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CHAUCER'S PARDONER AGAIN

By Felicity Currie

In this discussion of the Pardoner's performance, I should like to reopen the question of the Pardoner's attitude to his audience, the Canterbury pilgrims: The somewhat hysterical reactions to the Pardoner both before and after his Tale give us ample evidence as to what his original audience thought about him. But his own attitude and intentions are more elusive. His final discomfiture seems to suggest that for once he has misjudged his audience and misapplied his much vaunted, if perverse, charismatic powers. Yet it is hard to believe that so shrewd a demagogue would be caught so easily by his own bait. If his intentions were to win either admiration or money, why would he alienate even further an already hostile audience by the blatant revelations of his Prologue? It is possible, of course, that he had quite different intentions, and that he himself has been misjudged by pilgrims and critics alike. If this is the case, both Prologue and Tale need some reappraisal.

What remains intriguing about the Pardoner is that he has elicited identical reactions from his fellow-pilgrims and from decades of critics. To all he is wicked and vile. It would be impossible to whitewash him. When the Host, a devil for punishment, invites the Pardoner to alleviate the Physician's emotionalism with "som myrthe or japes," the "gentils" cry out in protest and demand "som moral thyng." Yet they had heard out the Miller and the Reeve without flinching — and presumably with enjoyment. Nor were there any objections to the repulsive Summoner, companion in song to the Pardoner, who has similarly dubious and monetary connexions with the Church. Only the Pardoner brings out their squeamishness. At the end of his Tale they are ready to laugh at him but not with him. He is emphatically not one of them.

The trouble with the Pardoner's intrusive personality is that it impedes any non-emotive evaluation of what he says. His own method of presentation also makes it difficult to avoid an emotional reaction — the sort of reaction, in fact, that he does get from the Host at the end. After such a Prologue can he be taken seriously? But, it must be said, to take the Pardoner seriously does not have to imply an admission that he means what he is saying, simply that he knows what he is doing. And if we, like the pilgrims, continue to be overwhelmed by the Pardoner's personality, we are, like the rioters of the Tale, sacrificing "substance" for "accident."

By the placing of the Pardoner in the General Prologue, his specifically mentioned association with the abhorrent Summoner, and his grouping with the "churls"; by the outcry of the "gentils" before he is allowed to speak, and by the Host's mockingly familiar "thou beel amy," Chaucer has carefully suggested the general

attitude of the pilgrims to the Pardoner. They ask for "som moral thyng," but whether they are prepared to accept it from a person so blatantly immoral, so "ful vicious" a man, only becomes apparent at the end of the Tale.

The Pardoner does not simply accept the challenge. At the end of his Prologue he is quite specific about how he is going to do it:

By God, I hope I shal yow telle a thyng
That shal by reson been at youre likyng.
For though myself be a ful vicious man,
A moral tale yet I yow telle kan,
Which I am wont to preche for to wynne.
Now hoold youre pees! my tale I wol bigynne. (457-62)¹

These words are not without innuendo. The Pardoner is going to do exactly as he has been told, but with a vengeance. The Tale should be to his audience's liking, he says, "by reson" – not only for its story value, or even for the way in which it is told, but *for its argument*.² This is just the sort of tale he tells every day when he is doing his job, preaching for money. But he is not now faced with an everyday situation, as he, throughout his Prologue, has made audaciously clear. He is not out for money on the present occasion, as has often enough been pointed out. Is he then merely out to entertain and impress? This, the most commonly granted "purpose" of the Pardoner,³ is surely as dubious as the belief that at the end of his Tale he is seriously trying to wheedle money from an audience before whom he has fully revealed himself. He particularly stresses the fact that he can tell a moral tale, even though he is "a ful vicious man." Why the need for this assurance and apology? A vicious man can impress and entertain without having to explain or apologize for anything. But to those conscious of a morality that practises what it preaches, a moral tale is hard to stomach from a "vicious man." That the Pardoner is alert to this is emphasized by the conclusion to his Prologue. After what he has already revealed, his vow to both please and instruct is a masterly, ironic touch of supererogation. He makes a point of assuring his audience that his tale will be particularly to their liking, and thus, in view of their request, particularly moral. The innuendo, quite appropriate to his whole method and attitude, is that the moral can apply also, and in particular to them. This, as the end of the Tale makes clear, they are not prepared to accept.

The application of the "moral tale" to the audience itself leads naturally to the vexed question of the Pardoner's "two audiences." Professor Elliott's position on this point is that the Pardoner designedly maintains a distinction between the "lewed people" who are his usual generous victims, and the "lordynges," his present, more sceptical audience:

That the Pardoner is simultaneously addressing . . . two audiences . . . is clear both from his own words and from the distinct modes of address he employs. The "actual" audience of fellow-pilgrims are the "lordynges" and "sires," both of them the normal words used for this purpose in *The Canterbury Tales*. . .

The Pardoner's imaginary audience were the "the lewed peple" whom he addresses in his mock or sample sermon in such terms as "goode men" (352, 904), "ye wyves" (910), "goode men and wommen" (377). This patronizing tone is nowhere adopted towards the pilgrims and even when the final joke is played out against Harry Bailey, the Pardoner addresses him politely as "sire Hoost" (943). One cannot help noting the difference in tone between this formula and the Host's own earlier "thou beel amy, thou Pardoner" (318). The Pardoner's distinction between his real and his imaginary audience presumably reflects an awareness that his fellow-pilgrims include men and women of intelligence and social standing whom it would be an insult to address in the manner reserved for his accustomed village audience of "lewed" people, from whose gullibility and naïve faith it was that he derived such a handsome annual income.⁴

This kind of evaluation, by taking what the Pardoner says at face value, must attribute to the Pardoner more honesty in his dealings with people than Chaucer gives us any warrant for. All we know is that the Pardoner is giving the pilgrims a demonstration of the kind of sermon he usually preaches. We have no guarantee that he feels any real deference or respect for his present audience, and Professor Elliott, in suggesting a "difference in tone" between the Pardoner's "sire Hoost" and the Host's "thou beel amy," could be taking too much for granted here. As this particular term of address "sire Hoost" follows directly the line

For he is moost envoluped in synne (942)

it may indeed be jocular, if not pointedly ironic, but it certainly cannot be called polite in any straightforward sense. If we suppose that the Pardoner maintains throughout a polite deference to the pilgrims, we have to accept the fact that he ultimately makes a fool of himself, or that a person who is so expert a deceiver and manipulator of people, a confirmed and unrepentant cynic, does in fact have the paroxysm of sincerity which Kittredge found in him, but which Professor Elliott will not allow. One wonders why the Pardoner should bother to be either sincere or polite to the pilgrims. He certainly has nothing to gain from it. He *may*, in the Prologue, be trying to impress them by showing them how clever he is in duping others, in the somewhat foolish hope of winning unadmitted, envious admiration from them. If this is so, then he is indeed flattened at the end. The whole thing thus becomes an attempt by the outsider to get himself, if not by virtue, then by craft, on the side of the angels. There can also, according to this line of reasoning, be no significant connexion between Prologue and Tale. The Prologue must simply be an extraneous virtuoso piece of exhibitionism and the Tale a good story, merely one out of the Pardoner's usual repertoire, with a conventional moral. Then we have a stupid joke, a foolhardy return to the exhibitionism of the Prologue, when the Pardoner offers his relics to the wrong kind of audience, followed by another, retaliatory, joke, and apparently he who laughs last laughs longest.

A more reliable guide to the Pardoner's attitude to his audience, and thus perhaps

to the purpose of his Prologue and Tale, can be found by attempting to answer two obvious but surely important questions: Why does the Pardoner use this particular type of prologue in which he reveals himself so completely? And why does he follow it with a tale of the triumph of death?

The Pardoner's Prologue is not merely a convention, borrowed from Jean de Meun, cleverly and dramatically used. In the case of both Faus Semblant and the Pardoner, the device of self-revelation betrays as much about the audience as about the speaker. This is not the place to examine the intricacies of Faus Semblant's function in *Le Roman de la Rose*, but a few relevant observations may be made. While allowance must be made for the fact that there are not the same demands for psychological credibility in the *Roman* as in the *Canterbury Tales*, it can as validly be said for Faus Semblant as for the Pardoner that he is doing what was asked of him without showing any undue respect or reserve before his audience. Whether they are entertained or impressed by him is irrelevant; the important thing is that whatever he says and whatever he proves himself to be, they need his services. His acceptance as one of Love's barons, as well as the importance of his rôle, indicates not only how delightfully cosmopolitan Love's chosen band has become, in Jean de Meun, but also Love's general subsidence from the ethereal to the earthy. Hypocrisy is both necessary and useful; society as a whole is riddled with it. Faus Semblant may be a shocking and repellent figure, but he is only an extreme portrayal of a pretty common sort of person. In fact, in his own diatribe the only people he regards as innocent of his kind of behaviour are the saints!

By means of the Prologue, Chaucer allows us to see how the Pardoner behaves before two types of audience, the "lewed peple" and the "lordynges," without allowing this double-edged performance to distract any attention from the central figure, who is the Pardoner and the Pardoner alone. And the Pardoner is directly addressing only one audience, the Canterbury pilgrims. It is true that he is telling them about his triumphs over another type of audience and even re-enacting for them some of his best moments, but what does this mean? The standard critical assumption seems to be that the Pardoner is treating the pilgrims as his intellectual equals, that he is in a sense implying respect or even flattery by exposing his tricks, as a way of assuring them that these would not be applied on the present occasion. But there are only two possible grounds for supposing that the Pardoner respects his audience: the first that he addresses them politely, and the second the fact that he tells them the "truth" about himself. Against the first it may be said that too much weight should not be attached to conventional formulas, which may in any case be used for a variety of effects — ironic, comic, etc. — as for example the "sire Hoost" of line 942 mentioned earlier. An answer to the second point depends upon what one thinks are the Pardoner's reasons for using this device. My own view is that blatantly and defiantly to reveal one's malpractices, however ingenious they are, to an audience who have gathered together in the name of piety and whose professions of moral concern are hot from their lips, is not deference but insult.

The most telling indication of the Pardoner's method of dealing with people comes in the General Prologue:

And thus, with feyned flaterye and japes,
He made the person and the peple his apes. (705-6)

These lines provide some insight into the Pardoner's cleverness. Of this at least there can be no doubt. The Pardoner is good at getting money out of the gullible, guilt-ridden rabble. Incidentally, he makes an ape of "the parson" as well — presumably not by selling him relics or pardons. Whether this means that the Pardoner shows up the parson by his greater hold over the parson's flock, or that the parson too is dominated and impressed by the Pardoner's personality, is not particularly important. What matters is the Pardoner's *method* of making fools of others. He does it by *feigned* flattery and trickery of one sort or another. In *Le Roman de la Rose*, Faus Semblant is quite frank about his double dealing even to the audience to whom he swears devoted service. The fact that he has revealed himself does not mean that he will behave differently:

— Oil, jou vous jur e fiance;
N'onc n'orent sergenz plus leiaus
Vostre peres ne vostre aiaus.
— Coment! C'est contre ʒa nature.
— Metez vous en en aventure,
Car, se pleges en requerez,
Ja plus asseür n'en serez,
Non veir se j'en baillaie ostages,
Ou letres, ou tesmoinz, ou gages;
Car, a tesmoing vous en apel,
L'en ne peut oster de sa pel
Le lou tant qu'il seit escorchiez,
Ja tant n'iert batuz ne torchiez. (11986-98)⁵

At the same time, despite his "double personality," he manages to get across some sound moral advice and castigation. We would not even think of questioning the motives of Faus Semblant, or demand that he should be sincere to one audience and false to another. He is effective as he stands, a daring allegorical figure, with typically human connexions. But Chaucer, by his totally human creations, has given us the right to question motives and to demand reasons for his methods of presentation. In the case of the Pardoner, he has created so overpowering a personality that we are inclined to accept what this "noble ecclesiaste" says at face value, even though we know he is a deceiver who uses feigned flattery. Thus, simply because he is polite to the pilgrims and shows them the tricks of his trade when he cannot possibly be hoping to get anything in return, we are led to believe that he is showing completely uncharacteristic respect for them, that he is in fact being honest for once.

If, on the other hand, we believe that he is being true to character rather than to the conventions of politeness he uses, we have to look for other reasons for his self-exposure in his Prologue.

On this occasion the Pardoner is faced by an audience with preconceived ideas about him. They think they know what he is like and what to expect from him. In

this sense they are different from the Pardoner's normal audiences; they certainly would not expect to come away from the performance spiritually enlightened. Their outcry before the Pardoner begins to speak suggests not only that they are different from the Pardoner's everyday audiences, but also that they are different from *him* – or think they are. He is not their kind and will not speak their language, if given a free rein. That the Pardoner is aware of the difference, in status at least, between the pilgrims and the common-folk he is familiar with, is superficially evident in the variation between the terms of address he uses. But it is more significantly evident in the technique of the Prologue itself – he would not be speaking like this to potential customers. All the way through he plays on the pilgrims' awareness of distinctions: "Lordynges," my relics are trash; but the "goode men" believe in them and pay money for them. "Goode men and wommen," only the pure in heart may "offren to" my relics; but "Sires", this is my most successful "gaude." My text is "Radix malorum est cupiditas," but my whole pretext for preaching is my avarice. Preachers should be poor but I am rich . . .

On the face of things, the final paradox in the series is that the Pardoner should be telling a moral tale, let alone preaching sermons. But the Pardoner has his own answer to this, whether the pilgrims like it or not:

Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice
Which that I use, and that is avarice.
But though myself be guilty in that synne,
Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne
From avarice, and soore to repent. (427-31)

God works in mysterious ways, which should not be open to criticism from the Canterbury pilgrims. We must return to this point later, when it will help to clarify the final damning reaction to the Pardoner at the end of his Tale. Suffice it to say here that the Pardoner, by mentioning his accidental spiritual success, is hardly excusing his motives but merely stating their irrelevance to the results his sermoning might have; and it is the results which are the most significant aspect of his moral tales.

The effect of the Pardoner's insistence on the paradoxes through which he works is not so much to separate the pilgrims from his everyday victims, but to separate the pilgrims from himself, overtly at least. Such blatant exultation in deliberate sin must outrage anybody with even the most basic sense of decency, and the "gentils" have voiced their claim to that. The Pardoner, in thus isolating himself from the pilgrims, is presuming upon their moral judgment. He is using his feigned flattery and japes in this instance, as in the case of his "gaude" in the Prologue, as a trap for pride. The Tale carries its own obvious comment on the deadly consequence of this sin. What the Pardoner is doing may be paraphrased as follows. The pilgrims have made their judgment on him before he begins; they have set themselves up as arbiters of what is moral and what is not. The Pardoner, exploiting this, pretends to flatter them by showing them how he fools others, and by letting them, with as much emphasis as possible, see him for what he is. Thus he catches them at the height of their pride: the pilgrims think they are different – from the rabble and

especially from the infamous Pardoner – so that when this travesty of morality proceeds to tell the moral tale they have asked for, and one with particular reference to them, they are unable to accept it. Just as the Pardoner can make people repent, even though this is not his intention, so his moral tale is a moral tale and applicable to all. But the audience, of course, whose pride forbids contamination either with the Pardoner's victims or with the Pardoner himself, dissociate themselves from the *Tale*, as well as from the personalities involved.

In *Le Roman de la Rose*, the figure of Faus Semblant shows hypocrisy rampant in society. The Court of Love, which is going to control events until the game is won, accepts Faus Semblant and needs him. The exaggerated self-portrait thus works as a kind of leveller: "most people, saints excepted, are hypocrites like me." The Pardoner's self-exposure works more subtly than this, but surely with the same purpose. The pilgrims are tricked by feigned flattery into believing they are superior. Far from keeping the "two audiences" apart, the Pardoner all the way through the Prologue and Tale, is working towards their identification..

It is not my intention to give a systematic analysis of either Prologue or Tale, but to refute the idea that the Pardoner is really deferential to his audience of pilgrims, and to suggest that the Pardoner is more successful than the fiasco at the end of his Tale has led critics to suppose. Thus, it may be pointed out, one of the main connecting threads between the Prologue and the Tale is the similarity between the people involved – the "lewed peple" of the Prologue, the three rioters in the Tale, and the Pardoner's present audience. The emphasis on the sin of pride has already been mentioned; in the Tale this pride is exemplified as a wilful preference for the temporal over the spiritual, for the easy life as against a reckoning with death.

In both Prologue and Tale, distinctions and paradoxes serve to emphasize not contrasts but parallels. We are told in the Prologue of the "goode men and women" who come up for the Pardoner's relics and make his living for him because they (like January of the *Merchant's Tale*) want to enjoy both this life and the next. The same applies to the rioters in the Tale. Life and living it well is their preoccupation. They cannot be sidetracked by evidence of death. Through a series of ironically balanced antitheses, the Tale moves from the physical to the spiritual, and from life to death. By means of the Pardoner's dramatic use of *Expolitio*⁶ his point is hammered home again and again: the pleasures of tavern-living are the deadly sins; "substance" is turned into "accident"; age is but the inevitable outcome of youth, just as the coins are symbolic proof that the wages of life can be death:

But, certes, he that haunteth such delices
Is deed, whil that he lyveth in tho vices. (547-48)

Death works all the time, through all the accidents of life, and not only by the finishing stroke. Death is "substance"; life, with all its trappings, is merely "accident."

The terrible confrontation between proud youth and pitiful age is the most dramatic instance in the Tale of life's paltriness and insignificance. We are told that it is the proudest of the three rioters who first addresses the humble old man. The

words he uses: "What, carl, *with sory grace!*" (717) are repeated, perhaps with theological overtones, in line 876, where they are applied to the youngest rioter. The possible implication that the proudest rioter is also the youngest, heightens the symbolic contrast between the youth and the old man, and the contrast again illuminates not only the obvious differences between the two in age and awareness, but the ultimate similarity of their predicament. The fact that death is perhaps closer in time for the young man, and that death is abhorred by one and desired by the other, is not as important as death's presence and inevitability. For the audience the rioter's brutal questions

Why artow al forwrapped save thy face?
Why lystow so longe in so greet age? (718-19)

become metaphysical questions about the nature of life in relation to death. One is reminded of the Poet's questions to the Leech Gatherer ("The oldest man he seemed that ever wore grey hairs") in Wordsworth's *Resolution and Independence*:

How is it that you live, and what is it you do?

In the *Pardoner's Tale* the rioter himself is unaware of the significance his questioning may have. Like the repeated pledges to find out and destroy death, it is, on the narrative level, one of the many examples of dramatic irony heightening the situation in relation both to the final outcome and to the moral of the tale. But from the Pardoner's point of view, and particularly from the point of view of a moral-conscious audience, it is as deliberate and revealing as in Wordsworth's poem. Youth confronts age asking about the meaning of life. In the Tale the old man gives the answer, for surely, whatever other implications his answer may have, he does sum up life — a life which has been lived. In the analogues listed by Frederick Tupper,⁷ the old man is a hermit, a holy man whose knowledge of the coins' relation to death is made explicit. But here the old man is not, in the theological sense at least, a holy man. He is simply a man who has lived, like the Ancient Mariner, and who has to talk and tell of life and penance. The old man's speech has also been compared to Maximian's First Elegy,⁸ and whether there is any direct relationship between the two passages or not, the import of what he says is not unlike that of elegy. His longing for death is a statement of the vanity and transitoriness of life. What he is as well as what he says provokes the elegaic questions: where is youth? where is pride? where is gaiety? Once the trappings are taken away there is nothing left but pain and a heap of bones.

The rioters are aware only of the old man's "accident"; the audience should be aware of his "substance." To make sure they are, the Pardoner makes the same point twice more — most obviously in the rioters' avarice, which prevents them from seeing death in the coins, and which is of course the main *exemplum* of the Pardoner's chief sin. But there is another, more subtle, indication of the rioters' false values, a hint which could prick the conscience of many a pilgrim. The "worste" of the three men speaks of the treasure as a gift of Fortune through which they will be able to live out their lives in "myrthe and joliftee" (779-80). He then adds that if they could take the gold home safely, they would be "in heigh

felicitee.” This misapplication of the Boethian term for the highest happiness⁹ which resides only in God and in goodness, and which is always contrasted with the gifts of Fortune, is the particular sin of those who live for life and the transitory pleasures it offers. This too, in a sense, is a form of avarice, because it suggests a greed for the temporal at the expense of the spiritual. The rioters are guilty of it, and so are the “lewed peple,” who cover their sins with the easy protection of pardons.

Why should the Pardoner have thought that this kind of “argument” would be to the pilgrims’ liking? The relevance of the “moral” and the identification of the “lewed peple” with the Pardoner’s present audience, which has been implied all the way through the Prologue and Tale, becomes blatant as he concludes his “sermon.” Here is a group of people on their way in “myrthe and joliftee” to offer themselves to a religious relic. They asked for a moral tale and the Pardoner has given it to them. But he has also reminded them of death, the other side of life – the last thing they want to hear about.

There is nothing out of character or inconsistent about the last stages of the Pardoner’s performance. He has simply told one of the stories he usually tells when he is preaching for money; but in offering it as a moral tale applicable to the pilgrims as much as to his usual audience of gulls, he has given them more than they bargained for, and more than they are prepared to accept from a self-confessed sinner. The “mock sermon” is concluded with the words “And lo, sires, thus I preche” (915), and the rest is the inevitable and only logical conclusion to what the Pardoner has been doing all along. The assumption of a “volte-face” or of a sudden paroxysm of sincerity when he tells the pilgrims that Jesus’ pardon is best (lines 916-18), is unnecessary, and indeed would be out of character. The Pardoner has never said that Jesus’ pardon is worthless – only his own. He could hardly say anything else to the pilgrims after his revelations in the Prologue. The lines that follow:

But, sires, o word forgat I in my tale:
 I have relikes and pardoun in my male,
 As faire as any man in Engelond,
 Whiche were me yeven by the popes hond.
 If any of yow wole, of devocion,
 Offren, and han myn absolucion,
 Com forth anon, and kneleth heere adoun,
 And mekely receyvethe my pardoun . . . (919ff.)

are no more audacious than the Prologue itself. They are simply the final “jape” on the pilgrims. It has been suggested that the Pardoner, who has carefully kept the yokels and the pilgrims apart, “would hardly start insulting them now.”¹⁰ But in fact the Pardoner has been insulting their pride all the time. In the Prologue he pretended to flatter them and he deliberately played on his own wickedness to arouse their sense of self-righteousness. But the Tale, with its emphasis on death, the great leveller of all men, has nullified any pretended distinctions between “gentils” and “lewed peple.” With a final *coup de théâtre*, the Pardoner deals his worst blow to the pilgrims’ pride. He says he almost forgot to offer them his relics and pardons.

This is not an "insurance policy" joke, as critics seem never to tire of suggesting.¹¹ Nor does the Pardoner seriously expect the pilgrims to line up, money in hand, for his dubious blessings. When he says "Come up and kiss my relics," he is showing the pilgrims once and for all that they are no different from his everyday audience; that they are certainly not exempt from death, which was the burden of his tale. One could again paraphrase and suggest that the Pardoner's moral amounts to this: "Are you in a fit state to receive death? Here you are on a religious pilgrimage — what would happen to you if death came now?" The relics, for all their falseness, become a *memento mori*, just as the Pardoner, in spite of all his sins, can be a type of *timor mortis*.

After the Pardoner's performance in the Prologue, one might almost have expected a taunt as daring as this. There is a beautifully ironic parallel between the lines

It is an honour to everich that is heer
 That ye mowe have a suffisant pardoneer
 T'assoille yow, in contree as ye ryde,
 For adventures whiche that may bityde.
 Paraventure ther may fallen oon or two
 Doun of his hors, and breke his nekke atwo.
 Looke which a seuretee is it to yow alle
 That I am in youre felaweshipe yfalle,
 That may assoille yow, bothe moore and lasse,
 Whan that the soule shal fro the body passe.
 I rede that oure Hoost heere shal bigynne,
 For he is moost enveloped in synne.
 Com forth, sire Hoost, and offre first anon,
 And thou shalt kisse the relikes everychon . . . (931ff.)

and

Goode men and wommen, o thyng warne I yow:
 If any wight be in this chirche now
 That hath doon synne horrible, that he
 Dar nat, for shame, of it yshryven be,
 Or any womman, be she yong or old,
 That hath ymaad hir housbonde cokewold,
 Swich folk shal have no power ne no grace
 To offren to my relikes in this place.
 And whoso fyndeth hym out of swich blame,
 He wol come up and offre in Goddes name,
 And I assoille him by the auctoritee
 Which that by bulle ygraunted was to me. (377ff.)

which constitute the Pardoner's "gaude." When the Pardoner is offering his relics seriously and for money he uses the device of "let only the sinless come"; but when they are offered as a joke (albeit a symbolic joke pregnant with implications) they are offered first and above all to the one "moost enveloped in synne"! It is only

the Host's reaction, supported by laughter from the rest, which makes the jape turn sour, and which is surely damning to the pilgrims. Swearing apart, Harry Bailey has been touched too near the bone. To be reminded of death is uncomfortable enough in any context, however general and indirect, or however fitting and proper, but to be reminded by a person like the Pardoner, and to be singled out as bad and stupid enough to be prey to such a man, is too much for his pride to take. His insult may be funny, but it is absolutely irrelevant. Far from serving the Pardoner right, it serves to prove him right by showing the Host's sense of guilt, as the ensuing laughter of the others shows theirs. The Pardoner *has* told a moral tale and has succeeded in showing the pilgrims that the moral applies to them. The victory is the Pardoner's victory. His moral tale is quite appropriate, and his joke against the Host as well as the others is timely and relevant. It can hardly be said to be wounding in any personal sense or "below the belt," as the Host's certainly is.

Chaucer has used a similar technique for two markedly different characters, the Clerk and the Pardoner. Both these storytellers put the pilgrims off their guard by promising them what they want and then giving it to them — barbed. The Clerk promises the Host obediently to tell the pilgrims "som murie thyng of aventures":

"Hooste," quod he, "I am under youre yerde;
Ye han of us as now the governance,
And therefore wol I do yow obeisance,
As fer as resoun axeth, hardily."¹²

But instead of giving the Host the obedience he expects, he gives him a story *about* obedience — obedience of a spiritual kind which is far removed from Harry Bailey's philosophy. The Pardoner aims his moral tale at Host, "lewed peple" and "gentils" alike. And, for the Pardoner, Chaucer has used the methods of Faus Semblant to emphasize and isolate his deliberate evil-doing. But, as we can always ask about a social scapegoat, how different are the rest? Let him who is without sin cast the first stone. The Host casts it, the others laugh, joining in. Blinded by the Pardoner's personality, by their bolstered sense of moral superiority and pride, they will not take the moral of the Tale, but turn it into a dirty joke. Yet the Pardoner has had his effect, and who can deny God's use of the contaminated vessel?

NOTES

- 1 All quotations are from F. N. Robinson's second edition of Chaucer's Works (1957). Where line references only are given they refer to the *Pardoner's Prologue and Tale* and the preceding *Introduction*.
- 2 The words "by reson" may not have as specific a meaning as "for its argument" which I have suggested. They may be used as an adverbial tag implying something like "certainly." But the general sense of the lines quoted seems to indicate that the Tale will please because of its moral, which is what has been asked for, and the Pardoner is apparently emphasizing this here. The context may thus suggest a functional rather than a formal use of the words "by reson." Other instances of this particular phrase in Chaucer (e.g. *HF* II 706-7, *PF* 534) suggest that it is to be taken as the direct equivalent of the rhetorical term *ratio* in its sense of argument or line of defence. The *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, for example, defines the term

ratio in detail in two places: II, xviii, 28, as part of the epicheireme: "Ratio est quae causam demonstrat, uerum esse id, quod intendimus"; and IV, xliii, 56, under the description of *Expolitio* (a device which the Pardoner certainly seems to make use of in his Tale; see above, p.17): "Nam cum rem simpliciter pronuntiarimus, rationem poterimus subicere; deinde dupliciter uel sine rationibus uel cum rationibus pronuntiare; deinde afferre contrarium . . . deinde simile et exemplum . . . deinde conclusionem . . ." In both cases the sense of *ratio* seems to be "argument," "proof" or "demonstration." See also Cicero *De Inv.* I, 18, Quintillian *Inst. Or.* III, xi, 4 and V, x, 6, where *ratio* is said to be the equivalent of the epicheireme ("Quidam epichirema rationem appellarunt"), the rhetorical argument itself. R. C. Goffin ("Chaucer and 'Reason,'" *MLR*, XXI, 13-18) specifically relates the Pardoner's use of "reson" to the presentation of a moral as part of his "notion of right composition." The context certainly suggests that the Pardoner's "argument" will be to present a moral; this is in fact his *ratio*, his line of defence against the over-hasty assumption on the part of the "gentils" that what he is expected to produce is "ribaudye." In rhetorical terms, the Pardoner concludes his prologue with his *ratio*, his line of defence briefly stated, and provides in the Tale his *rationis confirmatio*, elaboration by means of an *exemplum*. Robinson in his Glossary defines "reson" in its technical rhetorical application as "order." He is here presumably referring to Goffin's translation of "reson" in *Gen. Prol.* 37. But while there is a case for regarding Chaucer's use of the word "reson" as distinct in meaning from the formula "by reson," it seems unnecessary to equate the two rhetorical terms *ratio* and *ordo*. When Chaucer is using the formula "by reson" he seems to be referring directly to *ratio*, the component of the rhetorical epicheireme as explained above. Used on its own, however, and without specific reference to rhetorical demonstration or argument, "reson" may be equated with *ratio* in its more general application (*De Inv.* I, 6, 16, 18, 36, etc.), i.e. as indicating a sense of system, principle, plan, or simply reason.

- 3 See, for example, Professor R. V. W. Elliott ("Our Host's 'Triacle': some Observations on Chaucer's 'Pardoner's Tale'," *A Review of English Literature*, VII (1966), 61-73) and other critics referred to by him.
- 4 *Op. cit.*, 67-8.
- 5 *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. E. Langlois (Paris, 1914-24), III, 224.
- 6 Of this device the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* says: "non modo, cum causam dicimus, adiuuat et exornat orationem, sed multo maxime per eam exercemur ad elocutionis facultatem. Quare conueniet extra causam in exercendo rationis adhibere expolitionis, in dicendo uti, cum exornabimus argumentationem" (IV, xliiv, 58).
- 7 *The Pardoner's Tale*, pp. 415-38 in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales"*, ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago, 1941). See especially *Novella 2*, pp. 417-19; *Exemplum 1*, p. 420; Play A (where the "hermit" is St Antony) and B, pp. 423-36. In other analogues the role of the hermit is taken by Christ (*Nov. 1*, p. 416; *Nov. 3*, p. 419; *Exempla 4* and *5*, pp. 422-3); in one case by a "philosophus" (*Ex. 3*, p. 421); and in another by a "magus," who, however, plays no significant part in the story.
- 8 *Sources and Analogues*, p. 437.
- 9 *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, Books II and III, *passim*. See especially Book II, pr. 4 and 8; Book III, pr. 9 and 10.
- 10 By Professor Elliott, *op. cit.*, 70.
- 11 See, for example, John Speirs, *The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale*, in *The Age of Chaucer*, Pelican Guide to English Literature, I, 116.
- 12 *The Clerk's Prologue*, 22-25. (Cf. the Pardoner's *by reson*, line 458, discussed above, p.12 and footnote 2.)