

Bless this Mess:

The Pardoner's Morality in the Context of Fate

Geoffrey Chaucer's most famous work, *The Canterbury Tales*, is a dissection of humanity that carefully analyzes power dynamics, personal authority, and the boundaries of virtue. Each character presents a different perspective or strife, and when approached as a whole, the work may be seen as an allegory for the moral struggles of man. In this essay, I will discuss how Chaucer uses the Pardoner to represent these struggles in the context of fate. This will primarily be examined through lines 439-462 in the prologue preceding his tale.

The Pardoner is a transparently unsavory character, perhaps moreso than any of the pilgrimage's company. Although he is a member of the church, he behaves immorally and boasts of his actions. Chaucer does not shy away from exposing corruption in the clergy; this is evident through several sly inclusions in the introductions of the Monk, the Prioress, and the Friar in the general prologue. By juxtaposing the telling of moral tales with the sowing of distrust in the religious realm, Chaucer offers his audience secular moral guidance. This preoccupation with morality may be a result of Chaucer drawing influence from Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

In the discussion of morality, the concept of sin plays a central role. Within the selected passage of the Pardoner's prologue, five of the seven cardinal sins are present. The telling of this passage itself is an act of pride: it is told with a tone of self-contented glee. The sin of greed is exhibited at the very beginning of this passage:

What, trowe ye, the whyles I may preche

And winne gold and silver for I teche,

That I wol live in povert willfully?

Nay, nay, I thoghte it nevere, trewely! (l. 439-442)

This insistence of living beyond the means of an ordinary pardoner is further exemplified on line 446, where he insists he will not beg without profit. The Pardoner takes this greed another step beyond, saying that he will make these profits “[a] were it yeven of the povereste page, / Or of the povereste widwe” (l. 449-450). Not only does he desire wealth, but he is willing to take it from society’s most destitute civilians. This ties into his perpetration of gluttony. That is also exhibited in line 448, where he announces, “I wol have money, wolfe, chese, and whete,” as well as in line 452, where he drunkenly declares, “Nay! I wol drinke licour of the vyne”. The Pardoner also notes that he wants these profits and luxuries without having to work for them. He states, “I wol nat do labour with myn hondes” (l. 444), a sentiment which reflects sloth. Finally, lust makes an appearance on line 453: “And [I will] have a joly wenche in every toun.” Notably, this line is not elaborated upon, and from here the Pardoner quickly concludes the mirthful summation of his sins.

It is significant that lust only makes a brief appearance in the Pardoner’s prologue. Envy and wrath, the sins missing from the selected passage, are heavily prevalent within the tale that follows. The momentary inclusion of lust seems to be the Pardoner brushing past his status as a eunuch. Perhaps the knowledge of his ‘lack’ lingers in his drunken mind, but he supposes that his company is none the wiser. This identity, however, should be considered as the Pardoner tells his tale preoccupied with fate, temptation, and death. The Pardoner’s eunuchism, be it congenital or the result of castration, is a status to which he has been condemned. It can be interpreted as his own sort of damnation: an unfavorable fate has been thrust upon him which he cannot control nor change.

In the story that follows the selected passage, three rioters seek out Death with the intention of slaying him. In their adventure, they become distracted upon discovering a treasure.

They are overcome with greed and kill one another; ultimately, death comes for them. It is made plain at the beginning of the tale that their fate is to meet death, which functions as a signal for the Pardoner's recognition of the inevitable and immutable. The rioters would ultimately have met death whether or not they gave in to temptation; such is the condition of mortality.

The Pardoner, having already been saddled with a damnation in his mortal life, understands that he cannot change his living condition nor his eventual demise. In this way, his eunuchism functions as his enlightenment. This is a fate which is sealed, and no amount of good deeds nor sins will change that fact. This attitude explains his ambivalence when swindling people with false relics and empty pardons.

If the Pardoner believed that his actions could change the fates of others, he may have led a different life. However, he does not believe that salvation lies in any mortal's hands; he takes advantage of others because he does not feel responsible for their fates. He wields an every-man-for-himself attitude as a result of this belief. This idea is reflected immediately before his exemplum begins:

By God, I hope I shal yow telle a thing
 That shal by resoun been at youre lyking
 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.

Now holde youre pees, my tale I wol beginne. (l. 457-462)

Here, it is made clear that the Pardoner recognizes his unsavory behavior, understands his immoral actions, and acknowledges that the tale reflects morals to which he does not subscribe.

These lines also signify the importance of separating tales from their tellers; the Pardoner revels in his duplicity.

The pilgrimage company – and all of humankind – is dotted with hypocrites; the Pardoner is merely the most transparent among them. Their journey will lead them all the same fate. The Pardoner elects to luxuriate in its flames rather than make futile attempts to change the inevitable.

Works Cited

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales: Seventeen Tales and the General Prologue*. Edited by

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