

Benign Incarnations: Chaucer's Pardoner and the  
Pardoner's Old Man

by

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A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

(c) September 1994

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Latebrosa est enim nimis et quibusdam quasi cavernosis anfractibus saepe intentionem quaerentis eludit; ut modo velut elabatur e manibus quod inventum erat, modo rursus appareat, et rursus absorbeatur, ad extremum tamen sententiam nostram velut certior indago comprehendet.

St. Augustine, *De Mendacio*.

Licet enim oporteat indagantem multis insudare vigiliis et invigilare sudoribus, vix tamen est quicquam tam vile, vix est tam facile, quod ad plenum intelligat, comprehendat ad liquidum, nisi forsan illud perfecte sciatur quod nichil scitur perfecte, quamquam ex hoc insolubilis redargutio consequatur.

Innocent III, *De Miseria Conditionis Humane*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the figures of the Pardoner and the Old Man in *The Pardoner's Tale*. By first documenting the accepted role of a fourteenth century "quaestor" and the ramifications of his itinerant preaching, I will show that the Pardoner does not place souls in the great spiritual jeopardy most critics maintain. Turning to his exemplum, I will examine the figure of the Old Man and demonstrate how Chaucer's possible sources and analogues and the Old Man's appearance confirm the aged wanderer's benevolent nature. Further evidence, from other tales and works, will corroborate these findings: the Old **Man's** appearance at the threshold is clearly unlike other "liminal" appearances in the Chaucerian corpus. Finally, I will offer a possible explanation for the many conflicting interpretations which *The Pardoner's Tale* has generated. I believe Chaucer offers a complex exposition of his theories of language: using Augustine's theory of signs and interpretation, I explain how the Pardoner offers the Canterbury pilgrims a lesson on interpretation and how, simultaneously, Chaucer uses the Pardoner to illustrate a further lesson about the efficacy of language.

I would like to thank the Department of English and the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Manitoba for offering me the opportunity to complete my Master's Degree and extending the support necessary for me to do so.

I would especially like to thank my advisor, Professor Robert Emmett Finnegan, for his assiduous efforts to make me a more competent scholar and for teaching me how to secure my f sten amidst the threatening chaos.

## Introduction

In "A Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures," William Blake offers his assessment of the Pardoner:

The Pardoner, the Age's Knave . . . always commands and domineers over the high and low vulgar. This man is sent in every age for a rod and scourge, and for a blight, for a trial of men, to divide the classes of men, he is in the most holy sanctuary, and he is suffered by Providence for **wise** ends, and has also his great use, and his grand leading destiny. (526)

In one paragraph, Blake touches upon what I feel is the single most important feature of the Pardoner's appearance: his purpose, or "entente," both personally and generally, explicit and implicit. I hope to show that for every purpose, there exists a cross-purpose which, at least at first, confounds the explication of the presentation.<sup>1</sup> Blake appears to accept that the Pardoner can be of some utility, despite his self-professedly evil character, and I agree. Any study of Chaucer's presentation of the Pardoner and his tale must, while investigating the accepted role of a fourteenth century "quaestor," also take into account the contemporary theological background and the possible impact

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<sup>1</sup> As Blake says in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," however, "without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence" (Norton 61).

Chaucer's Pardoner's idiosyncratic differences have upon his office. One specific issue, as Peggy Knapp phrases it, is this: "Can an unworthy ecclesiastic elicit true contrition and offer true absolution" (80)? I believe that the Pardoner has a great deal to offer the pilgrims, though, by allowing Harry Bailly to speak on their behalf, the efficacy of the lesson, for them, is jeopardized.

Paul Movshovitz, in a 1977 Ph.D. dissertation, attempts to link Chaucer's Pardoner with the mythological tradition of the trickster figure.<sup>2</sup> In the process, Movshovitz makes a valuable observation about the final group of pilgrims in the General Prologue. He begins by labelling the final group, with the exception of Chaucer the pilgrim, who is held in reserve, as "cheaters," people who earn their livelihood "by a form of deceptive stealing" (104). Movshovitz feels that the severity of the behaviour increases until we reach the final pilgrim, the "deadly," "dangerous" Pardoner, about whose characteristics we cannot be certain. What really holds the Miller, the Manciple, the Reeve, the Summoner and the Pardoner together is the fact that they practice their deceptions by "manipulating appearances." I would suggest, however, that Chaucer practices similar manipulations as he weaves the fiction

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<sup>2</sup> There is certainly an element of the trickster there, as we shall see, but Movshovitz's analogues, especially the American Indian trickster Wakdjunkaga, are over-emphasized, given their relative remoteness from Chaucer's world.



that is *The Canterbury Tales*. Edmund Reiss agrees, and asserts that Chaucer's "design is to stimulate, tease and provoke, even by confusing and startling, and thus involve his audience in the process of understanding that may be seen as the dominant experience of his book" ("Ambiguous" 125). For that reason, the Pardoner is often paradoxical: concerns about language, communication, and theories of signs are inextricably linked with the Pardoner's presentation and inform much of the controversy which surrounds his character.

## Chapter One: The Pardoner and His Office

In this first chapter I shall explore the Pardoner from several vantage points. I shall begin by investigating the precise nature of sin and penance in order to better understand the Pardoner's role as it is defined by the Church. After examining the theory behind indulgences and their distribution by agents of the Church, I shall move into the Pardoner's description in the General Prologue and argue that evidence of his inability to be an efficacious preacher remains inconclusive. Though much ambiguity surrounds the Pardoner's portrait, I shall explore the issue of the Pardoner's preaching and argue that his message remains untainted despite his character.

Sin, according to Augustine, is an action of the will which contravenes the eternal law of God: "*Peccatum est, factum vel dictum vel concupitum aliquid contra aeternam legem*" (*Contra Faustum Manichaeum* 22.27 [PL 42.418]). The eternal law, Augustine continues, is the *ratio divina* or the *voluntas Dei* which seeks to preserve the *ordo naturalis*, the order of nature which demands the rational being regulate his desires according to the will of God (*CFM* 22.27-8 [PL 42.418-9]).<sup>3</sup> As Joseph Campbell puts it, sin is "a disturbance in that order which God wills should exist in

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<sup>3</sup> For Augustine, an act contrary to the natural order is an "*aversio voluntatis a Domino Deo*"--the will is thereby averted "*ab incommutabili bono ad mutabile bonum*" (*De Libero Arbitrio* 2.20.54 [PL 32.1269]).

the realm of rational creatures which He has created" (3). The term sin, however, requires close explanation: the *Catholic Encyclopedia* cautions lest, by considering all types of sin equal, we fail to recognize the "true nature" of sin. The divisions the *Catholic Encyclopedia* suggests are between original and actual and mortal and venial: the "true nature" of sin is "found perfectly only in a personal [or actual] mortal sin" (9.5B).

Original sin has its cause and source in Adam: because Adam was acting as the "head of the human race," all men, at birth, inherit the guilt of Adam's sin. An actual sin, however, is "committed by a free personal act of the individual will" (CE 9.4B). The first effect of mortal sin is most devastating: man is averted from his true end in God and his soul is deprived of sanctifying grace.<sup>4</sup> A venial sin, on the other hand, though similar in primary effect, differs in degree: instead of averting man from his true end in God, it "retards" man in the attainment of that end. In the venial sinner, sanctifying grace remains undiminished and the *macula peccati* is avoided, but there is a decline in virtue. "Frequent and deliberate venial sin," the *Catholic Encyclopedia* warns, "lessens the fervour of charity,

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<sup>4</sup> The privation of sanctifying grace is what Aquinas calls the *macula peccati*. The state of habitual sin, into which the mortal sinner falls, is the *reatus culpae*, which destroys "the due order of man to God." These privations are, in fact, the same thing: the distinction is "conceptual" (see the *Catholic Encyclopedia* 9.9A).

disposes to mortal sin, and hinders the reception of graces God would otherwise give" (9.10B). The secondary effect of both mortal and venial sin is the "penalty of undergoing suffering." The unrepented mortal sinner must endure eternal two-fold punishment--the pain of loss (*poena damni*) and the pain of sense (*poena sensus*). For the venial sinner, however, the punishment is temporal, lasting for a period of time which is commensurate with the quantity and quality of the sins committed.

In the remission of sin, there are two main Sacraments which the Church can administer: the Sacrament of Baptism and the Sacrament of Penance. The Sacrament of Baptism absolves both the guilt and the penalty of original sin. The Sacrament of Penance, on the other hand, has three components: contrition, confession and satisfaction.<sup>5</sup> Contrition and confession, because they are sufficient to remit the guilt of sin and any eternal punishment, are the primary components of the Sacrament.<sup>6</sup> Satisfaction, though a secondary component, is still integral: "it is requisite for obtaining . . . remission of temporal punishment" (CE

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<sup>5</sup> The Parson says: "Now shaltow understande what is bihovely and necessarie to verray parfit Penitence. And this stant on three thynges:/ Contricion of Herte, Confessioun of Mouth, and Satisfaccioun" (106-7). For a discussion of the three components of the Sacrament of Penance from the point of view of Aquinas, see Finnegan (306-7).

<sup>6</sup> The *Catholic Encyclopedia* states: "the absolution given by the priest to a penitent who confesses his sins with the proper dispositions remits both the guilt and the eternal punishment (of mortal sin) " (11. 628B).

11.628B). This temporal punishment must be commuted to the satisfaction of Divine justice either in this life or in the next, but, because the sufferings of Purgatory are held to be very great,<sup>7</sup> it is desirable to pay one's debt to Divine justice in this life, through penance.

Penance, then, *in se*, is the satisfaction demanded by the confessor when he grants absolution to a contrite sinner as part of the Sacrament of Penance. Penance may take many forms, but the most common penitential works are almsdeeds, fasting and prayer--the degree to which each is required is dependent upon the penitent's unique circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

However, Campbell comments that there are, in fact, three ways for men on earth to avoid the sufferings of Purgatory:

First, the repentant sinner receives from his confessor sufficient penance to satisfy for his sins, and he faithfully performs this penance.

Second, the repentant sinner, of his own volition, performs sufficient works of penance to satisfy the divine justice, or bears patiently, for the same end, the trials and sufferings which come to him in this life. Third, the repentant sinner gains indulgences. None of these ways excludes

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<sup>7</sup> Augustine comments: "Ita plane quamvis salvi per ignem gravior tamen erit ille ignis, quam quidquid potest homo pati in hac vita" (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 37.3 [PL 36.397]). (This comment is also cited by Joseph Campbell [11]).

<sup>8</sup> See the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (11.628B).

either or both of the others . . . (11)

The first two means of remitting temporal punishment are relatively clear; the granting of indulgences, however, is a theologically complex matter. An indulgence, according to the *Codex Juris Canonici*, is "the remission in the sight of God of the temporal punishment due for sins, the guilt of which has already been forgiven" (Codex Canon 992).<sup>9</sup> The granting of indulgences is made possible, as Clement VI explains in the Bull *Unigenitus* of 1343, because the Church is in possession of a great spiritual "treasury" which has accumulated as a consequence of the extraordinary merits of Christ, the Virgin and the saints.<sup>10</sup> A grant from this "treasury," then, can help the repentant sinner make restitution to God for the debt incurred as a result of sin.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> "An indulgence is either partial or plenary, according as it partially or wholly frees a person from temporal punishment due for sins" (Codex Canon 993).

<sup>10</sup> The Bull *Unigenitus* reads: "Quantum ergo exinde, ut nee supervacua, manis aut superflua tantae effusionis miseratio redderetur, thesaurum militanti ecclesiae acquisivit, volens suis thesaurizare filiis pius Pater, ut sic sit infinitus thesaurus hominibus, quo qui usi sunt Dei amicitiae participes sunt effecti . . . Ad cuius quidem thesauri cumulum beatae Dei genitricis omniumque electorum a primo iusto usque ad ultimum merita adminiculum praestare noscuntur, de cuius consumptione seu minutione non est aliquatenus formidandum" (*Corpus Juris Canonici* 1304). (This passage is also cited in Campbell [21] and in J.J. Jusserand [Wayfaring 311].)

<sup>11</sup> The *Catholic Encyclopedia* explains: "Since the satisfaction of Christ [and the Virgin and the saints] is infinite, it constitutes an inexhaustible fund which is more than sufficient to cover the indebtedness contracted by sin."

The *Catholic Encyclopedia* makes it clear that because "this treasury is left to the keeping, not of the individual Christian, but of the Church," an "exercise of authority" is required in order to determine the manner, terms and extent of granted indulgences (7.785A). The Church, in order to reach the diverse numbers of the faithful, felt it necessary to authorize certain agents in the apportioning of this "heavenly wealth."<sup>12</sup> The people chosen for this office, the people entrusted with the Church's greatest treasure, laid up, as Clement VI says, by a "copious torrent" of Christ's blood, "were called sometimes 'quaestors,' on account of what they asked, and sometimes 'pardoners,' on account of what they gave," (Jusserand *Wayfaring* 312) and in this manner, the office which gave rise to Geoffrey Chaucer's "gentil Pardoner of Rouncivale" was established.

The granting of indulgences, which, to the Church, no doubt seemed simple enough in its premise, quickly became problematic. Revealingly, the first subsection under indulgences in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* explains, in absolute terms, what an indulgence is not, and it is from this list that we begin to discern some of the abuses to

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Further, "as each organ shares in the life of the whole body, so does each of the faithful profit by the prayers and good works of all the rest" (7.748B).

<sup>12</sup> The *Codex Juris Canonici* states: "Apart from the supreme authority in the Church, only those can grant indulgences to whom this power is either acknowledged in the law, or given by the Roman pontiff" (Canon 995.1).

which the practice was subject:

It is not a permission to commit sin, nor a pardon of future sin . . . it is not an exemption from any law or duty, and much less from the obligation consequent on certain kinds of sin . . . Least of all is an indulgence the purchase of a pardon which secures the buyer's salvation. (7.783A)

Although there is nothing "essentially evil" in the giving of alms for pardon,<sup>13</sup> because "God's forbearance is constantly abused by those who relapse into sin, it is not surprising that the offer of pardon in the form of an indulgence should have led to evil practices" (7.787A). Of the two most "grave dangers" with which the practice was "fraught," one fell on each side of the exchange.

Purchasers of a pardon had to beware lest they regarded the giving of alms as the "price" of the pardon and failed to realize the "more important conditions" which were concomitant with the indulgence; those who granted the indulgences had to resist the temptation to corruption. For them, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* says pointedly, "the love of money was the chief root of the evil; indulgences were employed by mercenary ecclesiastics as a means of pecuniary gain" (7.787A) .

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<sup>13</sup> In theory, the giving of alms had nothing to do with the dispensation of pardon. Almsgiving was one work of penance which demonstrated that the repentant sinner was of the proper disposition to receive an indulgence.



In and of itself, the act of granting an indulgence had nothing to do with the spiritual condition of the agent: because the indulgence was a grant from the Church's "spiritual treasury," the agent's relative merits were irrelevant. The chief concern which arose out of the abuse of the office lay in the possibility that the "purchasers" of pardons from corrupt quaestors would fail to understand just exactly what they had "purchased" (i.e. they would expect *indulgentia a culpa et a poena* for any number of sins, both venial and mortal, whereas an indulgence applies only to the *poena* of sin) •<sup>14</sup> Both G.R. Owst and Muriel Bowden cite an article of the Oxford Petition of 1414:

Whereas the shameless pardoners purchase their vile traffic in farm with Simon, sell indulgences with Gehazi, and squander their gains in disgraceful fashion with the Prodigal Son: but what is more detestable still, although not in holy orders, they preach publicly, and pretend falsely that they have full powers of absolving both living and dead alike from punishment and guilt, along with other blasphemies, by means of which they plunder and seduce the people, and in all probability drag them down with their own

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<sup>14</sup> The *Catholic Encyclopedia* explains that although some "writs of indulgence" contain the expression *indulgentia a culpa et a poena*, none of them were "issued by any pope or council" (7.783A).

person to the infernal regions, by affording them  
frivolous hope and the audacity to commit sin.

(Owst *Preaching* 105; Bowden 281)

The "most detestable" activities of the "shameless pardoners" are their duplicitous claims to the full power of absolution and their preaching. The effect of these deceptions can be extreme, but although the recipient of the Pardoner's pardon may not have realized that he was receiving only a remission of temporal punishment, Melvin Storm makes it clear that the Pardoner does not, in fact, misrepresent the power of the indulgences he peddles. When the Pardoner recalls to his audience that Christ's pardon is best, it serves "to remind his listeners that there are two types of pardon" and "it is the second [*a poena*] that the Pardoner claims, by his profession, to distribute" ("*A Culpa*" 440). Alastair Minnis objects that the Pardoner has not clarified his "subordinate position and very limited role" ("Office" 100), but while this may be the case, neither does his mention of his "heigh power" represent an unequivocal claim to absolution *a culpa et a poena*. As well, we have seen that the Church ranks indulgences well below the true contrition of a penitent sinner: what the Pardoner extends is not, to those who realize what he is offering, as spiritually dangerous as many critics maintain: an indulgence is only meant to reduce the amount of time spent in Purgatory; it does not save a soul from damnation.

Though earlier scholars were largely convinced that the Pardoner's indulgences were fraudulent,<sup>15</sup> later scholars, like Bowden and Hamilton, disagree: "Chaucer's irony would be the more telling if he pictured a legitimate, clerical pardoner as guilty of all the sins of an impostor" (Bowden 286). Indeed, says Hamilton, "the ultimate irony doubtless lay in the very orthodoxy of the Pardoner's credentials" ("Credentials" 71). Because there are no definitive grounds upon which to declare his pardons valid or invalid, any conclusions must be subjective; recent criticism, therefore, tends to suspend judgement on the question.<sup>16</sup> Chaucer the pilgrim, however, in the *General Prologue*, connects the Pardoner with "Rouncivale," describes his "walet . . . breteful of pardoun comen from Rome al hoot" (686-7) and exposes the relics without explicitly questioning the authenticity of either the Pardoner or his pardons. Because the Pardoner's inventory of spiritual goods, both physical and verbal, comes to us through the aegis of the narrator and is so precisely described, I suspect Chaucer intends his audience to judge the Pardoner not as a "free-

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, J.J. Jusserand, who calls the Pardoner a "vagabond or highwayman" carrying on a "trade of imposture" ("Chaucer's" 424), and Owst, who suspects the pardons to be "spurious" (*Preaching* 128).

<sup>16</sup> Most critics omit a discussion of the Pardoner's indulgences *in se*. Others, like Finnegan, even with the authenticity of the pardons aside, find that the Pardoner "places almost insurmountable obstacles in the path of his imagined congregations' movement towards them [the pardons]" (307).

lance rogue," but rather as a fully-licensed quaestor, corruptly "selling" relics and indulgences. Still, Minnis, recounting the "dubious elements" in the Pardoner's portrait, decides: "Whether this individual's credentials are genuine or not, no right-thinking person would credit him" ("Office" 101).

The Oxford Petition quoted above states that the deceived recipients of pardons from "shameless pardoners" likely accompany the agent of the pardons to the "infernal regions" because they have been encouraged to sin with "audacity," as pardon is so easily gained. Jusserand cites the Bishop of Durham from a circular of 1340: "Quaestors • • • to the great danger of the souls who are confided to us • • • distribute indulgences to the people" (*Wayfaring* 322-3)<sup>17</sup> and Melvin Storm is certain that the Pardoner presents the pilgrims with a spiritual diversion, in the "Augustinian sense of motion away from God" ("Pardoner's" 812A). The Pardoner's effect upon the "lewed peple" to whom he is accustomed to minister has been the object of much debate, and at least part of the question hinges upon the degree of activity (or passivity) of the Pardoner's audience. To what extent can they be expected to preserve their own spiritual interests? Presumably, they ought to be aware of their responsibilities in the remission of the guilt and penalty

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<sup>17</sup> See also Jusserand's "Chaucer's Pardoner and the Pope's Pardoner's" (428-9) •

of sin and act accordingly. Minnis says: "it is perfectly clear . . . that in Chaucer's day the Pardoner's claim to absolve fully would have been taken seriously only by the most ignorant and gullible members of society" ("Office" 101). Though the Pardoner does not explicitly claim to "absolve fully," those who are inclined to believe that he does are likely those who are almost irredeemably "enveloped in synne." In addition, Finnegan points out, "it is unlikely that anyone making an offering to his relics. . . and finding consolation in the shoulder bone and magic mitten would have the spiritual disposition appropriate to the Sacrament of Penance" (307).

Chaucer's treatment of the Pardoner may well have been influenced by contemporary debate on the efficacy of indulgences: the Church's "authority" on grants from the spiritual treasury did not go unchallenged.<sup>18</sup> John Wyclif, for example, questions the Pope's arrogation of the power to pardon:

The indulgences of the Pope, if they are what they are said to be, are a manifest blasphemy, inasmuch as he claims a power to save man almost without limit, and not only to mitigate the penalties of those who have sinned, by granting them the aid of

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<sup>18</sup> Muriel Bowden comments on the link between Chaucer and Wyclif (281). See also David Lyle Jeffrey, "Chaucer and Wyclif: Biblical Hermeneutic and Literary Theory in the XIVth Century."

absolutions and indulgences, that they may never come to Purgatory, but to give command to the holy angels that, when the soul is separated from the body, they may carry it without delay to its everlasting rest. (*Tracts* 196)

Wyclif argues that official Church doctrine maintains that indulgences are made possible by our union in the body of Christ<sup>19</sup> and, therefore, that it is impossible to limit control of the treasury to a select few. Pardon, as a spiritual gift, should be given freely in order that rich men and poor men are able to benefit equally from the superabundant merits of Christ, the Virgin and the saints:

If this pardon be an heuenely giefte & gostly it schulde be geuen frely as crist techith in the gospel, & not for money ne worldly goodis ne fleshly fauour.<sup>20</sup> (*English Works* 82)

Bowden comments that Chaucer, while condemning the sins of pardoners in *The Pardoner's Tale*, "is [unlike Wyclif] silent about the theory that gave rise to their office" (281). I would suggest that this can be explained by two separate features of *The Pardoner's Tale*: first, I believe Chaucer intended the Pardoner to appear, at least to some extent, to be a creation of the Church rather than a maverick impostor. To say so explicitly, however, would

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<sup>19</sup> See Footnote 11.

<sup>20</sup> I have slightly modernized the text.

jeopardize not only Chaucer's position, but would interfere with what I suspect are Chaucer's ultimate ends. The lessons are these: 1) contemporary depictions of sinful pardoners, while technically accurate, ignore the fact that the root of their evil lies with the Church; and 2) in order to draw attention to the disjunction between the Pardoner's occupation and the tale which he offers to his fellow pilgrims, the Pardoner's superficial debasement is exaggeratedly complete.

This specific Pardoner, is, in the methodic delineation of particulars, encoded with more than the simple "type" of a "shameless pardoner." The description in the *General Prologue* offers a wide range of details which may seem superfluous and incidental, and therefore of little lasting importance, like his connection with "Rouncivale." Nonetheless, scholars have taken pains to show that his physical description, because it owes much to both the physiognomies and bestiaries of the time, is inextricably linked with his character. The key details upon which such investigations focus vary: the abundance and appearance of his "heer as yellow as wax;" his "glarynge eyen" as a "hare;" his "voys" as "small as hath a goot;" his lack of a beard; and, above all, Chaucer the pilgrim's enigmatic (and inconclusive) remark: "I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare" (675-91).

Because the Pardoner looks to be a "geldyng or a mare,"

many critics have concluded that this detail is a clue to either the Pardoner's sexual orientation or his lack of testicles.<sup>21</sup> Walter Clyde Curry, certain that the "secret" of the Pardoner is to be found in his "unfortunate" birth (59), states unequivocally that because the Pardoner was born a eunuch (i.e., a *eunuchus ex nativitate*), he is "in consequence provided by nature with a warped mind and soul" (70).<sup>22</sup> Robert Miller, more intent upon exegesis, traces the biblical tradition and reveals that there are in fact three types of eunuchry: 1) literal eunuchry (the two obvious types<sup>23</sup>); 2) eunuchry as voluntary chastity (by one's own will cut off from temporal pleasures<sup>24</sup>); and 3) eunuchry again as an act of will, but this time as a perverted act of will which cuts one off from good works.<sup>25</sup> The Pardoner, then, according to Miller, was not born a eunuch, but rather became, through an act of will, "sterile in good works" and "impotent to produce spiritual fruit."

While the accuracy of Miller's assessment of the

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<sup>21</sup> I do not mean to imply that this lack may not be metaphoric.

<sup>22</sup> This treatment ignores the fact that a "geldyng" is not a horse born *sine testiculis*, but one which has been castrated.

<sup>23</sup> See Deuteronomy 23:1 and the first two examples in Matthew 19:12.

<sup>24</sup> See the third example in Matthew.

<sup>25</sup> Miller cites Rupertus Tuitiensis as his source for these divisions (183).



Pardoner's efficacy remains to be seen, Miller pushes the eunuchry issue to extreme lengths. The second type of eunuchry involves "castration or circumcision by the word of God" which is "equivalent to cutting away the *vetus homo* that the *novus homo* might live" (186) • What the Pardoner has become, therefore, by an inversion of the proper will, is the *vetus homo* masquerading as *novus homo*, or the false prophet of Matthew 7:15. The New Testament relationship between the Old Man and the New Man may well be an issue in the Pardoner's presentation, but Miller's apportioning of roles is problematic, as will become evident later: I do not believe that the Pardoner's "essential nature" is exposed through "spiritual eunuchry." Nonetheless, Miller's eventual equation of the Pardoner with the fallen Adam, "unregenerate in accepted grace and unredeemed by Christ," will prove a valuable codicil to the Pardoner's use of language.<sup>26</sup>

Later research, building upon the influential work of Curry and Miller, has continued to investigate the Pardoner on the basis of his description as a "geldyng" or a "mare." Doreen Gillam equates the term "mare" with the female sex object, raises questions about the "stif burdoun" which the Summoner "bar to hym" (673) and cites several examples of "mare" as an insulting term for the recipient of an anal

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<sup>26</sup> See Chapter Four.

homosexual act.<sup>27</sup> Beryl Rowland, on the other hand, argues that the Pardoner is neither a physical nor a spiritual eunuch:

To regard the Pardoner as a true eunuch is to discount the references to his wenching, lechery, marital ambitions and association with the Summoner. To see him as a spiritual eunuch it is necessary to explain away as "irony" [Miller's term] the fact that whereas the Biblical eunuch is expressly forbidden entry *in ecclesiam Domini*, the Pardoner conducts most of his business "in chirches." ("Animal" 57)

Rowland offers instead that "geldyng" and "mare" are prominent in popular animal lore: because both the hare and the goat were believed to be hermaphrodite, or bi-sexual, and, in either case, extremely lascivious, her conclusion is that the Pardoner displays the characteristics of "the testicular pseudo-hermaphrodite of the feminine type" (58).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See also Monica E. McAlpine, who equates the term "mare" with the term "homosexual" ("Pardoner's" 10-11), and Carolyn Dinshaw, who considers the Pardoner's eunuchry to be a sign of the "fundamental incompleteness of language" ("Eunuch" 28).

<sup>28</sup> There are many other views on the impact of the Pardoner's description. For example, Eric Stockton summarizes the Pardoner's character: "[he is] a manic depressive with traces of anal eroticism, and a pervert with a tendency toward alcoholism" (47); Edmund Reiss argues that the Pardoner's condition is "sexless," giving him "an actual physical innocence" ("Biblical" 266); and Alan Fletcher comments that

Regardless of the fascinating sources behind theories of the Pardoner's "abnormality," there are several details which we must keep in mind if we are to avoid misinterpreting the description in the *General Prologue*. First, the Pardoner's condition is immediately diagnosed by Chaucer the pilgrim, whose eye cannot be assumed to be infinitely more discerning than those of the other pilgrims. Hence, the Pardoner's sexual condition, if Chaucer the pilgrim is correct, can hardly be termed a "secret." Harry Bailly seems convinced that the Pardoner is in full possession of his "coillons"; arguments which suggest that Harry sees the Pardoner's deficiency and seizes upon it as the ultimate insult run counter to the Host's personality to this point in the tale-telling contest.<sup>29</sup> The "insinuation"<sup>30</sup> is undoubtedly there, but the Pardoner's lack of a beard and his long yellow hair are, I believe, the outward signs which occasion the "geldyng or a mare" comment. The Pardoner's sexual orientation is debatable: he boasts that he "wol" have a "joly wenche" in every town and explains to the Wife of Bath that he had, until hearing her

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"aberrant sexual behaviour was a standard accusation in heresy charges" ("Topical" 120).

<sup>29</sup> Edelgard Dubruck considers the Host's "joke," because it is "commonplace," of no help in the discussion of eunuchry and homosexuality (105).

<sup>30</sup> This is Pearsall's word: "the suggestions of deviancy are there, but as a shocking and scandalous insinuation, rather than as the clue to the understanding of his whole nature and performance" (*Tales* 97).

words, been about to take a wife, but he appears effeminate and unnaturally attached to the Summoner; the Pardoner is also a "gentil" man who sings a distinctly secular love-song. While it is significant that the Pardoner possesses ambiguous elements in his description, the central issue here, I believe, is that the Pardoner could hardly look any less like a dutiful servant of the Church: his very appearance, as he steps into the tales, accompanied by the pimpled and pustular Summoner, puts both readers and his fellow pilgrims on their guard. As Edelgard Dubruck points out, the issue (of eunuchry and homosexuality) "has absolutely nothing to do with the seriousness of the message as detailed in the second prologue and in the exemplum" (105). Instead, there may well be a disjunction, again, between appearance and reality, which the Pardoner's performance will clarify.

Muriel Bowden concludes that the medieval pardoner, though he may have exceeded the limits of his authority in doing so, was involved in three basic activities: "selling" indulgences, "selling" relics, and preaching, and it is with the latter pair that we must resume our discussion of the Pardoner's activities. Innocent III demanded that pardoners carry "papal or episcopal letters" as evidence of their accreditation and Clement V added that they were not allowed to preach to the people "nec aliud exponere, quam quod in

literis continebitur supra dictis" (*Corpus* 1190).<sup>31</sup>

Nonetheless, Owst affirms that a pardoner was "invariably" a preacher: "No entry in the Episcopal Registers concerning him ever omits to speak of this side of his activity" (*Preaching* 99). It is possible that Chaucer's Pardoner and his fourteenth century contemporaries acted in defiance of Innocent III's code: their effectiveness at raising funds no doubt bought them some licence from local bishops. As Manly notes, indications exist that pardoners were sometimes able to buy the silence of local officials (*New Light* 123). In either case, there is adequate evidence to conclude that the Pardoner's peripatetic preaching is not significantly unusual: certainly, Chaucer the pilgrim and his companions find nothing remarkable in the fact that the Pardoner preaches. Even Kellogg and Haselmayer find that the Pardoner, at least in terms of his professional activities, is fairly "generic," embodying all the expected vices of his position (274). Still, his relics and his connection with Roncesvalles<sup>32</sup> are distinctive, and are probably themselves

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<sup>31</sup> Further impositions required that pardoners improve their lifestyles, and their power to demand shelter and audience from the local clergy was removed. Clement V also granted the Diocesan Bishops the power both to examine the credentials of pardoners and to act with impunity in the punishment of their transgressions. For a concise summary of the legislation of Innocent III, Clement IV and Clement V, see "De Questoribus" from the *Regimen Animarum*, reprinted in Kellogg and Haselmayer (256-7).

<sup>32</sup> See J.M. Manly for an extensive background to the hospital.

connected: as Owst says, hospitals became natural repositories for relics (*Preaching* 101).<sup>33</sup>

The Pardoner's preaching, likely (and significantly) a task he has undertaken on his own authority, requires close consideration. Alastair Minnis identifies three arenas in which the Pardoner's performance should be considered:<sup>34</sup>

"issues of authority and authorization, issues of requisite knowledge and preparation, and issues of personal character and disposition" ("Office" 89). Minnis confirms that monks and layfolk were not ordinarily to be permitted to preach<sup>35</sup>, and suggests that medieval preachers were expected to

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<sup>33</sup> Kellogg and Haselmayer argue that because the "carrying of false relics" is so rarely mentioned, "the Pardoner's false relics [as well as his association with Roncesvalles] mark him as a dangerous man with souls" (274-5). Melvin Storm ("Pardoner's") agrees, commenting, along with Daniel Knapp, that the relics are intended to link the Pardoner with the shrine at Canterbury. They allege that his offer of pardons and relics is really an attempt to substitute himself for the pilgrimage. Alan Fletcher goes to some lengths to unearth a "tradition in medieval religious writings for the association of false relics with pardoners" (118-9). I maintain that the relics function as examples in an ongoing discussion of signs, as will become evident in chapter four, and, therefore, find the question somewhat moot. However, I think it safe to conclude again that only the most spiritually corrupt would find themselves attracted to the material gains which the Pardoner's relics offer.

<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, I feel that because the Pardoner preaches and the pilgrims, and presumably the "lewed peple," do not comment upon his usurpation, the issue of the appropriateness of his doing so becomes subordinate to the effect his character has upon his performance when he does so.

<sup>35</sup> Minnis later adds: "Chaucer strongly hints that the Pardoner has usurped an office for which he is not fit" ("Office" 106) and cites as evidence the Pardoner's words: "I stonde lyk a clerk in my pulpet" (391).

exhibit "sufficient learning" for their teaching.<sup>36</sup>

However, this "sufficient learning" did not mean that they were to "impose scholastic subtleties" on their audience, but rather that they should have the depth of learning to enable them to address themselves "directly to the people" ("Office" 91). The issue of the Pardoner's authority to preach aside, his learning is clearly sufficient, and his preaching--"lewed peple loven tales olde" (437)--well adapted to his audience. The latter set of issues, however, is most pertinent, and presented medieval thinkers with the most difficulty. Is it possible to separate the sheep from the wolf, or the sermon from the preacher? Minnis offers evidence from Gerard of Boulogne, an Anonymous Quodlibet, and Henry of Ghent, but these writers offer no definitive solution to the problem. After careful consideration, Minnis concludes first that "Chaucer was aware of the theological dimensions of the literary problem . . . Can an immoral man tell a moral tale?" and second that "[Chaucer] provides no answer to the problem" ("Office" 118).

Janette Richardson, convinced that Chaucer meant the Pardoner's presentation to raise a specific issue, asks a similar question: "Is the Pardoner's justification of himself as a good preacher who promotes repentance for sin

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<sup>36</sup> Peggy Knapp cites Wyclif's sermon on Luke 4:14: "Certis traveile of the prechour or name of havynge good witt shulde not be the endde of preching, but profit to the soule of the peple . . . And curiose preching of Latyn is ful fer fro this ende" (72).

valid" ("Intention" 90)? The problem has been identified by many critics, yet there seems to be no one definitive answer: perhaps Minnis is correct. Richardson, allowing that the Pardoner uses "recommended techniques" in his sermon, denies that its "actual content" survives untainted: "Chaucer apparently agreed with the sermon manuals of his day that an effective preacher must teach as much by the example of his own deeds and character as he does by his words . . . good does not result from evil intentions" ("Intention" 94). Putting the issue of intent aside for the moment, Richardson's conclusion shares one prominent feature with many others: she ignores the fact that the Pardoner's regular audience of "lewed peple" would not have heard his "confession," nor would they know overly much about his character, excepting perhaps the physical details of the *General Prologue* (which is, admittedly, a portrait from which Chaucer the pilgrim seems to be able to infer a great deal). Richardson's strongest evidence is the "worldly terms" in which the Pardoner condemns sin, but the Pardoner would explain that he simply suits his material to the audience, just as Minnis suggests medieval preachers were encouraged to do.

In fact, medieval opinion on the effect of a preacher's character seems to have varied quite widely, depending upon contingent circumstances. Gerard of Boulogne makes the distinction between "notorious" and "secret" sin:



If the sin is unknown to the audience, and they actually want preaching and are willing to listen, then it is better, or at least less evil, to preach than to be silent, since the audience is not scandalized or provoked to sin, being ignorant of the preacher's sin. (Minnis "Office" 93)

Henry of Ghent speaks mainly of lecturing, rather than preaching, but clearly a sinning lecturer may "possess sound doctrine." However, "a priest whose life does not match his words is a source of scandal;" and a heretic, "who works against true doctrine, cannot teach by any means" (Minnis "Office" 97). A preacher, whose sin relates only to his private life, and who does not preach against true doctrine, may preach profitably. Still, the ultimate test rests in the relative degrees of good and evil: "If the preacher is doing more harm than good in his preaching, then the Bishop should step in and silence him" (Minnis "Office" 98).

Augustine, while stressing that the life of the speaker carries the greatest weight in determining the efficacy of his preaching, acknowledges that the wicked may indeed teach many who desire to learn (*DDC* 4.27), and cites part of the following passage:

The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds: But the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel.

What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether  
in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and  
I therein do rejoyce, yea, and will rejoyce.

(Phil. 1:16-18)

Boethius, too, admits that "sovereyne purveaunce hath makid ofte tyme fair myracle, so that schrewes han makid schrewes to be gode men" (4.Pr.6 328-31). Although the preacher may be of benefit, despite the fact that he does not practice what he preaches, Augustine nevertheless sees a pressing (and pertinent) danger: "ita fit ut cum non obedienter audiant [the audience], qui se ipse non audit, et Dei verbum quod eis praedicatur, simul cum ipso praedicatore contemnant" (DDC 4.27 [PL 34.118-9]).

There remains one analogue, or perhaps source, which may help to clarify the relevance of character in efficacious preaching--the very first tale of the first day of Boccaccio's *Decameron*.<sup>37</sup> The thoroughly evil Chappelet du Prat--a character who has much in common with the pilgrims' perception of the Pardoner--facing death, gives a false confession as a last (and perhaps only) gesture of good will. The confession is an oral masterpiece, and so moves the Friar who hears it that he immediately spreads the

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<sup>37</sup> Boccaccio clearly places this tale in a position of prominence to serve a purpose. Edmund Reiss evaluates the tale's placing thus: it indicates "the ambiguity of the words to follow in the *Decameron*," and suggests "the pervasiveness of deception." Reiss (and P.B. Taylor, "'Peynted'") notes the parallel with the Pardoner and discusses several other examples ("Ambiguous" 122-124).

word that a most holy man is to be buried. As a result, the degenerate Chappelet effects wondrous good as a saint: Chappelet's appearance of sanctity remains unquestioned. The teller of the next tale, Neiphila, summarizes the previous tale's message: "the goodnesse of God regardeth not our errors, when they procede from things which wee cannot discerne" (52).

As we have seen, a vital aspect of the Pardoner's character revolves around these kinds of dialectics, between the speaker and the speech, between the surface and the interior, as is set up in Matthew 7:15. The Pardoner, in a certain circumstance, describes himself in similar terms: "Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe/ Of hoolynesse, to semen hooly and trewe" (421-22).<sup>38</sup> Minnis claims that this image and the earlier one of the dove<sup>39</sup> are the imagery by which Chaucer "accentuates" his theme of "usurpation" or "perversion," but there appears to me to be another way to interpret this evidence. When Jesus sends the twelve

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<sup>38</sup> In Alan Fletcher's view, these lines "epitomize the Pardoner's hypocritical *modus operandi*" (111). He argues that since both sides of the orthodox/Lollard debate had inveighed against "false prophets," and Wyclif equated religious hypocrisy with heresy (in *Opus Evangelicum*), this contemporary debate informs much of the Pardoner's presentation: it is a "topical hypocrisy." However, Fletcher does not comment upon the fact that this tactic of the Pardoner is ostensibly occasioned only by trespass against the Pardoner's brethren: this is not the Pardoner's regular *modus operandi*.

<sup>39</sup> Thanne peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke,  
And est and west upon the peple I bekke,  
As dooth a dowve sittynge on a berne. (395-7)

disciples out to preach, he bids them beware: "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16). Clearly, the Pardoner can be associated with the false prophets, appearing in the guise of sheep: here, however, on the Canterbury pilgrimage, he is considered a "wolf," on account of his appearance, and treated accordingly--could it be that inwardly he is the sheep of Matthew 7:15?

Augustine, in treating the vagaries of scriptural analogies, looks at biblical use of the serpent:

Nam et de serpente quod notum est, totum corpus eum pro capite objicere ferientibus, quantam illustrat sensum illum, quo Dominus jubet astutos nos esse sicut serpentes; ut scilicet pro capite nostro, quod est Christus, corpus potius persequentibus offeramus. (DDC 2.16 [PL 34.47])

In addition, Augustine explains that the dove, because it brought the olive twig back to the ark, is an enduring symbol of peace.<sup>40</sup> There is the distinct possibility that the Pardoner has an association *in bono* with these two images. First of all, the Pardoner suffers his physical body to be attacked rather than give up his preaching and, second, he does, in a sense, as he spreads the word of Christ, bring the branch of religion to life's pilgrims.

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<sup>40</sup> Genesis 8:11.

An oft-cited predecessor of the Pardoner, the *Roman de la Rose's* Faux-Semblant, makes the relationship between appearance and reality clear:

A good heart makes the thought good; the robe  
neither takes away nor gives . . . If you were to  
put the fleece of Dame Belin, instead of a sable  
mantle, on Sir Isengrin the wolf, so that he  
looked like a sheep, do you think that if he lived  
with the ewes he would not devour them? (195-6)

The robe, or the garb of the sheep (or wolf), is not the key to understanding the wearer, and this is especially true of the Pardoner, who attracts paradoxes. Further, insofar as he has been linked with Faux-Semblant, we must keep in mind that this is by no means the Pardoner most audiences see. Faux-Semblant boasts of his power to deceive: "For Proteus, who was accustomed to change into whatever form he wished, never knew as much fraud or guile as I practice; I never entered into a town where I was recognized, no matter how much I was heard or seen" (196). These "false traitors," he claims, "know how to deceive people so that no one can recognize the deception" (207). And, for those who, at all costs, guard against being taken in, there is another danger (one the Canterbury pilgrims would be well advised to heed):

He who fears my [Faux-Semblant's] brothers more  
than God places himself under God's wrath. He who  
fears such simulation is no good champion of the

faith . . . Such a man does not want to listen to the truth nor have God before his eyes; and God will punish him for it, without fail. (207-8)

The Pardoner's potential to engender harm remains an open question. If we consider the efficacy of evil in Boethian terms, however, the Pardoner is certainly "harmless": Lady Philosophy is quick to demonstrate that because God cannot do evil, evil is nothing: the very strength of good is sufficient evidence that its opposite, evil, must be weak.<sup>41</sup> The Pardoner's unsolicited "confession," in terms of his two audiences (pilgrims and readers), certainly leaves him in a position much like that of a sheep among wolves. Unfortunately (perhaps), an element of the hunter figure must be present in any preacher: the Pardoner's skill in preaching on avarice obviously results from his personal relationship with it.

The Pardoner, in the conflicting elements of his presentation, moves between two extremes in nearly every facet of his personality. He is at once the drinking, fashionable man who "wol have a joly wenche in every toun," and the "geldyng" or "mare" who could not possibly do so. His mouth is capable of spitting both venom and honey, and his evil motives can be subverted by the power of his words.

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<sup>41</sup> Lady Philosophy says: "he that is myghty to doon oonly but goode thinges mai doon alle thinges, and thei that ben myghti to doon yvele thinges ne mowen nat alle thinges, thanne is it open thing and manyfest that thei that mowen doon yvele ben of lasse power" (4.Pr.2 238-44).

As a preacher, he is at once the wolf and the sheep, and though he emerges more on the side of the wolf in the eyes of the pilgrim audience, it may well be the result of his presentation of himself, perhaps exaggerated to meet their expectations, or to test their cognitive abilities. Certainly, his regular audience would not have been so easily able to appreciate the flaws in his wool. The Pardoner is a man who, as Faux-Semblant puts it, leaves "the kernel of religion" and takes "the husk" (197). Unfortunately, even this is ambiguous. We must decide if he delivers the husk he has taken to his audience, or leaves the naked kernel behind for them to recognize.

The Pardoner, on account of what he does and how he does it, is a unique figure among the Canterbury pilgrims. His physical appearance offers clues about his character and purpose, but does not permit any conclusions to be drawn. The Pardoner's personal moral status in the distribution of heavenly wealth is irrelevant; more hinges upon the recipients' preparations than upon the Pardoner's sale of indulgences. As a preacher, however, the issue is more complex. The weight of the evidence seems to indicate that the Pardoner can preach profitably to those who are willing to learn. While doing so might in no way profit his own soul, the pertinence of the lesson remains undiminished. When, in Chapter Four, I focus upon what the Pardoner attempts to teach his pilgrim audience, we shall see the

validity of his tale: I suspect God may well be willing to regard not our errors if we are, maugre the agent, moved toward Him.



## Chapter Two: The Pardoner's Exemplum and the Old Man

Having demonstrated that the responsibilities of a fourteenth century pardoner, as understood by the Church and other thinkers, are not conspicuously contravened by Chaucer's Pardoner, that his physical appearance cannot be used as a basis for judgement, and that his activities as a preacher are neither repudiated nor entirely condoned, we must look to his tale for further evidence of Chaucer's "entente" with respect to his "quaestor." In this chapter, I propose to examine, with specific reference to the Old Man, the Pardoner's exemplum. The Old Man plays a pivotal part in interpreting the Pardoner, and a close look, first at what he symbolizes and second at sources and analogues, will help illuminate the Pardoner's role.

Considerations of the Pardoner's exemplum do not vary as widely as considerations of his character. Though the quality of the exemplum is seldom disputed--Kittredge states: "the exemplum which the sermon embodies is one of the best in the world" (215)--some critics, such as G.G. Sedgewick, feel that the story of the three rioters is simply "an exemplum and nothing more," and caution against taking the tale out of context, or looking at it as "an end in itself" (433). As Dubruck has noted, the focus of most modern criticism has been on the psychology of the Pardoner and of the Old Man, while the exemplum has been "strangely neglected" (106). Miller, however, does notice an analogous

relationship between the Pardoner and the Old Man, and I suspect that the enigma which surrounds the Old Man may in fact be, with certain significant changes, a version of the veil of ambiguity which envelops the Pardoner. In the case of the Pardoner, I believe that the tale is the crucial piece of evidence: it is through the tale that his essence will be discovered.

The mysterious and brief appearance of the Old Man has been called "one of the great moments in Chaucer" (David 39); he is "perhaps the most tragic and mysterious figure ever created in an equal number of lines in any literature" (Manly 290). The fifty odd lines for which he is present in the narrative are strongly affective: his presence lingers long after Harry and the Pardoner make peace with a kiss. Any investigation of the tale must feature a study of the Old Man, though it is an oft-attempted critical task. John Steadman, with a kind of perverse satisfaction, notes that the Old Man has elicited from scholars "an embarrassing profusion of meanings" (121). Critics have certainly found a number of ingenious ways in which to explicate the Old Man, but none, as yet, are satisfactory. Alfred David suggests that much of the difficulty may arise from the reader's desire to make the Old Man one thing and one thing only, but this statement is puzzling. Whatever echoes, analogues or sources scholars unearth, and however valuable they may prove, readers must remember that, above all, the

Old Man is *Chaucer's* Old Man.

Recognizing that the Old Man is specifically Chaucer's creation, there are still critics who raise the problem of the Old Man's transcendent significance. Christopher Dean seems to agree with Sedgewick: while the Old Man is worthy of consideration, he ought to be considered in "relation to the exemplum alone," as he does not "transcend this [the exemplum] to embrace in some way the Pardoner himself" (45). Dean's conclusion, like Sedgewick's, is based upon the fact that the story which the Pardoner tells is clearly an "ensample" of the "olde stories" which are part of the Pardoner's method. Since it is not unusual to find various manifestations of the teller within the tale,<sup>42</sup> and the fact that the Pardoner chooses this specific tale at this specific juncture, Dean's decision is arbitrary: the Old Man has at least *some* bearing upon the characterization of the Pardoner. My investigation presupposes that Chaucer intended the Old Man to evoke associations which transcend his literal presentation.<sup>43</sup> Though J.B. Owen examines the tale assuming that "the old man is merely an old man" (50),

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<sup>42</sup> Who, for example, could deny the affinity between the "old wyf" the knight meets and the teller of the tale, the Wife of Bath?

<sup>43</sup> In order, the main details which point to the Old Man's greater significance are: 1) the Old Man's appearance at the threshold (the "stile"); 2) his description of his unfulfilling peripatetic existence; 3) his citation of, and repeated allusions to, the Bible; and 4) his unusual knowledge of Death's whereabouts.

the objections this reading raises are many and Owen's obvious difficulty in defending his "naturalistic reading" (Halverson 192) betrays its insufficiency. For example, an ordinary old man would not speak quite so enigmatically, nor so pointedly, to a group of wandering "riotoures." Further, simply because the Old Man's words echo Maximian does not mean that he can be typed with Maximian's essential "old man."<sup>44</sup>

Nonetheless, age *is* the primary physical characteristic of the Old Man. Marie Hamilton, in her article "Death and Old Age in *The Pardoner's Tale*," points out the number of references to age in the brief section of the tale in which the Old Man is present. The word "olde" is used on eight occasions to describe the Old Man--by the narrator, the rioters, and even the Old Man himself. With the repetition of words such as "age" and the many associated images of age ("carl," "tyme," "vanysshe," "hoor," etc.), Chaucer has created a portrait which, in a distinctly universal way, cannot forget its age. Peter Beidler recognizes that the Old Man is aligned with the specifically "human" complaint against age ("Noah" 250), and emphasizes that Chaucer places the tale firmly in the context of the plague--there are details in the Old Man's description which are meant to bind him to the world of Chaucer's audience. Though I find it impossible to agree with Beidler, who says that the Old Man

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<sup>44</sup> See Kittredge, "Chaucer and Maximianus."

is nothing more than a survivor of the bout of plague which struck a nearby village ("Plague" 260), the suggestion of the "pestilence" will prove significant.

Within the framework of the *Canterbury Tales*, the Old Man is as much a character as the Pardoner is, and he deserves consideration as such. As Pearsall recognizes, the relationship between the two characters is the key: "final judgement on the Pardoner . . . snags on the gratuitously and suggestively extended portrait of the Old Man, through which, conscious as we always are of his potential presence, we glimpse the Pardoner" (*Tales* 104).<sup>45</sup> Critical response to the Old Man, however, as David notes, often focuses on a single aspect of his character, or a single analogue, and therefore loses sight of other equally relevant details.<sup>46</sup> I propose that the Old Man may be better understood by establishing, within a framework of "symbol" and "motif," his characterization within the tale. By relating the Old Man's attributes to the nature of the exemplum, by examining him in the context of various sources and analogues and by juxtaposing his appearance and actions with similar figures

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<sup>45</sup> This is a curious addendum to Pearsall's earlier comment: "once a tale has properly got under way it is rare for there to be any reminder of the person or the character of the person who is telling it" (*Tales* 43).

<sup>46</sup> David feels that critics may perhaps have been influenced by "the mistaken notion that we are obliged to choose only one of several symbolic interpretations [in considering the nature of the Old Man of the Pardoner's exemplum]" (40).

in the Chaucerian corpus, I hope to demonstrate, in this chapter and the next, that the Old Man is neither Death, a "feend," nor reducible to any one definitive term: he is defined, at last, by both his function and his physical appearance;<sup>47</sup> he is a figure of aged wisdom with connections to the divine; a guardian and a judge, with a hint of the trickster; he is a comment on the nature of both language and knowledge.

The chief proponent of the Old Man as a personification, George Lyman Kittredge, assures us, in a seminal work from 1915, that the Old Man is "undoubtedly Death in person" (215). Later critics have recognized difficulties in such a view: the emphasis on age becomes superfluous, if not inappropriate,<sup>48</sup> and the Old Man's desire to die seems curiously at odds with his role as Death.<sup>49</sup> Kittredge's reading is more convenient than discerning: it accepts the Old Man's pronouncements in one speech and denies them in another. Specifically, if the Old Man is Death personified (or his agent), then the two

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<sup>47</sup> Christopher Dean states: "It is what [the Old Man] does with respect to the rioters that is far more important than what he himself actually is" (49). If it were that basic, the entire Pardoner's tale would have little relevance within the Pardoner's actions with respect to the pilgrims. The Old Man deserves to be treated as a character.

<sup>48</sup> J.G. Frazier's images of Death, while aged in some instances, are young in others (307-11). Death need not be ancient and atrophied.

<sup>49</sup> Owen comments: "that Death or his messenger should seek death is contrary to all the logic of allegory" (50). }

speeches, one of which explains why he cannot die (721-738) and one which directs the rioters to death (760-767), contradict, or, at the very least, conflict with, one another. On a literal level, the hoary "olde cherl" that the rioters encounter can hardly be connected with the violence and superfluity of the tavern boy's "Deeth":

Ther cam a privee thief men clepeth Deeth,  
That in this contree al the peple sleeth,  
And with his spere he smoot his herte atwo,  
And wente his wey withouten wordes mo.

He hath a thousand slayn this pestilence. (675-9)

In terms of this description, and the common assumption that the rioters have misunderstood the metaphorical or allegorical words of the tavern boy and the taverner, the fact that the rioters immediately recognize the Old Man as Death's "espye" is probably enough evidence that the Old Man cannot be so directly connected with death: the rioters are simply not that perspicacious.

Another difficulty with interpreting the Old Man as Death or his representative lies in the tavern boy's precise choice of words. More than representing an ominous label of a menacing killer, "a privee thief men clepeth Deeth" might well be an allusion to Christ's second coming. The New Testament warns us often that the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, and this makes the tavern boy's warning to "be war of swich an adversarie" (682)

particularly worthy of heed: "For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord shall so cometh as a thief in the night . . . therefore let us not sleep, as others do: but let us watch and be sober" (1 Thess. 5:2-7).<sup>50</sup> Though the rioters' dead fellow may not have been physically asleep, he was certainly neither watching nor sober, and for those reasons he was, as the rioters clearly are, in a deep spiritual slumber.

The Old Man is, by virtue of the development of the tale, tentatively connected with the tavern boy's "Deeth." Subsequent consideration should lead us to dismiss the erroneous assessment which the rioters make: we recognize that the youth's words are primarily allegorical. "Deeth" is an agent of the Lord, and the boy's warning is not to be aware in order to thwart death, but rather in order to die in a state of grace, and thereby achieve salvation.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> See also Peter 3:10-11; Rev. 3:3; and Rev. 16:15 (among others).

<sup>51</sup> There is an odd expression in the tavern boy's words which seems to equate "Deeth" with "pestilence": "He hath a thousand slayn this pestilence" (679). Benson simply glosses "this pestilence" as "during this plague," but the confusing syntax may, in part, be intended to link death with the pestilence in a specifically religious and causal way (see also Beidler "Plague"). In what may be simply an illustrative analogue, "The Book of the Resurrection of Christ by Bartholomew" in the *Apocryphal New Testament* explains part of the relationship:

Death addressed his son the Pestilence, and described the commotion which had taken place in his domain. Then he spoke to the body of Jesus and asked, "Who art thou?" Jesus removed the napkin that was on his face and looked in the face of Death and laughed at him. Death and his sons



Because J.B. Owen's argument (that the Old Man is simply an old man) is predicated upon disputing the similarly limited interpretation that the Old Man is Death personified, many of his points make sense. If the Old Man is Death, Owen points out, textual evidence would suggest that the revellers had, in fact, discovered Death twice--both in the figure of the Old Man, and in the eight bushels of shiny florins.<sup>52</sup> Further, in order to explain the Old Man's knowledge of Death's whereabouts, Owen claims that the Old Man's advice, to seek Death up the "croked wey," is simply a desperate attempt to escape the vindictive, drunk "riotoures":

There is nothing in Chaucer to suggest that the old man has seen the gold . . . he does not know what the revellers will find under the tree; for if he does, he ought, according to his earlier speech, to have remained with the gold, seeking his death in it. (51)

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fled. (182)

If the "pestilence" were, in fact, perceived as a judgement upon a spiritually corrupt age, then the Old Man becomes even more clearly a spiritual agent who is in some way divine. The implications of this passage are significant: Christ is disguised by a napkin ("forwrapped?") and has crossed into the other realm (Hell) to meet Death (not Death as the physical process, but Death of a spiritual kind), just as the Old Man seems to have done. The Old Man's role finds a parallel in Jesus'; the rioters are associated with Death and his followers. The inversion (as the rioters are generally seen to be attempting to usurp the role of Christ) is interesting.

<sup>52</sup> Owen states: "the dual symbol for Death thus imposed on the story confuses and diffuses the irony" (50).

While it is possible that the Old Man truly does not know the specific form that "Deeth" will take, I cannot be convinced that he has unwittingly directed the revellers to the death he sought for himself (Owen 52). The Old Man does direct them to one specific oak,<sup>53</sup> at the base of which the florins lie, and he has unequivocally said that he will keep his old age "as longe tyme as it is Goddes wille" (726). As Steadman says, the Old Man "does not attempt to shorten his life through his own agency" (127). The fact that the Old Man has recently been with Death, yet cannot die, despite his wish to exchange his "cheste" for a "heyre clowt," appears contradictory, but it suggests the distinction between the Old Man and the rioters. The Old Man plays upon the eagerness and gullibility of the rioters: I believe he knows the florins are there, and that the coins will be the catalyst which "kills" the three revellers.

Many characters have been proposed, with varying degrees of success, as antecedents to, or helpful commentaries on, the Old Man. Ranging from Owen's realistic reading, to Bushnell's assurance that the Old Man echoes the Wandering Jew, to Barakat and Harris's introduction of Odin and Beidler's mention of Noah, attempts to remove the shroud of mystery from the Old Man have been many. This proceeds,

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<sup>53</sup> For a brief but excellent discussion of the "ook" and how it functions as a "sign," see Carolyn Collette, "'Ubi Peccaverant, Ibi Punirentur': The Oak Tree and *The Pardoner's Tale*."

I believe, from two fundamental issues: 1) the Old Man's ambiguity requires, yet simultaneously denies, this kind of classification; and 2) figures of restless age are universal and numerous, and their characteristics do not vary all that widely (i.e., there is something appealing in Owen's claim, though it must ultimately be rejected). Nevertheless, there are specific details in several of these proposals about the Old Man's identity which do impress.<sup>54</sup>

The legend of the Wandering Jew is one source which has been cited as an informing analogue to the Old Man. Nelson Bushnell draws comparisons between the "immortal wanderer" and the Old Man which include meekness and piety, an inability to die (because, in both cases, of "Goddes wille") and extensive travelling. Bushnell admits, however, that several features of the portrait are not seen in any account of the Jew--the staff, the physical emaciation, the "mysterious" chest, and the "forwrapped" figure. Bushnell concedes that "it is not likely that Chaucer intended his readers to believe that his Old Man was the Wandering Jew in person" (460)<sup>55</sup> but simply borrowed the characteristics

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<sup>54</sup> In the interest of brevity, I shall mention only one in this chapter. In addition, the Old English *Wanderer* demonstrates just how "universal" some aspects of the Old Man's presentation are. Other analogues, such as the Old Icelandic parallels--Odin and other Norse gods--are beyond the scope of this thesis.

<sup>55</sup> Some scholars question the possibility that Chaucer could have known the legend of the Wandering Jew at all. G.K. Anderson states: "If he [Chaucer] heard of it [the legend] in England, there is no evidence that it was sufficiently

which would most suit a "perfect foil" to the three rioters. In the end, the similarity which seems most fitting is perhaps the one that is least apparent: there is something in the Old Man's description of his condition that hints at a kind of condemnation. Perhaps it is his attendance on "Goddess wille," or perhaps his isolation and brief appearance give a lasting impression of an unhappy solitude, a suggestion that there is a darker reason for this man's constant motion. In the affront to Jesus (as Malchus, Cartaphilus--Bushnell points out how varied the different accounts are), there is a temptation to make the connection with the fugitive and vagabond Cain, hidden from the face of God and possible object of vengeance.<sup>56</sup>

There are innumerable figures of age wandering the pages of medieval folklore and literature, as Joseph Harris notes,<sup>57</sup> and any one would have been enough to provide Chaucer with a prototype, but there is a further analogue and possible source which bears mention. Chaucer's familiarity with Innocent III's *De Miseria Condicionis*

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developed in that country by 1400 to give such a brilliant picture of an old man who cannot die" (32). However, because some of the details are so similar, Anderson muses that it may well be possible Chaucer learned of the legend "on one of his Italian journeys."

<sup>56</sup> See Genesis 4:13-15. Only an arrogant group like the three rioters would dare tempt "sevenfold" revenge by attacking him, and that seems exactly what they receive.

<sup>57</sup> "There are too many cloaked and aged figures wandering through the pages of medieval literature for one to be able to make any significant distinctions between them" (Harris 31).

*Humane* has been well documented, and Innocent's description of temporal life is a more likely source for the Old Man's earthly discomfort than Bushnell's Wandering Jew (or Cain). Innocent explains his conception of how righteous men view this ephemeral world: "[the just man] sustinet seculum tanquam exilium, clausus in corpore tanquam in carcere. 'Incola,' inquit, 'ego sum in terra,' 'et peregrinus sicut omnes patres mei'" (125). Further, "certe non vult exire de carcere qui non vult exire de corpore, nam carcer anime corpus est" (129).<sup>58</sup> The contrast between the rioters and the Old Man is highlighted by their different attitudes concerning temporal and physical things: the Old Man desires to die that he might escape the prison of the body; the rioters desire to ensure that they can never die.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to specific figures from whom Chaucer may have borrowed the characteristics of the Old Man, Frederick

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<sup>58</sup> Harold Steadman has also linked the Old Man with the *contemptus mundi* tradition, although there are difficulties in the relationship. One who truly regards the world with contempt would not walk "into Ynde" seeking a man with whom to exchange youth for age.

<sup>59</sup> In effect, the lament with which Boethius opens *De Consolatione Philosophiae* describes the condition of the Old Man:

For eelde is comyn unwarly uppon me, hasted by the harmes that Y have, and sorwe hath comandid his age to ben in me. Heeris hore arn schad overtymeliche upon myn heved, and the slakke skyn trembleth of myn emptid body. Thilke deth of men is weleful that ne comyth noght in yeeris that ben swete, but cometh to wrecches often yclepid. Allas, allas! With how deef an ere deth, cruwel, turneth away fro wrecches and nayteth to closen wepynge eien. (13-23)

Tupper lists a number of further sources and analogues, not just for the Old Man, but for the entire tale:<sup>60</sup> in general, most versions include a treasure which one man "understands" is somehow evil and wants nothing to do with, and a number of other men, usually three, who meet their deaths trying to obtain that treasure. In two of the stories, the hermit who finds the treasure immediately associates it with death; in one instance, he flees death, which is chasing him. Generally, however, the finder of the treasure, or a person who is present when the treasure is found, is a wise man, and realizes that it ought to be shunned.

In the six examples which most closely approximate the action of the Pardoner's version, the role of the Old Man is assumed once by a philosopher, twice by the above mentioned hermits, and three times by Christ. Excluding the stories of the two hermits, there are four warnings given. The philosopher warns his disciples "against the gold as a source of many evils," and Christ calls the treasure "that which robs us of souls," "the root of all evils," and "death," respectively. Although these stories have obviously been chosen for their similarity to the Pardoner's tale, and we can never know definitively with which sources Chaucer was familiar, the parallels do inform our understanding of the Old Man. In the closest analogues, his

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<sup>60</sup> See Bryan and Dempster 416-23.

role is assumed by Christ, who warns those who would attempt the treasure. The philosopher tells his followers to steer clear of the gold, and even in the other examples, the person who has prior knowledge of the treasure recognizes it for what it is and avoids it.

Although critics have often mentioned that the most telling difference in Chaucer's version is the Old Man's desire for death--which appears in none of the known analogues--this desire need not necessarily be interpreted as a difference, *in se*. The Old Man finds the "eighte busshels" "of floryns fine" under the "ook" in the grove and leaves them there. He recognizes that the treasure would be of no benefit to him, just as his counterpart in the analogues invariably does. The desire for death which he voices to the rioters is, in a sense, an unrelated, and therefore additional, detail. The distinction between spiritual and physical death is important, but the Old Man does not contradict the analogues by desiring the death which is "Goddess wille." By patrolling the earth as he does, he may be imitating the actions of Christ, attempting to help men achieve salvation. The Pardoner's role in this and his relationship to the Old Man's intervention will be discussed at length later, but one of the analogues is particularly telling. In Novella No. 83 in the collection edited by Gualteruzzi, Christ not only warns his disciples away from the gold, but returns to show them the dead bodies

and demonstrate the power of the treasure: the Pardoner also assumes a Christ-like position as he holds the example of the three dead rioters up to illustrate his theme--*radix malorum est cupiditas*--to the Canterbury pilgrims.

Robert Miller and many, if not most, other critics would not agree that there is anything spiritual or divine in the Old Man. Miller, as we have seen, uses the Pardoner's description in the General Prologue in his well-known investigation of physical and spiritual eunuchry and finally relates it to the Old Man. As erudite as his investigation is, I think there are several difficulties with his logic. Christopher Dean expresses reservations even in the connection of the two (main) types of eunuchry, and later in Miller's rendering of the Old Man. Miller asserts that the Old Man, by directing the revellers up the "croked wey," "assumes a position in the tale suggestively analogous to that of the teller," (197) and therefore is a symbolic presentation of the *vetus homo*. Miller fails, however, to analyze the whole of the Old Man's performance: the Old Man is not there exclusively to ensure that the rioters follow the "croked wey." Dean takes exception on many points, but one further example should suffice: "most unconvincing of all is the idea that the Old Man (or *vetus homo*) seeks death so that he can become the *novus homo*." Why would an allegorical figure of the evil in man (the *vetus homo*) "seek of its own volition to die" (48)?



Clearly, "the Old Man's humble piety . . . does not seem consonant with an allegorical figure of unregenerate sin" (Halverson 193).

The error here is serious: Miller has "virtually identified" the revellers with the Old Man (which is, of course, making practically the same mistake the rioters do), whereas the text of the incident explicitly does other things (Dean 48). What the presentation of the Old Man offers us is a dilemma of interpretation, for we are introduced to several characters at once. When examining the salient features of the Old Man, it is important to keep in mind that the details with which he is (loosely) associated, as I remarked previously, allude to different things. The "Deeth" that the rioters hear described is not the Old Man: we are dealing with literal and symbolic description, as well as allegory. This is not, however, to deny a *symbolic* link between "Deeth" and the Old Man, and that symbolic link is, I believe, the essence of the figure, as I shall demonstrate fully in Chapter Four.

The tavern boy recognizes the ~~figural~~ *figural* figure, Death, and describes him with an odd application of particular details (like the spear) to the universal (and spiritual) essence of death. The rioters seek the physical embodiment of Death; they are armed with a description and a location and seek as best they can. Unfortunately, death is a universal which has no physical being, outside of the

particular details which spell death to an individual. When the rioters see the Old Man, they correlate the accidental details of "Deeth" and the old stranger and determine that their essence is somehow the same. In a way, the rioters have now inverted their misinterpretation, regarding the Old Man symbolically, rather than accepting his literal appearance (and advice). However, it has long been recognized that the Old Man is emblematic of the rioters' successful quest: he does symbolize the fate of man in a world without death, where youth cannot be regained. Most readers and critics would accept both that the rioters have misjudged the Old Man, and that the Old Man is a symbolic figure. What remains, therefore, is to attempt to define the hermeneutic parameters of the symbol. From our vantage point, outside the frame of the tale, and outside the frame of the pilgrimage, we must attempt to interpret correctly the accident, and thus deduce the substantial figure of the Old Man. The difficulty of this task should be apparent: it may be that Chaucer has deliberately confounded attempts to penetrate the superficial details, to remove the "wrapping" from the Old Man. Still, examination of the sources and analogues again hints, as the evidence in the Pardoner's case did, at the ambiguous valence of Chaucer's creation. However, the Old Man's language, method of appearance and actions, which we have, as yet, only touched upon, will, when juxtaposed with similar figures in the Chaucerian

corpus, finally allow more concrete conclusions.

### Chapter Three: The Old Man and Other Chaucerian Characters

Elizabeth Hatcher, in her analysis of *The Pardoner's Tale*, admits Chaucer's use of "static symbol" and "motif," but praises critics like Alfred David and Christopher Dean for leaving those "symbols" and "motifs" behind and concentrating on the "dramatic function and meaning of the Old Man in his context" (246). The sources, analogues and symbols cited in Chapter Two must now give way in a similar fashion to an analysis of the Old Man "in his context." The Old Man's "context," however, is the Chaucerian corpus, though few critics have been willing to utilize other tales or works in order to explain the Old Man. Hatcher refers only to the tale itself, and thus, like Christopher Dean, would limit the Old Man's significance to the exemplum. I believe that the Old Man's function with respect to the rioters is the single most important aspect of his character: for the rioters, the meeting is a liminal, or threshold, experience.<sup>61</sup> Though the precise hermeneutic weight of the Chaucerian liminal experience may never be known, the most reliable way to approach a conclusion is through comparison with parallel situations. Like Hatcher, I acknowledge the value of "static symbols" and "motifs," but I believe the Old Man's avatars are subordinate to his immediate role "in his context." My definition of the Old

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<sup>61</sup> For my purposes, I refer to "threshold" as an encounter between one realm and another. Liminality may also anticipate the failure of normal sensory faculties.

Man's context may be unusually broad, but I suspect that it will help to solve the problems which remain after interpretations which are limited to the evidence found within *The Pardoner's Tale*.

Paul Ruggiers, in *The Art of the Canterbury Tales*, makes a passing reference to the similarities between *The Pardoner's Tale* and *The Friar's Tale* by pointing out that both are examples of "a preacher's anecdote successfully employed" (129). Further, both tales deal with "the unwitting encounter with spiritual death through the pursuit of material gain" (Ruggiers 129). Alexandra Hennessey Olsen justifies her comparison of the performances of the Pardoner and the Friar with reference to the reaction of the Canterbury pilgrims: "I should like to suggest that for an audience which has heard *The Friar's Tale* the Old Man is more ominous than when he is read only within the context of *The Pardoner's Tale*, for like the Green Yeoman he seems to be a devil wandering the earth in search of prey" (368-9). Though I object to the way Olsen discounts "external historical facts," and to her comment that the Old Man represents Death, a comparison of the two performances is, I believe, requisite to "understanding" the Old Man.<sup>62</sup> *The Friar's Tale* and *The Pardoner's Tale* complement one another

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<sup>62</sup> Olsen comments that she is operating on the assumption that *The Pardoner's Tale* follows fragment three, in which *The Friar's Tale* is found. This order, which is likely, would lend weight to my argument, but does not seem to me to be a prerequisite for the comparison.

to a much greater extent than has hitherto been recognized: despite the numerous thematic echoes and verbal similarities between the two tales, the differences between them are most telling.

Two further tales are rarely cited in the context of *The Pardoner's Tale*: *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and the tale of *Sir Thopas*. That both the *Wife of Bath* and the *Pardoner* tell a "confessional" tale has long been recognized, but the relationship between the Old Man and the "old wyf" has, as far as I know, received no close scrutiny. Paul Beekman Taylor examines *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, *The Pardoner's Tale*, and *Sir Thopas* as linked texts which rework a similar theme, but he analyzes them largely in terms of that theme--the shared motif of questing--which, though relevant, does not adequately explore the arbiters of the respective quests. Outside *The Canterbury Tales*, similarities between the central episode of the *Book of the Duchess* and the *Pardoner's* performance also inform a reading of the Old Man.

Just as the rioters "wolde had troden over a stile," (712) they meet the Old Man, or rather, as Olsen points out, the Old Man meets them. This "stile" is of great significance, but it suffices here to note that the experience is in some way liminal, much like the appearance of the Devil-Bailiff, who rides before the summoner "under a forest syde" (1379-80). In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, when the knight has given up hope, precisely this phrase--"under

a forest syde"--is used when his vision of the twenty-four dancing ladies is followed by the entrance of the "wyf - a fouler wight ther may no man devyse" (998-99). Sir Thopas deliberately seeks the other side of the gate:

Into his sadel he clamb anon,  
 And priketh over stile and stoon  
 An elf-queene for t'espys,  
 Til he so longe hath riden and goon  
 That he foond, in a pryve woon,  
 The contree of Fairye  
 So wilde. (797-803)

Thopas must cross "stiles" and "stoons" to find the country of the elf-queen and, when he arrives, he finds the country wild. The "pryve woon" is the "haunt" of the "greet geaunt" Olifaunt, who finds Thopas' trespass offensive: to his mind, the young knight does not belong in the home of the elven queen. Chaucer, in each of these scenes, provides an external marker which not only demonstrates that a significant meeting is about to occur, but also associates the new figure with the realm of the "other": the unknown (and therefore dangerous) realm on the other side of the "stile" or the shadowy world of the forest.

Olsen notes that just as the Devil-Bailiff "seems to be awaiting the summoner, the Old Man seems to be awaiting the rioters" (370), but neglects the key difference: the Old Man initiates the conversation with the distinctly non-secular

"God yow see!", while it is the summoner who greets the "yeman" with a casual "hayl, and wel atake" (1384)! The summoner asks the "yeman" his destination, but receives only a question in return. In contrast, the rioters ask the more probing questions, prefaced by "Why?" In terms of their respective quests, the two parties have met distinctly different figures. The rioters have met an aged man, presumably coming from the direction of the plague-ridden village, whose physical appearance leads them to believe that he may in fact be that "privee thief men clepeth Deeth" (675). The summoner, on the other hand, has not met someone from whom he could extort a "rente," though a fellow "bailly" might well have some new "gaudes."

In the Wife of Bath's story, the Knight has made a rather large error in judgement, and the successful fulfilment of the quest is the only way he can save his life. As he is returning, on his way to certain death, the "old wyf" rises "agayn the knight" and greets him:

'Sire knyght, heer forth ne lith no wey.

Tel me what that ye seken, by youre fey!

Paraventure it may the bettre be;

Thise olde folk kan muchel thyng.' (1001-4)

Had the Old Man been more direct, or the rioters more insightful, the old woman's words are the Old Man's advice to the three youths: "Heer forth ne lith no wey!" Her reference to the sapience of "olde folk" and her curious



knowledge of the knight's purpose look ahead pointedly to the Old Man. The woman is old and foul, so much so that she scarcely seems to "bar lyf," and yet she rises and intercepts the knight as he rides the wrong path, just as the Old Man intercepts the revellers and Olifaunt blocks Thopas' quest.

Though the "old wyf" remains guarded about her origins and purpose, both the Old Man and the Devil-Bailiff willingly explain themselves to their new acquaintances. The Old Man intimates that he has been wandering the earth for some time, and in distant countries like "Ynde," to find a man "that wolde chaunge his youthe for [his] age" (724).<sup>63</sup> Similarly, the Devil-Bailiff says: "I am unknown as in this contree" (1397), and later refers to the difficulty of his lot ("myn office is ful laborous" [1428]), before hinting that he will search at least as widely as the Old Man: "ryde wolde I now / Unto the worldes ende for a preye" (1454-55). The Old Man seems to have no home other than the earth which will not have him, and the Devil-Bailiff's origins, in the "fer north contree," though an echo of Jeremiah 6:1, are equally vague. The Old Man's purpose appears to be simply to wander until such time as God permits him to die, for he knows no youth will accept his age. The "yeman" explains that he is a "bailly" who is new to the area. Both figures

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<sup>63</sup> The Man in Black explains how difficult it was to obtain the love of White: "To gete her love no ner nas he/ That woned at hom than he in Ynde" (888-9).

show little regard for temporal goods: the devil-bailiff promises that all the gold and silver in his chest shall belong to the summoner, "if that thee happe to comen in oure shire" (1401); and the Old Man would gladly exchange his worldly goods for a "heyre clowt" in which to wrap himself.

Olsen uses the Devil-Bailiff's explanation of fiendish deception (they "swiche formes make / As mooste able is our preyes for to take" [1471-2]) to explain the physical appearance of the Old Man. Unfortunately, when we assume that the devil has chosen to appear as an "olde cherle" in order to best tempt the rioters, we must also believe that the Old Man's description of his state is also a ruse, designed to enhance his physical disguise.<sup>64</sup> There are several problems with this. Firstly, on an intuitive level, the Old Man's lament is far more poignant than Olsen's conclusion would allow:

Ne Deeth, allas, ne wol nat han my lyf.  
 Thus walke I, lyk a resteleees kaityf,  
 And on the ground, which is my moodres gate,  
 I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late,  
 And seye 'Leeve mooder, leet me in!' (727-31)

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<sup>64</sup> Christopher Dean cannot decide if the Old Man is a [good] spirit or an old man. If a "spirit" or a "divine force," then "he must obviously appear in the most harmless form possible rather than in his true form to ensure that any change of heart he brings about in the revellers is due to their repentance, not the result of their fear" (48). Dean's alternative is to "accept him as a real old man through whom God is acting" (49). The Old Man is not in disguise, and he is not really God's puppet, as we shall see.

Secondly, his persistent return to God, and his allusions to "Hooly Writ," seem particularly at odds with Olsen's conclusion. Though the fiend does appear in this tale, it is not until after the rioters have discovered the gold:

And atte laste the feend, oure enemy,  
Putte in his thought that he sholde poyson beye,  
With which he myghte sleen his felawes tweye;  
For-why the feend foond hym in swich lyvyng  
That he hadde leve him to sorwe brynge. (844-8)

Just as J.B. Owen takes exception to Kittredge's reading of the Old Man as Death because of the Old Man's directions to Death, so the double appearance of the fiend in the tale is unlikely.<sup>65</sup>

The Old Man's precise relationship with death is, as we have seen, difficult to isolate, but the "man in blak" in the *Book of the Duchess* offers convincing evidence that there is nothing sinister in the Old Man's yearning for, and proximity to, death. After following the whelp to a place which is clearly "other," the dreamer discovers the "man in blak" at the base of an "ook." Death, relates the mournful knight, has made him "al naked/ Of al the blysse that ever

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<sup>65</sup> The rioters refuse to heed the Old Man. If the Old Man is a fiend, and attempts, again, to influence the youngest rioter on his way to the village, logic demands that he be ignored. Further, it is facile to argue that the Old Man, acting as a fiend, forces the rioters to reject him in order to trick them up the "croked wey": they were already on the verge of crossing the "stile." The death which awaits them is neither hiding nor elusive, nor is there any need for it to be.

was maked" and has forced him to hate his days and nights (577-80):

The pure deth ys so ful my foo  
 That I wolde deye, hyt wolde not soo;  
 For whan I folwe hyt, hit wol flee;  
 I wolde have hym, hyt nyl nat me.  
 This ys me peyne wythoute red,  
 Alway deyng and be not ded. (583-88)

The "man in blak" compares his situation with the eternal cycle of "Cesiphus": "y am sorwe, and sorwe ys y" (597). No reader, regardless of the knight's excessive grief, would condemn the knight or call him a "feend." The Old Man assumes the role of both the whelp and the knight: he directs the quester and craves death. As far as death is concerned, the Old Man's desire to die is no more remarkable than the Man in Black's pursuit of his "foo."

The Old Man's uncertain identity may in part be due to his lack of a name. The Friar's summoner, for all his blindness, does ask a question which bears upon the Old Man's namelessness. Though his inability to act upon the result only amplifies his ignorance, the summoner eventually asks the "yeman" his name. Gail Ivy Berlin, in her article "Speaking to the Devil," cites various authorities (most prominently Athanasius' *Life of Antony*) which recommend this tactic for anyone who is confronted with an enigmatic figure whom they believe may be connected with evil. The key is to

ask: "Who are you, and where do you come from?" This not only "identifies and intimidates" the fiend, but also indicates "the questioner's spiritual strength" (Berlin 3). If Chaucer, or the Pardoner for that matter, had intended the revellers to display similar ignorance, or the encounter to appear more "fiendish," a parallel scene would have been simple to include. In *The Friar's Tale*, of course, the fiend's responses only help to heighten the irony of the summoner's continued inability to see the danger. As it stands in *The Pardoner's Tale*, neither the rioters nor the readers are certain of the Old Man's identity.<sup>66</sup>

The exact mechanics and result of each encounter remain to be examined in detail. The summoner generously informs the "yeman" that he intends to "reysen up a rente" which is due his lord, and the difficulty of his quest is not immediately apparent. On the other hand, for the knight in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and the rioters, their respective quests are ambitious ones. The knight must discover "what thyng that worldly women loven best," while the rioters have sworn "many a grisly ooth" that they shall kill "Deeth." The Parson (in the words of "Seint Paul") explains how death became part of the world of men: "Right as by a

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<sup>66</sup> The significance of the total lack of names in *The Pardoner's Tale* is, I believe, related to this concept: to name something is, on one level, to gain power over it. That type of knowledge places its possessor in a privileged position, and Chaucer deliberately denies us this power. Paradoxically, however, a different kind of power is granted as the former is withheld.

man synne entred first into this world, and thurgh that synne deeth, right so thilke deeth entred into all men that synneden" (321). Death, which is ultimately the creation of man, can only be vanquished by Christ, and the *Gospel of Nicodemus* makes Christ's role explicit: "Impious Death" trembles at the approach of Jesus, and all Death's minions cannot identify him. "Then the King of Glory trampling upon death, seize[s] the prince of hell, deprive[s] him of all his power, and t[akes] our earthly father Adam with him to his glory" (17:13), and thus expiates us all from the inherited guilt of Original Sin. The rioters' quest is, therefore, as Pearsall says, "a gross parody of Christ's struggle to overcome Death" (102); it is the height of presumption, and is echoed by the summoner's eventual and ridiculous advice to the fiend: "Taak heer ensample of me" (1580).

Both the summoner and the rioters have scarcely begun their respective quests when a figure of uncertain, and "different," origin appears and is not immediately recognized. The rioters decide that they have met Death's "espye," and the summoner thinks he has teamed up with a friendly "bailly." The fact that the Old Man represents the success of the rioters' quest has been documented before: he embodies the joylessness of the world without death, the Sybill's rash wish. Any such embodiment for the Devil-Bailiff must be more complex, but this fiendish figure may

typify the kind of character engendered by the summoner's world--the spiritually rotten offspring of a corrupt ecclesiast. Even the "old wyf" may symbolize the unattractiveness of a world where a man's will can be forced upon a woman. In any case, the conception and fulfilment of all three quests is at least somewhat perilous.

Thomas Pison discusses the liminality of the quest motif, and affirms that it signifies the "process of being in between cultural states, of being in transition," (157) and the significance of the context in which the knight, the summoner and the rioters are placed is clear.<sup>67</sup> A prerequisite of the liminal situation is its permanence--"the crossing of the threshold cannot be reversed" (Bloomfield 287)--and this is the source of the danger. Paradoxically, however, when the danger of the liminal situation is confronted, a permanent change for the better becomes possible.<sup>68</sup> The liminal point is a kind of marker, a signpost as unmistakable as the river Styx, meant to force the would-be traveller to recognize the nature of his journey. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* (though the knight does not cross), *The Friar's Tale* and *The Pardoner's Tale* each suggest "the ancient and perhaps universal act of crossing a

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<sup>67</sup> Christ's quest to vanquish death also marks a permanent change in the status of men: a spiritual life is guaranteed to the righteous, even in the face of physical death.

<sup>68</sup> The possibility is admittedly faint for the summoner.

barrier--in this case man's most dreaded and fundamental barrier: death" (Bloomfield 289).

In their ignorance, both the rioters and the summoner fail to realize the decisive nature of the encounter, and therefore make demands upon the characters they meet. The rioters demand the current location of Death from the Old Man, while the summoner asks to learn some "subtiltee" through which he can be more effective. The rioters are directed up the "croked wey" to the "floryns fyne," and the summoner accompanies the Devil-Bailiff until they both reach the home of the "old rebekke." At this point, neither party has yet made its final, fatal mistake. I would suggest, however, that neither the rioters nor the summoner have any chance of escaping their fate by the time they reach what will become the instrument of their demise. Clearly, the rioters have crossed over the "stile" to get to the grove. Given that the Old Man's words connect the "stile" implicitly with death ("the ground, which is my moodres gate" [729]), the rioters have crossed into Death's realm. Though he fails to comment upon the "stile" as an external marker, Pearsall agrees: "the death that the rioters find is no more than the physical correlative, an allegorical enactment, of the death that they . . . have already undergone" (101). Similarly, the summoner has sworn allegiance to the fiend: the manner in which he loses his soul is but a formality.



Olsen links the two tales through this swearing of oaths--the summoner and the Devil-Bailiff swear "to be sworne brethren," (1405) and the rioters pledge "to lyve and dyen ech of hem for oother" (703)--but she does not recognize the difference these oaths imply. Each of the rioters is similarly damned, and they torment the body of Christ with their oaths. The Devil-Bailiff and the summoner are of the same ilk. The Old Man, however, is left out of the swearing of oaths: unlike the rioters, he will attend "Goddess wille." Olsen also submits that "both the Yeoman and the Old Man are prescient" (370), and this is true of the "old wyf" as well. There can be no doubt that all three figures know more than those they encounter. The Devil-Bailiff lets it slip that he recognizes the summoner for what he is (1474), and the Old Man represents a transitional moment in the physical and spiritual lives of the rioters of which they are not aware. The key difference here is that the Devil-Bailiff's express purpose is to harvest souls, while the Old Man's knowledge is of a different nature. Like the foul hag in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* does for the knight, the Old Man presents the rioters with a choice, a kind of test. He meets the rioters and delays them, momentarily, from the symbolic and irrevocable crossing of the "stile." Christopher Dean comments that the Old Man expresses "the two aspects of God--His Mercy, leading to salvation, and His justice, leading to damnation" (49), and

the order in which these appear is crucial to understanding the difference between the Old Man and the Devil-Bailiff: "the path of salvation is shown first to mankind. Only when it is rejected must men then follow the path of damnation" (49). The "stile" is equated with the Old Man's "moodres gate," which symbolizes death, which, for the rioters, means certain damnation. If the Old Man were "the devil, walking the earth in human form" (Olsen 371), he would hardly attempt to stop the rioters from stepping into his "shire."

The "old wyf," in a similar manner, advises the knight not to "repreve" her, as "men sholde an oold wight doon favour" (1210). The knight has a choice, but, unlike the revellers, he follows the elderly figure's advice and wisely elects to put himself in her "governance." The closing comments in the tale are particularly relevant:

And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves  
That noght wol be governed by hir wyves;  
And olde and angry nygards of dispence

God sende hem soone verray pestilence! (1261-4)

The Wife of Bath prays for both the death of those who will not be governed by "hyr wyves" (i.e., by wise old age) and for a pestilence on the "nygards of dispence" (i.e., the avaricious).<sup>69</sup> Both the "wyf" and the Old Man appear as age

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<sup>69</sup> The respective relationships between the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner and the "old wyf" and the Old Man have further possibilities. Does the Old Man represent, as the

before youth and attempt to offer wisdom as a solution to the quest. The Old Man, through the language of "Hooly Writ" and his quiet advice, offers the rioters a chance at salvation (or life): indeed, the religious nature of the Old Man's language is one of the most striking differences between his portrayal and that of the Devil-Bailiff.

The Old Man's language seems to me to indicate something more than the *vetus homo*, though Miller would assure us that the Old Man simply "quote[s] Scripture to his own purpose" (197). Even if that were so, the Old Man's pre-emptive appearance at the "stile" and his initial response, which seems to be tolerance, are probably at odds with Miller's reading. Nonetheless, the Pardoner does assure his audience that he is a "ful vicious man," and says: "I preche of no thyng but for coveityse" (424). Though the question of the Pardoner's "entente" is not at issue here, the fact that the Pardoner occasionally, inadvertently, "twynnes" people from avarice may be brought to bear on the Old Man.<sup>70</sup> If the Old Man has assumed a position which is as closely analogous to that of the Pardoner as Miller suspects, then the Old Man's apparent warning, or the possibility that the rioters could have been

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"old wyf" may for the Wife of Bath, an attempt at wish-fulfilment on the part of the Pardoner?

<sup>70</sup> See 429-34. This admission is bracketed by the nearly identical lines 424 and 434, and thus draws attention to itself. I will return to "entente" in the following chapter.

saved, is only another manifestation of the Pardoner--his inadvertent "entente." The directions the Old Man gives follow a specific way, to a specific grove, and end at a specific tree: these directions are simple in order that the drunken, "lewed" rioters understand. Far easier to find, however, is the God who is omnipresent. The Old Man greets them with "God yow see!," and attempts once to leave them with "God be with yow, where ye go or ryde!," before directing them to the tree and taking his leave with what would, for the *vetus homo*, be a very uncharacteristic farewell: "God save yow, that boghte agayn mankynde, / And you amende" (766-7)! Though the rioters may not grasp the Old Man's meaning, the directions to the "straight way" are explicit enough.

In part, Olsen concludes that both *The Friar's Tale* and *The Pardoner's Tale* emphasize that "people who are intent on gain are easily hoodwinked" (370). The Old Man is certainly not out to beguile the rioters, and the Devil-Bailiff seems to have come specifically for the summoner. There is, however, a key difference here: the Old Man appears at the "stile" just as the rioters are poised to cross--he oversees that gate. The Devil-Bailiff's introduction and conduct are much different. He appears "under the forest syde," but emerges from the realm of the "other" to accompany the summoner as he rides. The Old Man, in a way, becomes equated with the "stile," and functions largely as it does,

though more evaluatively. Though the Devil-Bailiff seems to have come for the summoner, he, too, must await the results of a certain test before his victim can be spirited away. Even the "old wyf," by granting the knight a choice, has taught him what is, within the framework of the tale, a life-saving lesson. Quite simply, the Devil-Bailiff is a fiend, and operates as such; the "old wyf's" origins are mysterious, and her power is uncertain: she may well have deceived the knight, but that she saves his life is beyond doubt; as "other-worldly," enigmatic, and "death-like" as the Old Man may appear, his words and his actions prove that he is more benevolent than beguiling.

Janette Richardson notes that there is a providential aspect to the meeting of the Devil-Bailiff and the summoner: "it gives the devil his opportunity to serve as 'Goddess instrument' (1483) in ridding the world of an evil parasite" ("Hunter" 16). The Old Man is also an instrument of God, but only in so far as all those who abide God's will are His instruments. I do not, as I said earlier, believe that the Old Man is God's appointed representative at the "stile." The Old Man's ability to haunt the marginal world of the gate must be a function of his proximity to death. After all, the rioters demonstrate that the approach of death can lead to the gate; Thopas demonstrates that reaching the liminal world is possible through an act of will.

Finally, though, the Old Man of *The Pardoner's Tale*

does not permit succinct definition.<sup>71</sup> Nonetheless, he does not resemble "Milton's Satan," (Olsen 369) because he is not "confounded though immortal," and he is neither a fiend, nor the unrepentant Adam. In one respect, Owen is right: the Old Man is simply old, and impatiently awaiting death, although he exhibits an unusual sapience. The chief factor in the Old Man's character is his opportune and benevolent appearance to the rioters, but the similarities and differences between the Old Man, the "yeman" and the "old wyf" suggest a level of meaning which transcends the literal events of the individual tales. All three accounts offer a fascinating attempt to reconcile, or in some way discover, the relationship between two opposed aspects of the same thing. The Pardoner, at times, exhibits a clear discrepancy between intention and effect and asks probing questions about the nature of language (especially figurative language); *The Friar's Tale*, at least in part, hinges upon the relationship between word and meaning, or word and deed (specifically in the carl, and old Mabely); *The Wife of Bath's Tale* questions the correlation between appearance and reality.

The miller of *The Reeve's Tale* provides a valuable clue to part of the examination of language which I believe is

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<sup>71</sup> I refer here to the terms in which I have been discussing the Old Man in Chapters Two and Three. When, however, I shift the focus of the investigation in chapter four, I will offer what I feel is a precise definition of the Old Man's role.

one of Chaucer's concerns in *The Pardoner's Tale*. Symkyn scoffs at "the sleighte in hir [Aleyn and John's] philosophye," (4050) and when the loss and pursuit of their horse forces them to spend the night, Symkyn mocks their vocation:

Myn hous is streit, but ye han lerned art;  
 Ye konne by argumentes make a place  
 A myle brood of twenty foot of space.  
 Lat se now if this place may suffise,  
 Or make it rowm with speche, as is youre gise.  
 (4122-6)

Chaucer questions the ability of language to alter the perception of a physical space.<sup>72</sup> Just as there remains some ambiguity in the Wife of Bath's tale--has the "old wyf" really changed, or did the knight's capitulation alter his perspective?--so there remains the question of the Old Man's relationship to the gold, his degree of responsibility in the death of the rioters, and the effects, both potential and realized, of the Pardoner's mellifluous yet envenomed presentation.

The difficulty the audience experiences in qualifying the Pardoner and the Old Man, which prefigures this "pleye"

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<sup>72</sup> Edmund Reiss uses this incident to illustrate that it was a common fourteenth century belief that "language was implicitly deceptive" and that those who used it were "deceivers." As Reiss puts it, the miller "scornfully derides schoolmen who employ words to twist reality" ("Ambiguous" 115).

with language and perception, can in part be explained by the dictates of questing. You will recall that one characteristic of the quest motif is the transitory status of the questers. Taylor considers *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, *The Pardoner's Tale*, and *Sir Thopas* as intrinsically linked examples of the quest: "the plots of all three tales turn on a particularly significant structural element, that of the opposer or diverter of the quest" (130). This "screening force . . . doubles as an instructor to the quester on the nature of the quest" (Taylor 130) and the results in each instance are related:

The knight's quest to save his life in the Wife's tale is refigured by the rioters' quest to kill Death, and the questers in each tale misunderstand the necessary moral and spiritual implications of their search. ("Wife" 127).<sup>73</sup>

The knight's quest ends happily; the rioters' quest ends bitterly. In *Sir Thopas*, the object of the quest is never reached: the narrative is interrupted just prior to the pivotal encounter with the other-world giant Olifaunt. The interruption by Harry Bailly, Taylor contends, "casts the Host in the role of Olifaunt." According to Taylor, the three tales progress thus: Chaucer dismisses the "fantasy optimism" of the Wife and the "caustic pessimism" of the

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<sup>73</sup> Some of the Canterbury pilgrims are, I believe, guilty of a similar misunderstanding.



Pardoner, and demonstrates the persistence of the quest, even in the face of the Host's interruption, by beginning again in *The Tale of Melibee* (131).<sup>74</sup> In the context of the Canterbury tales, "even the subversive narrative of the Pardoner cannot prevent continued renewal of the human soul toward grace" (Taylor 131). This is, I think, a naive conclusion, and one which assumes that Chaucer's conception of the human soul approaching grace denies the value of reason and personality, and, therefore, of the Canterbury tales themselves--in Chaucer's view of language, which I shall explore in the next chapter, no tale can be exempt from classification as "subversive narrative."<sup>75</sup>

Pison concludes that the whole of the Canterbury pilgrimage represents a quest, the process "of being neither wholly of the inn nor yet arrived at the shrine" (157).<sup>76</sup> Pison's idea of the *rite de passage*, borrowed from Arnold van Gennep, proposes three separate stages which constitute the liminal (or questing) experience: separation, margin or liminality, and aggregation (158-9). Separation involves a distinct departure from the current habit, or role, and this

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<sup>74</sup> The summoner's quest for "rente" demonstrates essentially the same structure, and this places some stress on Taylor's theory of the relationship between the three tales.

<sup>75</sup> Evidence which I will cite includes Chaucer's "disclaimer" in the *General Prologue*, which begs us keep in mind that "Crist spak hymself ful brode in hooly writ" (739).

<sup>76</sup> Pison does not, however, make mention of *The Pardoner's Tale*.

is clearly what happens to the knight and the rioters. In the summoner's case, his solitary questing is perhaps indicative of, as Pison phrases it, a "detachment" from "society." The repercussions of being in the central position are the most pertinent to my reading of the Pardoner.<sup>77</sup> First of all, placement in the liminal situation denotes a separation from structure. Pison states:

The intermediate phase is a symbolic realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or future state, constituted instead by a blurring of social distinctions and the consequent emphasis upon the homogeneity and equality among humankind.  
(159)

In the marginal situation, therefore, we find both the aporia of transition, and the jubilant freedom of complete detachment. Here we have no "auctoritee" to which we can refer, but neither do we find ourselves bound to any kind of structure.<sup>78</sup> I believe that, within the context of the Pardoner's presentation, both levels of audience--Canterbury

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<sup>77</sup> By virtue of the pilgrimage, however, all the pilgrims (including Chaucer) would find themselves eternally suspended in this central position. Pison does not differentiate between the pilgrims in general and the individual tale tellers.

<sup>78</sup> Lumiansky, in assessing the relationship between the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner, touches on a related idea. Both characters, Lumiansky concludes, "are unashamedly beyond the rules by which the mass of people are governed; and each is a rebel within a different sphere of human behaviour" (6).

pilgrims and readers--are forced to recognize the aporia. What we find there is up to us. The host, and presumably the pilgrims, are unable to cope with that kind of hermeneutic liberty. There are parallel choices offered: the "old wyf" offers the knight a chance to look at things from a different perspective, the Old Man grants the rioters an opportunity to exchange their fate, and the Pardoner presents his fellow pilgrims with a similar dilemma: all three choices are significant and perhaps irrevocable.

The shrunken, aged figure of the Old Man so resembles Death that the rioters are unable to heed his words, and emerge from the liminal situation into a completely new structure: death and damnation. Because of the Pardoner's physical appearance, and perhaps in part due to his interruption of the Wife of Bath, the pilgrims are convinced of his scurrilous character. This, however, is unfounded. The Pardoner is perfectly capable of executing the duties of his office: indeed, when it comes to preaching, he *is* a "noble ecclesiaste," whose generous gift of understanding<sup>79</sup> is rejected by the blind Host, whose skill as literary critic is limited to superficialities.

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<sup>79</sup> This is one way in which to look at it. The Pardoner, as with the Old Man, also evaluates his audience by means of a "test," the nature of which will become apparent in Chapter Four.

#### Chapter Four: The Pardoner's Tale and Theories of Language

Perhaps the most frequently cited comment about Chaucer's Pardoner is that of Kittredge, who, without reservation, calls him the "most abandoned character among the Canterbury pilgrims" (211). As a point of contrast, the comment which is likely least cited comes from Edmund Reiss, who maintains that the Pardoner's condition is "sexless" and glimpses a Christ figure in the Pardoner, citing as evidence the "kind of crucifixion" the Pardoner suffers through the host's humiliating rebuff ("Biblical" 266). The Old Man has occasioned comments which are similarly antithetical: Alexandra Hennessey Olsen feels that he is "a devil wandering the earth in human form in search of prey," while Christopher Dean posits that he may in fact be a "good spirit," or an old man through whom God is acting. In previous chapters, I have argued the relative value of these critical judgements and offered alternative ways to look at both the Old Man and the Pardoner. I do not, however, presume to say that the critics with whom I have disagreed are wrong, exactly. I suspect that there is an explanation for this critical diversity in one of Chaucer's themes: the literal and figurative interpretation of signs. In this final chapter, then, I shall examine the Pardoner in the context of signs, using Augustinian thought as a foundation. Ultimately, I hope to show that Chaucer's "entente" in this tale is to illustrate the difficulty of communicating

efficiently through language and other signs. What this means for the Pardoner is significant: the Old Man in his exemplum becomes part of a thoughtful lesson on the nature of signs; the Pardoner himself becomes part of Chaucer's attempt to demonstrate the difficult nature of language.

For now, we must briefly consider a variety of responses to the entire Pardoner performance. Alfred Kellogg's study, as indicated previously, attempts to show that the Pardoner represents a man torn by sin, tormented by the conflict of the good and evil wills within him (the state of *infirmetas*, inherited from Adam).<sup>80</sup> Kellogg sees a progression in the various parts of the Pardoner's presentation which follows a careful pattern: it moves from the overtly evil prologue, to the Tale, told in a spirit of continued "defiance," yet "paradoxically" conveying "the power of Divine providence," and terminates in a sudden admission of the indestructible good "he has been striving so feverishly to conceal" (470).<sup>81</sup> Jane Chance would agree: the "Pardoner imagines that he seduces his audience while in

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<sup>80</sup> Kellogg summarizes Augustinian thought thus: the "created nature" is imperfect, mutable and therefore a lesser good than God, who is perfect and immutable. Out of this imperfection arises the possibility for sin. "The will, like the intellect a part and function of the mutable nature, is free to adhere to God, the supreme good, or to avert itself from God to seek its own satisfaction in lesser goods" (465-6).

<sup>81</sup> Kittredge's analysis has been very influential in this regard. He feels that the Pardoner "suffers a very paroxysm of agonized sincerity" before taking refuge "in a wild orgy of reckless jesting" (217).

fact tricking himself" (432); and Finnegan assures us that the Pardoner, at the conclusion of his tale, "finds his own soiled spiritual condition exposed" and is "reduced to impotent silence" (310).

The Pardoner is hardly likely to have been overcome by his own rhetorical skills,<sup>82</sup> yet I do not think that his "moment of sincerity" was in fact the "preparation for his proposed master-stroke of deception" (Curry 67).<sup>83</sup> At no time during his presentation does the Pardoner, in the manner of his usual "gaudes," actively attempt to "dupe" his fellow pilgrims, and I cannot accept that the Pardoner has a "tragic face" which remains hidden behind a "satyr's mask" (Kittredge 218). Further, it hardly seems likely that the Pardoner, after explaining his methods candidly and precisely, would suddenly find his "spiritual condition"--or anything else--unwillingly exposed. Rather, I firmly believe that these "dupes" are practiced in complete awareness, though they are far more subtle than usual: the "gaudes" we witness leave the pilgrims, who are presumably

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<sup>82</sup> Curry believes the Pardoner senses that his *coup de grace* is within the realm of possibility and denies Kittredge the moment of sincerity: "that the reprobate, near the end of his story, is so overcome by the power of his own eloquence that he is betrayed into a moment of sincerity, is unbelievable" (66).

<sup>83</sup> Lumiansky offers alternatively: "perhaps an immediate return to labours among his usual victims would have brought the Pardoner more money, but his vanity and his urge 'to get even with the world' would thus have been satisfied to a lesser degree than by success among the pilgrims" ("Conjecture" 5).

more penetrating than the "lewed" folk which form his regular victims, and the reading audience, questioning themselves. The Pardoner has offered them a complex exposition of the mutable relationship between appearance and reality, between sign and signified, and the audience, at least (and especially) Harry Bailly, has missed his meaning entirely. Because he has been rudely insulted after attempting to give the pilgrims genuine insight (in place of his customary "twynning" from avarice--perhaps a lesser good), the Pardoner is reduced to silent anger.

In order to appreciate the full impact which the Pardoner's presence and conduct have, it is necessary to consider his presentation from the *General Prologue* through to the conclusion of his tale. Although I have examined issues of the Pardoner's physical characteristics and his preaching, there remains a relevant comment in the *General Prologue*. I think it significant that the Pardoner is the final pilgrim to be introduced, and therefore is foremost in our thoughts, when Chaucer the pilgrim offers us his disclaimer about the tales that follow (I quote only 4 central lines):

Crist spak hymself ful brode in hooly writ,  
And wel ye woot no vileynye is it.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Larry D. Benson glosses this occurrence of "brode" as "plainly," and "vileynye" as "rudeness." Although not vital to my argument, I expect these words ought to be read as "broad" and "villainy" or "shame." The *MED* includes this use of "brode" as an example that it may mean "frankly" or

Eek Plato seith, whoso kan hym rede,

The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede. (739-742)

Though the passage is ostensibly intended to excuse faithful accounts of the various tales, it also hints that words are somewhat slippery things, and can easily be misunderstood. The implication, to the audience outside the artistic frame, is that Chaucer the poet is going to speak "hymself ful brode," just as Christ does in Scripture, and follow Plato's advice that the word be cousin to the deed.

In order to properly interpret language (and Scripture), one must understand the nature and function of signs.<sup>85</sup> In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine offers two definitions of sign: 1) "res eas (videlicet) quae ad significandum aliquid adhibentur" (I.2 [PL 34.20]) and 2) "signum est (enim) res, praeter speciem quam ingerit sensibus, aliud aliquid ex se faciens in cogitationem venire" (II.1 [PL 34.35]). For Augustine, there are two types of signs: *signa naturalia* and *signa data*. *Signa naturalia* are things which "sine voluntate atque ullo appetitu significandi, praeter se aliquid aliud ex se

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"freely" (2.1191); P.B. Taylor suggests that the line be read: "Christ himself spoke broadly (in parables) in Holy Writ, and you know well there is not villainy in that," and offers this interpretation of the line: "Christ spoke in parables, using fiction to forge truths in terms compatible with his audience's experience" ("Cosyn" 320).

<sup>85</sup> In a sense, what I am suggesting (and I realize that this is a rather grand, but not, I think, unwarranted, statement to make) is that we are to interpret Chaucer as we would interpret Scripture.



cognosci faciunt" (II.1 [PL 34.35]). Under this category Augustine would place smoke, which indicates fire, but has no will to do so: through experience we have learned to associate this sign with its signified. *Signa data*, on the other hand, are signs which living creatures give to one another "ad demonstrandos, quantum possunt, motus animi sui, vel sensa, aut intellecta quae libet." That is, "nec ulla causa est nobis significandi, id est signi dandi, nisi ad depromendum et trajiciendum in alterius animum id quod animo gerit is qui signum dat" (II.2 [PL 34.37]). In signs, therefore, there are three elements: 1) the object for which the sign stands; 2) the sign itself; and 3) the subject to whom the sign stands for the object signified. Of the *signa data*, words, says Augustine, have by far gained pre-eminence among men; words are used exclusively to signify and, in theory, "do not distract attention from what they are employed to mean by claiming attention to what they are in their own right" (Markus 76).

As Augustine explains in *De Magistro*, the purpose of speaking is either to teach or to remind ourselves or others of what is already in our mind.<sup>86</sup> Without going into the possible interiority of the "word," Augustine explains how we may be taught: human teachers can teach us the meanings of words and signs, and experience can provide a sense of

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<sup>86</sup> Speech is a recalling to mind because the words bring the realities themselves, of which the words are signs, to mind.

*signa naturalia*--but unfortunately, only the Interior Teacher--Christ--can teach by simultaneously "displaying to the mind the reality to be known and providing the language for its understanding" (Markus 71).

Augustine debates the nature of signs as a kind of introduction to the proper study of Scripture. Signs, which were unnecessary prior to the Fall, existed for a time in a kind of perfect community before the "sin of human dissension" brought a horrible penalty upon the world: as Augustine puts it, impious men had not only their minds, but also their tongues confounded.<sup>87</sup> Thus, Augustine stresses, signs have become dependent upon a community, and hold meaning only according to common agreement. Similarly, Sacred Scripture, although it originated in one language, "*qua opportune potuit per orbem terrarum disseminari, per varias interpretum linguas longe lateque diffusa innotesceret gentibus ad salutem.*" Now, therefore, "*multis et multiplicibus obscuritatibus, et ambiguitatibus decipiuntur qui temere legunt, aliud pro alio sentientes.*" Augustine maintains that God had good reason to do this: "*Quod totum provisum divinitus esse non dubito, ad edomandam labore superbiam, et intellectum a fastidio revocandum, cui facile investigata plerumque vilescunt*" (DDC II.4-6 [PL 34.38]). Not only that, but greater pleasure can be had

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<sup>87</sup> "*Ista igitur signa non petuerunt communia esse omnibus gentibus, peccato quodam dissensionis humanae, cum ad se quisque principatum rapit*" (DDC II.4 [PL 34.38]).

from metaphorical and figurative passages, even if the "matter and knowledge" are the same as in literal ones.<sup>88</sup>

Augustine continues, explaining how written things are misunderstood: "Duabus autem causis non intelliguntur quae scripta sunt, si aut ignosis, aut ambiguis signis obteguntur. Sunt autem signa vel propria, vel translata" (DDC II.10 [PL 34.42]).<sup>89</sup> The danger lies in mistaking figurative signs for literal ones: "Cum enim figurate dictum sic accipitur, tanquam proprie dictum sit, carnaliter sapiter. Neque ulla mors animae congruentius appellatur, quam cum id etiam quod in ea bestiis antecellit, hoc est, intelligentia carni subjicitur sequendo litteram."<sup>90</sup> Further, "ea demum est miserabilis animae servitus, signa pro rebus accipere; et supra creaturam corpoream, oculum mentis ad hauriendum aeternum lumen levare non posse" (DDC III.5 [PL 34.69]).

At its most basic level, Alfred Kellogg attributes the

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<sup>88</sup> "Nemo ambigit, et per similitudines libentius quaeque cognosci, et cum aliqua difficultate quaesita multo gratius inveniri" (II.6 [PL 34.39]). Furthermore, the obscurity of the divine word is beneficial in that, regardless of whether investigation uncovers the "truth," other truths are revealed in the process. See *De Civitate Dei* XI.19.

<sup>89</sup> Augustine gives the following example: 1) Literal: *bos* = *bos*; 2) Figurative: *bos* = a teacher of the gospel ("Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treads out the grain" [Deut 25.4]).

<sup>90</sup> A life of *intelligentia* is the life of an angel, in which "all truth can simply be 'seen' . . . Man's mental life is spent in laboriously connecting those frequent, but momentary, flashes of *intelligentia* which constitute *intellectus*" (Lewis 157).

Pardoner's physical and spiritual character to a similar kind of aversion--the Pardoner's "mind's eye" is not lifted "supra creaturam corpoream" and is satisfied with signs--as evidenced by the prolonged passage in which the Pardoner appears to assert his will over all else (439-53). However, though this may be equivocating, I feel it is vital to recognize that the passage allows for its own fictitiousness: the passage is perhaps best understood as a boasting performance, rather than a confession of fact. Clearly, this is not a past action, and the Pardoner's will is not his primary concern (though "coveityse" may be a temporal manifestation of the averted will). Instead, there is an unmistakable emphasis on "entente":

For myn entente is nat but for to wynne,  
 And nothyng for correccioun of synne.  
 I rekke nevere, whan that they been beryed,  
 Though that hir soules goon a blakeberyed!  
 For certes, many a predicacioun  
 Comth ofte tyme of yvel entencioun . . . (403-8)  
 But shortly myn entente I wol devyse:  
 I preche of no thyng but for coveityse.  
 Therefore 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 in that synne

Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne  
 From avarice and soore to repente.  
 But that is not my principal entente;  
 I preche nothyng but for coveitise. (423-33)

Much has been made of the Pardoner's unequivocal statement "myn entente is nat but for to wyne." I would argue that this passage has a playful tone: it does seem that the Pardoner is preying upon the worst suspicions of his pilgrim audience. Minnis says succinctly: the Pardoner's intentions seem to be in the wrong order, "but there is more to it than that: the Pardoner seems to be fascinated by the possibility that he may do good in spite of himself" (111).<sup>91</sup> The Pardoner explains that "many a predicacioun" can come from evil intentions: the implication is that the motivation of the speaker is impossible for the audience to intuit, and is therefore irrelevant.

Paul Bauschatz analyzes the Pardoner's exemplum in terms of Augustine's definitions of lying, showing, thereby, how "entente" takes on added meaning. In *De Mendacio*, Augustine asserts that a liar "aliud habet in animo, et aliud verbis vel quibuslibet significationibus enuntiat." The liar's intention to deceive becomes the criterion by

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<sup>91</sup> With the passage on faithful representation in the *General Prologue* and in the introduction to *The Miller's Tale*, Chaucer the pilgrim and Chaucer the poet demonstrate that they share an interest in "entente." Chaucer the pilgrim stresses that he does not, despite the appearance of his words, "seye of yvel entente," but rather rehearses his material as he hears it in order to avoid "falsing" his "mateere" (3172-5).

which his utterance is judged: "Ex anima enim sui sententia, non ex rerum ipsarum veritate vel falsitate mentiens aut non mentiens judicandus est" (PL 40.489). Consequently, Augustine admits that it is possible both to sin by speaking the truth and to effect good by speaking falsely, although he concludes, after lengthy deliberation, that lying is always a sin. By this definition, as Bauschatz notes, the Pardoner is not the "typical" Augustinian liar because he lacks the "heartfelt duplicity" (27). Nonetheless, it is the Pardoner's will to deceive his audience, and the relative "truth" of his utterance is irrelevant.<sup>92</sup>

Bauschatz points out the importance of the will's role in lying--a role which can neatly link Kellogg's spiritual reading with considerations of language: "God's discourse is an unqualifiedly direct presentation of His true and benevolent will" and "man's discourse must imitate God's" (Bauschatz 20). "God's discourse," to the earth-bound, is represented as Scripture which is the expression of His will (Bauschatz 20) and still the Pardoner, with his averted will, appears, despite the fact that Augustine would call

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<sup>92</sup> As we have seen, "truth" can be preached by a "ful vicious" man--"Christus veritas est, et tamen etiam non veritate annuntiari veritas potest; id est, ut pravo et fallaci corde, quae recta et vera sunt, praedicentur" (DDC 4.27 [PL 34.118])--and an audience which condemns the preacher's words on account of the preacher's moral status is also suspect. As Augustine phrases it, they may seek a defense of their own corrupt lives in the dubious morality of their preacher, who does not adhere to his own teaching (DDC 4.27). That is, because they despise the preacher, they also despise the word of God, and think themselves justified.

him a "liar," to represent God's "will" faithfully.<sup>93</sup> The paradox, within the framework of the Pardoner's exemplum, is that his will and God's seem to be in accord. In *De Magistro*, Augustine makes it clear that all speech is an expression of the will of the speaker: "qui enim loquitur, suae voluntatis signum foras dat per articulatam sonum" (PL 32.1195). The difficulty the pilgrims have in accepting the Pardoner's lesson may well spring from this unexpected realization that the Pardoner does, in fact, present them with an articulation of the will of God.

In *De Mendacio*, Augustine expends some effort discussing the relevance of examples of lying--or the misinterpretation of signs--in the Old Testament: "ubi quidquid gestum est, figurate accipi potest, quamvis revera contigerit: quidquid autem figurate fit aut dicitur, non est mendacium" (PL 40.492). Thus Augustine, without questioning the "truth" of biblical example, shows again that literal events are (occasionally) to be understood on a figurative level. This of course implies a certain responsibility on the part of the audience, and Augustine acknowledges it in a curious way: "omne autem figurate aut factum aut dictum hoc enuntiat quod significat eis quibus intelligendum prolatum est" (PL 40.492). Similarly, Boethian discussion of modes of knowing stresses that "omne enim quod cognoscitur non

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<sup>93</sup> I refer here to his tale, which is, at least superficially, "true" to God's teaching.

secundum sui uim sed secundum cognoscentium potius  
comprehenditur facultatem" (DCP 5.Pr.4).<sup>94</sup>

While the Pardoner's will, then, remains temporarily one with God's, the Pardoner's audience must take his lesson to heart, lest they risk condemning the will of God.

However, and this bears upon the inability to understand of both the rioters and the pilgrim audience, it may be that their lack of insight has its root in their own spiritual condition. In *De Magistro*, Augustine details the process by which we arrive at understanding: when we hear a speaker's words, we consult the guardian of Truth--Christ--who resides in the mind of every man. Here, Christ represents the excellence of God and His everlasting wisdom.

Unfortunately, the degree of understanding the hearer achieves is contingent upon the degree of perfection in the hearer's will: "sed tantum cuique panditur, quantum capere propter propriam, sive malam sive bonam voluntatem potest" (PL 32.1216). Lacking the strong presence of the Guardian of Truth, the rioters and the pilgrim audience are unable to penetrate the ambiguity of signs.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Edmund Reiss adds: "when Boethius defend[s] the difficult language of his tractates on Christian doctrine, he stress[es] that these *opuscula sacra* [are] to be 'understood only by those who deserve to understand'" ("Ambiguous" 114).

<sup>95</sup> The confounding of language was a result of our fall into pride, as I have said. In Scripture, clearly, there is both a literal and a figurative (or allegorical) sense. Minnis, commenting upon Aquinas' view of Scripture, notes that the literal sense in Scripture is assumed to have been written by man, while the allegorical was written by God. As Minnis



"Entente" is, therefore, a critical factor in the use of figurative language. Several tales leading up to the Pardoner's deal explicitly with appearances and the relationship between word and deed, or between word and intent.<sup>96</sup> The carter of *The Friar's Tale* offers the most overt example of this disjunction: the fiend is forced to educate the summoner about the distinction, for the "cartere," when offering his horse and cart to the devil, "spak oo thing, but he thoghte another" (1568). As the devil explains, it was not the carter's "entente" (1556) to forswear his team, regardless of how it appeared. As with Augustine, this confusion has to do with the lamentable state of Chaucer's world, brought on by sin, about which Chaucer complains in *Lak of Stedfastnesse*:<sup>97</sup>

Sometyme the world was so stedfast and stable  
That mannes word was obligacioun,  
And now it is so fals and deceivable  
That word and deed, as in conclusion,

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comments: "from the point of view of God, everything is literally clear. Allegory is part of the human condition" ("Authorial" 4-5). In a sense, then, our proximity to God is reflected in our ability to comprehend figures or allegory.

<sup>96</sup> Alternatively, Peggy Knapp poses the problem of the relationship between intent and the "efficacy of fiction making in Christian teaching" (77).

<sup>97</sup> In this section, though I do not quote him directly, I have benefitted significantly from Paul Beekman Taylor's article, "Chaucer's 'Cosyn to the Dede,'" in which he considers both this incident from *The Friar's Tale* and *Lak of Stedfastnesse*.

Ben nothyng lyk, for turned up-so-doun  
 Is al this world for mede and wilfulnesse,  
 That al is lost for lak of stedfastnesse. (1-7)

The inversion of the natural order of things and the subsequent confusion of word and deed recall Augustine's treatment of the aversion of the will from God. Since man is, by nature, good, to embrace evil is to act against nature, and invert (or pervert) the values of the Creator. In theological terms, the fall into concupiscence is no doubt the cause of the discrepancy between word and deed. As Kellogg states, the fall resulted in ignorance: with the illuminating light of God left behind, the mind "darkened and weakened in its ability to know truth" (466).<sup>98</sup> In general, Liam Purdon feels that the poem "identifies the supreme evil of the age as loss of belief in the life of principle," but that Chaucer also "demonstrates how the mutability and debasement of language are responsible for and encourage that evil" (145).

Besides the carter incident, Taylor lists many other examples of the discrepancy between word and deed in the Chaucerian corpus, and posits that they confirm Chaucer's purposeful attempt to confront "contemporary philosophical,

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<sup>98</sup> Lady Philosophy would agree: part of the complexity of this avaricious age is the confusion of language, and is manifest in man's confusion of "good" and "bad" fortune. "Good" fortune is, in fact, deceptive and fetters those who enjoy her; "bad" fortune enlightens and liberates and often nudges the errant back to the true path (DCP 2.Pr.6-8).

or theological, speculations about relationships between word, its informing thought, and its incited act" ("Cosyn" 317). The ramifications here are many, but our concern lies in language and communication--the possibility of understanding and the possibility of being understood. Because we are not God, and we have fallen from the undifferentiated condition which Adam enjoyed, we must communicate imperfectly, through signs, and we must do so without a common set of universals as a reference point. As R.A. Markus summarizes Augustine's thinking in *De Magistro*, "the meaning of a sign, what it 'signifies,' can only be expounded and established by means of further signs" (68).<sup>99</sup> Man must, as it were, do his best to narrow the semantic field of the original sign sufficiently that his meaning or intention cannot be seriously misinterpreted.<sup>100</sup> Though Chaucer the pilgrim hints that it is still possible for the

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<sup>99</sup> Augustine challenges Adeodatus to explicate a sentence without resorting to the use of alternative signs. Adeodatus fails (*DM* III).

<sup>100</sup> Our methods of understanding are severely limited. Aquinas explains that we are in possession of two separate methods of knowing: *intellectus* and *ratio*, where the former is "the simple grasp of an intelligible truth" and the latter involves a reasoned progression "towards an intelligible truth by going from one understood point to another." Thus, as C.S. Lewis explains it, *intellectus* allows us to see "self-evident" truths, and *ratio* helps us "to prove a truth which is not self-evident" (Watts 157). The existence of signs, therefore, is clearly a necessary evil in the use of *ratio*.

word to be cousin to the deed,<sup>101</sup> Chaucer the poet would clearly have regarded it as a very precarious business indeed.

The Pardoner, about whom I am writing here, does not resurface until he interrupts the Wife of Bath<sup>102</sup> to say that he had been "aboute to wedde a wyf" before her words made him doubt the wisdom of it. Here, the Pardoner confounds his fellow pilgrims (and startles the reading audience) by making a totally unexpected comment, one his appearance would not have led anyone to anticipate. The pilgrims are still convinced, however, that the Pardoner's physical aspect and his personality are directly related, and therefore, when the Host requests "som myrthe or japes," the others object vehemently: "Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye!/ Telle us some moral thyng, that we may leere/ Som wit, and thanne wol we gladly heere" (324-6). I suspect

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<sup>101</sup> Chaucer's phrase has its source in Plato's *Timaeus*. *Timaeus* explains: "that which is apprehended by intelligence and reason is always in the same state; but that which is conceived by opinion with the help of sensation and without reason, is always in a process of becoming and perishing and never really is" (11-2). As far as words are concerned: "In speaking of the copy and the original we may assume that words are akin to the matter which they describe; when they relate to the lasting and permanent and intelligible, they ought to be lasting and unalterable, and, as far as their nature allows, irrefutable and immovable--nothing less. But when they express only the copy or likeness and not the eternal things themselves, they need only be likely and analogous to the real words" (12-3).

<sup>102</sup> I am accepting Benson's ordering of the tales. Though it would help, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* need not precede the Pardoner's for my point to be relevant.

that the Pardoner, quite reasonably, finds their reaction somewhat insulting, and therefore plays along, pretending, reprobate that he is, to need a little time to come up with an "honest thyng." He will do it, however, and he certainly intends to teach them "som wit," if they are but able to absorb it.

The Prologue begins with the Pardoner's statement of theme--*radix malorum est cupiditas*--and method. He shows his "bulles" and his "lige lordes seel," in order to perform "Cristes hooly werk" (340) undisturbed; "And after that thanne tell I forth my tales" (341). The implicit but rather obvious equation is between Christ's holy work and the telling of tales. As he says later, because "lewed peple loven tales olde," he offers his audience many examples "of olde stories longe tyme agoon" which they can "wel reporte and holde": the Pardoner uses metaphor and figurative language in order to attract and hold better the attention of his audience. In this, the Pardoner emulates Scripture, which, because it represents the will of God, is the best example to which earthly discourse can aspire.<sup>103</sup>

The Pardoner recognizes his ability to effect occasional repentance, though he claims that it is inadvertent. He struts his rhetorical stuff in order to loosen the purse strings of his audience, but sometimes manages to "twynne" folk from avarice and bring them to a

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<sup>103</sup> See Bauschatz 20.

desire to repent. This principle is, I think, central to the prologue: an action, or a speech, is made which is clearly unambiguous, and yet the effect is either the opposite, or there is a deeper meaning which can be extracted. Thus the pilgrims and the reading audience, privy to the Pardoner's "principal entente," find little merit in his preaching--though he speaks "truth"--while the "lewed peple," however unsavoury their motives, are moved to make an offering. There are two other examples which bear mention: 1) the Pardoner's "gaude" literally demands that those steeped in sin (i.e. those who have not yet obtained sacramental absolution, and therefore should not be eligible to remit any temporal punishment)<sup>104</sup> leave the church before making any offering. The effect, of course, is just the opposite. Not wanting their neighbours to suspect their guilt, the sinners and the virtuous alike are compelled to remain; and 2) the Pardoner exhibits an awareness of different methods of communication. When someone threatens one of the Pardoner's brethren, he defames him in public, not directly, but by the use of "signes," and "othere circumstances": "[for] though I telle noght his propre name,/ Men shal wel knowe that it is the same" (417-8). In this way, the Pardoner explains, he is able to spit venom, while appearing holy and true. In the prologue, then, the

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<sup>104</sup> For the official church position on indulgences, see Chapter One.

Pardoner elucidates his methods and I believe he does so for the benefit of his current audience. He knows that his preaching can be efficacious, yet he recognizes, through the pilgrims' reaction to his appearance, that they are unlikely to heed the "truth" of his utterance. The danger, we can infer, is that they will condemn the word of God on account of the speaker--a perilous, and as Augustine points out, somewhat suspect thing to do. Furthermore, the Pardoner slyly mentions that he is able, in the most subtle fashion, to get back at those who threaten him.

The opening of the tale establishes a highly symbolic atmosphere: the rioters dance, play dice and drink greedily, but the Pardoner stresses that, in actuality, they are sacrificing to the devil. Similarly, their curses are in fact intended to shred Christ's body and the "tombesteres," "frutesteres," "syngeres" and "wafereres" are officers of the devil. There are numerous examples here--the Pardoner interprets and revises many of his illustrations<sup>105</sup>--but one further will suffice: "But certes," the Pardoner explains, "he that haunteth swiche delices/ Is deed, whil that he lyveth in tho vices" (547-8). The Pardoner demonstrates a knowledge of traditional Scriptural exegesis and the

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<sup>105</sup> For example, the Pardoner says: "(Of sweryng seith the hooly Jeremye,/ ) 'Thou shalt swere sooth thyne othes, and nat lye,/ And swere in doom and eek in rightwysnesse'" (635-7). The source, Jeremiah 4:2, reads: "And thou shalt swear, The Lord liveth, in truth, in judgement, and in righteousness."

metaphorical nature of "death" and "life": I suspect it would be difficult to credit him overly much.

The rioters accept the tavern boy's words literally, though the pilgrim audience would certainly have recognized that "the privee theef men clepeth Deeth" (675) only takes those who "sleep" and are "drunk" in the night, and that the military violence of "Deeth" is simply an extension of the metaphor of spiritual armour. The whole passage, I think, is an ingenious restatement of 1 Thessalonians 5:2-8.<sup>106</sup> The diligent and figuratively aware member of the audience would hear something quite different from what the rioters hear: "This man, though physically awake, died while drunk and in a spiritual slumber, ignoring the biblical warning to watch and be sober. For those who remain in such a condition, there is no joy in death, for they are condemned to damnation, and thus are menaced by 'Deeth.' Because they are not prepared for him, Death comes like a thief--he cannot be eluded. For the iniquitous, the end is swift and absolute: their heart is 'smoot atwo' before Death moves on

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<sup>106</sup> "For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for a helmet, the hope of salvation" (1 Thessalonians 5: 2-8).



o seek their brethren." The boy, well taught by his dame," whose mention is suggestively juxtaposed with the .averner's cry "By Seinte Marie!," recognizes that these rioters are kin to the dead man, and therefore advises that one should always be confessed and at peace with God.

The rioters' lack of insight continues when they meet the Old Man: there are two glaring examples. First of all, after the Old Man explains himself, he advises the rioters that they ought not do an old man villainy, as it states in "Hooly Writ": "'Agayns an oold man, hoor upon his heed,/ Ye sholde arise'" (743-4). The source is Leviticus 19:32, which reads: "Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head, and honour the face of the old man, and fear thy God!" The Old Man omits the concluding, and most important, part of the message: those familiar with the Bible would quickly have recognized that these are the words of the Lord. Similarly, when the Old Man capitulates, in a sense, and directs the rioters toward "Deeth," he says that they can find him up the "croked wey," under an "ook." This clue, certainly, ought to have triggered something in the rioters. Again, the pilgrim audience would be sure to recognize the "croked wey" as a sign with two-fold significance. While the way up to the grove may in fact be winding, scriptural use of the "crooked way" shows that it has a common metaphorical

meaning as well.<sup>107</sup>

The Old Man, as he appears to the rioters, is a *signum naturale*: his age, his location and the circumstances of his appearance lead the rioters, acting upon their limited understanding of signs, to conclude that he is somehow in league with Death. He is, however, at least as far as his function within the tale, a *signum datum*, an instrument, as it were, of the will of God. Part of his significance may be metaphoric, but, as Augustine points out, the Old Man could scarcely have said simply: "Don't go this way!" because the rioters would have rejected him outright. In any case, the rioters ought to have been able to recognize the commonly held significations of their community.

The Pardoner chooses this particular exemplum for its pointed relevance in this situation. The pilgrims, convinced by the Pardoner's outlandish physical appearance--which I suspect would parallel that of the rioters--that he cannot offer them anything worthwhile, are unwilling to have him tell a tale of his choosing. Instead, they demand a moral thing, by which they may learn some wit. The Pardoner decides that he will comply: he will tell a tale which ought to demonstrate to a reflective hearer the danger of

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<sup>107</sup> There are many examples, of which I will cite two: 1) "And for such as turn aside unto their crooked ways, the Lord shall lead them forth with the workers of iniquity" (Psalms 125:5); and 2) "The way of peace they know not; and there is no judgement in their goings: they have made them crooked paths: whosoever goeth therein shall not know peace" (Isaiah 59:8).

misinterpreting signs and, specifically, the danger of judging simply by appearances.

Because he tells such an instructive tale, I do not believe that the Pardoner directs people up the crooked way. Quite simply, only those who are already spiritually ailing, and intent on material gain, would ever accept the offer of his relics.<sup>108</sup> The truly penitent sinner would have occasion to hear an outstanding sermon, and, through the giving of alms, would remit all or a portion of their temporal punishments.<sup>109</sup> That is not to say, however, that the Pardoner is not a "dangerous" character. In the same way that the Old Man haunts the "stile," the Pardoner represents a last outpost for sinners. For those who are willing to

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<sup>108</sup> Relics, in general, have little intrinsic worth. Because they are signs, their fraudulence is irrelevant: it is what they signify that is important. The Pardoner's use of the relics to encourage donations is another outward indication of his moral turpitude which is not borne out by his preaching. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* explains that the association of "filthy lucre" with relics was abolished early on (12.734B): as with indulgences, the Pardoner's audiences ought to realize that relics were not to be "sold." In addition, neither is one "constrained to pay homage to [a] relic," nor is "dishonour" done to God if a spurious relic "is revered in good faith" (CE 12.738A).

<sup>109</sup> I make this statement assuming that the Pardoner's indulgences are not apocryphal. However, if that is not the case, because ultimate control of the treasury rests with God, I suspect the repentant sinner, suitably disposed to receive pardon, would nonetheless find that his temporal punishment had been remitted. Though I could find no direct statement on this matter in Canon Law or the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Augustine makes it clear that the real power belongs exclusively to God: "Non enim nisi peccatis homines separantur a Deo, quorum in hac vita, non fit nostra virtute, sed divina miseratione purgatio; per indulgentiam illius, non per nostram potentiam" (DCD 10.22 [PL 41.300]).

accept his relics while ignoring his advice, and for those who condemn him while they are themselves steeped in sin, failing the "test" may spell damnation. As the Pardoner explains, the "feend" finds the youngest rioter living in such a way that he has "leve" to bring him to sorrow. In this way, as the Devil-Bailiff tells the summoner, diverse figures can in diverse ways be "Goddess instrumentz" (1483).

In *The Pardoner's Tale*, Chaucer toys with the efficacy of signs, both words and things [res]. Metaphoric or figurative signs are the essence of effective and lasting communication--they are the source of delight which impels us to learn--but they can also prove treacherous to the unwary. The Pardoner is also aware of this: on the one hand, he cannot speak openly to the pilgrim audience because they have already condemned him. On the other hand, he can simultaneously offer them "som wit" disguised by fable and hope they are able to comprehend it while subtly mocking their superficiality. As the rioters demonstrate, a close conformity to the literal sense is appropriately named the death of the soul--it is the responsibility of each person, as the subject in the signifying triad, to be diligent and perspicacious in his interpretation of signs.

In conclusion, I would like to add that part of the key to understanding *The Pardoner's Tale* (and Chaucer's work in general) lies in his conception of the efficacy of language. The two central terms in the use of language are "wyl" and

"entente," and they apply both to the person who employs the signs and to the person who attempts to decipher them correctly. Bauschatz summarizes what the Pardoner's speech does:

[It] illustrate[s] for us that [the Pardoner] may speak in conformity with his will or in a manner totally dissociated from his will. He allows us everywhere all the possibilities for interpreting the intentions predicated in each act of speech.

(30)

This "freedom," again, places the audience in a position of grave responsibility but simultaneously offers an independence from "auctoritee" in which we ought to discover a novel delight. After all, words (and signs of all kinds) simply are not very effective tools: in *De Magistro*, Augustine states vehemently that there is really nothing which is learned by means of signs. The most that words can do, he says, is remind us to seek the thing which is to be learned for ourselves.<sup>110</sup> The danger in that, of course, lies in our tendency to read in a profane way, and not to follow the admonition of John: "Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgement" (John 7:24). Chaucer, too, in his *Retractions*, counsels his readers to thank Jesus for what appeals to them and not to ascribe

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<sup>110</sup> "Hactenus verba valuerunt, quibus ut plurimum tribuam, admonent tantum ut quaeramus res, non exhibent ut noverimus" (PL 32.1215).

anything they feel is indecorous to the poet's "wyl": "'Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,' and that is myn entente" (1083). The poet's "entente" is to write "for oure doctrine," regardless of how some works may have appeared. Though the road to understanding in the post-lapsarian world may be an arduous one, it is the difficulty of the journey which makes the arrival beautiful. As Augustine sees it, "the opposition of contraries" lends beauty to language and to the course of this world (*DCD* XI.18).

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