

Modern Critical

# INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

## Geoffrey Chaucer's The Pardoner's Tale



---

*Modern Critical Interpretations*

---

Geoffrey Chaucer's  
The Pardoner's Tale

*Edited and with an introduction by*

Harold Bloom

*Sterling Professor of the Humanities  
Yale University*



---

*Chelsea House Publishers* ◇ 1988

NEW YORK ◇ NEW HAVEN ◇ PHILADELPHIA

---

© 1988 by Chelsea House Publishers, a division  
of Chelsea House Educational Communications, Inc.

Introduction © 1988 by Harold Bloom

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be  
reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means  
without the written permission of the publisher.

Printed and bound in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum  
requirements of the American National Standard for  
Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Geoffrey Chaucer's *The pardoner's tale* / edited and with an  
introduction by Harold Bloom.

p. cm. — (Modern critical interpretations)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

Summary: A collection of nine critical essays on Chaucer's "The  
Pardoner's Tale" arranged in chronological order of publication.

ISBN 0-87754-906-0 (alk. paper) : \$24.50

1. Chaucer, Geoffrey, d. 1400. *Pardoner's tale*. [1. Chaucer,  
Geoffrey, d. 1400. *Pardoner's tale*. 2. English literature—History  
and criticism.] I. Bloom, Harold. II. Series.

PR1868.P3G46 1988

821'.1—dc19

87-22193

CIP

AC

## Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best modern critical interpretations of the Pardoner's Tale from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological sequence of their original publication. I am grateful to Bruce Covey for his assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction meditates upon Chaucer as Shakespeare's truest precursor in the representation of moral and emotional change brought about by and in a figure such as the Pardoner, who reacts to what he himself has said. Ian Bishop begins the chronological sequence of criticism with a consideration of the twofold narrative art of the Pardoner's Tale, while Penelope Curtis demonstrates how the tale, more than any other, "articulates the hidden principle in its teller's nature."

In two brief but crucial exegeses, the late Donald R. Howard emphasizes the uncertainty of the manuscript text, and then questions the "naturalness" of the Host's fierce response to the Pardoner in the epilogue. Warren Ginsberg, treating the tale as "sermon," studies the old man as a figure of avarice, after which H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., gives an overview contrasting the Pardoner's explicit exegesis of his tale with Chaucer's implicit interpretation.

In Monica E. McAlpine's discussion, the significance of the Pardoner's supposed homosexuality is expounded, while Robert P. Merrix analyzes the structure of the sermon in the Pardoner's Tale. R. A. Shoaf, in this volume's final essay, reads the Pardoner's Tale as an instance of the New Testament assertion that the letter, or literal reading, kills.

# Contents

Editor's Note / vii

Introduction / 1

HAROLD BLOOM

The Narrative Art of the Pardoner's Tale / 11

IAN BISHOP

The Pardoner's "Jape" / 23

PENELOPE CURTIS

The "Floating" Fragment / 43

DONALD R. HOWARD

"Modernizing" Chaucer / 49

DONALD R. HOWARD

Preaching and Avarice in the Pardoner's Tale / 63

WARREN GINSBERG

"Synne Horrible": The Pardoner's Exegesis  
of His Tale, and Chaucer's / 79

H. MARSHALL LEICESTER, JR.

The Pardoner's Homosexuality  
and How It Matters / 103

MONICA E. MCALPINE

Sermon Structure in the Pardoner's Tale / 125

ROBERT P. MERRIX

The Pardoner and the Word of Death / 139

R. A. SHOAF

**THIS IS PAGE v**

Chronology / 159

Contributors / 163

Bibliography / 165

Acknowledgments / 169

Index / 171

# Introduction

## I

Chaucer is one of those great writers who defeat almost all criticism, an attribute he shares with Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Tolstoy. There are writers of similar magnitude—Dante, Milton, Wordsworth, Proust—who provoke inspired commentary (amidst much more that is humdrum) but Chaucer, like his few peers, has such mimetic force that the critic is disarmed, and so is left either with nothing or with everything still to do. Much criticism devoted to Chaucer is merely historical, or even theological, as though Chaucer ought to be read as a supreme version of medieval Christianity. But I myself am not a Chaucer scholar, and so I write this introduction and edit this volume only as a general critic of literature, and as a common reader of Chaucer.

Together with Shakespeare and a handful of the greater novelists in English, Chaucer carries the language further into unthinkable triumphs of the representation of reality than ought to be possible. The Pardoner and the Wife of Bath, like Hamlet and Falstaff, call into question nearly every mode of criticism that is now fashionable. What sense does it make to speak of the Pardoner or the Wife of Bath as being only a structure of tropes, or to say that any tale they tell has suspended its referential aspect almost entirely? The most Chaucerian and best of all Chaucer critics, E. Talbot Donaldson, remarks of the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* that:

The extraordinary quality of the portraits is their vitality, the illusion that each gives the reader that the character being described is not a fiction but a person, so that it seems as if the poet has not created but merely recorded.

As a critical remark, this is the indispensable starting point for reading Chaucer, but contemporary modes of interpretation deny that such an illusion of vitality has any value. Last June, I walked through a park in Frankfurt, West Germany, with a good friend who is a leading French theorist of interpretation. I had been in Frankfurt to lecture on Freud; my friend had just arrived to give a talk on Joyce's *Ulysses*. As we walked, I remarked that Joyce's Leopold Bloom seemed to me the most sympathetic and affectionate person I had encountered in any fiction. My friend, annoyed and perplexed, replied that Poldy was *not* a person, and that my statement therefore was devoid of sense. Though not agreeing, I reflected silently that the difference between my friend and myself could not be reconciled by anything I could say. To him, *Ulysses* was not even persuasive rhetoric, but was a system of tropes. To me, it was above all else the personality of Poldy. My friend's deconstructionism, I again realized, was only another formalism, a very tough-minded and skeptical formalism. But all critical formalism reaches its limits rather quickly when fictions are strong enough. L. C. Knights famously insisted that Lady Macbeth's children were as meaningless a critical issue as the girlhood of Shakespeare's heroines, a view in which Knights followed E. E. Stoll who, whether he knew it or not, followed E. A. Poe. To Knights, Falstaff "is not a man, but a choric commentary." The paradox, though, is that this "choric commentary" is more vital than we are, which teaches us that Falstaff is neither trope nor commentary, but a representation of what a human being *might* be, if that person were even wittier than Oscar Wilde, and even more turbulently high-spirited than Zero Mostel. Falstaff, Poldy, the Wife of Bath: these are what Shelley called "forms more real than living man."

Immensely original authors (and they are not many) seem to have no precursors, and so seem to be children without parents. Shakespeare is the overwhelming instance, since he swallowed up his immediate precursor, Christopher Marlowe, whereas Chaucer charmingly claims fictive authorities while being immensely indebted to actual French and Italian writers and to Boccaccio in particular. Yet it may be that Chaucer is as much Shakespeare's great original as he was Spenser's. What is virtually without precedent in Shakespeare is that his characters *change themselves by pondering upon what they themselves say*. In Homer and the Bible and Dante, we do not find sea-changes in particular persons brought about by those persons' own language, that is, by the differences that individual

diction and tone make as speech produces further speech. But the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath are well along the mimetic way that leads to Hamlet and Falstaff. What they say to others, and to themselves, partly reflects what they already are, but partly engenders also what they will be. And perhaps even more subtly and forcefully, Chaucer suggests ineluctable transformations going on in the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath through the effect of the language of the tales they choose to tell.

Something of this shared power of Chaucer and Shakespeare accounts for the failures of criticism to apprehend them, particularly when criticism is formalist, or too given over to the study of codes, conventions, and what is now called "language" but might more aptly be called applied linguistics, or even psycholinguistics. A critic addicted to what is now called the "priority of language over meaning" will not be much given to searching for meaning in persons, real or imagined. But persons, at once real *and* imagined, are the fundamental basis of the experiential art of Chaucer and Shakespeare. Chaucer and Shakespeare know, beyond knowing, the labyrinthine ways in which the individual self is always a picnic of selves. "The poets were there before me," Freud remarked, and perhaps Nietzsche ought to have remarked the same.

## II

Talbot Donaldson rightly insists, against the patristic exegetes, that Chaucer was primarily a comic writer. This need never be qualified, if we also judge the Shakespeare of the two parts of *Henry the Fourth* to be an essentially comic writer, as well as Fielding, Dickens, and Joyce. "Comic writer" here means something very comprehensive, with the kind of "comedy" involved being more in the mode, say, of Balzac than that of Dante, deeply as Chaucer was indebted to Dante notwithstanding. If the Pardoner is fundamentally a comic figure, why then, so is Vautrin. Balzac's hallucinatory "realism," a cosmos in which every janitor is a genius, as Baudelaire remarked, has its affinities with the charged vitalism of Chaucer's fictive world. The most illuminating exegete of the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* remains William Blake, whose affinities with Chaucer were profound. This is the Blake classed by Yeats, in *A Vision*, with Rabelais and Aretino; Blake as an heroic vitalist whose motto was "Exuberance is Beauty," which is an apt Chaucerian slogan also. I will grant that

the Pardoner's is a negative exuberance, and yet Blake's remarks show us that the Wife of Bath's exuberance has its negative aspects also.

Comic writing so large and so profound hardly seems to admit a rule for literary criticism. Confronted by the Wife of Bath or Falstaff or the suprahuman Poldy, how shall the critic conceive her or his enterprise? What is there left to be done? I grimace to think of the Wife of Bath and Falstaff deconstructed, or of having their life-augmenting contradictions subjected to a Marxist critique. The Wife of Bath and difference (or even "differance")? Falstaff and surplus value? Poldy and the dogma that there is nothing outside the text? Hamlet and Lacan's Mirror Phase? The heroic, the vitalizing pathos of a fully human vision, brought about through a supermimesis not of essential nature, but of human possibility, demands a criticism more commensurate with its scope and its color. It is a matter of aesthetic tact, certainly, but as Oscar Wilde taught us, that makes it truly a moral matter as well. What devitalizes the Wife of Bath, or Falstaff, or Poldy, tends at last to reduce us also.

### III

That a tradition of major poetry goes from Chaucer to Spenser and Milton and on through them to Blake and Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, Browning and Tennyson, and Whitman, Yeats, and Stevens, D. H. Lawrence and Hart Crane, is now widely accepted as a critical truth. The myth of a Metaphysical countertradition, from Donne and Marvell through Dryden, Pope, and Byron on to Hopkins, Eliot, and Pound, has been dispelled and seen as the Eliotic invention it truly was. Shakespeare is too large for any tradition, and so is Chaucer. One can wonder if even the greatest novelists in the language—Richardson, Austen, George Eliot, Dickens, Henry James, and the Mark Twain of *Huckleberry Finn* (the one true rival to *Moby-Dick* and *Leaves of Grass* as the American book or Bible), or Conrad, Lawrence, and Faulkner in this century—can approach Shakespeare and Chaucer in the astonishing art of somehow creating fictions that are more human than we generally are. Criticism, perhaps permanently ruined by Aristotle's formalism, has had little hope of ever accurately describing this art. Aristophanes, Plato, and Longinus are apter models for a criticism more adequate to Chaucer and to Shakespeare. Attacking Euripides, Aristophanes, as it were, attacks Chaucer and Shakespeare in a true prolepsis, and Plato's war

against Homer, his attack upon mimesis, prophesies an unwaged war upon Chaucer and Shakespeare. Homer and Euripides after all simply are not the mimetic scandal that is constituted by Chaucer and Shakespeare; the *inwardness* of the Pardoner and Hamlet is of a different order from that of Achilles and Medea. Freud himself does not catch up to Chaucer and Shakespeare; he gets as far as Montaigne and Rousseau, which indeed is a long journey into the interior. But the Pardoner *is* the interior and even Iago, even Goneril and Regan, Cornwall and Edmund, do not give us a fiercer sense of intolerable resonance on the way down and out. Donaldson subtly observes that “it is the Pardoner’s particular tragedy that, except in church, every one can see through him at a glance.” The profound phrase here is “except in church.” What happens to, or better yet, *within* the Pardoner when he preaches in church? Is that not parallel to asking what happens within the dying Edmund when he murmurs, “Yet Edmund was beloved,” and thus somehow is moved to make his belated, futile attempt to save Cordelia and Lear? Are there any critical codes or methods that could possibly help us to sort out the Pardoner’s more-than-Dostoevskian intermixture of supernatural faith and preternatural chicanery? Will semiotics or even Lacanian psycholinguistics anatomize Edmund for us, let alone Regan?

Either we become experiential critics when we read Chaucer and Shakespeare, or in too clear a sense we never read them at all. “Experiential” here necessarily means humane observation both of others and of ourselves, which leads to testing such observations in every context that indisputably is relevant. Longinus is the ancestor of such experiential criticism, but its masters are Samuel Johnson, Hazlitt and Emerson, Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde. A century gone mad on method has given us no critics to match these, nor are they likely to come again soon, though we still have Northrop Frye and Kenneth Burke, their last legitimate descendants.

#### IV

Mad on method, we have turned to rhetoric, and so much so that the best of us, the late Paul de Man, all but urged us to identify literature with rhetoric, so that criticism perhaps would become again the rhetoric of rhetoric, rather than a Burkean rhetoric of motives, or a Fryean rhetoric of desires. Expounding the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, Talbot Donaldson points to “the enormous rhetorical

elaboration of the telling” and is moved to a powerful insight into experiential criticism:

Rhetoric here is regarded as the inadequate defense that mankind erects against an inscrutable reality; rhetoric enables man at best to regard himself as a being of heroic proportions—like Achilles, or like Chauntecleer—and at worst to maintain the last sad vestiges of his dignity (as a rooster Chauntecleer is carried in the fox’s mouth, but as a hero he rides on his back), rhetoric enables man to find significance both in his desires and in his fate, and to pretend to himself that the universe takes him seriously. And rhetoric has a habit, too, of collapsing in the presence of simple common sense.

Yet rhetoric, as Donaldson implies, if it is Chaucer’s rhetoric in particular, can be a life-enhancing as well as a life-protecting defense. Here is the heroic pathos of the Wife of Bath, enlarging existence even as she sums up its costs in one of those famous Chaucerian passages that herald Shakespearean exuberances to come:

But Lord Crist, whan that it remembreth me  
 Upon my youthe and on my jolitee,  
 It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote—  
 Unto this day it dooth myn herte boote  
 That I have had my world as in my time.  
 But age, allas, that al wol envenime,  
 Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith—  
 Lat go, farewel, the devel go therwith!  
 The flour is goon, ther is namore to telle:  
 The bren as I best can now moste I selle;  
 But yit to be right merye wol I fonde.

(*WBP*, ll. 475–85, E. T. Donaldson, 2d ed.)

The defense against time, so celebrated as a defiance of time’s revenges, is the Wife’s fierce assertion also of the will to live at whatever expense. Rhetorically, the center of the passage is in the famously immense reverberation of her great cry of exultation and loss, “That I have had my world as in my time,” where the double “my” is decisive, yet the “have had” falls away in a further intimation of mortality. Like Falstaff, the Wife is a grand trope of pathos, of life defending itself against every convention that would

throw us into death-in-life. Donaldson wisely warns us that “pathos, however, must not be allowed to carry the day,” and points to the coarse vigor of the Wife’s final benediction to the tale she has told:

And Jesu Crist us sende  
 Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fresshe abedde—  
 And grace t’overbide hem that we wedde.  
 And eek I praye Jesu shorte hir lives  
 That nought wol be governed by hir wives,  
 And olde and angry nigardes of dispence—  
 God sende hem soone a verray pestilence!  
(WBT, ll. 402–8)

Blake feared the Wife of Bath because he saw in her what he called the Female Will incarnate. By the Female Will, Blake meant the will of the natural woman *or* the natural man, a prolepsis perhaps of Schopenhauer’s rapacious Will to Live or Freud’s “frontier concept” of the drive. Chaucer, I think, would not have quarreled with such an interpretation, but he would have scorned Blake’s dread of the natural will or Schopenhauer’s horror of its rapacity. Despite every attempt to assimilate him to a poetry of belief, Chaucer actually surpasses even Shakespeare as a celebrant of the natural heart, while like Shakespeare being beyond illusions concerning the merely natural. No great poet was less of a dualist than Chaucer was, and nothing makes poetry more difficult for critics, because all criticism is necessarily dualistic.

The consolation for critics and readers is that Chaucer and Shakespeare, Cervantes and Tolstoy, persuade us finally that everything remains to be done in the development of a criticism dynamic and comprehensive enough to represent such absolute writers without reduction or distortion. No codes or methods will advance the reading of Chaucer. The critic is thrown back upon herself or himself, and upon the necessity to become a vitalizing interpreter in the service of an art whose burden is only to carry more life forward into a time without boundaries.

## V

Chaucer, writing at our American moment, would have written “The TV Evangelist’s Tale,” rather than “The Pardoner’s Tale.” Alas, we have no contemporary Chaucer to give us “The TV Evangelist’s

Prologue” and “The TV Evangelist’s Epilogue,” for which so much superb material has been provided in recent revelations. That is the context, aside from all historicisms, old and new, in which Chaucer’s Pardoner should be seen. He is at once obscenely formidable and a laughable charlatan, thus arousing in us ambivalences akin to those provoked by certain eminent preachers on our home screens.

In the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* we first encounter the Pardoner as the Summoner’s lustful companion, boisterously singing the tavern air, “Come hither, love, to me,” and producing, with his Summoner friend, a sound surpassing the trumpet’s cry. With his wax-like yellow hair, hanging like a lank of flax, thin and fine, and his piercing high voice, and his lack of beard, the Pardoner is the very type of the eunuch. We understand then why he hangs close to the authentically obscene Summoner, so as to pick up some sexual coloring, as it were. Beneath the overcompensation of lustful behavior, which fools nobody, the Pardoner is dangerously close to being an emblem of death, like the uncanny old man of his tale. The association of castration, blindness, and death, so crucial in Freud, is already a given in Chaucer, just as the strangely authentic power of the Pardoner’s sermon, which transcends his overt tricksterism, testifies to the weird prolepsis of Dostoevsky in the *Canterbury Tales*. A professional hypocrite who yet can invoke the terror of eternity, truly despite himself, the Pardoner is the most powerful representation of depravity we can find in English before the creation of Shakespeare’s Iago and Edmund. Even Talbot Donaldson underestimates, I think, the Pardoner’s depth of self-destructiveness:

But the Pardoner’s secret is, of course, a secret only to himself: at any rate Chaucer the pilgrim guessed it at once. But as long as the secret remains unspoken the Pardoner dwells securely in his own delusion, so that the secret remains valid for him. Yet at the end of his frightening story he wantonly imperils—and destroys—the fragile structure on which his self-confidence depends. Whatever his reasons—avarice, good-fellowship, humor—he concludes his sermon with an offer to sell his pardon to the pilgrims even after all he has told about his own fraudulence. Ironically he picks the worst possible victim, that rough, manly man who might be supposed to have a natural antipathy for the unmasculine Pardoner. The insult to the Host’s intelligence is the first and last failure of the

Pardoner's intelligence, for the Host's violently obscene reaction reveals the Pardoner's secret. Thereupon the man whose clever tongue has seemed to give him control of every situation is reduced to furious silence.

I do not think that "avarice, good-fellowship, humor" are the only reasons why the Pardoner so brazenly insults Harry Bailly, the most likely of all his listeners to give the brutal and inevitable riposte. Moved by the extraordinary intensity of his own tale-telling, the Pardoner achieves a kind of vertigo that mixes pride in his own swindling with something dangerously authentic out of the supernatural order of grace:

O cursed sinne of alle cursednesse!  
 O traitours homicide, O wikkednesse!  
 O glotonye, luxure, and hasardrye!  
 Thou blasphemour of Crist with vilainye  
 And othes grete of usage and of pride!  
 Allas, mankinde, how may it bitide  
 That to thy Creatour which that thee wroughte,  
 And with his precious herte blood thee boughte,  
 Thou art so fals and so unkinde, allas?  
 Now goode men, God foryive you youre trespass,  
 And ware you fro the sinne of avarice:  
 Myn holy pardon may you alle warice—  
 So that ye offre nobles or sterlinges,  
 Or elles silver brooches, spoones, ringes.  
 Boweth your heed under this holy bulle!  
 Cometh up, ye wives, offreth of youre wolle!  
 Youre name I entre here in my rolle: anoon  
 Into the blisse of hevene shul ye goon.  
 I you assoile by myn heigh power—  
 Ye that wol offre—as clene and eek as cleer  
 As ye were born.—And lo, sires, thus I preche.  
 And Jesu Crist that is oure soules leeche  
 So graunte you his pardon to receive,  
 For that is best—I wol you nat deceive.

(PT, ll. 567–90)

A desperate good-fellowship and a kind of gallows humor certainly are present in those closing lines. What is also present is a sense that the Pardoner has been carried away, and by more than his tale's strength or his own rough eloquence as a preacher. A kind of

madness or enthusiasm takes possession of him and drives him to the social suicide that Freud would have regarded as “moral masochism,” the need for punishment due to an unconscious sense of guilt, perhaps even a retroactive self-recognition that might account for his emasculate condition. The drive for destruction again turns inward and rages against the self, so that in courting a kind of social death the Pardoner receives premonitions of the spiritual death he has earned. That perhaps explains the outrageousness of the Pardoner’s address to his fellow-pilgrims:

It is an honour to everich that is heer  
 That ye mowe have a suffisant pardoner  
 T’assoile you in contrees as ye ride,  
 For adventures whiche that may bitide:  
 Paraventure ther may falle oon or two  
 Down of his hors and breke his nekke atwo;  
 Looke which a suretee is it to you alle  
 That I am in youre felaweshipe yfalle  
 That may assoile you, bothe more and lasse,  
 Whan that the soule shal fro the body passe.  
(PT, ll. 603–12)

What can the Pardoner have expected as response to this outburst? The need for rebuke surely dominates the Pardoner’s address to the Host, which asks for more than trouble:

I rede that oure Hoste shal biginne,  
 For he is most enveloped in sinne.  
 Com forth, sire Host, and offre first anoon,  
 And thou shalt kisse the relikes everichoon,  
 Ye, for a grote: unbokele anoon thy purs.  
(ll. 613–17)

The Host’s splendidly violent response, with its images of kissing the Pardoner’s stained fundament and slicing off and carrying away his testicles, is precisely what the Pardoner was too shrewd not to expect. But the shrewdness here belongs to the Pardoner’s unconscious death drive; the merely conscious ego of the wretch is stricken as silent as Iago was to be. Iago ends by saying that from this time forth he never will speak a word. His true precursor, the sublimely damned yet still comic Pardoner, also answered not a word: “So wroth he was no word ne wolde he saye.”

# The Narrative Art of the Pardoner's Tale

*Ian Bishop*

The Pardoner's Tale has often been praised for its dramatic irony, its concentration and the sense of awe that it engenders; it has more than once been described as one of the best short stories in English. The purpose of the present article is to reexamine some of the ways in which Chaucer achieves this result. I do not propose to do this by comparing the tale with its analogues—that has already been done by Mrs. Germaine Dempster among others. I shall rather compare some aspects of Chaucer's narrative technique in this tale with techniques that he employs in some of the most successful of his other short stories. But that is not my principal intent. My main purpose is to suggest that the concentration and the uncanny power of this tale are the result of three things in particular: a threefold economy, a double perspective and a unifying irony.

It is generally agreed that much of the tale's fascination is due to the figure of the "oold man and a povre" who directs the three rioters to the treasure. Yet there has been considerable disagreement about the identity and the significance of this character. In a recent article in *Medium Ævum*, however, John M. Steadman has offered an explanation of his function which is based more firmly upon Chaucer's text than are most of the other interpretations. According to Steadman the old man is not a sinister or a supernatural figure: he is neither the Wandering Jew nor Death in disguise. Moreover,

---

From *Medium Ævum* 36, no. 1 (1967). © 1967 by the Society for the Study of Mediaeval Languages and Literature.