

THE IMPOTENT PARDONER AND HIS RELATIONSHIP TO PREACHING

John Oakley

English 40209: The Canterbury Tales

December 1, 2014

The Pardoner, with his skill in moral preaching and his admission of being a terribly immoral person, is one of the most intriguing characters in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>1</sup> Chaucer uses him to examine the practice of preaching, in particular the abuse of preaching, and elegantly reveals a contradiction in the character. The poet reveals the Pardoner as an accursed, morally depraved man trapped in sin and powerless to progress. He does, however, have deceptive genius with respects to preaching ability. In fact it is this skill behind the pulpit and imagery related to impotence which create his damned situation. He preaches eloquently about the same vice that he falls prey to most, avarice, and while he warns people to avoid greed, he himself succumbs to this vice's power. Given the Pardoner's preaching and immorality, Chaucer shows that preachers in general face a troublesome contradiction in which their practice may be as powerless as the Pardoner. The Pardoner is an extreme example of an immoral preacher, and an analysis of his role within the tales reveals Chaucer's skill in characterization and a commentary on the practice of preaching as a whole. This paper will use the Pardoner to comment on the potential danger to preaching tactics and show him to be powerless in the face of his sin, despite his skill and admission of guilt.

To illustrate the Pardoner as a powerless contradiction we first look at Chaucer's illustration of the man as a character. The Pardoner's description comes last in the General Prologue, and he accompanies the Summoner, who is as much of a scoundrel as the Pardoner. Our Pardoner has long locks of yellow hair, and "Swiche glarynge eyen hadde he as an hare."<sup>2</sup> In addition to this, "no berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have; / As smoothe it was as it were late

---

<sup>1</sup> As its primary text this paper will use Geoffrey Chaucer, and Larry Dean Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, 34

shave. / I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare.”<sup>3</sup> With these descriptions we have a man accompanied with imagery showing him as cunning and deceptive as a hare, so some of his defining features reveal him to be a master of trickery and deception. He also lacks typical male features, such as a beard, and is a “geldyng”. The straightforward use of this word confirms, after suspicions which would arise from the character’s voice and appearance, that the Pardoner is indeed *eunuchus ex navitate*.<sup>4</sup> Thus far the Pardoner is physically described as incapable of growing a beard, reproducing as a male, or performing typical masculine activities. The character’s foundational description in the prologue reveals him as powerless in many ways, and these descriptions will symbolically add to the power of his powerlessness in moral faculties later on. His skill in preaching and ability to win money from the people seemingly contradict this powerlessness at first glance.

The Pardoner’s job is to go around to towns and sells people official church pardons in order to reduce their punishments from the sins they have committed. He does this by convincing them of the importance of repenting their sins, yet in reality he tries so hard and speaks so eloquently simply to gain as much money as possible. When he preaches his “theme is yet, and evere was, / *Radix malorum est Cupiditas*.”<sup>5</sup> This is the first logical aspect to his entrapment in sin. As much as he may know about the treachery of avarice, he continually commits this sin ceaselessly and without any hint of remorse. After his introductory remarks he begins his tale, which is an exemplum following his favored theme, and a prime example of what he gives as a sermon. He tells his tale elegantly, and it is often considered one of the most finely composed

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> G. G. Sedgewick, “The Progress of Chaucer’s Pardoner, 1880-1940”. In *Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism*. Edited by Edward Wagenknecht. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 130

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, 195

poems in the collection. He essentially puts on an act when he preaches, disregarding his true nature as a “vulgar, prating rascal.”<sup>6</sup> In his tale he skillfully makes a similar comparison, as his formal language contrasts the characters’ language in the tale, which is “grisly for to here hem swere.”<sup>7</sup> This contrast in language allows the listeners to notice his high form of speech, and deceives them into trusting him.

Another example of his expert skill in preaching is his revelation of avarice as the root of all evil, following in line with his Latin catch phrase. To drive this point home, though, he begins his tale by speaking first of “tavern sins”, such as gluttony, drinking, gambling, and lying. Sedgewick and other scholars attribute the Pardoner’s words spent on these sins as a consequence of Chaucer stealing parts of his text intended for the Parson and adding them here.<sup>8</sup> Upon examination, though, these sins could be intentionally included by the Pardoner as a subtle example of his extremely high skill in preaching. Later in the tale the three men find the pile of gold, and turn on each other out of greed. The two at the tree murder the youngest while he poisons them. These three murders all find their root in the greed they discovered along with the gold. Also, one of the two who remained at the tree says that after they split the gold between the two, “Thanne may we bothe oure lustes all fulfille, / and playe at dees right at oure owene wille.”<sup>9</sup> A sin that at first seemed irrelevant to avarice is shown to be made possible only through greedy deception. After the two men murder the youngest, they decide to partake in another sin mentioned by the Pardoner and take a drink of the wine their victim had brought. This wine poisons them, and the three men have killed each other, and all these acts were rooted in their

---

<sup>6</sup> George Lyman Kittredge, “Chaucer’s Pardoner”. In *Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism*. Edited by Edward Wagenknecht. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 19

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, 196

<sup>8</sup> G.G. Sedgewick, “Progress”, 134-5

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, 201

discovery of the gold. Avarice encompasses all of their troubles, leads them to other sins and ultimately to death. The Pardoner employs this relationship to avarice masterfully. But as he claims this he also condemns himself, since he has already fallen to greed in his own life. By the logic of the tale, the only thing left for the Pardoner is sin and death.

We have seen the skill that the Pardoner uses in speech, and it is also important to note that Chaucer has him preach in a way consistent with traditions of his time. “Practically every detail of the Pardoner’s practice and utterance can be paralleled in the homilies, the tractates, the sermon manuals, or other records relative to preaching”<sup>10</sup>, so the Pardoner can be viewed as a representation of what can go wrong with the practice as a whole. Chaucer intentionally chooses to create the Pardoner as a highly skilled preacher representative of the times. Just as intentionally, Chaucer defines the Pardoner as a *geldyng*, which has many implications.

The Pardoner’s preaching is accompanied by many images and references to him being powerless. The most prominent of these is the *eunuchus ex navitate*, leaving him biologically impotent. His impotence in a way defines who he is. Another defining factor is his career as a pardoner. Theologically speaking, pardoners only have partial power to absolve sins. When a sin is committed, a person must seek absolution “*a pena et a culpa*” meaning from both the punishment and guilt of the sin. Pardoners could only absolve some of the punishment, not the guilt, so by definition of his stature in the church he is impotent to cure people of their sins, though he claims to be able to do so in order to gain money. In his tale, the three men set out on a quest to kill Death. They foolishly believe Death is an actual person rather than the plague, and they do not realize their task is utterly impossible. This futile quest symbolically highlights the pardoner’s own powerlessness, his inability to escape death just like the rest of us. The money he

---

<sup>10</sup> G. G. Sedgewick, “Progress”, 130

collects deceives him into feeling some power, but he must be aware of the futility of his greed, as he describes the fall of the three men. These factors combine to portray the Pardoner as defined and surrounded by impotence.

In this paper we have seen both the Pardoner's skill in preaching and his presentation as an impotent person. His impotence lies in the fact that he acknowledges his sins, but will not repent or try to change his ways. The preacher tells his people that they should repent, and maybe they do heal their souls, but the Pardoner does not care. His knowledge of the power of greed and how effectively it lures people into sin only further ensures his own damnation. As he has claimed, he knows best about avarice because he is so experienced with it. Even in his tale he acknowledges that anyone who falls to sin "Is deed, whil that he lyveth in tho vices."<sup>11</sup> These sins include some other than want of money, but he has shown that money leads to many other sins. The main point here is that the Pardoner is telling that crowd that he is dead. He lives in those vices and abides by his greed for wealth, and he is knowledgeable enough to know that this will be the death of him. Salvation is not an option for him at this point, because his lack of remorse coupled with the circularity of the vice he preaches about have rendered him powerless.

After the tale of the three men, the Pardoner continues on with his regular pattern of preaching. Although he has already informed the pilgrims of his duplicitous ways, he actually asks them to buy his pardons to relieve any sins of avarice they may have committed. The preacher singles out the Host, who lashes out in anger at such a vulgar maneuver. The fact that the Pardoner would even ask this of the pilgrims makes little sense; he must be aware that they will surely not buy anything from him. Some argue that he does so because he gets lost in his usual business practice, or that he is teasing them since they have been impressed with his

---

<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, 197

tale.<sup>12,13</sup> A somewhat different explanation fits the impotent imagery surrounding the Pardoner and explains his behavior. The Pardoner has in a way fallen into his story. The logic that traps him in sin has so deceived him that he truly believes his sermon will work. In the same way that his stories trick innocent citizens to give him their money, he is so skilled that he has believed in its power as well. The Host immediately throws this concept aside when he rejects the Pardoner. In rather vulgar language the Host says that he wishes he “hadde thy coillons in myn hond / in stide of relikes or of seintuarie. / Lat kutte hem of.”<sup>14</sup> This gruesome imagery hearkens unfortunately to the Pardoner’s actual situation, and he is so hurt that he has no reply. His status as *eunuchus* has been brought up, reminding the Pardoner of his impotence (literally and figuratively) just after he had been deceived by his own skill in preaching. Emotion certainly adds to his silence, as Kittredge says, but the Pardoner is actually angry and embarrassed at his own impotence. This completes the circle of the Pardoner’s powerlessness and entrapment in sin.

The Pardoner serves as an extreme example of a depraved preacher, and his representation as powerless allows Chaucer to make a commentary on the practice of preaching. With this character’s great level of deception in his sermons, Chaucer shows that there is no inherent good in preachers. Although certainly not all preachers would be as terrible as the Pardoner, given that the skill can be perfectly mastered by such an immoral person necessarily casts doubt on preaching. It is important to consider how the Pardoner gives his sermons, although Sedgewick says to pay too much attention to “what the homiletic material is or how well Chaucer knew it” would “lose sight of what Chaucer is doing.”<sup>15</sup> The focus is not on what Chaucer knew, but how he uses it to characterize the Pardoner. He uses traditional preaching

---

<sup>12</sup> George Lyman Kittredge, “Chaucer’s Pardoner”

<sup>13</sup> G.G. Sedgewick, “Progress”, 155

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, 202

<sup>15</sup> G.G. Sedgewick, “Progress”, 134

skills to call into question the credibility of preaching. The reader is forced to ask of this character whether or not his lessons are worth listening to. Should someone in the crowd take his moral lesson at face value and use it as a good, or does his message lose some of its redeeming quality since it comes from a bad source? Chaucer, as he often does, seems to answer this question with an ambiguous “both”.

The question of the value of a sermon is essentially asking if the message can be taken completely out of context and used by the listener for his or her own benefit. What is interesting is that the same can be asked of the Pardoner’s Tale; on its own it is a beautiful exemplum, well written, and provides a great piece of literature. But the reader know the source, and in this way knows that the message is told with a hint of irony and cynicism. But this irony comes only in the context, not in the story itself. Indeed “reading it in and out of context are two quite different things.”<sup>16</sup> But when we step back and consider how Chaucer has characterized the Pardoner, we see the literary beauty of the contradictions at play. The literary value of the tale is great, but when it is complicated by the context of the Pardoner, we see Chaucer’s true poetic skill. He subtly infuses a seemingly good natured story with cynical elements, painting a contradictory image and simultaneously praising and condemning this skill of preaching. The best way to take the story is to appreciate its high quality and acknowledge what may be known outside it to enhance it. Chaucer, as he brings preaching into question, seems to think the same should be done when we hear moral lessons from the pulpit. We should take them as beautiful and edifying, but acknowledge that the source may not be perfect. Chaucer uses the Pardoner as an extreme example to reveal this to us, but naturally other preachers would not be as depraved as he. However, they will have their sinful imperfections, as all people do. When we consider the

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 128



individuality of each of them we see the true beauty in humanity, much in the same way that considering the whole work of the Pardoner and his tale reveals its true literary quality. Chaucer poetically composes this comparison, and it depends on the Pardoner's position as a preacher and his contradictory impotence. The poet's focus on characterization, one of his best skills, again reveals a larger commentary on a social practice- here, the dangers of preaching and how we should consider it.

## Bibliography

Chaucer, Geoffrey, and Larry Dean Benson. *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Kittredge, George Lyman. "Chaucer's Pardoner". In *Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism*. Edited by Edward Wagenknecht. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959.

Sedgewick, G.G. "The Progress of Chaucer's Pardoner, 1880-1940". In *Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism*. Edited by Edward Wagenknecht. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959.