

## The Pardoner's Personality in Relation to His Prologue and Tale

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Chaucer shows an admirable skill in choosing the story for each pilgrim in *The Canterbury Tales*. For instance, the Miller tells the story of an old carpenter cuckolded by a young clerk. It is just the kind of story we expect from the poet's description of him in the General Prologue. The story he has chosen for the Pardoner is an excellent moral tale. If he had assigned it to the Parson, the effect would have been merely to emphasize his virtue as an ideal clergyman. Or if he had made the Pardoner speak of ribaldry, he would have been just a common ribald, a companion for the Miller and the Reeve. Or if he had told a moral tale pretending goodness, he would have been an ordinary hypocritical ecclesiastic. But by making him tell it without concealing his villainy at all, Chaucer has succeeded in giving his personality more viciousness and complexity.

First of all, let us remember the description of the Pardoner in the General Prologue. His portrait, together with that of the Summoner, is most unpleasant. He is unpleasant because he is far from a good churchman. But then so are the rest of the churchmen in *The Canterbury Tales*. As it is often said, one-third of the Canterbury pilgrims are religious people. We have the Monk, the Friar, the Prioress, the Summoner, the Parson, etc. Except the Parson, however, none of them is an ideal ecclesiastic. They

all fall short of what they ought to be. Like the real clergy in Chaucer's days, they are worldly and are apt to be neglectful of their spiritual works. The Pardoner is disagreeable partly because of his corruption as a churchman but mainly because of his peculiar physical condition. According to medieval physiognomy, he is an *eunuchus ex nativitate*, a born eunuch,<sup>1</sup> and the poet describes him in terms of that unhappy physical state. First, there is an account on his eyes:

Swiche glaringe eyen hadde he as an hare.<sup>2</sup>  
(1. 686)

Polemon, an authority on the subject of eunuchs, remarks: "When the eye is wide open and, like marble, glitters or coruscates, it indicates a shameless lack of modesty. This quality of the eyes is observed in a man who is not like other men, *ut eunuchus qui tamen non castratus est, sed sine testiculis natus*".<sup>3</sup>

Then we have the following passage:

A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot.  
No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;  
As smothe it was as it were late y-shave.  
I trowe he were a gelding or a mare.

(11. 690-3)

Bartholomaeus Anglicus, another authority, explains the beard: "... and therefore in men yt ben gelded growe noo berdes. For they haue loste the hote membre that sholde brede the hote humour and smoke, the matere of heer".<sup>4</sup> As to the voice he explains: "And for febylnes and synewes ye voys of theum yt ben gelded is lyke ye voys of females".<sup>5</sup>

Polemon also distinguishes *eunuchus ex nativitate*, an eunuch by birth, and *eunuchus qui castratus est*, a man who is made an eunuch: "Eunuchs who are the result of defective procreation are generally of the same type of mind, crafty and vicious, . . . But he who has been made a eunuch differs in one respect: . . . he has a more noble nature and is without the power of sustained effort".<sup>6</sup> In a word, *eunuchus ex nativitate* is worse than *eunuchus qui castratus est* in mind and character. Besides being crafty and vicious, authorities agree that an eunuch is cruel, lustful, foolish, presumptuous and of evil habits.<sup>7</sup> The Pardoner's actions such as carrying "relics" and singing "Come hider, love, to me" result from his physical condition to some extent. Such are the informations we get about the Pardoner in the General Prologue. Now back to his Prologue and Tale.

When the Physician finishes his sad tale of Virginia, the Host, whose "herte is lost for pitee of this mayde" (1. 31), turns to the Pardoner for "som myrthe or japes" (1. 33). "It shal be doon," (1. 34) the Pardoner answers, but as they have just come in front of an alehouse, he says he will have some refreshment first. Hearing this, "thise gentils" begin to cry:

Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye !  
Telle us som moral thing, that we may lere  
Som wit, and thanne wol we gladly here.

(11. 38-40)

So they know he is going to tell ribaldry. Nevertheless, he consents and adds: "but I mot thinke / Upon som honest thing while that I drinke" (11. 41-2).

There seems to be some space of time between these last lines of the head-link and the first line of the Prologue – the time for the Pardoner to drink and think. However, he does not think about "som honest thing" as

he says. For he is accustomed to telling moral tales, so that “[he] can al by rote that [he] telle[s]” (1. 46). And so he does not need to think about it any more. What he thinks about while drinking is not what tale he should tell, but how he should tell his tale. Usually in churches, he pretends holiness and preaches. He finds no difficulty in making “lewed” (=simple) people believe in his holiness. But today, he is facing the people who know that he is the sort of man who is willing to tell ribaldry. In that case, it is no use to make a pretense of being a saintly ecclesiastic. He will even appear stupid if he does so. Now his audience wants some moral tale, and he has promised to tell one. But before that, he will openly confess all his wrongs: how he has deceived people by fake relics and has got money from them. Especially he will stress his avarice, or covetousness. His audience will be shocked at his confession. Then, after they are fully informed of his viciousness, he will tell a moral tale with splendid skill. The subject of the tale will be, of course, avarice – the very sin he himself is guilty of. In this way, he will make his moral tale immoral.

Thus, by the time he begins his Prologue, he has made up his mind to reveal himself directly and shamelessly. He has always been a hypocrite, that is, he has falsely put on an appearance of holiness. Now he throws off that appearance and shows his villainy without reserve. First he introduces his pet theme: *Radix malorum est Cupiditas*, i.e., the love of money is the root of evil. Then he relates how he has made a fortune by displaying false relics. He proudly describes himself standing in a pulpit, telling “an hundred false japes more” (1. 108) to the “lewed” people. He declares:

Of avaryce and of swich cursednesse  
Is al my preching, for to make hem free  
To yeve her pens, and namely unto me.

For my entente is nat but for to winne,  
And nothing for correccioun of sinne.  
I rekke never, whan that they ben beried,  
Though that her soules goon a blakeberied !

(11. 114-20)

He confesses: “Thus spitte I out my venim under hewe / Of holynesse, to seme holy and trewe” (11. 135-6). He repeats that he preaches “of nothing but for coveityse” (1. 138), and stresses his vice:

Thus can I preche agayn that same vyce  
Which that I use, and that is avaryce.  
But, though myself be gilty in that sinne,  
Yet can I maken other folk to twinne  
From avaryce, and sore to repente.  
But that is nat my principal entente.  
I preche nothing but for coveityse;

(11. 141-7)

He continues to boast:

I wol have money, wolle, chese, and whete,  
Al were it yeven of the povrest page,  
Or of the povrest widwe in a village,  
Al sholde hir children sterve for famyne.  
Nay ! I wol drinke licour of the vyne,  
And have a joly wenche in every toun.

(11. 162-7)

And once again:

For, though myself be a ful vicious man,  
A moral tale yet I yow telle can,  
Which I am wont to preche, for to winne.

(11. 173-5)

Now convinced that his audience is astonished and shocked as he has expected, he begins his Tale.

The Pardoner's Tale is in fact a sermon on the theme that the love of money is the root of evil. After denouncing drunkenness, gluttony, lechery, blasphemy and gambling, quoting examples from the Bible, he tells an excellent and impressive short story about the three revelers who set out to find and kill Death. Then the application follows. He exclaims on the horror of sins, and goes on:

Now, goode men, God forgeve yow your trespas,  
And ware yow fro the sinne of avaryce.  
Myn holy pardoun may yow alle waryce,  
So that ye offre nobles or sterlinges,  
Or elles silver broches, spones, ringes.

(11. 618-22)

And with "But sirs, o word forgat I in my tale, / I have relikes and pardon in my male" (11. 633-4), he produces relics from his bag, and invites the pilgrims to kiss them and offer money. What are we to make of him, who, after confessing how he has gained by deceiving people with false relics, tries to do the same thing again? Is he a fool? Is he taking every opportunity to gain? Or is he just joking? We are free to make guesses. But we have to keep in mind that he is not a fool; on the contrary, he is a very clever man. If he had joined the pilgrimage in order to gain, he could have thought of other clever

means to get money. He could have feigned goodness as usual. But since he decided to reveal himself, his avarice has become subsidiary, for this once perhaps. What he has intended in his Prologue and Tale is to disclose his villainy; to impress his audience by making a display of his viciousness. When he promised to tell a moral tale, he decided to make it immoral by his confession. Hence his Prologue. And now he has told his Tale. Because his power as a preacher is exceptional, by the time he has ended his tale, his audience has completely drawn into it. He sees that they are satisfied with the sermon, which, however, is quite contrary to his intention. His intention was, and is, to make a moral story immoral. That is why he has to produce relics from his bag. The pilgrims, as if they have been dreaming and now awake from it, remember that they have been given a sermon by a villain. And suddenly they learn that the moral tale has changed to the immoral tale. The Pardoner has succeeded.

However, everything does not go so well as he has planned. When he invites the Host to kiss the relic, because he is "most envoluped in sinne" (1. 656), he gets an answer which he has not expected:

I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond  
In stede of relikes or of seintuarie;  
Lat cutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;  
They shul be shryned in an hogges tord.

(11. 666-9)

He has not prepared for this. From the General Prologue, we know that he is an eunuch. For him, it is the secret he has hidden from others. But now the Host speaks of it before all the pilgrims. No wonder he gets so angry that he cannot utter a word. Immediately the Knight intervenes and the Host and

the Pardoner kiss each other. The pilgrims are merry again.

Thus, Chaucer has chosen a moral tale for the Pardoner and has used it effectively to describe his personality. A moral tale is what we have not expected to be told by the villain. He is the one who is most unlikely to tell such a tale. Yet in a way, he is likely to tell it. For, is he not a pardoner? It is his duty to deliver sermons. However, we have not expected it from *him*. The pilgrims, when they see who the next speaker is, begin to cry: "Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye!" (1. 38). They have known the Pardoner for some time now and understand that he is going to tell some immoral story. That is the kind of story they imagine he will tell. But what Chaucer has assigned to the villain is a moral tale. And the poet has used it to make him more immoral; to make him more vicious. Given a moral tale, the Pardoner spoils it by his confession (his Prologue) and later by producing relics for sale (his epilogue). In this way, he proves himself to be more vicious and sinister than we have taken him to be. Chaucer has succeeded in describing the Pardoner's personality by the skillful use of his Prologue and Tale.

#### NOTES

1. W. C. Curry, *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences* (New York, 1960), p. 59.
2. Quotations in this essay are from the following edition: J. B. Trapp, ed. *Medieval English Literature*. New York, 1978.
3. Quoted by Curry, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-2.
4. Quoted by Curry, *ibid.*, p. 61.
5. Quoted by Curry, *ibid.*, p. 60.

6. Quoted by Curry, *ibid.*, p. 59.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

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