

# The Pardoner's Tale

Szerző dezs

Angol érettségi tétel

## The Pardoner's Tale

The Pardoner's Tale belongs to the great period of the writing of the Canterbury Tales - not only on grounds of art, but because of its use of such sources as Innocent III's De Miseria and Jerome's Adversus Jovinianum that were at hand for the writing of the Man of Law's Prologue and most of the tales of Fragments III, IV and V. There is no proof that the Tale was composed with the Prologue in mind; they work together brilliantly, but the tale has a grim power of its own, independent of its speaker.(1)

The tale of the men who find death in the shape of treasure is widespread in both East and West, and Chaucer's precise source is not known. The versions current in the late Middle Ages, in Latin, Italian, and German, show many points in common with Chaucer's version, but there are some major differences. They all start, not with the rioters seeking death, but with a philosopher or holy man - sometimes even Christ - finding the treasure and directing the thieves to it. The malefactors are usually three in number : the one sent to town for food often brings specifically bread and wine. In one Italian saint's play, probably of the fifteenth century, he asks for poison to kill rats, like Chaucer's youngest rioter who claims to be troubled by rats and a polecat.(2)

The Pardoner's Tale shows less similarity in structure to the sermon it has been claimed to be than other tales in the Canterbury sequence, notably the Merchant's and Manciple's, where a brief narrative introduction (here, of the 'compaignye' of rioters) is followed by a long moralistic digression before the story gets properly under way. Many tales (the Summoner's, the Nun's Priest's) put these digressions into the mouth of a character; here, they are presented as part of the Pardoner's address to his congregation - he himself is a character within his own tale.

The structure of the Tale cannot finally be separated from the Prologue. It is not just that the text for the sermon precedes the

Prologue and that the theme of avarice and evil is expounded there in the Pardoner's own practices : the Prologue also acts as frame for the tale.(3)

One difference of this tale from all the others of the Canterbury Tales is that the characters introduced in the first few lines are not particularized. The Pardoner later appears to recall 'thise riotoures thre of whiche I telle' (661), but this is in fact the first time they have been distinguished from the 'compaignye'. The revellers mentioned at the beginning are there to introduce not so much the story as the preaching against the tavern sins. The effect is to reinforce the exemplary and the sinister qualities of the story when it does get under way : almost every one of the rioters' speeches and actions has been exposed in advance as damnable.

The exemplum of the rioters manages to combine a high proportion of direct speech with a strong sense of narrative speed, especially up to the buying of the poison. The rioters start up from their places in the tavern to search for death, they run to the treasure when they are directed to it. This literal speed of movement halts only for the eerie quietness of the old man's speech, and for their contemplation of the gold. Most of the space in this later part of the story is devoted not to events but to the rioters' plans for their own destruction.(4)

The Pardoner's Tale embodies two contradictory sets of meanings. In itself, it is a powerful moral tale against avarice and the tavern sins. Spoken by the Pardoner, it becomes deeply immoral - not only as a revelation of his own vice, but as a means to advance his own love of money; and moreover he chooses this tale while drinking in the tavern setting that he so fiercely condemns. Its two sets of significances are in direct opposition; but they reinforce each other rather than cancelling each other out. The Pardoner's vices become all the more unpardonable for being laid bare in the tale, and the message of the tale is all the clearer by virtue of the perversion of its purpose.(5)

The themes of the story itself are clear enough, as befits the moral purpose of a sermon. The condemnation of the tavern sins is resounding, and, in the case of gluttony, revolting. The tale of the rioters emphasizes the power of evil to bring about its own destruction : only in Chaucer's version do the malefactors set out to seek death, the treasure being no more than a catalyst for the forces of destruction already within them. It

is clear  
 from the beginning of the story that they all have to die in the end,  
 because  
 of their underlyingly sinful attitude.

The one figure in the tale who can see beyond this  
 materialism to God is the old man. But what is his role in the story ?  
 His  
 equivalent in the analogues is a wise man or philosopher, even Christ :  
 here he  
 keeps the wisdom, now associated also with old age, and the virtue - a  
 reading  
 of him as evil has to ignore the way Chaucer presents him. He cannot be  
 Death,  
 since death is his greatest desire, and part of the point of the tale,  
 paradoxically, is that death is not a material thing that can be found  
 - the  
 gold is death to the rioters, but only by metonymy for the  
 self-destruction  
 they bring with them. He is not a *vetus*  
*homo*, unredeemed or sinful man, since he knows all about the  
 Redemption,  
 quotes Holy Writ, and sees himself as following 'Goddess wille' (726).  
 He is  
 what the text says he is : an old man seeking death. (6)

It is also very important to note that the theme had  
 gained extra poignancy at the time of the Black Death, when the plague  
 struck  
 most viciously at the young and healthy - and it is 'pestilence' that  
 is  
 Death's weapon in the story.

The rioters are 'exemplary' characters : the point of  
 their appearance in a sermon is to warn the congregation off similar  
 vices.  
 They are accordingly never given individual names, and are often  
 referred to by  
 their degree of sinfulness - 'the proudeste', 'the worste'.

The  
 figure outside  
 the Tale who most nearly resembles them is, however, the Pardoner  
 himself. He  
 too is on a quest for treasure, and the quest becomes explicit at the  
 end of  
 the tale, in his double appeal to his congregation and to his pilgrim  
 audience.  
 The Pardoner makes it quite clear why he has come on the pilgrimage, he  
 only  
 wants to sell his goods to the other pilgrims. The morality of his tale  
 perverted for his own unethical purposes. (7)

- 1) Helen Cooper  
 The Canterbury Tales  
 p. 260
- 2) Ibid;  
 p.  
 264
- 3) Ibid;

p.  
266  
4) Ibid;  
p.  
268  
5) Ibid;  
6) Ibid;  
p.  
269  
7) Ibid;  
p.  
270

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