

Characters in Chaucer

## THE PARDONER (unconscientious)

**Overview** The *Pardoner's Tale*, in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400) follows the very downbeat *Physician's Tale*, and precedes *The Shipman's Tale*; the *Pardoner's Tale* is a response to the host's request for a cheerful narration, after the gruesome story of the *Physician*. We must judge for ourselves whether the host's request is satisfied: the pardoner himself (*pardoner: a mediaeval priest tasked with collecting indulgences or free will offerings*) is an ambiguous person with an ambiguous story to tell. As a man of the cloth he stresses constantly that money is the root of all evil, and yet in his self-descriptions he presents himself as full of all the vices, especially the love of money. Chaucer keeps us on our toes with this one!

**Character** The pardoner, as observed above, is not himself virtuous, in fact he is cynically content with his vices. As he describes himself, at the host's request, we see that he is a con man with a sleeveful of tricks, by which he keeps himself comfortable: he is a collector and seller of fake 'relics,' power-giving remains of holy men and women who have passed; holy bones; and fast talking stories with which he can convince a widow to share her inheritance with him. For all that, however, he constantly mutters the apothegm, *money is the root of all evil*, and generally comes on pious, especially when he tells his tale of the three hoodlums who decided to kill Death, but instead killed one another. The pardoner is that consecrated mediaeval cleric whose own faults do not undermine the validity of the sound doctrine he preaches.

**Ambiguity** The pardoner's tale targets three unsavory guys who find themselves in the taverns of Flanders. 'In Flanders there was a company of young folk that amidst rioting and gambling gave themselves up to folly in the taverns.' With this preface, the pardoner, who has been describing his own dubious life-practice, adopts the moral high road. His tone, carefully calculated, is Chaucer's own trick, to set us wondering what this ambiguous text is all about. The pardoner is, after all, expected to provide some upbeat, and yet he is with considerable aplomb taking us straight into the underworld. What is this trip we are taking?

**Vices** The pardoner is off and running, with an account of the vices favored by such as the 'three unsavory guys' in Flanders. He opens with gambling and gluttony, describing the kinds of savory sauces dear to the stomach-centered no-good, then goes on to hazardry, or gambling—the impious betting on God's plan—'the very mother of lies and deceit and cursed foreswearing.' Chaucer continues hereby to tease us with sermonizing from a pardoner who has introduced himself quite proudly as a rogue. This tease, we may say, is the 'cheerful tale' the host of the Tabard Inn has called for. Will he be satisfied?

**Tale** The three 'unsavory guys'—as the pardoner's tale goes on to relate—take off through the countryside, their quest to kill Death—the obvious enemy of pleasure. The three guys come on an old man, who directs them to a tree under which Death will be sitting. 'The revellers hastened til 'they came to that tree, and there they found coins in fine round gold, well nigh eight bushels of florins.' (In a sense it was death that they found, as the pardoner has insisted in his prefatory references to money as the root of all evil.) The upshot of the discovery of this cache is that the three unsavory buffoons manage to kill one another off completely, until nothing, literally, remains of their quest to kill Death except their own deaths. Money and death have been equated, and the search for either is neither more nor less than fatal.

**Complex** The pardoner, as he has told us about himself, has a checkered past of which he has no shame. He delights in his skills as a con man, and yet, when called upon to produce a tale which will illustrate the dangers of playing fast and easy with the virtues, he is adept and subtle. It is in fact, of course, Chaucer—entering his own text as the persona of the pardoner—who is reflecting moralistically onto the life-practice of the pardoner. That life-practice, as with more space we could have let Chaucer

show us, included fascinating lack of sexual self-confidence, in displaying which the pardoner distinguishes himself as a tale teller well disposed to boosting his own ego as a con artist.

**Parallels** Chaucer's multi angled *Pardoner's Tale* invites parallels of several sorts. Try these: Odysseus, in the cave of the Cyclops (in the *Odyssey*), is a master con man who rivals the pardoner in deception—pulling the wool over Cyclops' eye, by convincing the bestial creature that no one (nobody) is in his cave, and then blinding him; Ingmar Bergman, in the *Seventh Seal* (1957), creates a dreadful filmic Death, dressed in a blackness the pardoner summons up in the 'old man's' direction-giving to the bad guys; the bilingual German novelist B.Traven, in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1927), takes us scorchingly through a tale of money hunger among three treasure hunters who ultimately destroy one another.

### **Discussion questions**

Do you think the host of the Tabard Inn will have been pleased with the change of tone and pace provided by the Pardoner's Tale?

What is the pardoner's attitude toward himself? Is he a moralist and proud of it? Or a scoundrel?

Do you think the pardoner is making a conscious comparison between money as the root of all evil, and the coins which lie at the root of the tree to which the 'old man' directs the three bad guys? If so, what is the comparison?