



## THE PARDONER'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

- What do you think is the Pardoner's attitude towards his congregation when he addresses them, and what is his attitude to the pilgrims?
- Read lines 49–60 again and note all the indications that you think might suggest that the Pardoner is 'official'; are there any indications that he might be a self-appointed imposter? List the points for and against.
- Write a paragraph describing the Pardoner's character as it is revealed in these opening lines.

43	<b>Lordinges</b> gentlemen	52	<b>my body to warente</b> to protect myself
44	<b>I peyne me to han an hauteyn speche</b> I take care to adopt an imposing way of speaking	54	<b>Me to destourbe of</b> to hinder me from
45	<b>as round as gooth a belle</b> as clearly [possibly smoothly] as a bell sounds	55	<b>telle I forth my tales</b> say my piece, say what I have to say [This is followed by a long section of complacent self-revelation.]
46	<b>kan al by rote</b> know by heart	59	<b>To saffron with my predicacioun</b> to season, or to add colour to, my preaching
48	<b>Radix malorum est Cupiditas</b> love of money is the root of all evil [The Pardoner's text is from St Paul's First Epistle to Timothy 6. The Pardoner has only one sermon, on a text spectacularly opposed to his own way of life. He refers to his text again on l. 114 and quotes the Latin again on l. 140.]	60	<b>hem</b> them [contemptuous]
		61	<b>crystal stones</b> long glass boxes [possibly glass-lidded boxes kept to display relics]
		62	<b>cloutes</b> cloths
49	<b>pronounce</b> announce	63	<b>as wenen they echoon</b> as they all believe
	<b>whennes</b> whence, from where	64	<b>in latoun a sholder-boon</b> a clavicle (shoulder blade) in a setting made from an alloy of copper and zinc [The ignorant might well think this alloy to be gold.]
50	<b>bulles</b> official church documents [i.e. any official document, not necessarily papal documents]		
	<b>alle and some</b> every one of them		
51	<b>Oure lige lordes seel on my patente</b> the Bishop's seal [possibly the Pope's seal] on my licence to preach	65	<b>an hooly Jewes sheep</b> [a vague and off-hand reference suggesting something to do with the Bible]

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*Having presumably had his drink, the Pardoner launches dramatically into what he wants to say. He is still some distance away from his tale. He describes his approach to preaching and his methods. He is keen to establish his good standing as a visiting preacher, but goes on to give such an unlikely list of references that he raises suspicion, and finishes with a contemptuous list of the 'relics' he has for sale.*

'Lordinges,' quod he, 'in chirches whan I preche,  
 I peyne me to han an hauteyn speche,  
 And ringe it out as round as gooth a belle, 45  
 For I kan al by rote that I telle.  
 My theme is alwey oon, and evere was—  
*Radix malorum est Cupiditas.*  
 First I pronounce whennes that I come,  
 And thanne my bulles shewe I, alle and some. 50  
 Oure lige lordes seel on my patente,  
 That shewe I first, my body to warente,  
 That no man be so boold, ne preest ne clerk,  
 Me to destourbe of Cristes hooly werk.  
 And after that thanne telle I forth my tales. 55  
 Bulles of popes and of cardinales,  
 Of patriarkes and bishopes I shewe,  
 And in Latin I speke a wordes fewe,  
 To saffron with my predicacioun,  
 And for to stire hem to devocioun. 60  
 Thanne shewe I forth my longe cristal stones,  
 Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones,—  
 Relikes been they, as wenen they echoon.  
 Thanne have I in latoun a sholder-boon  
 Which that was of an hooly Jewes sheep. 65



## THE PARDONER'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

The Pardoner knows the worldly needs of his victims, and offers them healthy livestock and a cure for many human ills, if they buy his remedies.

- The Pardoner 'offers' to his hearers seem to grow more dubious by the minute. Do you think that in these lines he is reporting what he says to his congregation, or talking to the pilgrims, perhaps after a little too much to drink? Explain your view in detail.
- Whoever his audience may be, the Pardoner has said that he delivers only one stock sermon. Read aloud the three sentences that make up lines 80–5, 86–90 and 91–8. How would you describe the language? How much does he expect his audience to take seriously? What do you think would be the effect of such statements on his audience?
- Reread lines 91–8 aloud. What do you think would be the likely effect of what he says on the guilty, especially in front of people they know?

66	<b>Goode men</b> Dear brothers [a standard opening to a sermon]	78	<b>thilke</b> that same
67	<b>wasshe</b> washed or dipped	79	<b>eldres</b> forefathers
68	<b>swelle</b> should swell [fall ill]	82	<b>potage</b> soup
69	<b>That any worm hath ete, or worm ystonge</b> That has eaten any [harmful] creature [e.g. a liver fluke] or that has been bitten/stung. ['Worm' in Chaucer's day meant roughly what we might mean by 'creepy-crawly', and could include snakes.]	84–5	<b>Though . . . two or thre</b> even though he knew the truth about her infidelity, even if she had slept with two or three priests
71	<b>hool</b> whole, healed	86	<b>Heere is a miteyn eek</b> here also is a mitten [used for sowing seed by hand]
72	<b>pokkes . . . scabbe</b> pox and scab [skin diseases of sheep that affect their wool as well as their health]	89	<b>whete or otes</b> wheat or oats
74	<b>taak kep</b> take note	90	<b>So that</b> as long as
75	<b>the good-man that the beestes oweth</b> the householder who owns the beasts		<b>pens</b> pence
76	<b>wyke</b> week	92	<b>grotes</b> coins worth four old pence [quite a large amount of money]
		94	<b>wight</b> person
		96	<b>yshriven</b> confessed
		97	<b>cokewold</b> cuckold
			<b>ne</b> nor
			<b>grace</b> spiritual strength

## THE PARDONER'S PROLOGUE AND TALE



*The Pardoner continues to give a clear and apparently quite honest sample of his sermon.*

“Goode men,” I seye, “taak of my wordes keep;  
 If that this boon be wasshe in any welle,  
 If cow, or calf, or sheep, or oxe swelle  
 That any worm hath ete, or worm ystonge,  
 Taak water of that welle and wash his tonge, 70  
 And it is hool anon; and forthermoore,  
 Of pokkes and of scabbe and every soore  
 Shal every sheep be hool that of this welle  
 Drinketh a draughte. Taak kep eek what I telle:  
 If that the good-man that the beestes oweth 75  
 Wol every wyke, er that the cok him croweth,  
 Fastinge, drinken of this welle a draughte,  
 As thilke hooly Jew oure eldres taughte,  
 His beestes and his stoor shal multiplie.  
 And, sires, also it heeleth jalousie; 80  
 For though a man be falle in jalous rage,  
 Lat maken with this water his potage,  
 And nevere shal he moore his wif mistriste,  
 Though he the soothe of hir defaute wiste,  
 Al had she taken prestes two or thre. 85  
 Heere is a miteyn eek, that ye may se.  
 He that his hand wol putte in this mitayn,  
 He shal have multiplying of his grain,  
 Whan he hath sowen, be it whete or otes,  
 So that he offre pens, or elles grotes. 90  
 Goode men and wommen, o thing warne I yow:  
 If any wight be in this chirche now  
 That hath doon sinne horrible, that he  
 Dar nat for shame of it yshrive be,  
 Or any womman, be she yong or old, 95  
 That hath ymaad hir housbonde cokewold,  
 Swich folk shal have no power ne no grace  
 To offren to my relikes in this place.

## THE PARDONER'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

- Who do you think experiences the joy mentioned in line 113?
- What do you think could be the Pardoner's reason for making the declaration in lines 114–118?
- Look back over *The Pardoner's Prologue* and make a list of the material things he mentions. Then make a list of the spiritual things listed in this section of the work.
- The Pardoner reduces everlasting damnation to 'goon a-blakeberied' (l. 120). What in your view is the effect of this, bearing in mind his function in the Church?
- What impression of the Pardoner do you receive from the action he describes in line 127?
- Who do you think are the 'bretheren' mentioned in line 130?



▲ 'I stonde lyk a clerk in my pulpet.'

- 99 **out of** innocent of  
 101 **assoille** absolve  
 103 **gaude** trick  
**wonne** profited  
 104 **An hundred mark** sum of money equivalent to £66.66 [A vast income at that time. See ll. 705–6 of the Pardoner's portrait in *The General Prologue*, where he is described as receiving more in a day than a poor parson got in two months.]  
 105 **lyk a clerk** like a cleric  
 106 **lewed** unlearned, ignorant  
 110 **bekke** nod  
 111 **berne** barn [ll. 110–11 give a clear picture of the Pardoner's actions, but also suggest a parody of another dove—the symbol of the Holy Spirit. This is a subtle form of blasphemy which would be wrong in a spiritual and honest pardoner: Here Chaucer is perhaps leading the audience towards the more open blasphemy of the tale.]  
 112 **yerne** busily  
 114 **bisynesse** activity  
 115 **free** eager  
 120 **soules goon a-blakeberied** souls wandering aimlessly [i.e. damned]  
 123 **Som . . . flaterye** some to please people and to flatter them  
 124 **avaunced** promoted  
 125 **veyne** vain, empty  
 127 **him** them, or 'whoever it is'  
 128 **asterte** avoid  
 130 **trespased** offended or opposed

## THE PARDONER'S PROLOGUE AND TALE



*The Pardoner explains that this is exactly how he preaches, and he gives an account of his style of delivery. He also shows how he uses any technique or approach to wring money out of people.*

And whoso findeth him out of swich blame,  
 He wol come up and offre in Goddes name, 100  
 And I assoille him by the auctoritee  
 Which that by bulle ygraunted was to me.”  
 By this gaude have I wonne, yeer by yeer,  
 An hundred mark sith I was pardoner.  
 I stonde lyk a clerk in my pulpet, 105  
 And whan the lewed peple is down yset,  
 I preche so as ye han herd bifoore,  
 And telle an hundred false japes moore.  
 Thanne peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke,  
 And est and west upon the peple I bekke, 110  
 As dooth a dowve sittinge on a berne.  
 Mine handes and my tonge goon so yerne  
 That it is joye to se my bisynesse.  
 Of avarice and of swich cursednesse  
 Is al my preching, for to make hem free 115  
 To yeven hir pens, and namely unto me.  
 For myn entente is nat but for to winne,  
 And nothing for correccioun of sinne.  
 I rekke nevere, whan that they been beried,  
 Though that hir soules goon a-blakeberied. 120  
 For certes, many a predicacioun  
 Comth ofte time of yvel entencioun;  
 Som for plesance of folk and flaterye,  
 To been avaunced by ypocrisye,  
 And som for veyne glorie, and som for hate. 125  
 For whan I dar noon oother weyes debate,  
 Thanne wol I stinge him with my tonge smerte  
 In preching, so that he shal nat asterte  
 To been defamed falsly, if that he  
 Hath trespassed to my bretheren or to me. 130



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- The Pardoner takes his way of life very seriously. What is your impression of him in lines 137–48?
- How would you describe the tone of lines 149–60?
- What effect do you think the declaration in lines 153–60 would have on the pilgrims?
- Read lines 137–60 aloud, as faithfully as you can to the original pronunciation. To what extent do you think these lines show the Pardoner as an effective speaker?

131	<b>his</b> [whoever is his target from the pulpit. The victim is not named but is clearly identified to the congregation.]	150	<b>agoon</b> past, ago
134	<b>quyte</b> pay back, get even with <b>us</b> pardoners	152	<b>reporte</b> repeat <b>holde</b> hold, or keep in mind [This is why preachers used so many examples from well-known tales, but the Pardoner does not mind expressing a poor opinion of his congregations.]
135	<b>hewe</b> appearance	153	<b>trowe ye</b> do you think
137	<b>But . . . devise</b> [This is a sort of headline, not uncommon in medieval verse, and perhaps in medieval sermons. L. 148 has the effect of closing the section that opens on this line.]	154	<b>for I teche</b> through my teaching
138	<b>coveitise</b> covetousness, desire for gain	155	<b>wifully</b> deliberately, on purpose
140	<b>Radix . . . Cupiditas</b> [See note to l. 48.]	156	<b>Nay, nay . . . trewely!</b> no, no, that was never what I intended, honestly!
144	<b>twynne</b> depart from, give up	157	<b>sondry landes</b> different countries [The sense is 'anywhere'.]
148	<b>Of this . . . suffise</b> this should be enough on this subject	159	<b>make baskettes</b> [This is a reference to St Paul the Hermit (not St Paul the Apostle), who earned his living weaving baskets.]
149	<b>ensamples</b> examples [a technical term from the medieval art of preaching]		

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*The Pardoner expresses professional solidarity with his fellow pardoners. He describes his activities, the side effects they might have in bringing some people to repent their sins, and his determination to escape poverty.*

For though I telle noght his propre name,  
 Men shal wel knowe that it is the same  
 By signes, and by othere circumstances.  
 Thus quyte I folk that doon us displesances;  
 Thus spytte I out my venym under hewe 135  
 Of hoolinesse, to semen hooly and trewe.  
 But shortly myn entente I wol devise:  
 I preche of no thing but for coveitise.  
 Therfore my theme is yet, and evere was,  
*Radix malorum est Cupiditas.* 140  
 Thus kan I preche again that same vice  
 Which that I use, and that is avarice.  
 But though myself be gilty in that sinne,  
 Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne  
 From avarice, and soore to repente. 145  
 But that is nat my principal entente;  
 I preche nothing but for coveitise.  
 Of this mateere it oghte ynogh suffise.  
 Thanne telle I hem ensamples many oon  
 Of olde stories longe time agoon. 150  
 For lewed peple loven tales olde;  
 Swiche thinges kan they wel reporte and holde.  
 What, trowe ye that whiles I may preche,  
 And winne gold and silver for I teche,  
 That I wol live in poverte wilfully? 155  
 Nay, nay, I thoghte it nevere, trewely!  
 For I wol preche and begge in sondry landes;  
 I wol nat do no labour with mine handes,  
 Ne make baskettes, and live therby,  
 By cause I wol nat beggen idelly. 160





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- The Pardoner asserts his will very clearly in lines 161–6 (he has asserted it negatively in ll. 155–60 above). How far would you say he has consciously chosen to live like this?
- Can you see evidence of the Pardoner's enjoyment of what he is saying in these lines? Write a paragraph summarizing the evidence.
- Look back over *The Pardoner's Prologue*. What motives do you think drove him to make this extraordinary public confession? What kind of morals does he possess?
- We, the readers, know that the Pardoner deceives his congregations, but they do not. How far would you think it possible for a corrupt preacher to move his audience to genuine repentance? Does this corruption make a mockery of his moral message?

161 **countrefete** imitate [As a cleric the Pardoner was supposed to imitate the apostles, and, through the apostles, Christ. The reference to the apostles might have been suggested by the reference to St Paul the Hermit in l. 159, who was not St Paul the Apostle. The confusion might suggest that the Pardoner is used to making false connections without being challenged by congregations that knew no better.]

162 **wolle** wool (for clothing)

163 **Al were it yeven of** even if were given by

**povereste** poorest

165 **sterve for famine** die of starvation ['Starve' still survives in some areas

as a dialect word meaning 'die'. After Chaucer's time it acquired the specialized meaning 'die from lack of food'.]

171–2 **By God . . . youre liking** By God, I intend to tell you something that you are bound to enjoy, unless you are unreasonable [This double appeal, to God and to reason, suggests some of the strange contradictions in this character. In Chaucer's time, reason was not thought sufficient; humans needed faith in God as well.]

175 **am wont to** usually, or 'am in the habit of'

**winne** make money

176 **hoold youre pees!** be quiet, pay attention

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 Excerpt  
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THE PARDONER'S PROLOGUE AND TALE



*The Pardoner ends his prologue with a kind of manifesto declaring what he wants from life. He talks of the lengths he is prepared to go in order to get what he wants, and then asserts that his moral tale is something that, as rational people, they are bound to like.*

I wol noon of the apostles countrefete;  
 I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete,  
 Al were it yeven of the povereste page,  
 Or of the povereste widwe in a village,  
 Al sholde hir children sterve for famine. 165  
 Nay, I wol drinke licour of the vine,  
 And have a joly wenche in every toun.  
 But herkneth, lordinges, in conclusioun:  
 Youre liking is that I shal telle a tale.  
 Now have I dronke a draughte of corny ale, 170  
 By God, I hope I shal yow telle a thing  
 That shal by reson been at youre liking.  
 For though myself be a ful vicious man,  
 A moral tale yet I yow telle kan,  
 Which I am wont to preche for to winne. 175  
 Now hoold youre pees! my tale I wol biginne.'