ALLEGORY AND THE OLD MAN IN CHAUCER'S *"THE PARDONER'S TALE"*

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The Old Man who meekly greets the three revellers on their quest for death has been the subject of controversy over a number of years, the question being largely one of identification. Who is the Old Man and what is his exact function in the tale? In the numerous analogues compiled by Bryan and Dempster he does not make an appearance, and it is therefore assumed that he is largely Chaucer's creation.[1] In the Italian version which is close to Chaucer's in some of its details it is a hermit – *'un romito'* – who first espies a heap of gold in a cave and instinctively runs away:

> si la vide in certo luogo molto tralucere, imperciò che vi avea molto Oro: e si tosto come il conobbe, incontanente si partiò, e cominciò a correre per lo deserto, quanto e ne potea andare.

Meeting three robbers who are understandably mystified at the sight of a hermit on the run, he tells them that it is Death who is chasing him:

> ...io fuggo la morte, che mi vien dietro cacciandomi

The robbers investigate and, to their great surprise and joy, they discover the gold within the cave. There is undoubtedly a close parallel in the details given in this analogue and the actual tale told by the Pardoner. There are three characters who are indirectly warned by another who has already seen the gold; the impact of the gold on the three and the plot of the two against the third who is sent to the town to bring refreshment are similar in detail. The main difference in Chaucer's version is that of the enigmatic character of the Old Man

1 W.F Bryan and G. Dempster, *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales,* Chicago 1941, p.416ff. This close analogue No.82 in Borghini's *Libro di novelle e di bel parlar gentile* which 'goes back in its origin to the thirteenth century' is a likely source. There is certainly a close parallel in the narrator's reference to the crafty Devil who inspires one of the rioters to poison the others which is echoed by the Pardoner '...the feend, oure enemy/Putte in his thought that he sholde poyson beye.'

who is seeking Death rather than feeling from it.

There are basically three theories which are concerned with explaining the artistic function of the Old Man in the *Pardoner's Tale.* The first category of critics tends to explain him in terms of personification allegory, that is, the Old Man is seen as an allegory of Death itself or Death's messenger. The chief exponent of this view is Marie P. Hamilton who argues that most mediaeval analogues depict three messengers of Death, namely Sickness, Disaster and Old Age and she suggests that the Old Man must stand for old age as the Harbinger of Death.[2] W.J. Owen's[3] objection to this view is valid. According to him the three figures in the analogues cited by Mrs. Hamilton are definitely allegorical, whereas the rioters in Chaucer's version are meant to be taken literally – they swear, blaspheme and gamble and they are obviously not to be equated with either Sickness or Disaster. Various other interpretations have been put forward. N.S. Bushnell and Carleton Brown[4] see the Old Man as having strong affinities with the Wandering Jew because his restless wandering in search of death seems to be something in the nature of a curse or punishment. This interpretation, though it gives the Old Man identity, does not adequately explain his function in the Tale. Paul Ruggiers has recently suggested[5] that he represents old age and its somewhat bitter resignation and John Steadman[6] has made a detailed comparison between age and unregenerate youth in the tale. However, the function of the Old Man goes beyond that of serving as a foil to the revellers. W.J. Owen, on the other hand, argues against an allegorical interpretation for the old man especially if, as he claims, it is based on the evidence of a drunken rioter who thinks he is God's spy. Owen concludes that Chaucer was concerned with presenting an old man and that he should therefore be interpreted literally.

A literal interpretation of this central figure in the tale would fail to take into account the allegorical nature of his speech. If the Old Man's strong desire to exchange his old age for youth is to be taken literally, Why should he seek Death so fervently by knocking with his staff on the ground and beseeching his beloved mother to let him in? As Barbara Strand remarks:

> the old man's speech beginning at C.721 gratuitously introduces a great deal of

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2 M.P. Hamilton, 'Death and Old Age in the *Pardoner's Tale', Studies in Philology,* XXXVI (1939), pp.571ff.

3 W.J. Owen 'The 'Old Man in the *Pardoner's Tale', Review of English Studies',* II (1951), pp49-55.

4 N.S. Bushnell, "The Wandering Jew and the *Pardoner's Tale', Studies in Philology,* XXVIII, 450-460. and Carleton Brown's edition of the *Pardoner's Tale,* Oxford 1935, pp.xxx-xxxv.

5 Ruggiers, *The Art of the Canterbury Tales,* Madison 1955, p.129.

6 J.M. Steadman, "Old Age and *Contemptus Mundi* in the *Pardoner's Tale,*" *Meduim Aevum,* XXXIII (1964), 121-30

> information to which no literal meaning can be assigned. We have therefore to believe either that Chaucer was writing nonsense, or that an allegorical meaning was intended at this point...[7]

Miss Strang believes that the allegory is not sustained throughout and that the Pardoner was striving for effect at the cost of allegorical consistency. Other critics, notably Robert P. Miller and more recently Beryl Rowland, have seen the Old Man as symbolizing the spiritual degeneration of the Pardoner himself. Robert Miller traces a similarity between the Old Man and the *'vetus homo'* mentioned by St. Paul in various epistles to the Ephesians, as representing the flesh 'and its manifold lusts' – an image of unregenerate Adam as opposed to the *'novus homo'* who is mankind redeemed by Christ. He is therefore, according to Miller, an image of spiritual sterility prefiguring the Pardoner who is both spiritually and physically a eunuch. In Miller's words:

> It is not difficult to recognise the theological type after which the Pardoner is figured... His eunuchry, his *vestusas* and his pride would easily have identified him as a man sinning vigorously against the Holy Ghost.[8]

This identification may not be as straight forward as Miller suggests. There is no coarseness or aggressiveness in the Old Man's behaviour which one would associate with the unregenerate sinner. On the contrary the Old Man is mild and gentle – he greets the revellers in God's name and throughout his speech he seems resigned to his wretched condition:

> ...Death is God-given, and not without kindness and purpose. Death has an ordained role to rebel against this is the ultimate in human pride and egoism.[9]

It is the revellers rather than the Old Man who sin in their pride and arrogance in wanting to slay Death. Miller's assumption that the Old Man 'assumes a position in the tale suggestively analogues to that of the teller ' must be questioned.[10]

Recent scholarship has concentrated on the clinical aspects of the Pardoner's physical abnormality – 'the sexual deviate, while flaunting his abnormality, nevertheless dreads exposure.' Beryl Rowland's attempt to see the Old Man in terms of the degenerate Pardoner is unconvincing.

> Through the Old Man, knocking with his staff at his mother's gate, longing to be

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7 Strang, "Who is the Old Man in the *Pardoner's Tale?*", *Notes and Queries,* (1960), p.207.

8 P. Miller, "Chaucer's Pardoner, the Scriptural Eunuch and the *Pardoner's Tale,*" repreinted from *Speculum,* XXX (1955), pp180-199 in *Chaucer Criticism,* ed. Shoeck and Taylor, Indiana 1960, p.213.

9 Whittock, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales,* Cambridge 1970, p.192.

10 P.Miller, *op. cit.,* p.239.

let into his mother's womb, he seems to convey the anguished realization of his male impotency.[11]

Such a view tends to ignore the function of the Old Man within the tale itself. Structurally, the appearance of the Old Man is the focal point of the tale. His gentle words of greeting are in stark contrast with the coarse and agressive retort of the reveller. His plight and resignation arouse compassion in the reader and his Christian goodness is meant to stand put in contrast to the 'shere devil' of the ruffians who meet him. The hermit in the original analogue is a shadowy figure when compared with this decrepit mysterious remnant of humanity wrapped in shrouds who listlessely wanders 'lyk a restless caitiff' knocking on the ground, longing to be let into his mother's womb. It is the Old Man who directs the three young ruffians to death in the shape of a heap of gold florins under an oak tree.

The Old Man's words to the revellers, because of their inherent allegorical content, deserve careful scrunity. Kittredge has commented on Chaucer's debt in this passage to the First Elegy of Maximian and has remarked how this passage closely echoes Maximian, especially in the actual lamentations of the Old Man and in the details of his appearance.[12] A few lines, however, are the Pardoner's original contribution. The Old Man's strong desire to change his old age for youth and especially his eagerness to exchange the chest in his chamber for a 'hair clowte' to wrap himself in do not appear in Chaucer's probable sources. It is obvious that any attempt at a literal interpretation of his words would be meaningless. Why, for instance would the Old Man want a 'hair clowte' when we are told that he is 'al forwrapped'? The Old Man speaks metaphorically and it is the metaphorical nature of his speech which may provide a clue as to his real identity. The reference to the 'cheste' within his chamber has been taken to mean a chest of clothes by Spearing.[13] More likely, the Old Man is here referring to his chest of wordly possessions which he is willing to give up in

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11 Rowland, "Animal Imagery and the Pardoner's Abnormality", *Neophilologus,* XLVIII (1964), p.59.

12 G.L. Kittredge, "Chaucer and Maximian," *American Journal of Philology,* IX (1888), pp.85-86, first observed how Chaucer translated and adapted the First Elegy of Maximian, ll.221-236 for the speech of the Old Man to the rioters in the *Pardoner's Tale.* Chaucer presumably knew Maximian at first hand. Yhis would account for the mixture of Christian and Pagan elements in the Old Man's speech. For this reason Robert Barakat's suggestion, *Southern Folklore Quaterly,* XXVIII (1964), pp.210-215, that the Germanic god Odin might have provided a prototype for Chaucer's Old Man, need not be taken too seriously.

13 In his edition of the *Pardoner's Tale, Oxford 1965,* in his note to l l . 448-50, p.88.

The chest of wordly goods or ill-gotten possessions often figures out in mediaeval representations of the vice of *Avaratia.* See A. Katzenellenbogen,

order to obtain what he desires above anything else - Death itself. The coarse haircloth wished for by the Old Man which was commonly used in the Middle Ages to wrap corpses in, is here to be taken as a symbol of death. If he cannot be metamorphised into a young man Death is the Old Man's only hope of ridding himself of the burden of living.

There seems to be a connection in the Old Man's speech between the affliction of old age which seems to be God-given and allusion to the hoarding of wordly belongings which he realizes are of little avail to him. The context of the Old Man's speech must not be lost sight of - it is a sermon on the evils of *'cupiditas'* in which he appears. The Old Man's chest, which often features in mediaeval representations of Old Age, had become a symbol of the wordly goods amassed in men's lives and was frequently with *'coveitsye'*. The *Parson's Tale,* which is in fact a typical mediaeval commentary on the Seven Deadly Sins, provides an interesting gloss on the implications of *'cupiditas'* which the Pardoner denounces. The section on *De Avaritia,* in particular, contains interesting insights into the mediaeval notion of Avarice and Covetousness and their various ramifications. The Parson, to begin with, distinguishes between the covetous man who desires things which he does not have and the avaricious man who needlessly holds and keeps to himself all his possessions. The sin of the avaricious man is that he has more hope in his 'catel than in Jhesu Crist and dooth more observaunce in keeping his tresor than he dooth to the servyse of Jhesu Crist.'

He gradually becomes an idolator - every florin in his cofre is his mawmet' until he eventually loses the comfort of God and seeks an 'ydel solas of wordly thynges.' Quoting St. Augustine, the Parson defines Avarice as 'a likerousness in herte to have erthely thynges.' This concept of the avaricious person is in keeping with mediaeval pictorial representations of this Deadly Sin.

For instance, MS, BM Additional, 28, 162, of the *Somme le Roy* (folio 9v) depicts Avarice as a hooded man seated on a bench, surrounded by three horned devils, gathering coins from a chest and putting them in a bag.[14]

The Old Man's reference to the chest within his chamber may have had a special significance for the pilgrims who formed part of the Pardoner's audience. They would have sympathized with the plight of the hoarder, who, in his old age, had come to realize the utter futility of wordly possessions and their failure to acquire for the Old Man a resting place for his weary bones:

Allas! whan shul my bones been at reste?

Allegories of the Virtues and Vices of Mediaeval Art, London 1939, p.77 and Index fig. 721G, where *Avaratia* (is depicted pressing the lid of a chest down in secure her ill-gotten goods.)

14 See W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins,* Michigan 1952, p.199.

The Reeve, in particular, would have sympathized with the Old Man's predicament. Before telling his tale the Reeve had bewailed his grey hairs and his inability to enjoy life to the full, although the four sparks still burned in his old body as symptomatic of old age itself. Boasting, lying, anger and 'coveitise', according to the Reeve are the 'four sparkles longen unto eelde.' 'Coveitise' was the deadliest of the sins which beset Elde and the mentioning of the chest which he would willingly part with is an indication that the Old Man had yielded to sin. The Old Man has lived long enough to realize 'empty solas in earthly thynges' and that worldly goods so avidly sought after will not release him from the wretchedness of his decrepit condition. The gold florins – a symbol of the spiritual death to be suffered by those who come under its spell – have made no impact on him and it is not surprising that he should equate the gold with death itself in directing the rioters to the oak. The figurative meaning of his words cannot be missed – the gold will lead the rioters to their premature death at the precise moment when they cease to pursue their quest for Death. As for the Old Man he must yet endure the affliction of those who have lost the comfort of God by seeking an 'ydel solas in erthly thynges' – a repentant figure of Avarice he must realize the futility of hoarding and abide God's will.

There is a striking analogy between the affliction of the Old Man who is weary of life and cannot rest his bones and the punishment meted out to the *Avari* in the Seventh Canto of Dante's *Inferno,* where the Avaricious who had misspent their lives in the restless acquisition of worldly goods are compelled to roll huge stones in a never ending semi – circular movement. As Virgil the maestro explains to his attentive pupil:

> che tutto l'oro ch'e sotto la luna e
> che gia fu, di quest'anime stanche non
> potrebbe farne posar una

(*L'Inferno*, VII, 164 – 166)[15]

- all the gold beneath the moon would not afford rest to a single one of those weary souls. Chaucer may well have followed Dante in stressing the correlation between the hoarder's insatiable avidity and his inability to find spiritual solace even after death. In the case of the Old Man there is in his speech a distinct note of resignation and repentance, but it is the late repentance that stems from spirituality – *serae poenitentuae sterilitas* expounded by St. Augustine in his commentary on the Psalms.[16] Referring to a particular passage in St. Paul's letter to the

15 Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia,* Vol.I., ed. Momigliano, Firenze 1945. This correlation known as *'la legge del Contropasso'* stresses the strict correspondence with the crime committed. Cf. Momigliano p.24 note to lines 52-57.

16 St. Augustine, *Enerrationes in Psalmos,* Vol.II, ed. Vincenzo Tarulli, Roma 1970, p.232.

Corinthians,[17] Augustine comments on the plight of those who have been too long attached to the world:

> Habebunt quippe corruptionem carnis in qua doleant *non in qua moriantur;* alioqui et illi dolores finirentur.[18]

It is perhaps in the light of this commentary that the Old Man's predicament can be said to have a special significance.

That Chaucer may have had this particular commentary in mind is not unlikely – the *Parson's Tale* abounds in quotations from this learned father of the Church. Repentance has come somewhat tardily to the Old Man and before laying his bones to rest he is destined to seek death with that same unrelenting restlessness which in his youth had motivated his craving for earthly possessions before he can be finally released from the burden of the 'life he has lost in living.'

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17 I.Cor.15, 51.

18 "They will indeed endure the corruption of the body in which they may suffer but not die. Otherwise their suffering will come to an end."

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