# Introduction

*The Pardoner's Tale* is among those of *The Canterbury Tales* that have most often been extracted from the whole work and printed separately. It is right that this should be so, for it is certainly one of the finest of *The Canterbury Tales* and one of Chaucer's greatest works. The story itself, of three revellers who set out to kill Death and end by killing each other, is not original; nor are most of Chaucer's stories. This one is based on a folk tale, of oriental origin, which has been found in various versions all over Europe. But it is told with shattering intensity, and the emotion it arouses helps to convey a profound significance. It is turned into a story of damnation, in which we see the actors not simply judged by an outraged deity but recklessly damning themselves, throwing themselves headlong upon their fate. It is difficult to think of another work in medieval English literature in which the actual process of damnation is presented with such horrifying force.

Much of this force, and much of the individual colouring of the actual tale, is drawn from its teller. Nearly all of the tales told on the pilgrimage to Canterbury are related to their tellers in some way. Sometimes this is only a matter of general appropriateness, as with the Knight's chivalric romance, the Second Nun's saint's legend or the Nun's Priest's delightful beast fable. In other cases there is a closer relationship, so that the teller is hardly separable from the tale and its surrounding material. This is true of the Wife of Bath (whose prologue is over twice as long as her Tale), and perhaps especially of the Pardoner. Here there are such close connections among the portrait in *The General Prologue*, the Pardoner's intervention in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, his own Prologue, and his Tale and its aftermath as to indicate clearly the existence of a single underlying Chaucerian conception. Even here, though, we should not think in terms of modern notions of the dramatic monologue, in which every word reveals a complex but consistent personality. The medieval tendency is to see stories

as having an autonomous existence, much like natural objects, and to locate meanings in stories themselves rather than in the imagined consciousnesses of those who tell them. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer was moving towards a closer connection between narrative and narratorial consciousness, and there is nothing to stop us from wondering, if we choose, what *The Pardoner's Tale* would reveal about the Pardoner if we were to imagine it as his dream. On the other hand, there is little to encourage us to hear in the tale the distinctive 'voys . . . as smal as hath a goot' (*The General Prologue* 690) mentioned in *The General Prologue*, and the dramatic effect of 'And lo, sires, thus I preche' (629) depends on our having become so absorbed in the story as to forget temporarily the teller and his profession. There are, though, important links, to be discussed later in this Introduction, between the Pardoner's blasphemously self-destructive and damnable way of life and the themes of self-destruction, blasphemy and damnation in his Tale.

This way of life, as represented by Chaucer, is set firmly in the everyday world. The abuses of late-medieval religion are shown as they were really seen by contemporaries, only with a poet's penetration into the human experience that lies behind historical documents. The setting is everyday in another sense, too. The Tale is dramatically related to the pilgrimage: it begins with an altercation among the pilgrims and comes to an end with another altercation. We are led from this world to the very brink of the next and then brought safely back. *The Pardoner's Tale* is a work of Chaucer's high maturity, dating probably from the last decade of his life, the 1390s, and undoubtedly written specifically for inclusion in *The Canterbury Tales* and for the Pardoner to tell. It shows Chaucer's poetic art at its height, extending itself under the urgent pressure of experience to a superb virtuosity.

In this Introduction, after a brief summary of the work's content, we shall be concerned first with the Pardoner and his

historical background, and then, in order, with his Prologue, Tale and conclusion.

## Summary

1–42 The Host comments on *The Physician's Tale* and asks the Pardoner to tell the next. He agrees to tell a 'moral' tale.
43–167 The Pardoner demonstrates to the pilgrims his methods of preaching to ignorant people, and asserts that he preaches not for their salvation but for his own gain.
168–176 He asserts that, though 'vicious' himself, he can tell a moral tale, and promises to do so, but pauses first to take a drink at a tavern.
177–196 The Tale begins. There were some young people in Flanders who used to drink and blaspheme in a tavern.
197–211 He breaks off the Tale to preach against the debauchees' vices. First he deals with drunkenness.
212–262 Then gluttony.
263–302 Drunkenness again, illustrated by the *exempla* of Attila and Lemuel.
303–342 He preaches against gambling, illustrated by the *exempla* of 'Stilboun' and Demetrius.
343–374 He preaches against swearing.
375–424 He returns to the Tale. Three of the debauchees hear a corpse being carried past the tavern – that of a friend who has been killed by Death. They swear to seek out Death and kill him.
425–481 They meet an old man, who says that he wishes to die but cannot, and directs them down a crooked path to Death.
482–519 They find a heap of gold coins, and the 'worst' of them proposes that they should draw lots to decide which of them should go and fetch provisions, so that they can stay there till night and then carry away the gold in secret. The lot falls on the youngest, who departs for the town.

520–550 In his absence, one of the remaining two suggests to the other that they should kill the youngest on his return and then split the gold between the two of them.
551–592 Meanwhile, the youngest decides to kill the other two, buys some poison from an apothecary, borrows some bottles and puts the poison in two of them, filling the third with drink for himself. He returns to the gold.
593–608 The two others kill him, and then drink from one of the bottles of poison, and so die themselves.
609–632 The Pardoner exclaims against the sins and continues his demonstration of how he preaches for gain.
633–682 He turns to the pilgrims and invites them to make offerings in return for his absolution. The Host ought to begin. The Host rudely refuses and insults the Pardoner, but the Knight makes them kiss and the pilgrims ride on.

## The Pardoner

We first meet the Pardoner long before he begins on his Tale, in *The General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales*. There the 'nine-and-twenty' men and women who gather together at the Tabard Inn in Southwark before setting off on their pilgrimage to the shrine of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury are described at varying lengths. Some are dismissed with a mere mention of their presence or with a very brief description, but others are described in great detail. The Pardoner is among these last. His description, which is quoted in full after the Note on the text section, is 46 lines long. He is the last of all the pilgrims to be described, and he is placed in this position of emphasis as one of a pair. He and the Summoner, who is described at exactly equal length immediately before him, are presented as boon companions, riding together and singing in unison, 'Com hider, love, to me' (*The General Prologue* 674). This distinctly worldly song might seem inappropriate for two officers of the Church, but it expresses

accurately the nature of their devotion. Their hearts are in the world, and above all in the profit they can make for themselves out of their ecclesiastical function. This indeed is what we have come to expect of Chaucer's presentation of the Church: of the eight descriptions of ecclesiastical figures in *The General Prologue*, only one – that of the Parson – is unequivocally favourable, and that, in its generality and its reliance on denials of corruption ('He was a shepherde and *noght* a mercenarie' [*The General Prologue* 516]), seems to depict an ideal opposed to experience. The Summoner and the Pardoner are given far more detailed physical descriptions, the one red-faced and covered with hideous spots ('Of his visage children were aferd' [*The General Prologue* 630]), and the other smooth-chinned, dressed in a ghastly parody of fashion, but with eyes staring like a hare's. Together they make a horrifying pair, whose repellent outward appearance fully expresses their inner corruption. They have completely betrayed the trust placed in them by a Church which, in using them, is itself a traitor to its own ideals.

## Pardoners in the medieval Church

The function of a pardoner in the medieval Church will require some explanation. Punishments were imposed on members of the Church for their sins, and these 'penances' might take various forms, such as repeating prayers or psalms, fasting or other forms of self-mortification. Gradually the practice grew up of allowing sinners to exchange one form of punishment for another, and particularly of allowing them to contribute alms instead of performing a physical penance. By the fourteenth century the theory known as the Treasury of Grace had developed. According to this, the Church was the guardian of the merits of Christ, the Virgin and the saints. Their merits were more than enough to compensate for all the sins that mankind might commit, and so it was possible for the Church, as keeper of the Treasury, to distribute them among its members. Thus individual penance came to seem

unnecessary: all that was needed was true penitence and payment in money or goods. Thus the sinner would be dispensed from his penance, and the Church would obtain resources for carrying out good works.

Special officers were required for carrying out such exchanges: they were called *quaestores* in Latin, pardoners in English. They might be priests or monks, but they might also, like Chaucer's Pardoner, be laymen employed as professionals. Their work would be carefully regulated by the higher authorities of the Church; they would require written authorization, signed and sealed by a bishop or by the pope himself; they would be allowed to remit the punishments only of those who were truly penitent, and their gains would have to be handed over to their superiors. This is what pardoners had originally been, but, if we turn from this summary to the pardoner Chaucer describes, we find not a replica but an appalling parody.

Certain elements remain. A *quaestor* needed an episcopal licence, and Chaucer's Pardoner has not just one but several, with the seals of all possible authorities dangling from them:

> First I pronounce whennes that I come,
> And thanne my bulles shewe I, alle and some.
> 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.
> Bulles of popes and of cardinales,
> Of patriarkes and bishopes I shewe. (49–57)

He might possibly have had a genuine licence from 'oure lige lord', the local bishop, but only the very simple could expect him to be authorised as well by 'popes', 'cardinales', 'patriarkes' and 'bishopes'. These other documents must surely be fakes, intended

to dazzle the impressionable. The Pardoner is careful to point out that he can offer no help to those who have on their consciences sins so appalling that they have not dared to confess them:

> 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 yshriven 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 findeth him 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. (91–102)

But this apparent scrupulosity is really a lever for his own advantage, for naturally none of his audience will wish to admit publicly that their conscience is burdened in this way. Instead, they will all come rushing forward with their offerings simply to prove that they are not in mortal sin. Moreover, though the Pardoner reminds his audience that they must have confessed their 'sinne horrible' before he will release them from their penance, he goes on to claim that he will then *assoille* (absolve) them. He makes the claim more explicit at the end of his Tale, when he turns to his audience in order to exploit the story's effect on their emotions:

> Now, goode men, God foryeve yow youre trespas,
> And ware yow fro the sinne of avarice!
> Myn hooly pardoun may yow alle warice,
> So that ye offre nobles or sterlinges,
> Or elles silver broches, spoones, ringes.

Boweth youre heed under this hooly bulle!
Cometh up, ye wives, offreth of youre wolle!
Youre names I entre heer in my rolle anon;
Into the blisse of hevene shul ye gon.
I yow assoille by myn heigh power,
Yow that wol offre, as clene and eek as cleer
As ye were born. (618–29)

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. (651–4)

Clearly he is claiming the power to absolve sinners not only from the penance for their sins (*a poena*) but also from the sins themselves (*a culpa*). He is offering to *warice* (cure) them of the effect of sin, to restore them to the innocence of a newly born child, to send them straight to heaven at the moment of death; but these powers belonged only to a priest, not to a lay *quaestor*. The Pardoner's constant trick is to usurp the role of the priest and to exploit it for histrionic purposes – it is the role itself that he finds attractive and profitable, not the responsibilities that should go with it.

I stonde lyk a clerk in my pulpet, (105)

he says; and preaching is another of the priest's powers that he lays claim to. His whole offering to the pilgrims is in the form of a specimen sermon, with the Tale itself as an illustration of his text; but lay *quaestores* were in general specifically prohibited from preaching.

With the role of priest he combines that of medicine-man or witch-doctor. The trappings he makes most play with are spurious holy relics, with the power (as he says) to work miracles. Among

those mentioned in *The General Prologue* are the veil of the Blessed Virgin (actually a pillowcase) and a piece of the sail from St Peter's boat. Later we hear of the transparent cases

> Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones, (62)

which will heal and protect men and beasts, and even cure jealousy; of a mitten which will ensure a good crop to anyone who has put his hand in it; and of other relics, of unspecified power, available for kissing by the faithful if a suitable offering is made. All this is little different from a claim to magical powers. Though it does not take in Harry Bailly, the Host, it is evidently effective among the Pardoner's usual audiences, for he claims to make a hundred marks a year by his 'craft'. Here a last difference from the *quaestor* as he should be emerges. The true *quaestor* collects money for the Church, but the Pardoner keeps all he gains for his own profit, and indeed boasts of the fact. The constant theme of his preaching is

> ware yow fro the sinne of avarice! (619)

but avarice is his own ruling passion. He is aware of the paradox and calls it constantly to our attention.

## Evidence about fourteenth-century pardoners

How are we to explain this vast difference between the *quaestor* according to the canons of the Church and Chaucer's Pardoner? We may feel tempted to suppose that Chaucer was simply inventing an anti-ecclesiastical satire to shock his audience and make them laugh. But historical evidence shows that in the Pardoner he has drawn an accurate picture of the *quaestor* as he really was in the fourteenth century. The original idea of the office had become utterly corrupted, and historical warrant can be found for every aspect of the corruption that Chaucer depicts.

In 1390, Pope Boniface IX issued a letter in which he exposed some of the very abuses presented by Chaucer. There are false pardoners, he says, who 'affirm that they are sent by us or by the legates or nuncios of the apostolic see, and that they have been given a mission . . . to receive money for us and the Roman Church, and they go about the country under these pretexts'. Chaucer's Pardoner similarly claims to come from Rome, and the pilgrim Chaucer of *The General Prologue* reports his claim unquestioningly:

> With him ther rood a gentil PARDONER
> Of Rouncivale, his freend and his compeer,
> That streight was comen fro the court of Rome.
> (*The General Prologue* 671–3)

> His walet lay biforn him in his lappe,
> Bretful of pardoun, comen from Rome al hoot.
> (*The General Prologue* 688–9)

The Pardoner is presented not only as having come from Rome but as being 'of Rouncivale' – that is, as being employed to collect alms by the Chapel and Hospital of Our Lady of Rouncivalle at Charing Cross, just outside London. He could really have held this position, but there are grounds for suspicion because in the 1380s warrants were issued to arrest persons claiming to be collecting alms for the Rouncivalle Hospital but converting their receipts to their own use. Once again Chaucer is following historical fact. Boniface adds that these false *quaestores* 'proclaim to the faithful and simple people the real or pretended authorizations which they have received; and, irreverently abusing those which are real, in pursuit of infamous and hateful gain, they carry further their impudence by mendaciously attributing to themselves false and pretended authorizations of this kind'. We have just seen how Chaucer's Pardoner displays his many 'bulles' in this way; and