

THE PARDONER AND HIS TALE

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Chaucer's villainous Pardoner is arguably his most unforgettable creation. Notwithstanding his shameless confession of his depraved nature, or perhaps because of it, we cannot help but be drawn towards this paragon of evil, as we are drawn towards anybody who practises his profession so consummately either for good or for evil.

Our admiration for his skill is however tempered by our just moral indignation. Chaucer exploits our ambivalent feelings for the purpose of irony. Certainly an awareness of the ironic dimension of *The Pardoner's Tale* will add immeasurably to our understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment.

Chaucer's ironic method primarily depends on the two points of view of Chaucer the poet, responsible for the conception of *The Canterbury Tales*, and Chaucer the pilgrim who joins the pilgrimage at the Tabard Inn and whose account of it we are allegedly reading. Chaucer the pilgrim is Chaucer the poet's inspired creation which gives him the double viewpoint so necessary for irony. Chaucer the pilgrim is naive, easily overawed by the words and actions of his fellow-pilgrims whom he tends to believe implicitly. The reader has therefore to keep this in mind in the General Prologue where the 'nyne and twenty' pilgrims are introduced through Chaucer the pilgrim's point of view. But while the narrator beams with pleasure at his description of the 'cleverness' of such pilgrims as the Pardoner, the Wife of Bath and so on, there lurks behind it all, unnoticed by the unsophisticated reader, the pursed lips of the poet.

Indeed, the contrast between what is being actually stated, implied or even suggested and what is actually the case is the root of irony. Very often Chaucer the pilgrim sees only the surface of things while Chaucer the poet makes us aware of the reality beneath. Chaucer's method can be observed in the portrait of the Pardoner in the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer's ironic depiction is evident from the very first line (A671). The use of the adjective 'gentil' to describe this Pardoner, the bosom friend of the disreputable Summoner just described, can only be justified in an ironic sense. Anybody who is the 'freend' and 'compeer' of this disgusting, hateful Summoner, and who is a member of the disreputable company of the Augustinian friars of Rouncival, is anything but 'gentil'.

The Pardoner's evil nature is brought out obliquely mainly by means of reference to his hair, glaring eyes and thin voice, which according to the medieval physiognomists are signs of the shameless, deceitful, lustful and effeminate hypocrite. Even the animals to which the Pardoner is compared are meant to be repulsive. The goat, age-old symbol of lechery and of the

devil, the gelding and the mare, the latter an offensive image applied to a male, are all meant to put the reader off the character being described. Incidentally the Pardoner himself will describe his actions in terms of animals. Describing his method on the pulpit he consciously compares himself to the dove, symbol of wisdom and the Holy Ghost (109-111). However when he later is describing the way in which he repays his enemies it is to a venom-spitting animal that he subconsciously compares himself.

The Pardoner is surrounded by doubts. His ambivalent sexual nature, effeminate in appearance, masculine according to his insistent claims of success with wenches, is the very stuff that nurtures doubts. For if it is true that the Pardoner is a villain through and through, beyond all hopes of salvation and uncaring of the spiritual welfare of his congregations, he is yet an agent of Christ's church and potentially carries the means of salvation. After all "many a predicacioun/Comth ofte time of yvel entencioun;" (121-122) and he is proud that he is able to "maken other folk to twynne/From avarice, and soore to repente" (144-145). This however is purely fortuitous since he openly admits that "I preche nothing but for covetise" (147). This unintentional good seems to be the Pardoner's only saving grace, the only moral justification for his evil existence.

All this should warn the reader before coming to any easy generalizing about the Pardoner. His character has all the complexities, moral and other, of real life together with its contradictions. These contradictions are the main source of the rich irony in *The Pardoner's Tale*.

Any mature response to a literary work takes irony and ironical overtones into consideration since this will take into account all the possible attitudes that may well question the writer's own.

Irony is a mode of discourse that conveys meanings that differ from — and are usually opposite to — the professed or apparent ones. All kinds of possible irony fall into two major categories: situational and verbal. Irony successfully exploits the distance or contrast between the words or events and their contexts.

The basis of irony, according to G.N. Leech in *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* is 'the human disposition to adopt a pose, or put on a mask. The notion of disguise is particularly pertinent as it brings out (a) the element of concealment in irony and (b) the fact that what is concerned is meant to be found out.'

This is a most fitting description of what happens in the Pardoner's prologue when we are made to witness the peeling of his protective mask in front of our own eyes. It is this difference between the mask and reality that gives rise to the irony in the Tale. Chaucer the poet is fully conscious both of the reality and the deceiving mask, Chaucer the pilgrim is only partly so.

The sheer 'humanity' which led Chaucer the poet to admire even the sweat on a horse's side in *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, makes him appreciate the sheer vitality of the Pardoner's performance, while his love for fellow human beings makes him condemn the immoral and irresponsible attitude

of the Pardoner towards his congregations. Though we feel that Chaucer would condone the Pardoner's own assessment of his performance: "Mine handes and my tonge goon so yerne/That it is joye to see my bisynesse" (112-113), we are sure that this will not lead him to accept this corrupt character in his entirety.

The most obvious case of irony is in the matching of tale to teller. It is certainly paradoxical that this wicked and dissolute pilgrim should narrate this most beautiful and moral of tales. This certainly is no mistake or oversight on Chaucer's part who took great pains to fit tale to teller. Internal evidence in *The Canterbury Tales* suggests that Chaucer shifted tales round to suit particular tellers. In some cases the matching is superficial as in the case of the Second Nun and her tale. In Chaucer's greatest creations this fitting is often deep and of a psychological nature as in the case of the Wife of Bath, the Nun's Priest, the Merchant and the Pardoner himself.

That the Pardoner should narrate so well such a fine tale need not bother the reader unduly. Chaucer the pilgrim had conceded that "He was in chirche a noble ecclesiaste" (A 710), and this he certainly had to be if he could earn so much money, as he says. He is also conscious of the irony that he only preaches against that self-same sin he practises: "Thus kan I preche again that same vice/Which that I use, and that is avarice" (141-142). His preaching against avarice is only meant to soften up the audience so that they may open their purses more readily when collection time arrives. The sermon against avarice itself becomes a manifestation and an instrument of the Pardoner's own greed.

Yet, in spite of the Pardoner's avowed intention of making his congregation "to twynne/From avarice, and soore to repente" (144-145) so that he may satisfy his own greed, he cleverly exploits that same avarice. For this purpose he offers (at a price) the shoulder bone of the Holy Jew's sheep that guarantees the multiplying of the livestock and the mitten that will increase the harvest. Typically the Pardoner exploits both the avarice and the desire to repent from it!

The tale the Pardoner eventually narrates is one of his "olde stories" — "a moral tale" meant to make the congregation better and hopefully lead its members to everlasting life. The atmosphere is however one of sin and death. The Flanders setting is itself suggestive of latent evil. Flanders was after all the native country of the hated Flemish weavers so ruthlessly massacred in London during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. The particular setting in the tavern, the "develes temple", adds to the predominantly immoral atmosphere.

The Pardoner takes pleasure in drumming this feeling into his listeners. After a few lines of narrative he breaks off into the long digression on the sins of the tavern (197-374) condemning drunkenness, gluttony, gambling and swearing. Though the digression effectively breaks the narrative continuity, it succeeds in presenting a picture of utter moral corruption. Most importantly the frequenters of the tavern are shown to be spiritually dead as they wallow in its evil. The Pardoner himself marks this clear. "But certes, he that haunteth

swich delices/Is deed, whil that he liveth in tho vices" (261-262).

The Pardoner is conscious of the obvious irony that the spiritual and material lives do not go together. The tavern with its youthful company, its gay musical instruments, its dancing girls, its singers, its confectioners, its eating and drinking, spells nothing but spiritual death. It is the very haunt of the devil, the presiding genius of evil.

The sermon stresses this point over and over again. Denunciation follows denunciation: drunkenness and gluttony (the flesh), gambling (the world) and swearing (the devil). The many examples from *auctoritee* — For lewed people loven tales olde — further underline this feeling of all-encompassing evil and death. One should remember that the Pardoner's main concern is to strike fear and doubt into the heart of his audience: as such the sermon cannot be considered as an unnecessary artistically-pointless digression.

The sermon serves to create the atmosphere of moral corruption in which the three revellers are introduced. When they are first seen it is to the background of the chilling 'clynkynk' of the bell that signifies that yet another plague-stricken corpse is being carried to its grave. As the pestilence rages outside, inside the tavern lies the kingdom of the spiritually dead. Ironically the revellers are dead before they set out on their fatal quest.

The sermon is a beautiful example of how Chaucer can remain faithful to his characterization of the Pardoner as seen in the General Prologue and in the Pardoner's prologue. Behind this outward condemnation can be glimpsed the deliberate gloating of the sinner who positively cherishes the sins he condemns. The beautiful descriptions of the toiling cooks as they knock out the marrow out of the bones and of the food passing 'thurgh the golet softe and swoote' can only come from a confirmed gourmet for whom food and its preparation is a sheer pleasure. Similarly the witty description of the spontaneous mixing of the French and Spanish wines and the lively account of the gamblers at play come from somebody with more than a bookish knowledge of what he is describing.

The tale itself is a fine example of effective story-telling. The moment the Pardoner decides to return to the tale, we are totally immersed in a terrifying account of greed and its fatal consequences, both physical and spiritual. The stink of physical death is ominously hinted at by the clinking bell. However the worst death, that of the soul, is to be found within the precincts of the tavern. Truly in the midst of life we are in death! If there were still any doubts about the spiritual state of the revellers, this is made clear by the account of their rising 'al dronken in this rage' and of their hellish progress to the accompaniment of 'many a grisly ooth'.

It is now that there occurs the haunting encounter with the Old Man. Much has been written about him and what he represents. He has been as the Wandering Jew, 'a symbol of Death itself, or possibly of Old Age, conceived as Death's messenger' and simply 'Old Age' as the harbinger of Death'. On the other hand, it has been insisted that he represents 'a notion of aged humanity' and also that any allegorical interpretation should be resolutely re-

jected. The Old Man is all these and more.

He who disappears as suddenly and as silently as he appears adds a further dimension to the tale: his presence forebodes the evil that is to follow though he is, ironically, 'good', just as the florins that been so faire and brighte' turn out to be the direct cause of the revellers' death.

The Old Man presents the last chance to the young men to save their soul. Of all the characters in the tale, he is the only one who is spiritually saved. This necessarily makes him stand out among all the other personages.

His serenity contrasts with the agitation all around. He is sure of himself while the revellers in spite of their apparent certainty exude doubts. His 'Now, lordes, God yow see!' contrasts clearly with their 'What, carl, with sorry grace!'

And yet the Old Man is too ironically searching for Death as a relief from Life. The physical death he is hankering after is only meant to give him spiritual life. If the spiritually dead revellers were to succeed in killing physical death, this would ironically result in the destruction of the means to achieve spiritual life.

It is the Old Man who effectively shows the way to Death to the revellers. He directs them to 'that grove' where, he says, he left him. Still he sends them to their death with God's blessing, for all it will be worth to them. Indeed his final direction chills our blood with apprehension: 'Se ye that ook? Right there ye shal him finde' (479).

The hoard 'of florins fine of gold ycoined rounde' they find is the last thing they expect. Indeed as the Pardoner ambiguously assures us: 'No lenger thanne after Deeth they soughte' (486). The quest for Death has been forgotten, or has it been fulfilled?

The discovery of the gold, we feel, will only lead to the revellers' ultimate destruction. Though, as the worst of them asserts, there is enough gold to enable all of them to live out the rest of their lives 'in mirth and jolitee', we are sure that mere sight of the gold will excite in them that *cupiditas* which, we have been repeatedly assured, is the root of all evil.

The hoard of gold will destroy that vaunted friendship which was meant to outlast death itself. As soon as 'the worste of hem' begins to speak we feel that his glib patter must hide an ulterior motive. His very insistence on the need to take the treasure away sound suspicious to our — and to the other two revellers' — ears.

In graphic terms the Pardoner is illustrating his one and only 'theme'. With the departure of 'the yongeste of hem alle' to fetch the 'breed and wyn', we feel that before long the remaining two will team up against him, and that later each one will try to destroy the other.

In his account of the third reveller's progress the Pardoner clearly explains that cupidity is a devilish machination intended to damn us eternally. It is only a short step from the rolling up of the 'beautee of thise florins newe and brighte' in his heart to the fiend's positive suggestion that he should buy