

# Chaucer's pardoner: a critique of capitalism

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In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* there is one pilgrim whose overriding character trait seems to be hypocrisy itself: the Pardoner, basking in sin and, at the same time, preaching violently to the masses against precisely his immoral behavior. Indeed, the difficult task of understanding the Pardoner's intent is further complicated by the interplay between the different audiences who are subject to his preaching. The pilgrims to whom his speech is addressed in the *Tales*, aware of the duplicity of the Pardoner's thoughts and behaviors, digest his words in an entirely different manner than the "ignorant" masses for which the speech was constructed and is most often performed. Unraveling the layers of meaning within the Pardoner's speech requires us to be simultaneously aware of how the speech is received by both parties, as well as understanding the tension between truth and deception that encompasses even the Pardoner's professed motivations and desires.

From the pilgrims' point of view, the Pardoner is a hypocrite par excellence, capitalizing on his skill as an orator to drain the masses of what little wealth they have. However, the extreme, heartless, and seemingly indefensible position that the Pardoner argues suggests that there is more at play here than simply a critique of greed and hypocrisy among the clergy. One cannot read the Pardoner's tale without recognizing that the masses are in fact moved to spiritual reform despite the Pardoner's day-to-day behavior, and recognizing as well the way his confessional style seems to strangely support his moral and spiritual argument. By examining closely the rhetorical strategies the Pardoner employs in his speech, we can see that the Pardoner,

in divorcing spiritual belief from personal responsibility, has himself become an unlikely but nonetheless highly effective tool for spreading morality.

It must first be recognized that the Pardoner exemplifies the ultimate divergence between religious belief and personal responsibility to uphold religious values. "For though myself be a ful vicious man, / A moral tale yit I you telle can," he tells his companions, asserting that his role as a teacher is not usurped by his transgressive behavior (171-72). The divergence between his belief and behavior is further illustrated in some of the first words we receive from the Pardoner, spoken in response to the Host's request for a lecture on morality. "' I granute, ywis," quod he, " but I moot thinke / Upon som honeste thing whil that I drinke,"" the Pardoner responds (39-40). This line is delivered with the phrase " honeste thing and the word " drinke" conspicuously close to one another, our first clue that in tearing down the idea of living life according to one's principles, the Pardoner intends to use, for example, his enjoyment of drink to actually support his preaching. In fact, the Pardoner gives us clues to understanding the mechanism of this tactic: " Thus can I preche again that same vice / Which that I use, and that is avarice" (139-40). In this simple statement, the Pardoner goes a bit further than saying his preaching can go on despite his behavior, suggesting he is in fact harnessing his own greed in order to be a better salesman of spiritual reform.

The Pardoner is able to harness his greed in a number of ways, many of which are freely accessible to the careful reader. Most importantly, he is aware that by offering products and services whose consumption is equated

with progress on a spiritual level, his financial success is dependant the spiritual success of the masses to which he preaches. This awareness results in the efforts we know to be dishonest based on the behavior he confesses to the pilgrims, but are effective for spreading spirituality nonetheless. As he explains to the pilgrims, " in Latin I speke a wordes fewe, / To saffron with my predicacioun, / And for to stire hem to devocioun" (56-57). Without knowing that the Pardoner's goal is simply to drain his audience of money, one might assume from these lines independently that the use of Latin in his speeches is a rhetorical strategy that is both clever and admirable, as stirring the masses to religious devotion is clearly to be viewed as positive outcome of his speech regardless of the Pardoner's " true" intentions.

Knowing that the financial reward that the Pardoner reaps is intimately tied to his ability to move the masses toward spiritual reform, we can see that another strategy the Pardoner employs is to empower his audience toward that end. The Pardoner focuses his empowerment of the masses in both general ways related to their lack of social and political authority, and in more specific ways that help them to facilitate spiritual improvement on their own. A clear example of the former strategy is the way the Pardoner focuses on the transgressions of the wealthy and powerful. When preaching about the sins of King Herod, for example, the Pardoner subtly attributes partial responsibility for Herod's moral transgression to his wealth. " When he of win was replete at his feeste, / Right at his owene table he yaf his heeste / To sleen the Baptist John, ful gilteless," the Pardoner explains (201-3). The only context given here for Herod's transgression is that he was filled at his feast, a criticism of excess targeted specifically at the wealthy. This rhetorical

strategy allows the audience to more clearly identify with the Pardoner on a social level, however false is the reality, and turns the buying of his religious wares into an act of solidarity that is independently admirable.

Not only does the Pardoner boost the self-esteem of the lowly masses through criticism of the powerful, he also promotes ideas that suggest the masses hold subtle power over their leaders. In discussing the errors of gambling, for example, he explains, " If that a prince useth hasardrye... / ... He is, as by commune opinioun, / Yholde the lasse in reputacioun" (311-14). In this seemingly throwaway statement, the Pardoner is subtly suggesting to the audience that by taking a stance on the importance of spiritual reform, the masses can wield power by simply judging the spirituality of the powerful. Thus, the buying of religious services offered by the Pardoner becomes to some degree a worthy political act inspired by the Pardoner's empowerment, a clear example of how the Pardoner's strategy binding his own financial success with the spiritual reform of the masses results can constitute a mutually beneficial arrangement.

Having attached his own financial rewards to the capacity of his audience to embrace spiritual reform, the Pardoner also gifts his audience by empowering them to gain spiritual knowledge independently. A solid example of this strategy is how the Pardoner intentionally structures his lesson around a story so that the weak-minded would be better able to digest and repeat his message. " For lewed peple loven tales olde—/ Swiche thinges can they wel reporte and holde," he explains (149-50). In using the word " reporte," the Pardoner is suggesting that transmission of his message

will continue beyond his sales pitch. Taken alone, however, the idea that the Pardoner would be empowering individuals to take control of their spiritual reform is yet another positive outcome of his overall strategy. The spiritual benefits become even more apparent when one considers the advice the Pardoner gives in explaining the morality of those heroic figures involved in biblical miracles: “ alle the sovereign actes... / Were doon in abstinence and in prayere: / Looketh the Bible and ther ye may it lere” (286-90). The advice to seek an outside source, the Bible, for spiritual answers is quite revealing in terms of the Pardoner's intentions. The Pardoner professes not to be interested in whatever spiritual reform might follow the reception of his speeches, but does nothing to stop this process. In fact, he empowers the peasants to further themselves spiritually by suggesting they consult the Bible in addition to buying his wares.

This approach to the Pardoner's speech, suggesting that his financial success is intimately tied to the moral and spiritual benefits his audience receives, is useful in addressing arguments that claim his apparent hypocrisy is simply an example of corruption in clergy. The Pardoner, for example, is heartless in describing his indifference to the fate of the masses, a fact that calls into question how we are to interpret his moral and spiritual purpose as a character. This indifference often becomes almost vicious when the Pardoner is describing the depths of his avarice. “ I wol have moneye, wolle, cheese, and whete,” he tells the pilgrims, “ Al were it given...of he pooreste widwe in a village—/ Al sholde hir children sterve for famine” (160-63) However, in our approach we understand the Pardoner makes this shocking comment in the context of his endless pursuit of wealth, which relies on breaking down the

spiritual assumptions of his audience, in this case his fellow pilgrims, in order that they accept spiritual reform through a purchase of his services.

The Pardoner does not merely scoff at or profess simple superiority to the masses; instead, he marginalizes them with cruelty, forcing those pilgrims around him to question whether their own spiritual beliefs divorced from practice might bring them to such cruelty without the kind of active spiritual reform on sale by the Pardoner. A further clue toward the Pardoner's "true" intentions is the clunky transition he makes between his wild speech and his offering of relics and Pardons. In a very short period of time, the Pardoner moves from "O traitours homicide, O wikkednesse!" (608) to "But sires, oo word forgat I in my tale: / I have relies and pardon in my male" (631-32). This abrupt shift makes it clear to the reader, though perhaps not the Host, that the Pardoner is deliberately trying to shake up the spiritually apathetic minds of the pilgrims in order to dizzy them into moral reform and hence the purchase of his services.

Furthermore, the indifference that the Pardoner professes to the lives of those to whom he preaches becomes the intellectual equivalent to the mechanism of showing indifference to actual moral practice. Both distinctions ultimately aid the Pardoner in his mutually beneficial arrangement of acquiring wealth by spreading spirituality. This position is stated early on, as the Pardoner lays out his intentions in indisputable terms: "myn entente is nat but for to winne, / And no thing for correccion of sinne" (115-16). The Pardoner here is clearly aware that his actions affect the moral behavior of the audiences, but denies any higher purpose for his evangelism.

Again, approaching the statement understanding that the Pardoner merely wants money from his companions, we can see the power of a confessional approach that allows the Pardoner to capitalize on indifference for his fellow man. He continues, " I rekke nevere whan that they been beried / Though that hir soules goon a-blackeberied" (117-18). This makes sense now, as attachment to those individuals affected by his speech would only hinder his overriding motivation: greed. Thus, we see the Pardoner has both practically and intellectually divorced himself from those spiritual ideals that he spreads so well due to financial ambition.

Finally, the Pardoner's strategy of divorcing spiritual belief with his own personal practice is expanded in the way he pulls in customers by capitalizing on their own avarice, pushing them toward spiritual form through appeals to their darker natures. From the beginning of his speech, the Pardoner entices his audience with the prospect that their moral reform will result in Old-Testament style reward. " If that the goode man.../ Wol every wike.../ Fasting drinken of this welle a draghte—/ ... His beestes and his stoor shal multiplie," the Pardoner slyly prods (73-77). Here, the Pardoner equates the buying of his products with spiritual reform that deserves rewarding, rewarding of a financial nature that taps into the greed of the peasant audience. Later, in a more explicit way, the Pardoner appeals to the greed of his audience by explaining that gambling is to be avoided because it will rob them of their money. " Hasard is verray moder of lesinges," he explains, "... and wast also / of catel and of time" (303-7). While this advice seems at first merely common sense, we understand that the Pardoner has a more devious reason for criticizing gambling as a poor use of money: he wishes to set up



gambling in opposition to what is not financial waste, the spiritual investment that comes from purchasing his services.

In fact, the Pardoner continues to take advantage of his audience's greed as part of the general structure of the speech itself. The Pardoner in effect glorifies sin in order to expose the audience's attraction to sin, thereby setting up the peasants to experience the full force of his subsequent condemnations. For example, at the beginning of the story about the young rioters he describes the sultry entrance of dancing and fruit-bearing girls: "right anon thane comen tombesteres, / Fetis and smale, and yonge frutesteres" (189-90). The obvious sexuality of such lines, no doubt, are meant to arouse sinful feelings in the Pardoner's audience, and the Pardoner uses similar speech to describe gambling and gluttony. Here it could be argued that the Pardoner's intimate knowledge by experience of sin aids him in creating these enticing descriptions of transgression, and thus becomes a crucial element of the Pardoner's rhetorical strategy.

Clearly, the Pardoner's effectiveness as an evangelist is a result in great part of his tactic of marrying his own by-all-means-necessary business enterprise with the spiritual success of his customers. The Pardoner is in essence the consummate capitalist, believing that he can bring good to the public while at the same time winning their wealth. Of course, he would not be such a good salesman if he were not able to capitalize on his own greed and the greed of his audience, and if he were not able to divorce entirely his religious beliefs with his immoral behavior. That those receiving his speech are often

moved to spiritual form cannot be a surprise to the reader, and can be understood as a beneficial outcome of the Pardoner's skills in enterprise.

What the Pardoner is doing essentially is displacing moral and spiritual responsibility onto the masses, wishing to take credit for their spiritual progress while being able to enjoy a life of sin at the same time. Phrased this way, we can see that the Pardoner's practice is really only an extreme version of the kind of hypocritical life of excess for which religious evangelists have been criticized to this day, only taken to an extreme level and thus exposed to be not so dangerous after all. That is not to say, of course, that the Pardoner plays out his role flawlessly, or is not corrupted to a degree from his decadence. However, understanding the mutual benefits that exist in the relationship between the Pardoner and his flock will allow the reader to more effectively handle the way Chaucer explores intellectual and spiritual power and how it is wielded. The reader might also use this understanding to explore the political nature of the Pardoner's empowerment of the masses. In any case, the overall strategies that Chaucer employs in developing the speech and character of the Pardoner are indisputably important in their immense social and political scope, and will continue to be so as long as religious, political, and financial ambitions continue to coexist in such precarious tension.