

A CLOSE READING OF *THE PARDONER'S PROLOGUE* AND *THE PARDONER'S TALE*  
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*AUTHORS' NOTE*

Middle English quotations come from the following edition and line numbers are cited parenthetically: Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale*. In *The Canterbury Tales*, edited by Jill Mann, 159-63. New York: Penguin, 2005.

Present-Day English translations follow in brackets and are the above authors' translations, which can be found on the Omeka website.

Chaucer is cleverly known for the complementary ironies of his characters and their societal expectations throughout his work of *The Canterbury Tales*. He also outlines the *Pardoner's Prologue and Tale* similarly. The ironic nature is essential to establishing his viewpoints about the Church and the society in which he lived. Chaucer uses irony with the genre and structure of the text, the character of the Pardoner himself within his tale, and the old man present within the *Pardoner's Tale* to make this statement about the faults in society.

Scholar Helen Cooper claims the genre of the *Pardoner's Prologue and Tale* is similar to a sermon construction and an exemplary tale yet does not entirely fit into either category. She defines a sermon construction as “a biblical text; an indictment of sin; the main story as illustrative exemplum; the application of the story to the congregation; and a concluding prayer,” (Cooper 263). An exemplary tale is a moral tale. The *Pardoner's Tale* fits these definitions because the Pardoner spends the majority of his time lecturing about *Radix malorum est Cupiditas*, – “Greed is the root of all evil” – as stated many times throughout the text. What he means by this saying is one can live a moral life if they turn away from gluttony and greed. He starts with this overarching theme and dives into preaching about gluttony in different forms: food and drink, gambling, and oaths. With each form, he shares a story about the shamefulness of gluttony and then a story about its wickedness, like in a homily.

For example, the Pardoner shares at the start of his tale a story of young people in a tavern who were drinking, gambling, dancing, and eating in excess. The lectures about the wickedness of gluttony and ends his rant with lecturing that gluttony is “O original of oure dampnacioun” (500) / “[The cause of our damnation.]” He gives this warning to his “congregation” about the vileness and wickedness of gluttony, on how it is a direct sin against Christ. At the end of the tale, he concludes with a prayer of blessing and absolution. He states, “Now goode men, God foryeve yow youre trespass,/ And ware yow fro the sinne of avarice!” (904-5) / “[Now good men, God forgives you of your wrong-doings, and guard yourselves against the sin of greed!]”

Having the Pardoner’s tale designed like a sermon as if he were a clerk is very befitting to this ironic theme because the Pardoner himself is not a priest. Though he compares himself to one, stating, “I stoned lik a clerk in my pulpet.../ I preche so as ye han herd bifore” (391; 393) / “[I stand like a clerk in my pulpit...I preach as you have heard before,]” he is anything but a cleric. In the “General Prologue,” he is described as having long, thin, yellow hair and looking disheveled except for the cape he wore. If it were not for the papal edicts he claims to carry, allowing him to grant pardons and sell relics, he would completely be dismissed by society because of his appearance and behavior described in the “General Prologue.” They are all components to the contrasting irony of appearance and actions.

Furthermore, the tale the Pardoner tells is ironic because he preaches against the sins he commits daily. As stated before, he first begins his tale against the gluttony of wine and food. Even as he warns, “But certes, he that haunteth swiche delices/ Is deed, while that he liveth in tho vices,” / “[But certainly, he that indulges in such pleasures is dead, while he lives in those vices,]” (547-548) the Pardoner stands before the pilgrims drunk. As he states that gambling is deceitful and comparable to manslaughter, gambling (too) is one of his vices. In regards to oaths and swearing, he

warns that one will face a never-ending death if they perjure themselves. Every time he runs his ruse, though, the Pardoner perjures by swearing he comes from the Pope himself to grant pardons and to sell relics for absolution. And the worst of all: greed. He heavily preaches that “greed is the root of all evil,” but greed is exactly why he preaches in the first place: to line his pockets with riches in order to live a comfortable life no matter what it costs to those around him. Because he preaches the opposite as he practices, he is the definition of an ironic character.

This theme of irony continues further into the actual story the Pardoner tells through the representation of the Old Man. The synopsis of his story is that three drunk, young men search to kill Death for killing their young friends and end up finding their own deaths through greed. Pivotal to their search, they come across an old man. They dismiss him for his elderly age, insulting his appearance, and asking, ‘Why livestow so longe in so greet age?’ (719) / “[‘Why do you live so long in such old age?’]” The Old Man heeds them a warning that they do not fully understand and thus ignore:

‘...For I ne kan nat finde  
A man...  
That wolde change his youthe for min age.  
And therefore moot I han min age stille....  
Ne death, allas, ne wol nat nahn my lif!’ (721-722; 724-725; 727)

“[‘For I cannot find a man...  
that would change his youth for my age.  
And therefore, I must keep my age still...  
not even Death, alas, will take my life!’]”

As explained by Elizabeth Hatcher in her work “Life without Death: The Old Man in Chaucer’s ‘Pardoner’s Tale,’” the Old Man is the very thing the rioters want: life without death. Ultimately, they are seeking out Death to “kill him,” so that they will never die. The Old Man with his cursed

body and weak spirit is living life without a chance to die. They discriminate against him and ignore him because of his age and appearance; yet, one could argue they are the fortunate ones for dying young. They did not have to watch their bodies become frail and fail them. Because of the rioters' treatment towards the Old Man, the state in which he has to live, and the situation of the rioters wanting to kill Death, the situation is rather ironic.

Overall, Chaucer uses irony repeatedly through *The Canterbury Tales* to create complex characters and a statement about the society in which he lived. Particularly through the *Pardoner's Prologue and Tale*, he uses this form with the genre and structure of the tale, the Pardoner himself, and the Old Man to establish complex characters and a complex story to demonstrate the faults in society in regards to greed and presentation of self. The genre is considered a sermon construction and exemplary tale, though the Pardoner himself is neither a clerk nor moral, as indicated by his appearance and actions. Furthermore, in using irony to establish multiple purposes for the Old Man, Chaucer demonstrates the faults in the Pardoner's character to be someone he desires and the world needs.

## Works Cited

- Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Pardoner's Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Jill Mann (London: PenguinBooks, 2005), 456-473.
- Cooper, Helen. *The Canterbury Tales: Oxford Guides to Chaucer*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996).
- Hatcher, Elizabeth R. "Life without Death: The Old Man in Chaucer's 'Pardoner's Tale,'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1975): 246-252.