

Chaucer's Pardoner: The Fool of *The Canterbury Tales*

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is filled with characters that share the same qualities as Shakespearean characters. Both of these famous authors explored an array of traits that earn each character a label, such as the moody one, the ironic one, the foolish one, the petty one, and the immoral one. They were also able to show that not every character fits exclusively into the one category the reader may assume they do—and that the characters they interact with certainly do not see their depth, either. The Pardoner's part in *The Canterbury Tales* forces the reader to question the Pardoner's true intentions in his prologue, tale, and epilogue. It seems he is just a hypocrite who relishes in his own irony. Is that really all there is to him? In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Feste is just Lady Olivia's Fool who can get himself out of trouble with his clever wordplay. The reader finds that this is not really the case, though, as foolish Feste turns out to be one of the wittiest characters in the play. Could it be possible that the Pardoner is just the Feste of his own story?

In his prologue, the Pardoner explains that all of his sermons follow the topic of "*Radix malorum est cupiditas*" ("The root of evils is cupidity [greed]"). Immediately after stating this, he admits that he himself is extremely greedy. He admits that all of his relics are fake, he accepts money in exchange for pardoning people, and that he only preaches for the wealth the job provides him. He even goes so far to say that he'd happily take money from a poor boy when he states, "I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete, / Al were it yeven of the povereste page" (lines 448-449). His entire prologue

is full of contradictions: the one preaching about greed is the one with the ability to pardon those who commit the sin, but he is also the guiltiest sinner among them. All of this leads the reader to wonder why a salesman would admit his sinful tricks to his own customers. The Pardoner is smart enough to know that his title gives him the ability to get away with such a thing. He mentions that it means nothing that his relics are not real, for as long as he is the one selling them the customer will believe in it. The buyer of the relic will give it credit for anything good that comes after its purchase. Even if the Pardoner himself were to tell a past client that his or her relic is fake, the owner will more than likely shrug it off due to his or her original belief. *If it's fake, why did my business flourish after I prayed with it?* Their belief in the false will trump hearing the truth. Regardless of the salesman's confession that they are useless, a relic still has value so long as the Pardoner's title is associated with it.

This can be compared to the fact that Feste can get away with saying whatever he wants, simply because of his title as the Fool. People know his occupation, so they understand there is no need to look further into what he says or the meaning behind his words. For example, Feste is able to make fun of Duke Orsino without anyone challenging him for it. In Act 2, Scene 4, Orsino asks Feste to sing the same sad song they have heard from him before. Feste complies with pleasure—after all, it is part of his job. When the song is over, Orsino pays him and asks for permission to dismiss him. The first part of Feste's adieu is, "Now the melancholy god protect thee, and the tailor make thy doublet of changeable taffeta, for thy mind is a very opal" (2.4, lines 72-74). The melancholy god is Saturn, who was thought to control the melancholic. Feste is making a direct stab at the fact that Orsino is always sad and moping around. Having a

doublet that is made of changeable taffeta would mean having a jacket that appears to change colors by the angle you look at it, and an opal is a gemstone that shimmers different colors. This all symbolizes Feste making fun of Orsino's erratic mood swings and constant changing of his mind. The second part of his goodbye is, "I would have men of such constancy put to sea, that their business might be everything and their intent everywhere, for that's it that always makes a good voyage of nothing. Farewell" (2.4, lines 74-77). This is a jab at Orsino having no real destination, and therefore he lacks direction. Feste wishes that people who are lacking direction could be the ones out on the rough seas, because someone who has no destination does not mind when their direction changes. The Fool has cleverly pointed out all of the Duke's major flaws. Feste's goodbye is accepted with no objections, though, because a Fool's statements are considered inadequate. Feste's title as the Fool ensures that no one will take what he says seriously, therefore no one will object when he says something that is actually insulting to his superiors. If someone were to respond to what he said, they would be admitting either that they agree with his insults or that they consider themselves to be equivalent to a Fool. A Fool's comments do not deserve to be analyzed, and those who believe otherwise must think of the Fool as their equal.

In his tale, the Pardoner tells a story about a group of young men whose greed ultimately leads to their demise. It is meant to scare the people listening by showing the disaster that can come from committing the sin of greed. In his epilogue, he tells one of his typical sermons: "Com up, ye wyves, 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. And lo,

sires, thus I preche” (lines 910-915). To summarize, he is reminding the pilgrims that he has the power to pardon them of their sins and ensure their acceptance into heaven when they die, as long as they pay him to do so. The Pardoner is clever with his timing—he just finished a tale about men dying in sin and never being pardoned for it, which means that they all went to hell. He follows with, “But sires, o word forgat I in my tale. / I have relikes and pardoun in my male” (lines 919-920). The salesman describes the relics in his possession and states that they are for sale if anyone would like to buy some. This announcement is confusing to the reader, seeing as how the Pardoner was just bragging about making money off of the fake relics. What has given this man the ability to trust in his title to this extent?

A number of things contribute to the Pardoner’s arrogance. Advertising his products after admitting to their illegitimacy may seem risky, but the fact of the matter is that his actions have been risky from the start. There was never any “proof” that these relics were real, the buyers simply have faith in the Pardoner. When it comes to death and the afterlife, people are willing to buy into anything that will put their own mind at ease. The Pardoner is extremely corrupt, but people are willing to overlook that fact if it means there is a chance he can help them get on god’s good side. There is an article by Rod Dreher called “Priest: Here’s Why Bishops Cover Up Abuse” on *The American Conservative* website that provides some explanation for this. Dreher quotes an anonymous Roman Catholic priest saying, “Being a priest is thought to bestow a certain dignity and grace on a person, and that grace objectively must be safeguarded. The world is objectively better off with more priests than less. So, even if a man is totally corrupt, the idea is that he’s still a priest, and that must be held onto at all costs.” Even if he is a

fraudulent man, his religious title confirms that the sacraments he offers are still good. The Pardoner has been using this fact to his advantage. He can admit to selling worthless items to these people and still leave the pilgrimage knowing he will always be successful. He can say and do whatever he pleases because, at the end of the day, he knows a Pardoner can get away with it.

The Pardoner's confidence in his title giving him immunity can be compared to that of Feste's. In Act 1, Scene 5, the audience is introduced to Feste and learns that he has been absent lately—a luxury the Lady's Fool should not have, yet Feste is not worried about there being any consequences. Lady Olivia enters and announces, "Take the fool away" (1.5, line 34). With no hesitation, Feste replies with, "Do you not hear, fellows? Take away the lady" (1.5, line 35). Then follows witty banter between the two, with all of the wit coming from Feste's side of the conversation. He has a charming way with words that gives him not only the ability to explain himself, but also the nerve to turn the conversation upside down on his own Lady Olivia. It seems outrageous when Feste asks if he can *prove* to Lady Olivia that between the two of them, she is the fool. It is even more outrageous that she allows him to:

OLIVIA Well, sir, for want of other idleness, I'll bide your proof.
FESTE Good madonna, why mournest thou?
OLIVIA Good fool, for my brother's death.
FESTE I think his soul is in hell, madonna.
OLIVIA I know his soul is in heaven, fool.
FESTE The more fool, madonna, to mourn for your brother's soul being in heaven. Take away the fool, gentlemen. (1.5, lines 59-67)

The reader may think this is a risky conversation for a Fool to have with his superior. However, he has made his point. Lady Olivia is mourning the fact that her brother is no longer alive on earth. Feste points out that religion has taught them that good souls go to

heaven and heaven is a paradise. Feste concludes that if she is sure her brother is in heaven, it is foolish of her to be sad that her loved one is now in a better place. It seems like such a simple thought process to relieve some of Lady Olivia's grief, yet Feste is the only one who could say it to her. Sure enough, Feste does not receive punishment for his actions, nor for the bold conversation. How did the Fool talk his way out of trouble, and in that fashion? Feste does not have the arrogance that the Pardoner does, but he does have the same confidence. If a Fool says something out of line, it is acceptable simply because he is a Fool. Feste is a smart man, and his intellectual thought and articulateness are not the only things that prove it. He knows that his title as the Fool means people do not take what he says seriously. He chooses to use this to his advantage by saying what is actually on his mind. A Fool could ignore the opportunity to express what they really think, but Feste chooses to exercise the immunity his title gives him every chance that he has.

The epilogue of the Pardoner's performance has been analyzed in numerous scholarly articles. As previously discussed, the Pardoner is well aware that his title allows him to get away with his corrupt actions. However, it is hard to believe that the Pardoner sincerely thinks the pilgrims will purchase his relics after he admitted they are fake. It seems unlikely that he is *that* confident in his title's influence, and this makes the reader speculate some other explanation for bringing his sales pitch up again.

Additionally, his intention is unclear when he calls out the Host by saying, "I rede that oure Hoost heere shal bigynne, / For he is moost envoluped in synne. / Com forth, sire Hoost, and offre first anon, / And thou shalt kisse my relikes everychon" (lines 941-944).

What was the Pardoner trying to accomplish in his epilogue?

George Lyman Kittredge, a former Harvard University professor (from 1888 to 1936) and influential literary critic, wrote an analytical article titled “Chaucer’s Pardoner.” Kittredge suggests that the Pardoner’s attempt to sell his relics after admitting they are fake is actually his defense mechanism against feeling deep emotions. Kittredge proposes that the Pardoner was affected by his own tale when he asks, “May we not believe that the beautiful and impressive story that he has just told... has moved even him, though he has told it a thousand times before in the way of his profession?” (Kittredge 832). His tale is about the results of greed, which is a sin the Pardoner often commits, so it appears possible that the tale brought up some unwanted emotions of his own. Kittredge’s theory is supported when the Pardoner admits that Christ’s pardon is more important than his when he says, “And Jesu Crist that is oure soules leche / So graunte yow his pardoun to receyve. / For that is best. I wol yow nat deceyve” (Chaucer lines 916-918). For the first time, the Pardoner seems to be preaching from his heart. The act is fleeting, though, as he quickly attempts to abandon his emotions by bringing up his sales pitch again.

According to Kittredge, the Pardoner was so surprised by his unusual feelings that he believed the extreme act of retelling his spiel was the only way to cover them up. There is no way he could have actually expected anyone to buy the relics, as it would “imply superhuman folly on the speaker’s part to try to deceive the pilgrims when he has just warned them against his own deceit” (Kittredge 832). The Pardoner was so desperate to escape his emotions that he went to the extent of insulting the Host. He was determined to stray as far as possible from the feelings he had accidentally stirred up. The Host responds angrily, suggesting that he should cut off the Pardoner’s testicles and

keep those in place of buying any relics. The embarrassing statement fills the Pardoner with rage, yet he remains silent. This further supports Kittredge's theory because "so fluent a man as the Pardoner, if he got angry, would have plenty of words in which to vent his wrath" (832-833). He is suggesting that the Pardoner could not handle so many emotions at once, and was therefore left speechless. George Lyman Kittredge believed the Pardoner's attempt to sell relics to people who already knew they were fake was not an earnest one, but actually just a means to distract himself from the intense emotions he was feeling.

While the Pardoner was not expecting to be successful in selling his relics to the viewers of his performance, the suggestion that strong emotions had an impact on him is uncharacteristic. The more plausible explanation is that the Pardoner was simply further exemplifying how his tricks work: he tells a sermon that portrays extreme consequences for people who sin, then he presents his relics knowing that he has scared listeners into thinking they need to buy them. The Pardoner already knows that this routine is a success and he has no problem confessing that to these people. The pilgrims have already let him get away with being a greedy conman, since they allowed him to continue with his tale after his confession. He sees no harm in telling some people about his tricks because he knows that a Pardoner will always have plenty of willing customers. Though the Pardoner does not think his title is powerful enough to have these people knowingly pay for fake products, he knows that his title will still have its influence long after this pilgrimage.

The Pardoner insulting the Host has a simple explanation, and it does not have anything to do with him feeling extremely emotional. The simple explanation is that he

was so caught up in his own spiel that he got carried away. He has been getting away with this for so long that he took this moment of revealing his tricks a little too far. It is likely that this was the first time he confessed his sinful behavior and he got wrapped up in the new experience. The Pardoner also did not consider that the Host was upset by the revelation of his own gullibility, so the comment made towards him was enough to push him past his breaking point. This would also explain why he falls silent with rage when the Host insults him back, because someone responding to what he was saying caught him off guard. The Pardoner brings up selling his fake relics again with no expectations of any response from the others on the pilgrimage.

The Pardoner's actions can be justified with the same reasoning that Feste's can. From afar, the Pardoner seems like nothing more than a hypocrite who is meant to be hated by the reader. Chaucer would never make a character's analysis that easy to conclude, though. These characters deserve to be explored, especially if the easiest explanation to their actions does not make much sense. By finding even the smallest similarities between the actions of characters with different labels, it is possible to see them from a new perspective. The reader can seemingly humanize the inhumane Pardoner by comparing him to a character audiences love—the Shakespearean fool.

Citations

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