Contradictions and a Consistent Critique

Geoffrey Chaucer's writing is able to maintain interest to modern audiences despite having been written approximately six hundred years ago. This continuing fascination is due in no small part to his sharp satirical mind and his unmistakable criticisms of the existing religious hierarchy, particularly vibrant in the *Canterbury Tales*. From the General Prologue's ironic portraits of the various religious pilgrims to specific tales from and about religious figures, the work uses subtle linguistic variation and blatant criticism to draw attention to inconsistencies and possible points of contention within Chaucer's contemporary religious environment. The Pardoner's portrait, prologue, and tale use both plot-oriented and poetry-oriented contradictions to create a specific and intricate condemnation of common contemporary religious practices that illuminates Chaucer's overarching views on 14th century religious practices.

When examining the Pardoner's portrait, it is important to begin with its placement within the set of pilgrims' portraits. The Pardoner is not grouped with other second estate figures such as the Friar and Monk, but is instead listed among the last of the pilgrims: "Ther was also a Reve, and a Millere,/ A Sumnour, and a Pardoner also,/ A Maunciple, and myself- ther were namo" (GP I. 542-544). While even the hypocritical, monetary-minded Friar is placed directly after the Monk, the Pardoner appears with the coarsest of the pilgrims. The Miller is the pilgrim who drunkenly interrupts the Host's preferred order of social deference (MP I.3120) and, in doing so, represents the voice of the commoners as opposed to the elite. By placing the Pardoner among these pilgrims, Chaucer (as narrator) is passing judgment on the Pardoner's character and worth. The Pardoner, when judged by the company he keeps, comes off as lowly and somewhat extortionate, especially as the characters of his companions are revealed. The Reeve and the Miller squabble within their tales, introducing a level of crudeness to the tale-telling game quite

different than the courtly Knight's Tale implies. The Summoner, with whom the Pardoner appears to be close (GP I. 669), is also criticized heavily (although by the questionably noble Friar), both explicitly in a prologue and figuratively in a tale. Though relations between the characters in the *Canterbury Tales* are often strained and criticism between characters is often somewhat dubious (easily attributed to or indicative of general social position), Chaucer reserves some of his most outrageously immoral acts for the Miller, Reeve, and the summoner in the Friar's tale. It is no accident that the Pardoner appears alongside these men: as readers become aware of the company the Pardoner keeps, it becomes easier to predict his behavior and characterization.

Even among this undesirable group of ruffians, the Pardoner's portrait comes last and is noticeably concerned with his appearance. Nine full lines (GP I. 675-681) are devoted to the way in which he wears his hair, a seemingly irrelevant detail but one which helps illustrate the ways in which Chaucer is setting him up to be a frivolous religious figure. The Pardoner attempts to cultivate a modern, sleek appearance but instead appears foolish to his companions. The narrator notes his attempt when saying, "Hym thoughte he rood al of the newe jet" (GP I. 682). It is important, however, that the Pardoner's reasons for wearing his hair as he does are attributed to his mind rather than a shared sense of style. The Pardoner *thinks* he is up to date and fashionable, but Chaucer gives no hints that his self-evaluation is correct. The use of adjectives such as "thynne" and "dischevelee", as well as a direct comparison to flax, imply a certain distaste for the Pardoner's sense of style amongst the group as a whole and creates a noticeable gulf between the Pardoner's personal evaluations and consensus opinions. Adding to this sense of critique is the emergence of a primarily physical description: the Pardoner's portrait places equal emphasis on his appearance and his possessions, allowing for his demeanor in religious duties and preaching

mostly at the end of his portrait and then only as an afterthought. The primary view of the Pardoner that Chaucer offers is that of a man trying incredibly hard to appear legitimate and on the cutting edge of society, only to fail and worrying excessively over his appearance.

Following this description of the Pardoner as overly concerned with physicality (and also incorrectly applying that concern) is an interesting rhyme that recalls the beginning of the portrait and illuminates Chaucer's early bias against the Pardoner. Chaucer directly belittles the Pardoner's sense of stature and papal connections when he is "Bretful of pardoun comen from Rome al hoot./ A voys he hadde as small as hath a goot" (GP I. 687-688). The line concerning Papal pardons is sandwiched between a note about the Pardoner's sack and of his apparently grating voice, rhyming with "goot" and forming a decidedly unfavorable comparison. By associating the line about pardons with the goat, a traditional implication of Satan, Chaucer is commenting, although slightly and indirectly, on the quality of the Pardoner's supposed absolution. This decidedly negative connotation sets up another comparison to brutish animals (horses, GP I.691) and immediately precedes the direct discussion of the Pardoner's methods. More importantly, however, it is a repetition of a poetic technique used at the very beginning of the portrait, before any discussion of the Pardoner's appearance. The unlikely and almost blasphemous juxtaposition of Rome with trivial or inhuman elements in fact occurs twice within the portrait, and though the first comparison is to a song (not as overtly devilish as a goat), the rhyme in both cases trivializes Rome and the act of pilgrimage itself. Where the opening of the portrait could easily lead into a discussion, or even condemnation, of the Pardoner's actions, Chaucer instead digresses into a treatise on appearance. The Pardoner has come straight from Rome (GP I.671), but apparently all he has to show for it is a jolly attitude and penchant for singing love songs. The direct rhyme between "Rome" and "to me" in the first lines and the close

connection between visiting Rome and having the voice of a goat undermine the Pardoner's attempts at spiritual gravity and set up the direct condemnations that follow.

Chaucer's narrator is not subtle in criticizing the Pardoner and his physical attributes, but he is ruthless when describing the Pardoner's possessions. While the other General Prologue portraits tend to be forgiving and positive in their descriptions, the Pardoner is openly ridiculed throughout. The narrator repeatedly trumps the Pardoner's voice: gone are the ventriloquisms of the Friar and Prioress. With regards to the Pardoner, Chaucer is markedly skeptical: lines 695 and 696 repeat "he seyde" when referring to the Pardoner's possessions. The repetition underlines the lack of trust and respect towards him; he is not taken seriously for a second and his words are repeated to draw ridicule. Chaucer's repetition here draws attention to the separation between narrative voice and character voice in the Pardoner's portrait, and while this makes the ventriloquism of earlier portraits more easily recognizable, it distances the reader from the Pardoner and excludes the possibility of sympathy. Compounding the Pardoner's already considerable problems of credibility is the outright dismissal of his relics. When "he seyde" that his relics had certain origins, there is a possibility that the Pardoner is correct. This room for vindication is removed when the narrator refers to a certain relic solely as "pigges bones" (700); these are not even afforded the Pardoner's description but are dismissed immediately as fakes.

Chaucer deliberately breaks form and openly despises and distrusts the Pardoner from his first observations of physical appearance to a description of occupation and preaching. The description of the Pardoner's normal mode of operation is unsurprisingly unsympathetic given the portrait's general treatment of his character. It is no surprise that the Pardoner uses "feyned flattery and japes," along with his false relics, to get "moore moneye/ Than that [a poor] person gat in monthes tweye" (GP I.703-705): the portrait has been laced throughout with references to

deceit and a fundamental disconnect between the Pardoner's presentation of reality and a reasonable construction thereof. This straightforward examination (and implied condemnation) is, however, unique to the Pardoner's portrait and conspires along with its placement to belittle the Pardoner at every turn and even when the Pardoner is granted talent (his resemblance to a goat does not impede his singing of offertories (GP I.710)), he is roundly abused. Chaucer intends his praise of the Pardoner's singing ironically, focusing on an already negative trait and linking good deeds only to the prospect of financial gain.

The Pardoner's portrait is throughout brimming with irony and contradictory phrases and rhymes that offset any religious authority the man might have. The lengthy focus on appearance does not deviate entirely from Chaucer's previous representations of religious figures, but it does place an unusual emphasis on the Pardoner's deliberate attempts to seem admirable. Whereas Chaucer simply presents the table manners of the Prioress (GP I.127-135), the Pardoner's portrait focuses on the distinction between personal presentation and actuality. By proposing reasons behind the Pardoner's actions, Chaucer contradicts his previous stance of absolute naiveté and shows a level of perception difficult to gauge from the preceding portraits. This essential contradiction in the narrator's demeanor is present amongst contradictory passages within the text itself. Rhymes that couple holy Rome with frivolity or, worse, devilry force readers to consider the holiness of this religious figure and, as an extention, the religious system itself. A religious climate that encourages absolution at (literally) any price is subtly criticized when a figure embodying its contradictions is held up to direct and unsparing scrutiny.

It is not only in his General Prologue portrait that the Pardoner is criticized; his prologue and tale go further in presenting contradictory condemnations of his preaching and practice. The Pardoner is again routinely attacked from the moment he is asked to tell a tale. The tale he

follows is the Physician's Tale, a story concerned with moral purity; the Pardoner is conceived as its antidote. "Telle us som myrthe or japes right anon" (ParI VI.319) commands the Host, assuming that the Pardoner is not to be taken seriously and also assuming that his tale would, as a matter of course, lack sufficient gravity. The Pardoner is viewed as comic relief instead of as a legitimate religious representative or member of the second estate. As in the General Prologue, the Pardoner is placed on a relatively equal footing with the Miller and Reeve, each of whom told humorous tales of no great moral consequence; the Pardoner is expected to do the same. He obliges in good faith, but not before another criticism is leveled. The Host does not want the Pardoner to drink before telling his story, to which the Pardoner replies, "I moot thynke/ Upon som honest thyng while that I drynke" (ParI VI.327-328). The tale that the Pardoner ends up telling, however, is a repetition of the sermon he usually delivers to the masses, as far from an "honest thyng" as he can come. He attempts to fleece his fellow pilgrims, a dishonest action itself stemming from the inability to think of an honest thing even after claiming to attempt to do so. There are two levels of dishonesty and contradiction stemming from this line alone, the line that introduces the Pardoner's portion of the *Canterbury Tales*, defining it (at least in retrospect) as a particularly tricky and devious part of the collection.

Even more striking than the Pardoner's inability to succumb to drunken honesty (potentially excusable on account of drunkenness but important nonetheless) is the Pardoner's completely incorrect illustration of a Biblical verse. The Pardoner is a religious figure who preaches "*Radix malorum est Cupiditas*" (ParP 334) just before attempting to lull his audience into trust and, eventually, extort radical payments for dubious coupons of salvation. This is hypocrisy in its barest form: the Pardoner undermines what he preaches by exercising the precise opposite. His character is defined by greed and a love of money. In choosing this Biblical maxim

to represent the Pardoner, Chaucer is calling attention to the problems inherent within a church that allows such practices without openly condemning them. In presenting the Pardoner as completely and entirely outrageous, viewed as nothing but a joke by his companions, Chaucer is placing religious criticism in the mouth of a buffoon, making it more tolerable and easing it into the fabric of the *Canterbury Tales*.

What the Pardoner does through his tale is symbolize an industry of religion that develops throughout the Pardoner's entire performance. The Pardoner sets the mood by beginning with scripture presuming that, when he comes to undermine it later, his audience will not notice or will be too ashamed not to contribute to the pot, believing that the Pardoner does not accept money from "any wight…That hath doon synne horrible" (ParP 378-379). This backwards method of enforcing compliance (and lining the Pardoner's pockets) turns religion into a social practice and draws it away from themes of repentence or absolution: a person hearing the tale who thickens the Pardoner's coffers may be doing so not out of a desire for absolution but to avoid seeming sinful to his neighbors. The sleight of hand practiced by the Pardoner uses scripture to promote the avarice it explicitly forbids.

Taken alone, the Pardoner becomes a reprehensible individual who does not necessarily stand in for the church as a whole. Chaucer includes other religious figures in his work who seem more reasonable and, in the case of the Parson, are ideal representations of the religious life. The Pardoner is obviously intended to stand out and embody precisely everything wrong with religion: when Chaucer openly criticizes the Pardoner in his portrait, he is criticizing the specific character and maybe his profession as a whole, but the critique seems limited in scope. Chaucer builds on contradictions within the Pardoner's portrait and the fundamental contradiction of his tale to create a criticism of pardoners, who come to represent money in religion. After reading

the Pardoner's attempts to fleece his flock, however, it is important to revisit the earlier religious portraits and observe how they are more like the Pardoner than is at first obvious.

The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale are built on the contradiction between the Pardoner's words against greed and his greedy action; the intended effect is to enforce the original scripture (*Radix malorum est Cupiditas*) by presenting its abhorrent opposite. Easily forgotten in the Pardoner's extravagant flaunting of his own teachings are the contradictions within the Prioress's, Monk's, and Friar's portraits, which focus just as much on social status and physical appearances as does the Pardoner's, though they are treated with a certain degree of respect. Madame Eglentyne, for example, is "ful simple and coy" in the second line of her description (GP I.119); Chaucer goes on to speak of the characteristics of her voice and her wonderful table manners. The Monk is an excellent horseman who blatantly ignores the fact that traditional practice "seith that hunters ben nat hooly men" (GP I.178). His religious faults are masked within a venerating attitude of the adoring narrator, but it is clear that the Monk is more concerned with social status and the pursuits of the leisure class than living a sparse monastic life. The Friar is the worst offender of all, closely linked to the Pardoner through their mutual love of money. Though "he hadde maad ful many a mariage/ Of yonge women at his owene cost" (GP I.212-213), he is described as a member of a "povre ordre" (GP I.225). Both the Friar and the Pardoner embody precisely the opposite ideals than those they profess, and though the Friar is admired by Chaucer's narrator, he is no less guilty of similar sins.

The Pardoner is only the most obvious of the religious sinners in the *Canterbury Tales*, and when the standards he implies are applied to the other second estate pilgrims in Chaucer's group, each one fails. The Prioress and Monk seem to excel at the type of posturing for which the Pardoner is ridiculed, forging identities outside of their religious vows and adopting the manners

and hobbies of the leisure classes despised by the Biblical aversion to greed and wealth. The Pardoner serves as a key to unlock the deep religious criticism in the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer's obvious contempt towards the Pardoner dwarfs the subtlety of his other religious critiques but illuminates his vision of proper religious practice. The Pardoner is crafted to show where Chaucer stands and to elicit agreement; viewing the previous portraits with an eye towards Chaucer's ultimate end draws out contradictions within them and reveals that they are not so unlike the Pardoner themselves. The staggering inability of the clergy to follow one of the most basic tenets of the Bible and of the vows specific to their orders is a direct condemnation of the commercial nature of the 14th century church, a condemnation that flows from the disconnect between religious preaching and religious practice. This is borne out most fully by the reviled Pardoner but becomes evident in earlier portraits as well as the religious overtones of the *Canterbury Tales* congregate to form a unified vision of where, exactly, religion is going wrong.

Work Cited

Chaucer, Geoffrey. The Canterbury Tales. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000.