augustinian rules ironic.
14. Paul, Eph. 4. 25.
15. C. 444.
16. C. 450.
17. Both the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath use the language of Gen. 1. 28 in an earthly and carnal sense. Augustine refers to Gen. 1. 28 in the spiritual sense of multiplication of virtue in the individual and of the faithful in the Church. See Miller's essay in Schoek and Taylor's anthology of Chaucer criticism.
18. C. 350-365.
19. C. 372-376.
20. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*. Also of relevance is Paul's "But now we are loosed from the law of the letter wherein we were detained, so that we should serve in the newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter." (Rom. 7. 6.)
21. See Curry's essay cited in note 2.
22. William Blake, *A Descriptive Catalogue*.
23. Ibid 1.
24. D. S. Fansler, *Chaucer and the Roman de la Rose*, pp. 162-165. It is generally assumed that Chaucer had a hand in the translation of the *Roman de la Rose* into English, which would account for the adaptation. In any event, recurrence of diction in both the Pardoner's *Prologue* and the Friar's portrait in *The General Prologue* attest to the fact that Chaucer was at least familiar with *The Romaunt of the Rose*.
25. Quoted from *The Romaunt of the Rose*, 6317-6336 in Robinson's edition.
26. C. 415-416.
27. C. 427-428.
28. C. 459-460.
29. *The Romaunt of the Rose*, 6307, 6360.
30. C. 335 on.
31. *The Romaunt of the Rose*, 6923.
32. C. 395-398.
33. C. 405-406.
34. C. 421-422.
35. Scholars have had difficulty with both the introductory speech and the remarks coming at the end of the tale. B. H. Bronson (*In Search of Chaucer*) and Rosamond Tuve (*Allegorical Imagery*) for example, both admit that the tone of the confession is monstrous. G. H. Gerould (*Chaucerian Essays*) emphasizes the Pardoner's drunkenness throughout his performance. Kittredge interprets the benediction at the close of the tale as the point where the Pardoner, in mounting emotional crisis, experiences "a very paroxysm of agonized

- sincerity” followed afterwards by desparate jesting (*Chaucer and His Poetry*). Some say that the Pardoner’s closing remarks are in jest. Curry, basing his conclusions on the Pardoner’s physiognomical status of “eunuchus ex nativitate,” emphasizes the cynicism of tone throughout, the impulse to mock and offend the society from which he was outcast. D. V. Harrington believes that the Pardoner need not be taken as a real character at all (“Narrative Speed in The Pardoner’s Tale,” *Chaucer Review*, III)
36. “Thanne telle I hem ensamples many oon . . . For lewed peple loven tales olde.” (C.435-437)
 37. See N. H. Bushnell, “The Wandering Jew and the Pardoner’s Tale,” *Studies in Philology*, XXVIII, and Carleton Brown, “Chaucer: The Pardoner’s Tale.”
 38. See Kittredge’s *Chaucer and His Poetry*, p. 215, and R. K. Root, *The Poetry of Chaucer*, p. 229.
 39. J. M. Manly, *Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*. Also, *Some New Light on Chaucer*.
 40. See Robinson’s *Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 836.
 41. See M. P. Hamilton, “Death and Old Age in The Pardoner’s Tale,” *Studies in Philology*, XXXVI.
 42. See J. M. Steadman, “Old Age and Contemptus Mundi in The Pardoner’s Tale,” *Medium Aevum*, XXXIII.
 43. See R. P. Miller’s essay cited in note 2 and D. W. Robertson’s *A Preface to Chaucer*, Chapter IV, “Allegory, Humanism, and Literary Theory.”
 44. See W. J. B. Owen’s “The Old Man in the Pardoner’s Tale” in Wagenknecht’s collection of Chaucer criticism. Owen’s interpretation is the only one of these that is unintelligent and unacceptable. For although the Old Man can be representative of many things, he cannot be simply and only an old man.
 45. See *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*, G. Dempster ed., pp. 409-438.
 46. Related to this is J. Richardson’s article, “Hunter and Prey: Functional Imagery in *The Friar’s Tale*,” *English Miscellany*, XII.
 47. Ibid 11.
 48. C. 720-730.
 49. C. 761-762.
 50. C. 915-944.
 51. Ibid 27.
 52. S. L. Bethell discusses this phenomenon in *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition*.
 53. Ibid 1.
 54. See Curry’s essay cited in note 2.
 55. Gerould’s view. See note 3.
 56. Frederick Tupper’s “The Pardoner’s Tavern” expounds the view that the Pardoner’s performance takes place during a tavern stopover on the way to Canterbury. Though textual evidence is inconclusive in this regard, I see no harm in adopting this view.
 57. This has also been the subject of much scholarly debate. If there is a difficulty, I see no harm in it being a part of the Pardoner’s own random procedure.

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