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What Do We Say to the God of Death?: Examining the Modern Relevance of Chaucer’s “The Pardoner’s Tale”

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Abstract

This article investigates the contemporary implications of Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Pardoner’s Tale,” focusing specifically on the parallels between the character of the Pardoner and modern-day charlatans within the Christian community. By exploring the concept of the medieval pardoner in English society, and Chaucer’s decision to include such a character in his *Canterbury Tales*, a larger narrative emerges that calls into question those who make blind appeals to faith during times of crisis, such as a global pandemic. Examining the descriptions of Chaucer’s Pardoner reveals a character steeped in sarcasm, fraudulence, and deceit who seems to cut against the grain of an anthology of tales that follows a group of Christians on a pilgrimage to a religious site. The entire work of *The Canterbury Tales* in many ways represents a “memento mori,” or a reminder that we all must die, and suggests through a collection of stories from a diverse group of pilgrims that death is the great equalizer of human beings. The Pardoner’s inherent threat to this equalizing property of death reveals a dark side of the Christian faith, and a space that Christianity holds for charlatans to enter, charlatans who peddle in false promises, and sell God as a means to cheat death. This space, of course, still exists today, though the charlatans who occupy it have taken new names. Where once stood Chaucer’s Pardoner, televangelists and mega-churches have taken his place, while relics and pardons becoming tithes and “The Prosperity Gospel.”

Keywords

The Canterbury Tales; The Pardoner’s Tale; Memento Mori; COVID-19; Religious Extremism

Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in

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disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

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In an era stricken with such afflictions as environmental catastrophes, astronomical wealth inequality, and a global pandemic, a story that serves to remind us that someday “we all must die” might hit a little too close to home, but Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, and especially his “Pardoner’s Tale” hold deep relevance to this current moment. Central to Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* lies the thematic identity of the piece as a *memento mori*, or an artistic reminder that someday everyone will eventually die. Chaucer’s writing at the turn of the fourteenth century in medieval England contains a myriad of tales featuring changing attitudes and ideas, as the three estates began to mix, the Black Death began to end, and the future was all but certain. Of these tales, “The Pardoner’s Tale” notably is the only tale to explicitly mention the Black Death, a pandemic plague which draws many comparisons to the pandemic that is currently raging, COVID-19. “The Pardoner’s Tale,” both in story and storyteller, seems to threaten the very essence of *The Canterbury Tales*, offering a moral story about the pitfalls of avarice as told by a charlatan whose very job serves to fool Christian churchgoers into purchasing fake relics and indulgences. This threatens the entirety of Chaucer’s work in two major ways: the first being that the pilgrimage underlying the story itself is a religious journey to the site of St. Thomas Beckett, a revered martyr, and the stories are all being told on the way to a religious experience. This story in particular, (which thematically displays the cost of greedily chasing and holding on to money) aims to open up the pilgrims to the idea of spending their own money on the Pardoner’s wares. The second threat that the pardoner creates comes from his profession and who he is. If the tales are meant to be read as a *memento mori*, a reminder that we all must die, the point of this collection seems to be in proving that in death all human beings are finally equal, that nothing but our souls depart the earthly world with us. So why did Chaucer include a religious charlatan as a storyteller on a pilgrimage of faith? Especially one who appears to exhibit such an indifferent attitude toward death that it seems to undercut a central theme of the anthology itself? “The Pardoner’s Tale,” questions the authority of blind appeals to faith, calling out the opportunists who seek to profit off of turbulence, upheaval, and anxieties surrounding plague and death. It thereby may allow modern readers and scholars to better understand the state of modern Christian extremism and the charlatans who deal in the same lies and deceit of Chaucer’s Pardoner, capitalizing off of a global pandemic. Through his presentation of the Pardoner, Chaucer provides a framework for critically examining those who peddle in hope and prey on misery, which can and must be applied to those abusing faith for personal gain in any century.

Chaucer seems to view his character the Pardoner in a somewhat sarcastic vein, as a harmful component of the Christian establishment that deserves to be questioned before joining in the new future unfolding in the Middle Ages. Christian imagery and promises of buying one’s way into heaven might not be so easily consumed in a new culture of blended estates. This characterization of the Pardoner as a potential outsider becomes immediately obvious in the “General Prologue” of *The Canterbury Tales*, and the physical description offered tends to occupy much of the exploration of this tale by modern scholars. The description may, however, also be seen as a discrepancy in the text and offers the first instance of deceit and hypocrisy that quickly become the staples of the Pardoner’s character. Chaucer seems to offer an expanded and progressive worldview towards most of the individual pilgrims, like the Wife of Bath, for example, but this does not seem to apply to the Pardoner, who some argue is satirized based on gender and identity (Whitney 359). Chaucer’s description of the Pardoner makes it clear that the gender identity of this character remains in question:

“His wallet biforn hym in his lappe
Bretful of pardoun, comen from Rome al hoot.
A voys he hadde as small as hath a goot.
No berd hadde he, ne never shoulde have:

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As smothe it was as it were late have.
I trowe he were a geldyng or a mnare.
But of his craft fro Berwyck or Ware
Ne was ther swich another pardoner.” (“General Prologue,” Lines 686-693)

Based on the imagery of the wallet, as well as the comparison to a “geldyng or a mare,” many scholars read the description of the Pardoner as a eunuch, or a castrated man. Later in the text, the Pardoner discusses affairs with women in several towns, pointing to the possibility that while castrated, he is still capable of sexual acts. Others assert that the Pardoner may be a non-binary gender and see the language used as “hermaphroditic” evidence. Elspith Whitney suggests that the gendering of the Pardoner actually does not matter, and that what is important about the descriptions of his body simply is the confusion itself: “While critical reading of the Pardoner once perhaps reduced his deviancy to an overly determined physical condition, the pendulum has now swung toward the opposite extreme, threatening to make the particulars of the Pardoner’s body irrelevant” (Whitney 359). Whitney goes on to discuss the intricacies of masculine stereotypes in the Middle Ages, detailing that even simply only having daughters could constitute one a “feminine” figure, or less of a man. In this way, it is clear from the beginning of the tale that Chaucer is intending to make the Pardoner a potentially satirical figure, but most importantly, one who attempts to posture as something he is not.

“The Pardoner’s Tale” itself offers a much more complicated piece of this puzzle, providing another layer through which Chaucer textures his investigation of the shifting tides of the time and further poking holes in the Pardoner as a religious figure. The character of the Old Man brings in a sense of paganism to the story, while presenting a lesson in morality and greed. The Old Man in the tale offers to lead the characters to death, but instead points them toward treasure and riches. While revealing to the travelers that he cannot die, The Old Man speaks of his “earthly mother”: “And seye, ‘Leeve Mooder, leet me in! / Low how I vanysse – flesh and blood and skyn! / Allas, whan shul my bones been at reste?’” (“The Pardoner’s Tale,” lines 731-733). This image runs contrary to a typical mother image of the Virgin Mary for Christianity at the time. The earth mother creates a deeply pagan image, which questions the storyteller’s authority as a seller of Christian relics and indulgences. By creating tension in the story and the storyteller, Chaucer effectively highlights the problem with the Pardoner and brings back the level playing field of death in the tales altogether. Gudrun Richardson highlights this point in his essay, while pointing to the positive side of Christianity expressed in the text as well: “Chaucer, by his use of the Earth Goddess with her liminal status between life and death, asserts the positive nature of death as part of the natural continuum. Perhaps this is a criticism of the Church, but it is also an affirmation of Christianity’s fundamental message of redemption” (Richardson 327). According to Richardson, Chaucer is questioning the way the church seems to operate, but expresses optimism for faith and Christianity, and importantly maintains the narrative that we are all equal in death. Whether or not Chaucer questions the entirety of Christian faith and Christianity through this tale, he clearly intends to cast doubt on the Pardoner’s Christian integrity, without disturbing the universal truth of *memento mori*. The story itself also intends to prime the audience to purchase relics and pardons, as the tale the Pardoner tells holds a moral theme that condemns greed.

Of course, “The Pardoner’s Tale” ends with a shameless merchandise plug, as the Pardoner attempts to sell relics and pardons to the other pilgrims, this time invoking the anxieties around the potential for death along the way to their ultimate destination of the site of St. Thomas Beckett:

For adventures whiche that may bityde.
Paraventure ther may fallen oon or two
Doun of his hors and breke his nekke atwo.
Looke which a seuretee is it to yow alle

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That I am in youre felaweshipe yfalle, That
may assoille yow, bothe moore and lasse,
Whan that the soule shal fro the body passe.
I rede that oure Hoost heere shal bigynne,
For he is moost envoluped in synne. (“The Pardoner’s Tale,” lines 934-942)

The Pardoner’s attitude in the transition from storyteller to swindler once again creates a discontinuity around the perception of death in the tale. Approaching the idea with a certain nonchalance, the Pardoner seems to view death and the anxiety surrounding it as a tool for personal gain, suggesting that the pardon he offers is a practical necessity on a dangerous trek. Furthermore, the promise the Pardoner offers, though false, consists of converting earthly wealth into a leg up in death, calling into question the status of death as the great equalizer. Scholar Takami Matsuda argues that this moment reveals the full extent of the Pardoner’s true exploitative nature, stating “the Pardoner’s claim is made possible by the presence of various practical means of securing individual salvation which grew up in response to the establishment of the doctrine of Purgatory. Here the Pardoner is depicted as consciously exploiting such an established system of salvation for his personal gain” (Matsuda 314). The Pardoner leans heavily on the Christian belief system of a purgatory that necessitates a certain amount of net good to move on from, and this is all taking place in a time of the plague, when death lurks around every corner and people are afraid. This exchange culminates in a bout of anger from the Host himself, which can be read as an expression of general anger toward this kind of exploitative behavior.

The anger that Harry Bailey conveys toward the Pardoner feels extreme during a first glance at the text, as he uses vulgar language and aggressively violent threats to express his disdain for the Pardoner’s digression, but the historical context of this text might reveal where all of that anger comes from. During the active years of the Bubonic Plague, the population of England saw a rapid decline that nearly cut its total in half, and while no actual number is certain, estimates suggest that upward of 25 million people died due to the Black Death in totality (“Black Death”). With so much death surrounding the pilgrims’ everyday lives, playing around with salvation could easily stir up some unsettled emotions. The other nefarious aspect of the Pardoner’s pitch is that it seems to target a vulnerable population: those who are desperate or deeply afraid. Considering the greater metaphor that the Pardoner might represent, the Host’s anger creates a catharsis for anyone who may have had personal experience with a grifter or a conman. In an age that feels inextricably linked to Chaucer’s time, the parallels between the Pardoner and modern-day Christian leadership, especially televangelists and those peddling the infamous “Prosperity Gospel,” are striking.

The concept of the Prosperity Gospel quite simply suggests that investing one’s money in the church will return dividends because God himself will shower those who donate with fortune and luck. An article published by *Reformation Charlotte* offers this excerpt from notorious televangelist Kenneth Copeland’s book: “Do you want a hundredfold return on your money? Give and let God multiply it back to you. ... invest heavily in God; the returns are staggering ... Every man who invests in the Gospel has a right to expect the staggering return of one hundredfold” (Copeland 67). Similar to the way the Pardoner preys on those afraid of death, Copeland preys on those who are poor and desperate, growing such a large personal net wealth that he is able to afford his own 20-million-dollar private plane (“Reformation Charlotte”). Much like the Pardoner, Copeland does not practice what he preaches.

The “Prosperity Gospel” does not just limit itself to wealth, however, and during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the rhetoric surrounding the return on investment on one’s health led to a perfect storm of confusion, twisted ideologies, and unfettered ignorance. Pastors and televangelists alike continued to ignore public health policy, holding church services and large public gatherings during the utmost peaks of infectivity risk. Many churchgoers even bought into their

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religious leaders' rhetoric to the point of believing that by receiving communion they would not be infected. One woman even stated that she "wouldn't be anywhere else. I'm covered in Jesus' blood. All these people go to this church. They could get me sick but they're not because I'm covered in his blood" (Yearling). The pardons and indulgences of the Pardoner have taken on a new form in the present-day United States, spawning an odd sense of perceived invincibility or, at the very least, a Pardoner-like indifference toward death itself. The hollow promise, however, remains the same, resulting in many of the unfortunate faithful paying the ultimate cost for buying this modern rhetoric.

In a time when Christian Americans are losing their lives and their jobs to the novel coronavirus, Kenneth Copeland continues to sell the concept of the "Prosperity Gospel" to a ludicrous degree. In 2020 Copeland demanded of his congregation not to stop tithing, declaring "Hey! Your job's not your source. If it is, you're in trouble. Jesus is your source! Whatever you do right now, don't you stop tithing! Don't you stop sowing offerings" (Turley). Much like the Pardoner, what Copeland is really doing is selling the promise of God's grace and God's favor, something that he has absolutely no power to give. The modern timeline took an even zanier turn for the worse when Copeland declared an end to the pandemic by "blowing the wind of God" at it. Preaching in a sermon, he said "I blow the wind of God on you. You are destroyed forever, and you'll never be back" (Woodward). Copeland offered rhetoric that sold believers on continuing to ignore safety protocols and public health measures in order to keep the churches open and the donations flowing in the absolute weirdest way possible, and yet it still worked.

At first, it certainly seems odd that Chaucer would include a religious charlatan in his anthology of tales which follow a group of pilgrims as they set out on a deeply religious journey, but of course he had a deeper plan for the Pardoner. "The Pardoner's Tale" allows for an intensive investigation into some of the unhealthy and problematic customs associated with Christian faith, and the ways in which belief allows a space for someone like the Pardoner to enter and prey on the anxious and the fearful. Through this critical investigation, Chaucer supplied a framework with which we can investigate any such charlatan or fraud hiding behind the guise of God and faith. First and foremost, the simple eyeball test can be revealing already to the potential discrepancies that may indicate fraud. In real life they will not be so obvious as the extreme level at which Chaucer made the Pardoner's body something to question, but in simply looking at Kenneth Copeland, it is obvious that something is not quite right about him. The expensive suits and his arrival in his own private plane should be questioned; he obviously does not live to serve if he spends that kind of money on himself. The Pardoner's story itself also presents a critical opportunity for examination of character, and just as there are flaws in the Christian integrity of the "The *Pardoner's Tale*," modern televangelists reveal chinks in the armor as well. To use another Kenneth Copeland example, "blowing the wind of God" presents a completely ludicrous speech, which not only places him as a vessel of God, but one with a similar omnipotence and power, a level of vanity that makes no sense from a Christian perspective. Further, we could continue to apply the pagan lens to Copeland and read his speech as a potential appeal to a "wind God" or other earthly deity. Finally, the most important and obvious piece of this charlatan puzzle is quite simply what the Pardoner asks of others, what Copeland, Osteen, and other televangelists ask of their congregations: the actual selling of false promises. The Pardoner sells the promise of salvation after death, and televangelists like Copeland sell the "Prosperity Gospel," but it all boils down to the exact same product: an empty promise. The significance of "The Pardoner's Tale" to a modern audience cannot be understated. History is cyclical in many ways, and the history of human nature does not change rapidly. Charlatans will always cling to those of deep faith, and Chaucer's warning, as well as his framework for critically evaluating and identifying these frauds, proved useful centuries ago and will remain relevant for centuries to come.

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