CHAUCER'S PARDONER: A PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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by
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I.

INTRODUCTION

Even the most casual reader of this thesis may argue that Geoffrey Chaucer was not acquainted with modern psychology. But Freud and his successors did not invent the human mind; they simply investigated it and assigned names to certain mental attitudes or conditions which have existed throughout the history of man. Shakespeare did not know Freud, either, but who can deny the psychological realism of Hamlet or of Lear? And why should not the modern critic use modern terminology to talk about it.

It is with the psychological realism of Chaucer's Pardoner that this thesis is primarily concerned. I have no desire to get the character on the couch and put imaginary words in his mouth or thoughts in his mind; that would be carrying subjective interpretation a step beyond sanity and would serve no constructive critical purpose. The importance, especially in a case such as this, of grounding interpretation firmly on textual evidence cannot be underestimated. In the comparatively few lines in The Canterbury Tales that bear directly or even indirectly upon the Pardoner's personality, however, Chaucer has created a character
who has fascinated, puzzled, and challenged many generations of critics and scholars.

With this thesis I take my place among the multitude of those who have submitted their opinions as to what makes the Pardoner tick. Those readers who are more versed in psychology than I will notice, undoubtedly, that I am strictly an amateur psychologist. I would point out, however that the word "amateur" may be traced back to its Latin root, _amare_, "to love"; an amateur, therefore, in the original sense of the word, is one who does something for the love of it. I do not mean to make a critical hobbyhorse of psychology. I do, however, find it an interesting and, in this case, useful tool for literary analysis. This is, after all, a psychologically-oriented age (as my very use of "psychologically-oriented"—a term which might justifiably be called jargon—demonstrates), and my interpretation of the Pardoner makes use of psychological constructs which are common knowledge to the educated public. The present thesis is, in other words, a literary rather than a scientific project. Normally enough, I have always been interested in people and in what makes them behave as they do, and it was the Pardoner as a _person_ to whom I was drawn from the first.

Why, of all the Pilgrims, should the one who is generally (I might say, unanimously) considered the most evil and the most
obnoxious be, to myself and a very few others, the most attractive? If Chaucer himself considered the Pardoner hateful, as some critics claim (and this will be discussed later), I must have been misled by my first reading. But after careful study my initial reaction remained the same. There had to be a reason why I was drawn to the Pardoner; there had to be something in Chaucer's presentation of this character that allowed, even if it did not necessarily encourage, a relatively sympathetic interpretation. I found it impossible to hate the Pardoner or to accept the theory that Chaucer hated him, and the key to my conviction is an understanding of the Pardoner's psychology.

He well may be the villain of *The Canterbury Tales*, but his villainy is qualified and softened by social and physiological circumstances. The Pardoner is not an Iago. Iago's black heart is almost beyond understanding and his evil is beyond forgiveness because there seems to be so little motivating it; his reasons for hating the Moor are so superficial that one feels that he hates the Moor because he hates everyone. In modern terms he is a psychopath, a completely antisocial personality. The Pardoner is more like Macbeth, whose cruelty is motivated by the overwhelming ambition that takes possession of him. This we can understand; we can even find it possible to feel pity or even sympathy for Macbeth. And so it is, I feel, with the Pardoner.
II.

THE CRITICS' JUDGMENTS

Chaucer's Pardoner is the most harshly judged and most frequently damned pilgrim in The Canterbury Tales. He has been almost automatically condemned by medieval society and by the majority of modern scholars as well, but both have overlooked a fact which Chaucer himself consciously or unconsciously recognized: the Pardoner is most certainly corrupt, but it is circumstance, his society, and centuries of prejudice which have corrupted him. Critics who "hate" him are overlooking or ignoring certain important elements of Chaucer's portrait, elements which must be considered in order to reach a relatively complete understanding of the character.

The Pardoner, therefore, has been judged far more harshly than he deserves and the critics who "hate" him have demonstrated a complete lack of the Christian charity with which Chaucer viewed him.

There are unfathomed depths in the characterization of this extraordinary human being—depths of subtle suggestion and complex meaning which may never be brought to light. The mysteries will never be solved, however, if critics continue to analyze the Pardoner on a comparatively superficial level. His body and soul have been carefully examined for their physical and moral deficiencies,
but scholars have barely scratched the surface of his mind; they have been content to explain his behavior without attempting to justify their explanations.

Gordon H. Gerould, for example, explains (or more exactly, avoids explaining) the Pardoner's baffling words and moods by arguing that he is simply too drunk to control himself. "He is the drunkard whom most of us have met at one time or another, who calmly and sometimes tearfully tells all to a stranger casually encountered."¹ This argument is unconvincing, partly because Gerould cannot adequately justify this excessive drinking; he can not explain why the Pardoner drinks. To say that he drinks because he is evil and is evil because he drinks is to explain nothing. This theory is particularly vulnerable because Gerould, if he confines himself to textual evidence, cannot prove that the Pardoner had more than one "draughte of corny ale" (VI, 456)² and a single drink is hardly enough to motivate the confession in the Prologue and the confusion in the Epilogue to his tale. It seems improbable that one drink could take effect so quickly or that its effect would last so long, especially since it may be assumed that the Pardoner is no stranger to alcohol and has built up a certain tolerance to its stimulation. In addition, food tends to minimize the intoxicating effects of alcohol, and the Pardoner clearly states, "I wol bothe drynke, and eten of a cake" (VI, 322).
Much has been made of Professor Tupper's extension of Jusserand's fantasy—the "well-known essay on 'The Pardoner's Tavern' in which ... Mr. Tupper insisted that the preacher perform in a tavern, while the Pilgrims were seated around him." G. G. Sedgewick acknowledges the ambiguity with which Chaucer shrouded the episode but argues, convincingly, I feel, that Mr. Tupper's literal tavern interior "will never do":

Only a frivolous person, I suppose, would wonder how the "tap-wenches" and the proprietor of the ale-stake liked strenous attacks on their livelihood—especially if delivered in their own premises. And Harry Bailly—he too wanted a drink, but as an innkeeper would he feel justified in being a party to such a disturbance of the peace? Further, it is difficult to enjoy the spectacle of the Lady Prioress standing with the Pardoner at a bar-rail ... If Chaucer had had the slightest interest in providing a "tavern background," he would have provided one. Since he did not, we may infer what should have been obvious from the start, that he was concentrating the whole of his effort on the character and directing his reader's whole attention to the same object ... .

The Tavern Heresy, like its fellows, puts stress on the wrong thing—on the sins not on the sinner, on the situation not on the person in it.5

Even in spite of the opinion of as eminent a scholar and editor as F. N. Robinson (who believes that "both the Prologue and the Tale of the Pardoner are apparently delivered while the pilgrims
are still at the tavern) we may safely discount the theory that the Pardoner is merely a man motivated by alcohol.

This mistaken theory is only a small part of the critics' abuse of the Pardoner. Those who do not label him a drunkard have other, less flattering names for him. He is called "a thorough-paced scoundrel," a "depraved creature," and a vain, "lofty rogue." Sedgewick points out that Jusserand considered the Pardoner "the most monstrous" of Chaucer's characters and notes that William Blake saw in the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath the "scourge and blight" of every age. It would be foolish, if not downright insane, to consider all the critics mistaken; the Pardoner is evil, of course, but Chaucer goes to great pains to suggest to us how he got that way, and we should carefully consider the poet's characterization of the Pardoner and determine his attitude toward that character. A careful study of the Pardoner, including the psychological aspects of his corruption, and of Chaucer's attitude toward him, should prevent critics from judging the Pardoner too harshly if, indeed, they would venture to pass judgment upon him at all.
NOTES


2 Citations from Chaucer in my text are to The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Fred N. Robinson (Boston, 1957).


5 Ibid., p. 442.


7 George Lyman Kittredge, "Chaucer's Pardoner," The Atlantic Monthly, LXXII (1893), 830.


9 Sedgewick, p. 456.

10 Ibid., p. 431.
III.

EUNUCHRY THEN AND NOW

A search for inner motivation must begin with a careful examination of external characteristics. Even the most casual reading of Chaucer's description in the General Prologue, however, discloses the fact that the Pardoner is physically abnormal: he is a eunuch. If his lack of facial hair and his high, feminine voice do not immediately indicate this specific abnormality, Chaucer's straightforward statement of fact cannot be ignored: "I trowe he were a gelyng or a mare" (I, 691).

The use of the feminine "mare" may suggest that the Pardoner is a homosexual, and Paull F. Baum notes that

the Summoner bare to hym a stif burdoun (A 673), i.e., sang a strong bass to the Pardoner's treble (A 688) . . . .
But there are further possibilities, by association with Nth burd, a young woman, and bourd, a jest, fun (gave him a good time), and bourdon, a staff . . .
and burden, a ninny, a "mule between a horse and a she-ass" (NED). These, added to the Pardoner's being a gelyng or a mare (A 691), bear out the suggestion that these two worthies were homosexuals and point to the obscene pun.

Another scholar finds literary parallels in Gascoigne, Shakespeare, and Dylan Thomas to support Baum's suggestion, and
concludes that "the leather-lunged Summoner appropriately sings the masculine bass part in his duet with the Pardoner ... just as he takes the active role in his homosexual relationship with him." Further support for this theory, emphasizing the fact that "burdoun" may be used as a synonym for "phallus," has been offered by B. D. H. Miller. Baum adds,

The gentle Pardoner is described (A 670) as Of Rouncivale. Mrs. Hornstein draws attention to Robinson's note (p. 769) that Tatlock had suggested, hesitatingly, that a pun is intended on "rouncival," a mannish woman, or "rouncy," a riding-horse. Robinson regards this as unlikely. It may be accepted by those who believe the Pardoner was a homosexual.

Homosexuality, however, stems from emotional rather than physiological disturbances, and homosexuals do not necessarily display the physical characteristics that mark certain types of eunuchs.

From the description, then, it is obvious that the Pardoner is the victim of either early castration or anarchism, the "complete absence of the sexual glands" resulting from a "disturbance in the development of the sexual glands ... in the embryonic stage." Professor Walter G. Curry, using medieval physiognomy rather than modern medicine to substantiate his claim, asserts that the Pardoner's affliction is congenital, that "he carries upon his body and has stamped upon his mind and character the
marks of what is known to medieval physiognomists as a *eunuchus ex nativitate*." The Pardoner must go through life with the physical manifestations of his inadequacy marked plainly for all to see.

The extent to which physiognomy was common knowledge in medieval society can only be surmised today; Curry assumes that medieval readers immediately recognized the Pardoner's condition, physically and morally, and Robert P. Miller extends the recognition of that corruption to the spiritual. Miller points out the distinction between the natural *eunuch* and the spiritual *eunuch*. The latter type is divided into the *eunuchus Dei* and the *eunuchus non Dei*; the Pardoner, of course, belongs in the second category—that of the eunuch whose actions are unholy, against God.  

Whether these things are immediately apparent or not, the Pardoner is undeniably abnormal, and as a human being whose intelligence indicates at least average sensitivity, it is not stretching the point to assume that he is bothered by that abnormality. Havelock Ellis remarks that "as far as I can judge, sex feeling exists unmodified by absence of the sexual organs. The eunuch differs from the man not in the absence of sexual passion, but only in the fact that he cannot fully gratify it." Thus the Pardoner's condition may well be considered the source of
both mental and physical anguish and frustration. From puberty, a most important stage in the development of the human personality, he is marked by a tragic physical disability which leads directly to his moral and spiritual decay; his tortures, moreover, are compounded by the scorn of an antagonistic society.

Historically, the attitude toward eunuchs has never been very sympathetic. "In former times inability of cohabitation, as well as sterility, were generally considered a disgrace . . ."10 Maimonides, a twelfth century physician, theologian, and jurist, notes in his Mishné Torah: Yad Ha-Hazaka (1180) that "a very old man, a eunuch, or a childless person is not appointed to a Sanhedrin [a Hebrew court], since these are apt to lack tenderness."11 Ellis' research provides an adequate summation of the problem:

As regards the mental qualities and moral character of the castrated, Griffiths considers that there is an undue prejudice against eunuchs and refers to Narses, who was not only one of the first generals of the Roman Empire, but a man of highly estimable character. (Lancet, March 30, 1895) Matignon, who has carefully studied Chinese eunuchs, points out that they occupy positions of much responsibility, and though regarded in many respects as social outcasts, possess very excellent and amiable moral qualities (Archives Cliniques de Bordeaux, May, 1896) . . . . It is often forgotten that the physical and psychic qualities
associated with and largely dependent on the ability to experience the impulse of detumescence, while essential to the perfect man, involve many egotistic, aggressive and acquisitive characteristics which are of little intellectual value, and at the same time inimical to many moral virtues.  

Here a modern authority demonstrates that prejudices against eunuchs have existed throughout history and, what is more points out that their societies' condemnation was undeserved. There is no reason to imagine that medieval Englishmen were more tolerant of or more sympathetic to the eunuch's dilemma than the Romans, the Chinese, or the Hebrews. If Professor Curry's findings are to be accepted, even with reservations, it is obvious that a concept of "the honorable eunuch" did not exist in Chaucer's society. The medieval world was a man's world. One philosopher argued that "women differ from men not in quality but in degree; they are apt to all men's occupations, though to a lesser degree," but even this charitable opinion accepts the general doctrine of feminine inferiority. The Pardoner is effeminate; for that reason alone he must be considered inferior by the medieval mind. But to return to Curry: the most thorough condemnation of the eunuch is expressed by the physiognomists.

Now physiognomy is nothing more than the art of discovering the characteristic qualities of the mind or temper of a man by observation of his form
and the movements of his face and body, or both. For Chaucer and for every educated man of his time this physiognomical lore made it possible to judge with a certain degree of accuracy and with approximate infallibility the inner character of a man from a study of his form and features. . . . What, then, could be more natural than that Chaucer . . . should consult the physiognomies for suggestions as to the physical characteristics most appropriate for the men and women whom he wishes to introduce to his special audience?

With this idea in mind, let us proceed to examine what the physiognomies might have to say regarding the Pardoner's features in relation to his character. 14

What follows assigns to the Pardoner almost every obnoxious, repulsive character trait possible to man.

It will be recalled that he has long, straight hair as yellow as wax, which hangs thinly spread over his shoulders, each hair to itself; his eyes are wide open and glaring like those of a hare; his voice is high-pitched and as "thin" as that of a goat; he is entirely without any indication of a beard; and, if we may judge from the description which he gives of himself in the act of delivering one of his powerful sermons, his neck is long and scrawny . . . .15

The voice and eyes "are directly associated with shameless impudence, gluttony, and licentiousness," while the hair indicates physical and mental effeminacy, a cunning and clever mind, and a deceptive nature. These are all traits characteristic of the eunuchus ex nativitate, described without fail as a vicious, foolish, lustful, and presumptuous man of evil habits. 16
Because the Pardoner is a born eunuch, and because he is therefore marked by a number of physical characteristics for which he cannot be held responsible, he is automatically condemned as evil by his society. His eunuchry affects not only his sexual organs but his entire body; it practically predetermines his total physical appearance and, if Curry is correct, his character and personality as well. The most important single fact about the Pardoner, therefore, is the fact that he is a eunuch.
NOTES

1Paull F. Baum, "Chaucer's Puns," PMLA, LXXI (March 1956), 232.


5Whether the Pardoner is sexually aroused by men or by women is immaterial; because of his abnormality it is physically impossible for him to achieve total satisfaction by any means at all. If he is a homosexual as well, that fact might constitute one more reason for his society to condemn him.


7"The Pardoner's Secret," Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences (New York, 1960), p. 59. This type of eunuchus will be described and discussed below.


14Curry, pp. 56–57.

15Ibid., p. 55.

16Ibid., p. 59–60.
IV.

REJECTION AND RETALIATION

Since eunuchs were automatically marked as evil, it is safe to assume that from the earliest manifestations of his abnormality the Pardoner was ill-treated and rejected by his society; his wickedness and perhaps even his choice of a profession stem from that rejection and his subsequent feelings of inferiority. His isolation is indicated by his social standing among the Pilgrims: even before he opens his mouth the "gentles" will have nothing to do with him; his only friend is the thoroughly obnoxious Summoner. If "there are numerous evidences of an intimate connection between the gonads—as part of the whole psychological organization—and mental disorder . . . ,"¹ the Pardoner's complete lack of sexual development suggests that he suffers from a corresponding psychological imperfection or disturbance as well. Psychic and social pressures drove the Pardoner to the moral and spiritual decay that dominates his portrait in The Canterbury Tales. He is the tormented, neurotic victim of an overwhelming inferiority complex, and his actions must be considered in this light.

The Pardoner's wickedness—his boasting, his avarice, his consumption of alcohol, and the sadistic pleasure he gets
from duping the public—may be explained in terms of his overpowering feelings of inferiority. So, in all likelihood, may his oratorical skills. He boasts, first and foremost, in order to bolster his self-esteem; this boasting tone saturates his entire Prologue. The Prologue is, in fact, one big boast concerning his ability as a preacher, his ability to cheat, the resulting financial success, and his general wickedness.

"Lordynes," quod he, "in chirches when I preche, I peyne me to han an hauteyn speche, And rynge it out as round as gooth a belle, For I kan al by rote that I telle."

(VI,329-332)

Thus he begins with the assertion that his haughty, arrogant, and proud speeches are delivered in bell-like, ringing tones and, in addition, he knows them all by heart. Were he not fundamentally unsure of himself, he would simply demonstrate his ability and then retire, satisfied by the knowledge that his audience recognized a job well done. There would be no reason to say, "Myne handes and my tonge goon so yerne/ That it is joye to se my bisynesse" (VI,398-399) unless he very much wanted the Pilgrims to recognize his talent and was very much afraid that they would not. Just in case they fail to believe his claims, he boasts of his financial success: "By this gaude have I wonne, yeer by yeer,/ An hundred mark sith I was pardoner" (VI,389-390).
Even the so-called confession of his wickedness has a boastful ring. Wickedness, in the Middle Ages as now, was probably considered brave and manly; today young men steal hub caps, get drunk, seduce girls, and the like, and then brag about it to prove their masculinity. If their behavior shocks their friends, so much the better; they read jealousy, admiration, and awe into the disapproving silence. In the last analysis, all they are seeking is the approval of their peers, and the Pardoner's behavior is not far removed from this. In a vain attempt to compensate for his lack of masculinity, the Pardoner turns to "manly" wickedness. Nothing would be gained if he were to keep his evil behavior a secret, however; therefore he must brag about it:

I preche of no thyng but for coveityse.
Therfore my theme is yet, and evere was,
Radix malorum est Cupiditas.
Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice
Which that I use, and that is avarice.
But though myself be gilty of that synne,
Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne
From avarice, and soore to repente.
But that is nat my principal entente;
I preche nothyng but for coveitise.

(VI, 424-433)

In ten short lines he mentions his own avarice three times, not including his reference to "that same vice," and twice asserts that he preaches only "for coveityse"; in addition, he emphasizes
the shocking admission of his hypocrisy. Seymour L. Gross has made a more inclusive study of this repetition and has discovered that

the opening 59 lines of the Prologue are, psychologically speaking, reasonably balanced: they are a sort of abbreviated handbook on how a pardonor by means of fake bulls and phony relics goes about cheating the poor trusting peasants. But the remainder of the Prologue is decidedly over-balanced. In 74 lines of verse there are no less than five distinct passages totalling [sic] 33 lines in which the Pardonor reiterates, ad nauseam, that he preaches only for his own profit, and that therefore there is not the slightest shred of moral purpose in his life (C. 389-390; 400-404; 424-433; 439-453; 461).2

The constant repetition of his wickedness leads one to wonder whether he is really as "vicious" as he claims to be; it seems that the gentleman "doth protest too much."

In the passage quoted above (VI, 424-433) the Pardonor's assertion that, sinful or not, he is able to make others turn from sin may be considered just one more boast about his skill. It may, however, be taken as a momentary shift in the mood of the narrative, a shift that reveals the basic goodness of the Pardonor. It is rather pathetic. He recognizes the fact that he can save others, but he cannot save himself; he is granting the value of salvation and at the same time revealing his conviction that he himself is beyond salvation, beyond hope. The
Pardoner is giving himself up to the sin of despair. His predicament is genuinely touching; here the mask of evil falls away for a moment, and one can almost hear him say, in a voice tinged with pride yet softened by a faint tone of wistful longing, "Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne/ From avarice, and soore to repente" (VI,430-431). His use of "soore" indicates that he is able to make other sinners feel sore or wounded or sad in the face of their sins. They, however, may easily rid themselves of the psychic pain of their aching consciences by repenting; for the Pardoner there is no relief, and one can imagine the realization of this thrusting itself upon his consciousness as he speaks these lines. His only defense against the pain caused by his sinfulness is to deny it, to pretend that he is invulnerable. He pridefully insists, although he is never able to convince himself, that there is no higher power than himself. Alfred L. Kellogg points out that

the judgment of God, the inescapable hell within which is the penalty of that pride, the Pardoner is extremely interested in concealing, for he is a man, as he eagerly informs us, whom justice cannot touch. Yet in the Prologue one senses his punishment in certain typical actions of the sinner defying the penalty of his sin—the attempt to escape where pain cannot follow, the attempt to pervert and destroy the offending good.
So after the Pardoner admits the value of salvation he recovers quickly and, as he is to do later when again overcome by sudden sincerity (see below), he re-asserts his wickedness: I may be able to save others, he says, "But that is nat my principal entente;/I preche nothyng but for coveityse" (VI, 432-433).

Wine, women, and song are other paths of wickedness for the Pardoner. Thus he says, "I wol drynke licour of the vyne,/ And have a joly wenche in every toun" (VI, 452-453). In view of the fact that he is a eunuch, the latter claim becomes another futile attempt to deny his sexual abnormality. His interruption of the Wife of Bath may be directed toward this end also, for he claims to have considered marriage and asks the Wife to "teche us yonge men of youre praktike" (III, 187). In reality, of course, a wife would only intensify his sexual frustration (see Ellis, p. 11 above). The statement of his marital aspirations may be, as Sedgewick says, "jocosity . . . . But in view of his profession and his House of Rouncivale, it is impudent; and in the light of the portrait, dangerously shameless."5

Here Sedgewick assumes that the Pardoner has taken religious orders. This is not necessarily so.

The Chapel and Hospital of Rouncival, like the mother house, were under the Augustinian rule, and we are apt to think that because he preached the Pardoner must have been in holy orders;
but there are several reasons for thinking that Chaucer's Pardoner, if in holy orders at all, was certainly in very minor ones . . . . According to his statement to the Wife of Bath he "was about to wedde a wyf." We need not believe that he really had any such intention, but at least neither that expert in matrimony nor any of the other pilgrims expressed any doubt that he had the right to do so . . . . 6

The fact that the Pardoner preaches proves nothing because during Chaucer's time the profession was notoriously corrupt, and had been so for over a century. Kellogg and Haselmayer point out that Innocent III (in 1215), Clement IV (in 1267), and Clement V (in 1311-1312) found it necessary to pass legislation in order to establish limits to the activities of evil pardners who were abusing their profession for their own gain. The combined legislation of these three popes defined the rights and duties of a pardoner as these:

The pardoner must bear papal or episcopal letters; he must be examined and licensed by the Bishop. If he is permitted to enter the churches of the diocese, he is forbidden to do more than read his letters and collect contributions. If he errs in his practices or in his mode of life, he is to be punished by the Bishop. This was the simple code governing the pardoner. Enforcement, however, was a very different matter.

The intimidation of priests and the illegal purchase of letters and licenses made it possible for corrupt pardners to thrive,
and the "gentil Pardoner/Of Rouncivale" (I,669–670) was attached to a place that had had a reputation for evil pardoners since the early years of the thirteenth century.  

The search for documents on the subject will show once more the marvellous exactness of Chaucer's pictures; however malicious they may be when they concern the Pardoner, they do not contain a trait that may not be justified by letters emanating from papal or episcopal chancery. . . . It was a lucrative trade, and the competition was great; the success of authorized pardoners had caused a crowd of interested pardoners to issue from the schools or the priory, or from mere nothingness . . . . The list of the misdeeds of pardoners was in truth enormous, and it is found even larger on exploring the authentic ecclesiastical documents than in the poems of Chaucer himself. Thus in a bull of Pope Urban V, dated 1369, we find the description of practices which seem to have been unknown to the otherwise experienced "gentil Pardoner of Rouncival."  

Whether the Pardoner had taken holy orders or not is unimportant; all pardoners seem to be equally corrupt, particularly those of "St. Mary's Rounceval." In any case the holy orders would not be the main reason that the Pardoner is most unlikely to marry; the biggest barrier, once again, is his eunuchry. In the light of this fact his claim that he "was aboute to wedde a wyf" (III, 166) becomes just another idle boast, and the song that he sings, "Com hider, love, to me!" (I,672), expresses a desire that cannot
be fulfilled. The love song and his ability to tell "myrie" stories are further proof that he is trying desperately to give the impression that he is sexually normal.

The Pardoner boasts about his drinking as he boasts about everything else. It is more important, however, to examine the real reasons that he turns to alcohol. Why does he insist upon having a drink before beginning his tale? "I moat thynke/ Upon som honest thyng whil that I drynke" (VI, 327-328) is only an excuse; "being a man of ability and eloquence, he must have plenty of 'honest things' at his tongue's end," as Kittredge says, but I cannot agree with Kittredge's suggestion that "he is honestly thirsty, and glad of an excuse to quench his thirst" and no more. The Pardoner is not the type that would require an excuse in order to have a drink. Sedgwick's criticism of Tupper's literal tavern setting and the improbability of Gerould's claim of drunkenness have already been discussed, but even these careful studies do not explain why the drink is so important to the Pardoner. In the framework of this interpretation, two possibilities arise. The drink may be simply another action contrived to shock the high-minded pilgrims in the group, though ale was so common a beverage that no one is likely to have been very surprised. It may be, however (and very likely is), a necessary preparation without which the Pardoner might not have had the
nerve to speak before an intelligent group of people. He has little trouble convincing himself that he is superior—intriguingly, at least—to the "lewd :peple" he is able to dupe, but the Pilgrims are different. They represent the nobility, the Church, and the fast-rising middle class; ordinary peasants cannot afford pilgrimages, which "had been gradually becoming journeys rather of pleasure than of duty, for those who could afford the necessary expense which they entailed." The Pardoner had probably never addressed such a company before, and he was understandably uneasy. Even one drink, however, would tend to relax jumpy nerves, give a sense of courage, and loosen the tongue. One might imagine the Pardoner taking a long swallow of ale and then launching into his Prologue, which is just one long boast about his wickedness and his ability. The sound of his own voice and the conviction with which he delivers his boastful assertions further inflate his faith in himself; finally he is able to say, "Now have I dronke a draughte of corny ale,/By God, I hope I shal yow telle a thynge/ That shal by reson been at youre likynge" (VI, 456-458) and, with one last boast that he is "a ful vicious man" (VI, 459), go straight into a self-confident delivery of his magnificent tale.

I mentioned earlier Kellogg's Augustinian approach to the Pardoner which involves the progression of the seven deadly sins and noted that the Pardoner is guilty of the sin of despair.
Kellogg is able to assign the remaining six sins to him as well and points out that his love of money, wine, and women amount to the sins of avarice, gluttony, and lechery and the sin of pride as well. Avarice, gluttony, and lechery are simultaneously the typical sins of all pardoners: avaricia, gula, luxuria, and a very significant pattern in the progressive degeneration of the human spirit. These three sins in the order stated constitute a progression within the seven deadly sins—the final three—and suggest thereby the final resort of a creature who has lost its happiness in the sins of the spirit and now seeks to lose its misery in the more physical sins. 13

Garland Ethel, too, discusses the Pardoner in terms of the seven deadly sins, and notes that "lechery is by no means dependent upon capacity . . . "14 The Pardoner's frequent assertions that his life revolves around wickedness and excess are his only defense against an antagonistic society, but in protecting himself from this world he is facing eternal damnation in the next. If he was ever sincerely religious—and the knowledge of Christianity demonstrated by his preaching indicates that he very well might have been—his present behavior would be, as Kellogg suggests, the source of excruciating inner torment.

One realm of the Pardoner's wickedness remains to be examined: the enjoyment he gets from his dishonest dealings with the general public. This sadistic pleasure is understandable when
considered in the light of society's treatment of him. He has been rejected by the world because of his eunuchry, and each time he gets the better of people and takes their money he is "paying them back." He has been hurt, so he retaliates in the only way he can: by cheating people out of money that they can ill afford to throw away. In reference to evil motives he says,

For certes, many a predicaciooun
Comth ofte tyme of yvel entencioun;
Som for plesance of folk and flaterye,
To been avaunced by ypocrisye,
And som for veyne glorie, and som for hate.
(VI,407-411)

The motive of "hate" seems to be emphasized by its position at the end of the list, and this—far more than the others—would seem to be the Pardoner's true motive: the people hate him, and his only defense is to hate them back. Notice that his attitude toward his "bretheren" is quite the opposite of the cruelty and hatred with which he greets society as a whole:

For whan I dar noon oother weyes debate,
Thanne wol I styngye hym with my tongue smerte
In prechynge, so that he shal nat asterte
To been defamed falsly, if that he
Hath trespassed to my bretheren or to me.
(VI,412-416)

The Pardoner's loyalty is unselfish; he will use his skill as an orator to defend not only himself but his "bretheren" as well. This loyalty is a bit pathetic, because the Pardoner undoubtedly had few—if any—friends worthy of his love. Sedgewick notes
that the Pardoner is first mentioned in the same breath with the
Reeve, the Miller, the Summoner, and the Manciple, and

that is the Pardoner's gang: the slums of
the Pilgrimage, tellers of harlotries all
of them . . . . Mr. Curry notes that there
is no evidence of contact between the Par-
doner and respectable folk. There certainly
is not. None of the "gentils" would touch
him with the proverbial pole, and even Harry
Bailly's final intimate contact was effected
under stern duress.

The only Pilgrim who rides with him is
the scabby Summoner, "his freend and his com-
peer."15

It may be argued that there would have been a lot of evil pardners
and summoners for him to associate with, but it is hardly probable
that many of them would have been on his intellectual level.

The high quality of the Pardoner's intellect is demon-
strated most vividly by the near-perfection of his oratorical
skills. Practically the only kind words Gerould has for him are
these: he "is an actor of talent."16 This statement opens
another avenue of psychological possibility. The Pardoner has
created a rôle; his characterization is presented each time he
performs before a crowd, and his financial success indicates the
effectiveness of his performance. If the Pardoner may be con-
sidered an actor--a creative artist--his creativity may be in
fact a kind of sublimation. Sublimation is "the process of
consciously gratifying unconscious sexual or aggressive impulses,
in work, play, or art. The Pardoner's "talent" may well be the product of frustrated sexual impulses which have been diverted into creative channels. He has a great deal of energy which, although he cannot achieve complete satisfaction, he must try to dispose of in any way possible since the sexual release is denied him. Thus the perfection of his oratorical art might be considered an end in itself (the gratification of sexual and aggressive impulses) as well as merely the means to an end (duping the people).

The Pardoner's skill as an orator may also be a result of the mechanism of over-compensation, "the development of excessively positive . . . reaction patterns in an attempt to overcome feelings of inadequacy." His behavior in general, in fact, may be attributed to his constant efforts to overcome the feelings of inadequacy and inferiority which have been instilled in him by an unsympathetic society ever since his physical abnormality first became apparent.
1. David Henderson and R. D. Gillespie, *A Text-book of Psychiatry* (London, 1950), p. 545. Also note Samuel H. Kraines, *The Therapy of Neuroses and Psychoses* (Philadelphia, 1948), p. 211: "In many instances, however, the stress or precipitating factor lies not in obvious difficulties such as physical or financial disability, but in more subtle ones which concern one's pride and ego and which may cause far more intense suffering than does actual physical distress. Social estrangement, ostracism, contempt, lack of appreciation, even the difference of being unusually thin or fat or short or tall may exert a pressure which will result in the warping of the personality."

2. "Conscious Verbal Repetition in the Pardoner's 'Prologue','" *Notes and Queries*, CXXVIII (October 1953), 413.


4. Kellogg, p. 471. Also see Swart, *op. cit.*, who feels that the Pardoner's greatest sin is *Superbia* or pride.


12. G. G. Coulton, Chaucer and His England (New York, 1927)

13. Kellogg, p. 471

14. Ethel, p. 226

15. Sedgwick, p. 443.


18. Ibid., p. 606.
V.

NEW NOTES ON THE EPILOGUE

The Pardoner is so accomplished an artist that only once does his talent desert him completely; only once do his defense mechanisms break down and leave him utterly vulnerable. This, of course, is during the confusion of events that follow his tale of the three "riotoures"—during that short lapse of time between the end of the exemplum and the moment when the Pilgrims "ryden forth hir weye" (VI, 968). It is not difficult, however, to arrive at the psychological truth of the Pardoner's puzzling and apparently irrational behavior.

The exemplum—the tale itself—ends with a typical summary of results: "Thus ended been thise homycides two,/And eek the false empoysonere also" (VI, 893–894). But the Pardoner, as Kittredge explains, "is at a white heat of zeal. Forgetful of his surroundings, he does not stop with the 'application,' but goes on to the exortation with which he regularly concludes his harangues."¹ The fact that he says, "Cometh up, ye wyves, offereth of youre wollel" (VI, 910) proves beyond doubt that this is part of his memorized sales pitch, for there is only one wife among them, and thus the statement "has no appropriateness when

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addressed to the pilgrims.² It is as if the actor forgets that he is creating a rôle and begins to live the part. But suddenly the Pardoner realizes where he is and to whom he has been preaching; immediately the tone of the speech changes completely. "And lo, sires, thus I preche" (VI,915), he admits to the Pilgrims. The tone is not oratorical or demagogic but conversational—almost humbly so. Then, as Kittredge rightly suggests, he is moved to give a traditional but extraordinarily sincere and touching benediction:

"And lo, sires, thus I preche.
And Jhesu Crist, that is oure soules leche,
So graunte yow his pardoun to receyve,
For that is best; I wol yow nat deceyve."
(VI,915-918)

There is no boasting here; there is no hint of cynicism or of irony. It is simply a sincere statement of fact—a statement prompted by the embarrassment of having been carried away by the force of his oration, a statement that reveals "the Pardoner's better nature, which he had himself thought dead long ago"³—or which he had hidden so carefully from others.

Suddenly his defensive facade is stripped away, and with it go his poise and his self-confidence. Will the Pilgrims laugh at his sincerity, his admission of inferiority? What can he say now? Kittredge says that he hurries into "a strain of
reckless jocularity to escape from the serious mood that has
surprised him, 
and I suggest that it is desperation that drives
him to attempt such rash joking. In his nervousness he feels
that he has to say something to break the awkward (or so it seems
to him) silence evoked by his moving benediction, so he continues
with the memorized sales pitch—most likely the first thing to come
to mind—and hopes desperately that the Pilgrims will take it
as a joke.

But sires, o word forgat I in my tale:
I have relics and pardons in my male,
As faire as any man in Engelond,
Wich wwere me yeven by the popes hond.
If any of yow wole, of devocioun,
Offren, and han myn absolution,
Com forth anon, and kneleth heere adoun,
And mekely receyveth my pardoun.

(VI, 919-926)

"The invitation has sometimes been taken as given in dead earnest;
but this is inconceivable. It would imply super-human folly on the
speaker's part to try to deceive the pilgrims when he has just
warned them against his own deceit," and the Pardoner is not a
fool. Consider also his state of mind: he does not believe for
a minute that any of the "gentils" would kneel before him and
accept his pardons; his poise has been shaken by the sudden sin-
cerity of his benediction, and he is well aware of the brutal
honesty with which he revealed the very depths of his own
sinfulness to them. He knows exactly what they think of him. This knowledge, of course, makes him even more nervous, as does the dead silence which greets his feeble attempts at sarcastic humor; he is not, needless to say, being very funny. One can almost feel the tension growing and the Pardoner becoming more and more upset.

Finally, in absolute desperation, he tries to divert attention to the Host "and pointedly suggests that he begin, as being the most sinful of the company. This remark alone would suffice to indicate how little serious purpose there is in the proposition of the Pardoner. The host is the last person to yield to seductive suggestions of this sort in any case, and it would be idle to expect him to do so after the full revelation of himself that the Pardoner has made." So Harly Bailly, who enjoys a joke when the joke is on someone else, takes offense, and his insulting words "for sheer obscene brutality . . . have no parallel in the Canterbury Tales—and that is saying a good deal." Bailly avenges the minor insult he received by cutting deep into the poor Pardoner's most vulnerable spot: his lack of masculinity. Small wonder that the "Pardoner answere nat a word" (VI,956); but one wonders whether his silence is the result of anger or whether he is simply too crushed and hurt to speak after the unexpected attack.
Sedgwick's interpretation of the Epilogue agrees generally with that of Kittredge, who was most often quoted above. Sedgewick, however, cannot accept the glimmer of goodness that Kittredge sees in the Pardoner and therefore attributes the sharp shift in mood that follows the benediction to the Pardoner's vanity.

I imagine that a hush has fallen over the pilgrims as the Pardoner brings his "sermon" to a close. No one, not even the Host, has a word to say . . . . The tale itself is impressive beyond words; the summary and appeal that follow it are appallingly impressive in another way; and the solemn benediction crowns it all with a third emphasis. It is a performance that might well impose silence. . . .

The Pardoner, as I see him, looks around at the silent pilgrimage with perhaps some surprise and certainly deep satisfaction . . . . It suddenly occurs to him, "They have been impressed in spite of themselves! What do they think now of the man forbid? I will get some fun out of their embarrassment." The hush has flattered the preacher's vanity and so leads to his undoing.8

In view of the Pardoner's overwhelming feelings of inferiority, however, it seems more likely that he would be confused rather than flattered by the silence, especially following the unguarded sincerity of the benediction. It is easier to agree with Kellogg, who uses Augustinian theology to support Kittredge's interpretation and asserts that "in the final confession (lines 916-918) there springs forth suddenly, fully disclosed, the side of the
Pardoner's being he has been striving so feverishly to conceal—the nature, created good, suffering, indestructible whose very presence makes the Pardoner's existence a hidden torment and his whole way of life folly. Of the final judgment of God, Chaucer tells us nothing. The Pardoner himself is very pitiable. ... His life is a wretched and pitiful pretense. Chaucer treats him gently because the Pardoner's vice is its own punishment."

His own tortured mind leads him to sin and thus to additional punishment.

This circle of self-torture is so vicious that there seems to be an element of masochism in it. Perhaps, in fact, St. Augustine was describing what we now call self-destructive behavior. In his innermost self the submerged good in the Pardoner's nature writhe in agony, a butterfly impaled on the pin of wickedness. But in the midst of this agony is a certain, perverted satisfaction: he knows that he deserves to be punished and, in lieu of immediate retribution from the heavens, takes the burden of that punishment upon himself. Masochism is defined as "conscious or unconscious desires to experience physical or psychological pain." The Pardoner's need to punish himself is unconscious, and the punishment that reveals itself is the psychological pain of knowing himself for what he is. This knowledge in turn increases the desire to punish himself. The boasting,
the cheating, the drinking, the hypocrisy—all are products of, and causes of self-disgust and also instruments of self-punishment. Similarly, he self-destructively manipulates the hostile attitudes of others toward him. The Pardoner is obnoxious because subconsciously he wants people to reject him because he cannot accept himself. In the Epilogue as in the rest of his life, his subconscious mind causes him to alienate the people by whom his conscious self has always wanted desperately to be accepted.

At the end of the Epilogue the Knight comes to the Pardoner's defense. He does this not out of any love for the Pardoner but out of the nobility's duty and desire to preserve peace and order; still, it is the Pardoner whom he defends, not the Host, and he speaks up immediately when he sees that the others are laughing at the Pardoner, as if to prevent him from being wounded even more deeply.

But right anon the worthy Knyght bigan,
Whan that he saugh that al the peple lough,
"Namoore of this, for it is right ynoough!"
Sire Pardoner, be glad and myrie of cheere;
And ye, sire Hoost, that been to me so deere,
I prey yow that ye kisse the Pardoner.

(VI, 960-965)

Thus it is the Host who is actually forced to apologize first. Far from the idea that "the enforced reconciliation between the Pardoner and the Host at the instance of the Knight represents a humiliating punishment for a professional hypocrite," the brief,
almost perfunctory kindness of the Knight most likely would be gratefully accepted by the deeply wounded, friendless eunuch. Kellogg, if you recall, considers him "very pitiable" and Kittredge says that he "is an able and eloquent man, a friar, very likely, who had entered his order with the best purposes, or, at any rate, with no bad aims, and with possibilities of good in him, and had grown corrupt with its corruption." The last statement is, granted, the product of a rather sympathetic imagination. Nevertheless, at the end of the Epilogue, I feel that the scales of sympathy definitely have shifted to the side of the Pardoner; Chaucer could not have intended that our final attitude toward him be one of absolute hatred and loathing.
NOTES

1Kittredge, p. 831.

2Ibid.

3Ibid., p. 832.

4Ibid.

5Ibid.

6Ibid.


8Ibid., pp. 154-155.

9Kellogg, p. 470.

10Maslow and Mittelmann, p. 604.


12Kittredge, p. 833.
VI.

CHAUCER, THE GENTLE PARDONER

My interpretation of the Pardoner's behavior and personality may seem at first to be overly sympathetic in comparison with the majority of critical analyses. One critic expresses the belief that the Pardoner deserves "the harsh crudeness of the Host's reply to express something of our feeling towards this cynical and depraved creature, and the Host gives him full measure."1 But such a view turns Chaucer into a writer of melodrama, and that, like the literal tavern interior, will never do. It is unwise to state that "there is nothing upright about the Pardoner"2 and to assume, as respected scholars have done, that Chaucer hated him. Baum expresses the opinion that too many scholars have interpreted Chaucer too imaginatively—"the scholars collaborating with the poet," he calls it.3 He rejects Kittredge's "moment of agonized sincerity," but he rejects the idea that Chaucer hated the Pardoner as well.

And how can we be sure that Chaucer hated the Pardoner? No doubt he disapproved of the contemporary practices which his character illustrates; but this is not the same as hating the character he created. One remembers
Chesterton's quip that the poet was himself "a gentle pardonor." It is hard to think of Geoffrey Chaucer as capable of hatred. But on the aesthetic side, has he made his pardoner . . . a revolting figure? There may not have been any moment of agonized sincerity, but the man had his good points. He seems to have been honest in giving himself away, and his evident vitality is almost enough to save him from our censure.  

Even a most objective interpretation of the text, then, shows that Chaucer did not look upon his literary brainchild with utter contempt; the poet's sympathy is indicated by the fact that the Pardoner does have "his good points," by the fact that he is assigned one of the poet's finest tales, by the fact that the benediction may be considered a sincere utterance, by the fact that he is in a position to bid for sympathy in face of the Host's insult, by the fact that the Knight comes to his defense, and finally by the fact that so many capable and respected scholars have been unable to condemn him completely.

There have been so many arguments on both sides, however, that one must reach the opinion that Chaucer neither condones nor condemns: he presents. One critic claims, with what appears to be astounding shallowness of thought, that the poet "had no moral purpose in describing the Pardoner, and no religious purpose. He describes the Pardoner merely because the man was like that . . . ."  

Kittredge, though he manages to avoid sweeping
generalizations, expresses a similar idea: "Chaucer is not a reformer. He is not even, if rightly taken, a satirist. His aim is not to reconstruct the Church or to ameliorate humanity, but to depict certain characters, and to let them tell stories." Chaucer presents. True. But in the depth of his presentation lurk a myriad of meanings. It is, after all, Chaucer's opinion of the Pardoner that counts, and the Pardoner is such a complex personality that the possibilities of his depth of meaning must not be denied.

One thing is sure: the wide variety of opinions that have been expressed about the Pardoner (and about most of the other Pilgrims as well) almost prove that Chaucer himself did not pronounce judgment upon the characters he presented. Concerning the Pardoner's sins, recall Kellogg's words: "Of the final judgment of God, Chaucer tells us nothing." Of course he tells us nothing; even the poet must not presume to read the mind of God, and neither should he put himself in God's place and sit in judgment of his fellowman. Chaucer, therefore, judges not lest he be judged (Matt. 7:1), and this refusal to take a position that would necessitate a judgment constitutes a moral position in itself: the human refusal to judge corresponds to Christian charity.
At the heart of mediaeval Christianity is the doctrine of Charity, the New Law which Christ brought to fulfill the Old Law so that mankind might be saved. Since this doctrine has extremely broad implications, it cannot be expressed satisfactorily in a few words, but for convenience we may use the classic formulation included in the *De doctrina Christiana* of St. Augustine. The opposite of Charity, the St. Augustine describes it, is cupidity, the love of any creature, including one's self, for its own sake. These two loves, Charity and cupidity, are the two poles of the mediaeval Christian scale of values.  

The refusal to judge, then, is the refusal to commit the sin of pride or self-love, the refusal to consider oneself superior to any man.

If Chaucer's attitude toward his Pilgrims is one of Christian charity, is it possible that this charity might be considered the general tone or theme of *The Canterbury Tales*? Many medieval works "either condemn or satirize cupidity and hold forth charity as an ideal either directly or by implication. This is exactly what we should expect of Christian authors."  

Chaucer's attitude is undoubtedly charitable, but his presentation must be considered indirect.

For in order to formulate a hypothesis about the theme or pervading spirit of the *Canterbury Tales*, it is necessary to take into account both the author's
fascination with things and problems of a secular nature and his inclusion among the tales of writings decidedly Christian in spirit. This apparent conflict, in no way inconsistent with medieval thought, can most effectively be formulated, and most satisfactorily resolved, by using the phrase the "human condition"—a phrase, though often attributed to Montaigne, which was current well before Chaucer's time . . . .

The Canterbury Tales develops this theme of the human condition—the human imperfection which limits human dignity. The General Prologue, in describing pilgrims, at once begins to unveil the imperfections of each—from the peccadilloes of the Prioress, through the hypocrisy of the Monk and the Friar, to the out-and-out decadence and evil of the Summoner and the Pardoner. . . . Still, the great originality of the Canterbury Tales, and the thing which catches the attention of the modern reader, is not this general theme of human imperfection but the tolerant humanity of the author, his detached and ironic treatment of men's sins and frailties. Of this, the Pardoner's Prologue and Tale are the supreme example: the Pardoner's terrible secrets—his physical imperfection, and the torment of guilt which he suffers inwardly over his moral imperfection—come forth at the end of his tale, the most terrifying reminder anywhere in Chaucer of human weakness, of men's awful need for God's mercy; but even here Chaucer makes no condemnation.12

Chaucer presents an ultimately charitable picture of the "human condition" by means of each individual among the Pilgrims. And "the mixture of immoral absurdities and goodness . . . does reveal
the eternal mixture of good and evil in all human hearts, and the eternal mixture of human dignity and human imperfection in all human beings, even the wicked Pardoner.

Scholars and critics, too, would perhaps be wise to be charitable in the Christian sense of the love of man for his fellow men and the accompanying refusal to judge them. The Pardoner requires of us not judgment but understanding, and if he is to be accepted as a personality, as he deserves to be, rather than merely as a grotesque personification of evil, the psychological aspects of his wickedness—which have been sadly neglected in the past—must not be ignored.
NOTES


4Ibid., p. 56.


8Kittredge, pp. 829-830.

9Kellogg, p. 470.


11Ibid., p. 46.

12Donald A. Howard, "The Conclusion of the Marriage Group: Chaucer and the Human Condition," Modern Philology, LVII (1960), 231. Professor Howard has been a most helpful and understanding adviser to me throughout the past year, and I am most grateful for his direction.

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