

## Introduction

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### **Reform, Corruption and the Tormented Soul: Chaucer's Vision of the Medieval Church in *The Canterbury Tales***

**Lisa Cornelius '97**

When the Black Plague erupted in England in 1348, two sectors of society were hit the hardest: the peasants, as a result of their unsanitary and crowded living conditions, and the clergy, who were responsible for praying over the dead. Once

On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this thesis. Professor Craun's advice and help were instrumental in its creation and revision.

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When the Black Plague erupted in England in 1348, two sectors of society were hit the hardest: the peasants, as a result of their unsanitary and crowded living conditions, and the clergy, who were responsible for praying over the dead. Once the Plague subsided, the nation was left in need of religious authority figures and laborers, the latter contributing to the growth of capitalism as workers marketed themselves to the highest bidder, a practice which eventually led to the Peasants’ Revolt in the 1380s. So, as the Church, in search of working class people that could

fill the void left by the Plague, hired people like the Pardoner to do a job that invited corruption, taking money in exchange for forgiveness of sin, and as the laborers learned that it was possible to break out of their place in society by marketing themselves and making money, these circumstances collided and provided a catalyst for the decline of morals and the authority of the Church. This was the reality in Chaucer's time, a reality presented in many of the pilgrims that were a part of the clergy, but strikingly so in the figure of the Pardoner. A comparison between the ideal parish priest, the Parson, and the reality figure, the Pardoner, reveals the shortcomings and corruption Chaucer saw in the Church despite efforts at reform in the previous century, specifically after the meeting of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and the subsequent attempts to educate parish priests and the laity about the practice of penitence and the theology behind it.

The Parson is clinical and educated, repeating the lessons of the Church as a parish priest should, but he lacks characterization and personal qualities. He is a representative of the Church as an institution. The Pardoner, on the other hand, represents the product of the Church and society as it was in the fourteenth century. He uses a religious facade to make money, knowing that what he has become is against the original tenets of the Church, but he is tainted with corruption from within and cannot break free from sin. If we view the Pardoner's character in this

way, Chaucer's focus on penitence makes sense. Penitence is a vehicle for reform, so I argue that Chaucer illustrates the Church's struggle for reform in the thirteenth century by presenting us with the Pardoner, a man trying unsuccessfully to repent.

In order to best illustrate my argument, I rely heavily on the analysis of rhetoric in the Parson's and Pardoner's discourse on sin and on the penitential process as it is used in the two tales and distorted by the Pardoner. Chapter One is an illustration of the Parson as the ideal parish priest, as presented by penitential literature and several contemporary scholars. These include Lee Patterson, whose article "The 'Parson's Tale' and the Quitting of the 'Canterbury Tales'" provides an historical context for Chaucer's Parson and the format for penitential literature as it is followed in "The Parson's Tale"; Thomas Tentler, whose book gives in-depth consideration to the religious and social climate which led up to Chaucer's own time period and a close look at the process of penitence; and Edwin Craun, whose book on deviant speech I use to analyze the will and intent behind the discourse of the Parson and to provide an anatomical analysis of the Parson's sermon and its literary elements. When we examine the structure of the Parson's discourse and his use of rhetoric to create detestation for sin, his selflessness and motive for speaking become clear: his concern is for the souls of the pilgrims, not for himself.

Chapter Two compares the Parson, as the standard, to the Pardoner according

to the same methods outlined in Chapter One, which are based on the analysis of his speech, an examination of the process of penitence as it is presented in the tale, and how those two combine to reveal the intent of the speaker. In "The Pardoner's Tale" there is a much stronger emphasis on creating the detestation and revulsion that should lead his audience to contrition and confession, but his intent is not to help the pilgrims learn to correct their behavior, like the Parson. Instead he speaks to embarrass his listeners and convince them to give him money for his assurance of forgiveness. Using "The Parson's Tale" as the standard for comparison, it becomes evident that there is no care taken by the Pardoner to analyze the intent behind the sin and teach his listeners how to avoid sin in the future. The Pardoner's version of confession is a quick fix with no attention given to changing the behavior and thinking that lead to sin, which is the goal of penitence.

Chapter Three examines the purpose of the Pardoner's confession in the Prologue in relation to his discourse on sin. This analysis exposes the Pardoner not only as a corrupt representative of the Church but also as a soul in torment, torn between the "goodness" we know he has a knowledge of and the sin he claims to take pleasure in. I argue in this final analysis, relying once again on Patterson, that "The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale" can be interpreted in many different plausible ways on a psychological level, many of which converge to support the idea that the

Pardoner is a soul in torment and can be viewed as a representative of the corruption that came to the Church with the growth of capitalism in medieval England.

In 1215, Pope Innocent III called together the Fourth Lateran Council in an attempt to address clerical corruption and incompetency. What emerged in Britain as a result of that meeting was "an educational enterprise that had two aspects" (Patterson 334):

First, primarily, [bishops] sought to instruct the clergy in the knowledge it required to perform its tasks properly: basic theology, the canon law governing clerical behavior and pastoral care, and the proper administration of the sacraments, especially penance. Second, they thought to instruct the laity in the basic elements of the faith: the Ten Commandments, seven sins and virtues, seven sacraments with special attention to penance . . .

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Priests were dispatched by the Council in order to deliver sermons and to teach people how to be good Christians, with the hope that such teaching would guide the people to contrition and, eventually, to confession (Crain 12). These priests were part of a large movement toward reconnecting the penitent with an understanding of what sin is, why it is bad, and what must be done to achieve forgiveness, all in preparation for a successful confession. We find such a priest dramatized by

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Geoffrey Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer's Parson assumes the responsibility in the final fragment of the *Tales* for the pilgrims' instruction on individual sins, why they should be shunned, the remedy for each sin and the marriage of contrition, confession and penance to form penitence.

Thomas Tentler's book, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation*, examines penitential practices as they developed in the medieval Church prior to the Reformation, focusing mainly on the penitential literature that was generated by the Church leaders of the time. The idea of penitence came into existence long before the Fourth Lateran Council met, and some characteristics of the ritual were consistently present. For instance, penitents had to feel sorrow for the sins they committed, perform penitential exercises assigned by the priest and be pronounced absolved from sin or reconciled with the rest of the believers by a priest (Tentler 3). But between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, there were several changes in theology and practice concerning the act of confession. Penances became less severe; contrition became essential, making the actual penitential exercises secondary; the Fourth Lateran Council declared that annual private confession was obligatory; and the precise role of the priest was more carefully defined and its importance in the process of penitence was greatly enhanced (Tentler 16).

These changes, made over time and, more specifically, by the Council



became a part of confessional literature: handbooks for priests and the laity on penitence, its ideal forms, its processes, and the narratives used to illustrate these teachings and make them more accessible and memorable. Chaucer's "The Parson's Tale" is an example of such literature.

["The Parson's Tale" ] is an astonishing performance: long, prosy, and anything but 'merry' since it deals, from beginning to end, with penitence as the sure way to heaven. Though the narrative situation makes it look like a sermon delivered from horseback, in its form it actually is a treatise, such as can be found in numerous handbooks current in Chaucer's time which instructed priests or laymen on matters pertaining to the Sacrament of Penance (Wenzel "Chaucer's Parson's Tale" 86).

The Parson uses his opportunity to speak to give the pilgrims a detailed guide for penitence:

This [right wey of Jerusalem celestial], of which man sholde gladly herknen and enquere with al his herte/ to wyten what is Penitence, and whennes it is cleped Penitence, and in how manye maneres been the acciouns or werkyngs of Penitence,/ and how manye spesces ther been of Penitence, and whiche thynges apertenen and bihoven to Penitence (X. 80-82).

According to the Parson, penitence is "varray repentance of a man that halt hymself

in sorwe and oother peyne for his giltes” (X. 85), or the attempt of a man guilty of sin and burdened by sorrow and guilt to ask forgiveness. The penitent man first “biwaylen the synnes that he hath doon, . . . purposen in his herte to have shrift of mouth, and to doon satisfaccion,/ and nevere to doon thyng for which hym oghte more to biwayle or to compleyne, and to continue in goode werkes, or elles his repentance may nat availle” (X. 86-7). Perfect penitence is dependent on three conditions: contrition of heart, confession of mouth and satisfaction. This is one of many instances in which the Parson uses the words of a saint to back up his assertions, a practice that will be discussed in more detail below: “For which seith Seint John Crosostom, ‘Penitence destreyneth a man to accepte benygnely every peyne that hym is enjoyed, with contricioun of herte, and shrift of mouth, with satisfaccioun, and in werkyng of alle manere humylitee’” (X. 108). The penitent man is required to accept without complaint the punishments assigned to him as a part of penitence.

A discussion of what constitutes sin will lead us into a more detailed analysis of the three parts of penitence, as described above by the Parson. We begin with the processes of examination for sin that the Parson employs in his discourse on the seven sins and the Parson’s use of rhetoric to push his listeners toward the first requirement in the penitential process: contrition. This analysis of rhetoric reveals

the Parson's motive in speaking, as he speaks to promote changes in behavior, and, therefore, contributes to my portrayal of him as the ideal religious figure in the *Tales*. From there we can combine an analysis of the Parson's discourse on what constitutes a good confession with an examination of the traditional responsibilities of penitent and priest in the process to illustrate the way in which confession can be used to bring conflicting aspects of the human soul into harmony. As the penitent remembers with detestation his previous sins and the joy he took in them, he is guided by the priest to perform the moral opposites of those sins as acts of penance, completing the penitential process.

Of course, the practice and principles of penitence are called into action because of sins committed by a Christian and because of that Christian's desire to be forgiven by God. Thirteenth-century pastoral literature commonly relied on St. Augustine's definition of sin: "Every sin . . . is something said or done or desired against the law of God" (Craun 10). One example of sin is lying, a type of deviant speech that is expressly forbidden in the Ten Commandments. According to the Augustinian point of view, which was taught by the medieval clergy,

. . . varieties of speech are labeled as deviant and then proscribed because they depart from, even subvert, the communally assigned, divinely approved norms. In the process, the types, like flattery, backbiting, or perjury, are

often anatomized in terms of what they signify, the will of speakers, speakers' intended effects, and the actual consequences (Craun 37).

In order to completely analyze and correct sin, then, the penitent must first look at the anatomy of each sin --- primarily the properties of the sin itself, the intent behind the sin, and the will to perform the sin --- and address each accordingly.

This is a process of examination that the Parson repeatedly employs in his tale. In his discourse on the Seven Sins, each sin must first be defined in detail, allowing the pilgrims to see what exactly about the sin is evil, or what makes it wrong. For example, the Parson begins his discourse on the sin of Avarice as follows:

. . . whan the herte of a man is confounded in itself and troubled, and that the soule hath lost the confort of God, thanne seketh he an ydel solas of worldly thynges./ Avarice, after the descripcioun of Seint Augustyn, is a likerousnesse in herte to have erthely thynges./ Som oother folk seyn that Avarice is for to purchacen manye erthely thynges and no thyng yeve to hem that han nede./ And understood that Avarice ne stant nat oonly in lond ne catel, but somtyme in science and in glorie, and in every manere of outrageous thyng is Avarice and Coveitise (X. 739-42).

The Parson speaks of what leads the man to commit the sin --- in this case a troubled heart and a loss of faith --- and of the action that follows --- the man turns

his attention to a more tangible support system, his possessions. This avarice, the Parson explains, takes many forms: it can be a desire for “erthely thynges” or the refusal to show charity to others, and is not limited to possessions, as a man can show avarice in his pursuit of glory.

After the clinical definition of sin comes the analysis of why it is wrong and the consequences that will come to those who are guilty of it:

Soothly, this Avarice is a synne that is ful dampnable, for al hooly writ curseth it and speketh agayns that vice, for it dooth wrong to Jhesu Crist./ For it bireveth hym the love that men to hym owen, and turneth it bakward agayns alle resoun,/ and maketh that the avaricious man hath moore hope in his catel than in Jhesu Crist, and dooth moore observance in keynge of his tresor than he dooth to the service of Jhesu Crist./ And therefore seith Seint Paul *Ad Ephesios quinto*, that an avaricious man is the thraldom of ydolatrie (X. 744-47).

In this case the avaricious man is warned that his actions wrong Jesus as they turn man’s attention away from Him and toward his possessions. He becomes an idol worshiper. By listing the consequences of each sin, the Parson tries to create detestation and aversion to sin, which is discussed below in detail. It is important to note in this passage that the Parson emphasizes that the sin itself is inherently evil

and should therefore be avoided. He is not preaching hellfire to the pilgrims, shaming them for committing the sins. This is an important characteristic for the ideal priest, which is also described in more detail below.

Next comes the evaluation of the penitent's intent in committing sin. As is the case with the sin of lying, the sinner must have the intent to deceive. According to the Augustinian point of view,

... humans invented spoken signs so that, as social beings endowed with reason, they could express their thoughts to each other. What *De Mendacio* explores is why speakers transgress this normative purpose and practice by uttering what they know to be false. This deviant act Augustine traces to the speaker's will and intention, focusing on the speaker's moral defect, not on the false statement (Craun 39).

So, once the penitent understands why the sin is inherently evil, he must first look at his will to perform the action. Coming back to lying as an example, the sinner must have the will to tell a falsehood, combined with the rational intent to deceive. This is the emotional part of the sin: "For [Carpenter] and for the compiler of the *Speculum*, both citing Thomas Aquinas, lying always springs from the will to express a falsehood, the will to use a sign to convey what is incongruous with what one actually perceives or thinks . . ." (Craun 40). In the case of avarice, the sinner

“withholdes and kepes swiche thynges as [he has], withoute rightful nede” and has the will to turn from God and “loveth his tresor biforn God” (X. 743, 750).

Next, the penitent must turn to examining his own intention in committing the sin and address it. This is the rational part of the act of sinning, and it is also addressed by the Parson. In his discourse on Avarice, the Parson first describes why one might be drawn to commit the sin: “For soothly, whan the herte of a man is confounded in itself and troubled, and that the soule hath lost the confort of God, thanne seketh he an ydel solas of worldly thynges” (X. 739).

By determining what pushes the sinner to commit the sin, the priest enables the penitent to identify what led him personally to sin and how he will be most successful in combating that urge. In the case of avarice, when a man feels that he has been forsaken by the force in which he is supposed to have blind faith, he turns away from such an intangible support system and relies on the tangible things around him: his possessions.

After the anatomy of sin, the Parson uses his own language to create detestation in the penitent, making the sin seem repulsive and therefore pushing the penitent to feel contrition. Confessional literature generally focused on this detestation and abhorrence to create revulsion against sin: “detestation is the reason’s aversive reaction against sin during the process of contrition” (Craun 58).

Such an appeal to the emotional side of the act of sinning also carries over to the rational aspects. The penitent feels detestation and revulsion, but the intent behind the Parson's discourse is to change the will also.

. . . detestation of sin involves a rational appraisal as part of an act of will in which one chooses at once to withdraw from evil and to desire the moral life.

. . . Pastoral discourse on deviant speech . . . aims at nothing less than the conversion of the will, the will of those who read it and of those who hear it applied in the pastoral acts of preaching, directing confession, and catechizing. It may inform, but, in the process, it also aims to move both the reason and the emotions (Craun 58).

This is all part of the Parson's rhetoric on sin. These are the goals of his discourse: to help the penitent recognize what makes sin evil and his own intent and will to perform the sin, and to create revulsion in the penitent that will help him turn away from sin and adopt a new way of life, that of a good Christian.

The Parson's goals are achieved through a mix of rhetorical elements employed by him (or by Chaucer), including the use of *sententiae*, *exempla* and *figurae*. *Sententiae* are

general statements of a moral, religious, or doctrinal character from an *auctor*, a text, usually written, which has currency in clerical culture as a



transmitter of knowledge and wisdom . . . . Pastoral *sententiae* are often cast in the imperative, as injunctions or prohibitions, the better to elicit a passionate response (Craun 59-60).

Indeed, *sententiae* are abundant in “The Parson’s Tale.” Such references lend credence to his efforts to convert the ways of the pilgrims he preaches to, and by linking his own admonitions against sin to those of the saints in the Bible, his words seem to come straight from the authority of God himself: “And therefore seith Seint Paul *Ad Ephesios quinto*, that an avaricious man is the thraldom of ydolatrie” (X. 747). According to Professor Edwin Craun, “The rhetorical end of collecting these authoritative materials is to modify human conduct so that it conforms to the models they sanction . . .” (60).

But in speaking to people of such caliber as we see in *The Canterbury Tales*, the Parson must employ more than just pious statements from the religious authority figures in order to present a convincing and tempting alternative to sin. Because so many of the pilgrims are from that rising middle class, the Parson must find a way to make those important lessons accessible to them on a simpler and more memorable level. He does this through the use of *exempla* and *figurae*, the function of which are described by Professor Craun as follows:

In order to effect cognitive and behavioral change the more readily in people

in general . . . [*sententiae*] must be supported by two basic means, comparison and narrative . . . . Both brief narrative and similitude are termed interchangeably *exempla* and *figurae* in pastoral texts, suggesting their common rhetorical function (62).

The Parson must find a way to appeal to the pilgrims on their own level if he is going to get through to them. He flatly rejects the fable as a way to communicate his lessons: "Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me,/ For Paul that writeth unto Thymothee,/ Repreveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse/ And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse./ Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest,/ Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?"(X. 31-36). He is not interested in camouflaging his discourse (the wheat) under the guise of an entertaining story, which is worthless. The Parson chooses instead to present his discourse by way of explication of the sins individually, but he includes in those explications many short illustrative examples of his abstract subject matter that make it easier to grasp. In his section on Anger, he uses similes and metaphors to accomplish this:

For certes, right so as fir is moore mighty to destroyen erthely thynges than any oother element, right so Ire is myghty to destroyen alle spiritueel thynges . . . . Ther is a maner tree, as seith Seint Ysidre, that whan men maken fir of thilke tree and covere the coles of it with asshen, soothly the fir of it wol

lasten al a yeer or moore./ And right so fareth it of rancour; whan it is ones  
conceyved in the hertes of som men, certein, it wol lasten peraventure from  
oon Estre day unto another Estre day, and moore (X. 546, 550-51).

Although these likenesses are not even remotely related to the lewd tales of the  
Miller and Cook, the Parson chooses simple images that will stick in the minds of  
the pilgrims. In this way, his warnings against sin become more than just words  
from the kill-joy Parson; they become images, and images stick in the mind more  
readily than mere words.

The Parson's motive in his pastoral rhetoric is completely selfless. He not  
only preaches about the sins in order for the pilgrims to recognize them in  
themselves, but he creates a discourse that he hopes will create that aversion to sin  
and attention to responsibility to a higher power that will keep the pilgrims from sin  
in the future. He hopes to help prepare them for a change of life. This brings us  
back to contrition.

The Parson's discourse promotes accountability for sin, not shame for having  
committed sins in the past. His purpose is not to cultivate the pilgrims' reaction to  
his discourse for personal gain, but rather it pushes them to evaluate their lives and  
choose the better way --- the Christian way he preaches of. All this must begin with  
contrition. Sorrow stems from the remembrance of previous acts against God, and

becomes the first condition of penitence - contrition of heart:

Contricioun is the verray sorwe that a man receyveth in his herte for his synnes, with sad purpos to shryve him, and to do penaunce, and nevermoore to do synne./ And this sorwe shal been in this manere, as seith Seint Bernard: 'It shal been hevy and grevous, and ful sharp and poynaunt in herte' (X. 128-29).

The six characteristics of contrition, as listed by Raymond of Penaforte in the *Raymundina*, his own penitential doctrine supporting the reforms of the Lateran Council during thirteenth century, are: 1) reflection on sin; 2) shame for sin; 3) revulsion at the sin's vileness; 4) fear of judgment/the pains of hell; 5) sorrow at the loss of the Heavenly Father; and 6) the triple hope of grace glory and pardon (Tentler 238). The Parson, through his discourse, attempts to invoke all of these feelings from his listeners as he explains the nature of sin, why it is bad, the effect it has on man's relationship with God, and what one can do to make up for it and regain God's favor.

Most authors of penitential literature at the time agreed that this type of contrition is ideal, but St. Thomas subscribed to a different theory. According to St. Thomas, contrition was not as important as the actual performance of the act of confession:

hearing . . . he warned against examining the reasons for sorrow, 'because a man cannot easily measure his own emotions.' . . . [he] drew back from the attempt to establish rigid and exalted standards for contrition. Thus he judged sorrow to be adequate even if a penitent was displeased with his sins only because he found them repugnant, and not because he had reached that higher level of sorrow, displeasure at sin primarily because it is an offense against God (Tentler 25).

And if the act of confession becomes more important than the reasons for it in the ritual of Penitence, then the responsibility for the ritual is no longer shouldered solely by the penitent. The priest also takes on a crucial role in supporting the penitent. According to Professor Craun, part of that role is to help foster self-understanding. We see this in the *Confessio Amantis* as Gower argues through Genius, the confessor, that in order for a penitent to recognize all that he must confess and to avoid self-deception, the priest must be a guide and present him with *sententiae, exempla* and *figurae* from biblical texts (Craun 135).

According to Tentler, there are several characteristics that are necessary in a good confessor. From "a manual for curates in the diocese of Autun," we are told that the ideal confessor is "soft in correcting, prudent in instructing, conscientious in punishing, courteous in questioning, discreet in imposing a penance, gentle in

hearing the penitent, and kind in absolving” (Tentler 95-6). Of course, this immediately calls to mind Chaucer’s Parson. Although the Parson questions none of the pilgrims directly, he does address many of their immoral actions in his “Tale,” in effect attempting to prompt self-evaluation and guiding the pilgrims’ recognition and categorization of their sins. The Parson’s sermon is not harsh or condemning, but rather instructional, providing a gentle prod toward confession, and backing up his assertions with *sententiae* from the saints and the Bible, as discussed above. This patient and instructional method is taken up with the hope that, if confessors deal with impenitent men in a tolerable fashion, the penance assigned will lead to eventual reform and acceptance of a Christian lifestyle (Tentler 122-23).

During the confession, there are several questions that must be answered in order for the priest to hear the confession in the correct mind set and ask the appropriate questions about particular sins. According to Tentler, the priest should “find out the penitent’s profession and social and marital status so that he can hear the confession more intelligently and be ready to ask pertinent questions about the sins he is told” (Tentler 84). Other than such preliminary questions, however, “the confessor is urged to let the penitent follow his own order . . . . Only necessary interruptions are proper, and the confessor is to delay his special questions until

after the penitent has told all the sins he can remember” (Tentler 86). If the penitent has made no attempt to organize and categorize his sins, the priest must teach him to confess by guiding him through a list of sins from references such as the Seven Deadly Sins and the Ten Commandments, as we see the Parson doing in his tale, since all sins stem from these. From here the priest asks questions to determine the extent of the penitent’s sorrow and his intention to amend, then imposes penance and gives absolution (Tentler 86).

But from a penitent man’s point of view, a private confession entailed different components. St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, written at the end of the fourth century, is an example of one man’s private confession, motivated by a desire to repent and to once again be worthy of God’s love. His confession is made up of three parts: 1) admitting wrong and asking forgiveness; 2) praising God; and 3) making a confession of faith. Indeed, confession in its ideal form was not merely a discussion between priest and penitent, but instead was a dialogue between the feelings in the penitent’s heart and the virtuous guidelines and standards he has been taught by the Church (Craun 131-32). As Augustine demonstrates:

My will the enemy held, and thence had made a chain for me, and bound me.

... By which links, as it were, joined together (whence I called it a chain) a

hard bondage held me enthralled. But that new will which had begun to be in

me, freely to serve Thee, and to wish to enjoy Thee, O God, the only assured pleasantness, was not yet able to overcome my former wilfulness, strengthened by age. Thus did my two wills, one new, and the other old, one carnal, the other spiritual, struggle within me; and by their discord, undid my soul. Thus I understood, by my own experience, what I had read how the flesh lusteth against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh (Augustine 121).

The ideal confession is the attempt to reconcile an inner struggle, that of the spirit against the flesh, as well as a standard ritual performed between penitent and priest.

In this way, confession can be seen as an act that brings two conflicting parts of the penitent man back together as a whole. But according to Tentler, confession is also a vehicle for making man whole by helping him to recover grace lost as a result of sin. In order to recover lost grace, man must confess his sin and accept responsibility for past, present and future sin (Tentler 60). This view of confession moves away from the ritualized act and places the spotlight on the penitent, making the struggle between “good” teachings and “bad” thoughts the central idea at work, as well as a feeling of incompleteness because of the loss of God’s grace. But in the ninth and tenth centuries, the two views of confession were brought together by the idea of shame: “[I]nstead of stressing divine institution, some theologians asserted that the chief virtue of confession derived from the shame it engendered



when the penitent was forced to tell his sins to another man” (Tentler 20). As the penitent performs the ritual, the inner struggle is at work as the penitent feels shame for “bad thoughts” and is pushed toward the “good teachings.”

As stated previously, Augustine confesses because of a true desire for repentance and a strong desire to regain God’s favor. *The Confessions* is an account not only of the dialogue between man and God, the ritual of confession, but also between the man remembering his past foul acts and the new man, looking back on them with scorn --- the inner struggle:

I will now call to mind my past foulness, and the carnal corruptions of my soul; not because I love them, but that I may love thee, O my God. For love of Thy love I do it; reviewing my most wicked ways in the very bitterness of my remembrance, that Thou mayest grow sweet unto me (Thou sweetness never failing, Thou blissful and assured sweetness); and gathering me again out of that my dissipation wherein I was torn piecemeal, while turned from Thee, the One Good, I lost myself among a multiplicity of things (Augustine 27).

As an illustration of this, Augustine describes his theft of some pears, purely for the joy of sin:

Fair were the pears we stole, because they were Thy creation, Thou fairest of

all, Creator of all, Thou good God; God, the sovereign good and my true good. Fair were those pears, but not them did my wretched soul desire; for I had store of better, and those I gathered, only that I might steal. For, when gathered, I flung them away, my only feast therein being my own sin, which I was pleased to enjoy. For if aught of those pears came within my mouth, what sweetened it was the sin. And now, O Lord my God, I enquire what in that theft delighted me; and behold it hath no loveliness” (Augustine 32).

But Augustine’s confessions are not only for God’s ears. His book is another instructional manual for the laity on recognizing sin and repenting. Augustine uses his confessions to provide an example for others to follow. According to Augustine, God’s teachings are of little use to the laity without such an example to follow. His *Confessions* are, in effect, an extended *exemplum*:

This is the fruit of my confessions of what I am, not of what I have been, to confess this, not before Thee only, in a secret exultation with trembling, and a secret sorrow with hope; but in the ears also of the believing sons of men, sharers of my joy, and partners in my mortality, my fellow-citizens, and fellow-pilgrims, who are gone before, or are to follow on, companions of my way. These are Thy servants, my brethren, whom Thou willest to be Thy sons; my masters, whom Thou commandest me to serve, if I would live with

Thee, of Thee. But this Thy Word were little did it only command by speaking, and not go before in performing (Augustine 155).

His use of words like “sharers,” “partners” and “fellow-citizens” allows readers to see him as an equal, one who was engulfed in sin but has successfully risen above it, and presents them with an opportunity to follow in his footsteps. Of course “The Parson’s Tale” also serves an instructional purpose, but it is more of a handbook on the parts of Penitence and the categorization of sins, rather than one on the human experience of reconciliation and repentance. For example:

As such a handbook, “The Parson’s Tale” lays out for us the four conditions that are necessary for “a profitable confessioun”:

1) It must be made in sorrowful bitterness of heart and be

\* shamefast,

\* humble,

\* full of tears, in body and heart,

\* showing no shame,

\* with a willingness to receive penance.

2) It must not be hastily done and

\* should be thought through;

\* the penitent should know the number and greatness of sins;

Indeed, Augustine \* the penitent should be contrite and intend never to sin again;

his *Confessiones* \* the penitent should confess all to one man.

passage 3) The penitent must confess all.

open 4) The penitent must confess often (X. 323-25).

This description of confession, combined with the three more personal components presented above by Augustine, make up the “ideal” and complete confession. Many passages from Augustine’s book are exemplary of this type of confession, with the exception that they are not made to a priest. For example:

Narrow is the mansion of my soul; enlarge Thou it, that Thou mayest enter in. It is ruinous; repair Thou it. It has that within which most offend Thine eyes; I confess and know it. But who shall cleanse it? or to whom should I cry, save Thee? Lord, cleanse me from my secret faults, and spare Thy servant from the power of the enemy. I believe, and therefore do I speak.

obvious Lord, Thou knowest, have I not confessed against myself my transgressions unto Thee, and Thou, my God hast forgiven the iniquity of my heart? I contend not in judgment with Thee who art the truth; I fear to deceive myself; lest mine iniquity lie unto itself. Therefore I contend not in judgment with Thee; for if Thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall abide it? (Augustine 13).

Indeed, Augustine fulfills the Parson's demands as well as his own in the whole of his *Confessions*, and even demonstrates most of those characteristics in this short passage. He is sorrowful and most humble, willing to be punished, and he has opened the door for God to come into his heart by making his confession of faith and praising God while admitting his sins and knowing their severity.

All the components for good confession must come together in order for Penitence to be successful: a knowledgeable priest, a contrite penitent and all the conditions and standards assigned to them. But perhaps most important is the responsibility that must be taken on by both the priest and the penitent to make sure that confession has been complete and in good faith: "The system works on guilt and responsibility; it will not work, for example, if the forum of penance is run by total incompetents who forgive indiscriminately . . ." (Tentler 125). Although it is necessary to have a responsible priest for a good confession, the bulk of the burden obviously rests with the penitent. That brings us to his responsibilities.

According to Raymond of Penaforte, the best confession leads to a change in lifestyle, and the penitent's work lies in sorrow and reformation (Tentler 105).

"True confession must be complete, open, and self-accusing," according to Sigfried Wenzel in the explanatory notes to "The Parson's Tale." "'Al moot be seyde' is a translation of the etymology of 'confessio' (saying together or all at once). Thus

according to Penaforte (3.34.13), who adds: 'ille confitetur qui totum fatetur' (he confesses who says all)" (Chaucer, 958). Completeness of confession is an integral part of the ritual of Penitence, most agree, and it is here that the knowledgeable priest, along with penitential literature, can help the penitent along:

The widening of confession to include instruction is also reflected in the form and contents of vernacular treatises. Prior to visiting his confessor, the penitent is expected to engage in a thorough self-examination that discovers both the sins to be confessed and the circumstances that determine their gravity. There were several kinds of written aids to this self-reflection . . . .

The most common aids were simply the ubiquitous account of the deadly sins . . . (Patterson 337).

"The Parson's Tale" presents a detailed account of different aids for self-examination, including the Seven Deadly Sins and the Decalogue. It also provides a distinction between venial and deadly sins: "Synne is in two maneres; outhur it is venial or deedly synne. Soothly, whan man loveth any creature moore than Jhesu Crist oure Creatour, thanne is it deedly synne. And venial synne is it, if man loveth Jhesu Crist lasse than hym oghte" (X. 357).

The Parson's discussion of the Deadly Sins is strictly organized into a detailed account of the characteristics of the sins followed by a remedy for each:

The discussions [of deadly sins] follow a careful and, with few exceptions, consistent pattern of exposition. First the sin is related to others of the seven, reminding us through this reference to the *progressus peccati* that each sinful act is part of a larger process of self-destruction . . . . This is followed by a definition of the sin, and the introduction is then completed by a careful exposure of its nature and gravity in relation to the divinely disposed reality of which it is both a privation and violation (Patterson 342).

As Patterson asserts, this is true of most of the explications of sin in "The Parson's Tale." As an example, we may look at the section on Anger. First comes the relation to other deadly sins:

After Envye wol I discryven the synne of Ire. For soothly, whoso hath envye upon his neighebor, anon he wole comunly fynde hym a matere of wratthe, in word or in dede, agayns hym to whom he hath envye./ And as well comth Ire of Pride as of Envye, for soothly he that is proud or envious is lightly wrooth (X. 532-33).

Next the Parson gives us a definition of the sin:

This synne of Ire, after the discryvyng of Seint Augustyn, is wikked wil to been avenged by word or by dede./ Ire, after the Philosophre, is the fervent blood of man yquyked in his herte, thurgh which he wole harm to hym that

he hateth (X. 534-35).

From here, the Parson goes into the different “maneres” of Ire and a description of each. For example, a man can be jealous of goodness, and this is a good kind of Ire, whereas a man who seeks revenge against another is guilty of a wicked form of Ire (X. 538, 542).

The Parson introduces his entire section of expositions with the image of a tree, stating that Pride is at the root, and that all the other sins grow from it:

Now it is bihovely thyng to telle whiche been the sevene deedly synnes, this is to seyn, chieftaynes of synnes . . . ./ Of the roote of thise sevene synnes thanne, is Pride the general roote of alle harmes. For of this roote spryngen certein braunches, as Ire, Envye, Accidie or Slewthe, Avarice or Coveitise (to commune understondynge), Glotonye, and Lecherye./ And everich of thise chief synnes hath his braunches and his twigges, as shal be declared in hire chapitres folwyng (X. 386-88).

From the root of the tree, Pride, grow all the different species of the seven sins, each branching off from the other and each inspiring a new one to grow from it.

In 1240, the discussion of the Deadly Sins and the Decalogue became, by law, a necessary part of confession. According to a statute from Worcester, since attention to the Decalogue and Seven Deadly Sins is necessary for salvation, they



must also play a large part in confession and be preached to the laity frequently (Craun 12). These aids for self-examination played a major role in the preparation for confession in which the penitents were expected to engage.

So the three parts of the penitent's work in the act of confession are: 1) the performance before the priest; 2) the inner emotions, particularly contrition and sorrow, which should be real and of a certain nature, stemming from the self-examination for sin; and 3) future intentions for reformed behavior (Tentler 104). But in addition to those conditions, St. Thomas' commentary on Book 14 of the *Sentences* presents a list of sixteen characteristics that are part of good confession.

The confession/penitent should be:

- \*simple      \*frequent      \*ashamed      \*prompt      \*humble
- \*unadorned      \*whole      \*strong      \*pure      \*discreet
- \*secret      \*faithful      \*willing      \*tearful      \*reproachful

\*showing readiness to obey (Tentler 106).

This brings us to the third part of Penitence: after contrition and confession comes satisfaction. Satisfaction is the work one must do in order to win God's favor once again, and, according to the Parson, it has three parts. First, the penitent must have contrition of heart and offer himself to God; second, the penitent must take pity on those around him; and, third, he must give good counsel and comfort to

those in need (X. 1029). But the penance typically assigned to a penitent could range from public humiliation to making a pilgrimage barefoot. It is through penance, says the Parson, that man is able to reach heaven:

Thanne shal men understonde what is the fruyt of penance; and after the word of Jhesu Crist, it is the endeles blisse of hevене,/ ther joye hath no contrariouste of wo ne grevaunce; ther alle harmes been passed of this present lyf; there as is the sikernes from the peyne of helle; ther as is the blisful compaignye that rejoysen hem evermo, everich of otheres joye (X. 1075-76).

Heaven is the goal of this process, and as the Parson describes, it is a goal well-worth the price paid through the ritual of penitence. The return for the penitent's effort and commitment to change is everlasting bliss and joy with no grief, no harm and none of the tortures of hell.

The Parson's ideas for penance according to individual sins are addressed in his sections on "Remedies," which follow the passages for each sin. These passages are most revealing of the Parson's motivations and goals for his discourse. His prescriptions for satisfaction are not arbitrary assignments for the penitent: they are not asked to "do" penance, as many penitents who frequented the more self-serving confessors of the time were. The Parson does tell them to perform certain

actions, like being more generous to the poor or loving one's neighbor instead of being envious of him, but all of his penitential assignments are more than mere physical exercises, and none require public humiliation. Instead, they require deep thought and emotional work, not physical hardship or monetary payment to the Church. An example of this is the Parson's remedy for the sin of Envy:

Now wol I speke of remedie agayns this foule synne of Envye. First is the love of God principal and lovyng of his neighebor as hymself, for soothly that oon ne may nat been withoute that oother./ And truste wel that in the name of thy neighebor thou shalt understonde the name of thy brother; for certes alle we have o fader fleshly and o mooder - that is to seyn, Adam and Eve - and eek o fader espiritueel, and that is God of hevene./ Thy neighebor artow holden for to love and wilne hym alle goodnesse; and therefore sieth God, "Love thy neighebor as thyselfe" (X. 514-16).

The sinner is directed to find the moral opposite of his sin --- to apply the will in the opposite way in which it was applied when the sin was committed. In this case, the moral opposite of envy is love and, we find as the Parson continues, charity. The moral opposite of the sin works to cancel it out.

This approach to satisfaction gives us a clear understanding of the Parson's motives. One can only conclude that they are purely selfless. He only prescribes

what will bring the penitent emotionally and rationally closer to salvation because his prescriptions are the makings of a good Christian.

Penance can, however, serve two other functions. In providing punishment for actions that fall outside the realm of social norms, penance can serve as a deterrent to others contemplating sin that affects others. In effect, it is a form of social control, much as a modern prison, or even the equivalent to “community service.” Doing penance makes an example out of one sinner for others to see, and, the priests hope, helps them make better “Christian” decisions in their own lives. In the case of the Parson, it is the good works prescribed as penance that are intended to serve as the example for others.

But penance also serves to soothe the guilty conscience of an individual sinner. The sinner is paying his dues to God, much as a criminal makes up for his crimes by doing good acts for his community. Penance is not only the remedy for the penitent man, but also for society.

“From its origins in the first centuries of the ancient and medieval church, penance was a function of society and the individual” (Tentler 12-13). And Chaucer echoes this in the closing lines of “The Parson’s Tale”:

Thise almesses shaltow doon of thyne owene propre thynges, and hastily and prively, if thow mayst./ But natheles, if thow mayst nat doon it prively,

thow shalt nat forbere to doon almesse though men seen it, so that it be nat doon for thank of the world, but oonly for thank of Jhesu Crist./ For, as witnesseth Seint Mathew, *capitulo quinto*, 'A citee may nat been hyd that is set on a montayne, ne men lighte nat a lanterne and put it under a busshel, but men sette it on a candle-stikke to yeve light to the men in the hous./ Right so shal youre light lighten bifore men, that they may seen youre goode werkes, and glorifie your fader that is in hevене' (X. 1033-36).

The alms done by one man can bring light upon others, the light of the Christian way, which is the goal of all penitential literature. Overall, the Parson, his description of the penitential process and his detailed discourse on the sins and their "remedies" present to us the ideal religious teacher, according to penitential literature, and a portrait of the original intentions, motivations and practices of the Church untainted by corruption, as were put forth in the Bible and by the saints.

"The Parson's Tale" has provoked much discussion as scholars argue its authorship and its purpose in the *Tales*. Because it is so radically different in tone, form and language from the rest of the tales, can we then assume that by presenting the discourse of the ideal priest after the foil made up of the earlier tales, Chaucer meant it to be a pious ending to an effort to expose corruption and immorality around him? Can we even assume it was authored by the poet, and not just tagged

on the end by his literary executor out of frustration at the lack of an appropriate conclusion? According to Sigfried Wenzel, the latter would not be a good assumption. Although the tale's style and subject are radically different from what we see in the preceding pages of *The Canterbury Tales*, contemporary critics no longer question its authorship (Chaucer, 956).

Although theories against this have been entertained in the past, many critics agree that "The Parson's Tale" is to be taken seriously, as Chaucer's response to all that has come before it in the *Tales*:

The importance which the tale derives from its position is further strengthened by the image of knitting up . . . . the image of tying a knot may well be more than just a plausible and popular way of signaling the end of a story. There is evidence that the image had a special place in the technical vocabulary of rhetoric and particularly the art of preaching, and that it indicated the process of tying up the several strands that had been developed at length in the preceding discourse, with the purpose of expressing the very gist of a speech or sermon (Wenzel, 91).

The sarcastic tone stemming from the use of incongruous detail that Chaucer employs in describing the other pilgrims in the "General Prologue," as well as within the individual prologues and tales, is enough to set the stage for a moral

statement at the conclusion of the work. It seems safe to conclude that Chaucer's Parson, as the only major figure in the *Tales* whose description is completely void of sarcasm, is to be taken seriously as an ideal representative of the Church. His discourse on sin lacks the corrupted motivation and self-serving attitude that are represented in many of the other religious figures on the pilgrimage, including the Pardoner.

But of his craft, fro Berwyk into Ware  
Ne was ther swich another pardoner.  
For in his male he hadde a pilwe-beer,  
Which that he seyde was Oure Lady veyl;  
He seyde he hadde a gobet of the seyl  
That Seint Peter hadde, whan that he wente  
Upon the see, til Jhesu Crist hym hente.

## Chapter Two

Chaucer has presented to us, in the figure of the Parson, an ideal representative of the Church concerned with preparing penitents for confession and helping them change their lives to follow God's prescribed path. But Chaucer also presents us with the Parson's antitype --- the Pardoner. "A pardoner, sometimes called a *questor*, was a distinctively medieval official. He was engaged as a rule in three activities: in selling indulgences, in selling relics, and in preaching" (Bowden 276). From Chaucer the Pilgrim's description of the Pardoner in the "General Prologue," we are immediately aware that he is not the ideal religious figure we find in the Parson. Chaucer says that he does indeed know how to "rede a lessoun or a storie" and that "he song an offertorie" (I. 709-10), but he also observes that the Pardoner's relics are fraudulent:

But of his craft, fro Berwyk into Ware

Ne was ther swich another pardoner.

For in his male he hadde a pilwe-beer,

Which that he seyde was Oure Lady veyl;

He seyde he hadde a gobet of the seyl

That Seint Peter hadde, whan that he wente

Upon the see, til Jhesu Crist hym hente.



He hadde acroys of latoun ful of stones, (I. 701-06).

And in a glas he hadde pigges bones (I. 692-700).

And as the pilgrim reveals, the Pardoner knows that his first priority is the income he receives as a result of his trickery and smooth-talking.

An examination of “The Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale,” when placed in comparison with “The Parson’s Tale,” can be pursued by many avenues. Both present explications of some of the deadly sins, but the Pardoner also gives us a confessional prologue and an extended *exemplum* in the narrative of the three revellers. The points by which the Parson was examined in the first chapter, including structure and rhetoric, can now be applied to the Pardoner, allowing us to analyze his character and motivation for giving the pilgrims a discourse on sin.

The “General Prologue” opens the door for a comparison between the two religious figures, as Chaucer the Pilgrim contrasts their methods of, and success in, making money.

... with thise relikes, whan that he fond

A povre person dwellynge upon lond,

Upon a day he gat hym moore moneye

Than that the person gat in monthes tweye;

And thus, with feyned flaterye and japes,

which He made the person and the peple his apes (I. 701-06).

So not only is the Pardoner getting money from poor people in exchange for the privilege of touching his fake relics, but he is also making them fools by flattering them and persuading them to believe in his threats and promises, as is discussed below. This portrait of him from the "General Prologue" is in great contrast to the portrait of the Parson given to us by Chaucer the Pilgrim. The description of the Parson is free from all hint of sarcasm or the incongruous detail that Chaucer employs in describing the other pilgrims in order to invite us to draw our own conclusions about them. The Parson practices what he preaches, as Chaucer tells us three times in the portrait: "This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf,/ That first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte" (I. 496-97). And not a single negative word is spoken against him: "A bettre preest I trowe that nowher noon ys" (I. 524).

Chaucer's Pardoner, however, was not an unusual character in medieval society. Corruption became rampant among pardoners responsible for selling indulgences and the merits of the saints (also called the treasury), and more and more people were suddenly in the "business" of forgiveness, rather than taking responsibility for helping a penitent examine his sins and repent. In the fourteenth century, the Church authorized people like the Pardoner to give laymen shares in the heavenly treasury in exchange for repentance, confession and, of course, money,

which was to be used for the maintenance of the Church.

Opportunities for dishonesty were inherent in the pardoner's calling: indulgences could be forged by anyone who chose to name himself a pardoner; or the legitimate pardoner, even if he did not turn thief and appropriate for himself the money he received, could sell his pardons without exaction of either repentance or confession on the part of the buyer (Bowden 277).

This is a perfectly appropriate description of Chaucer's pardoner. Though there is no concrete evidence that he is not a legitimate worker for the Church, his eagerness to sell his indulgences is evident as his pouch is "Bretful of pardoun comen from Rome al hoot" (I. 687), and he confesses later in the *Tales* that his true motivation in pardoning sinners is greed and personal gain.

As the Pardoner brings his narrative to a close, he invites the pilgrims to open their purses and kiss his relics, promising to enter their names in his book as an assurance of salvation:

Myn hooly pardoun may yow alle warice,

So that ye offre nobles or sterlynges,

Or elles silver broches, spoones, rynges.

Boweth youre heed under this hooly bulle!

Cometh up, ye wyves, offreth of youre wolle!

Youre names I entre heer in my rolle anon;

Into the blisse of hevne shul ye gon.

I yow assoille, by myn heigh power,

Yow that wol offre, as clene and eek as cleer

As ye were born (VI. 906-15).

But no mention is made of confession. Not once in the course of his sales pitch does he touch on contrition, self-examination or responsibility for sin. Instead he says, in effect, that they may die at any moment, and if they want to go to heaven and avoid hell, they should give him money and kiss the relics:

Paraventure ther may fallen oon or two

Doun of his hors and breke his nekke atwo.

Looke which a seuretee is it to you alle

That I am in youre felaweshipe yfalle,

The I may assoille yow, bothe moore and lasse

Whan that the soule shal fro the body passe (VI. 935-40).

He invites them to participate in a simple action involving none of the prerequisites for forgiveness that the Parson focuses on in his discourse, such as self-examination for sin, contrition, the ritual of confession and the assignation of penitential

exercises.

As we examine the Pardoner's rhetoric, many other shortcomings become clear. The Pardoner's examination of the anatomy of each sin he touches on in his "Tale" is entirely emotional, leaving out any consideration for the rational part of the action. As discussed above, in order to move away from sin successfully and begin the process of changing the way a sinner lives his life, the confessor must appeal to the rational side of sin, the intent, as well as the emotional side, the will. By addressing both, he can focus on what pushed the sinner to sin in the first place and help him change his behavior and thinking so that he can avoid those same circumstances in the future. The Pardoner preaches only to create an emotional effect and temporarily create in the sinner a desire to change the will to commit sin, not to change the rational process that created the intent to sin. He doesn't want his audience to understand their sins or think in theological terms about why their sins are wrong and why they were pushed to commit them. He only appeals to their sense of revulsion without considering their responsibility to God or others, because, after all, if he created in them a desire and understanding that led them to a change of life, he would be out of a job.

So, in avoiding the root of the problem of sin, the Pardoner must focus on evoking an immediate and temporary reaction from the audience, one based on fear

of punishment from God. As the Parson uses soft speech and gentle prodding to achieve his goal, the promotion of a change of life, the Pardoner uses a pushy and loud “hellfire and brimstone” style of preaching, a style we can imagine as he describes how he stands above his audiences and sweeps his eyes across them:

I stonde lyk a clerk in my pulpet,  
And whan the lewed peple is doun yset,  
I preche so as ye han herd bifoore  
And telle an hundred false japes moore.  
Thanne peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke,  
And est and west upon the peple I bekke,  
As dooth a dowve sittynge on a berne.  
Myne handes and my tonge goon so yerne  
That it is joye to se my bisynesse (VI. 391-99).

This is the type of pushy preaching still used today by television evangelists hoping to draw in large contributions from viewers. An example of this is the Pardoner’s treatment early in his “Tale” of gluttony as it applies to drinking:

Senec seith a good word doutelees;  
He seith he kan no difference fynde  
Bitwix a man that is out of his mynde

And a man which that is dronkelewe,

But that woodnesse, yfallen in a shrewe,

Persevereth lenger than doth dronkenesse.

O glotonye, ful of cursedness!

O cause first of oure confusioun!

O original of oure dampnacioun,

Til Crist hadde boght us with his blood agayn!

Lo, how deere, shortly for to sayn,

Aboght was thilke cursed vileynye!

Corrupt was al this world for glotonye (VI. 492-504).

This is an example of his use of *sententiae*, a literary element which the Parson also employs in his discourse on sin, as discussed in Chapter One. But whereas the Parson unaffectedly presents his educational quotes from biblical figures in order to lend credence to his assertions, the Pardoner turns his version of those same quotes into an emotional and exclamatory attack on the sinner --- not just the sin. He demonstrates this as his discourse on gluttony continues: "O dronke man, disfigured is thy face,/ Sour is thy breeth, foul artow to embrace" (VI. 551-52). The attempt to create revulsion is founded not in an attack on gluttony, but on the gluttonous man.

The Pardoner leads his audience through such a dramatic and affected

sermon to a very superficial way of looking at sin by focusing on fear and shame instead of promoting an understanding of sin and why it is evil. We see this as he recalls the story of Adam and Eve and how God cast them out of paradise into “wo and peyne” for their sin (VI. 511). He speaks only of the consequences of what they did, not of why what they did was wrong or how they were tempted to sin. There is no attempt in his discourse to help the listeners find the moral opposite of their sins in order to help themselves in God’s eyes through good works in the future. But it is not only a fear of God that he is promoting; it is also fear of embarrassment. *Ther wol I nat lese my name.*

In this discourse on sin, which is found at the beginning of the “Tale,” the Pardoner appeals to the pilgrims’ sense of wanting to protect their reputation in one way by telling stories about sinners in the past who are looked down upon by others. These are *exempla*, which are also used by the Parson, but in a very different manner. The Pardoner presents his *exempla* in story-form, focusing on drama and effect. But the Parson uses his *exempla* as metaphors in order to create in the minds of his listeners an accessible image of the idea he wants them to grasp and remember. Again, whereas the Parson promotes understanding and desire for forgiveness, the Pardoner focuses on public humiliation and the fear of developing a bad reputation. We see this early in his discourse on “hasardrye,” or gambling:



Stilboun, that was a wys embassadour,  
Was sent to Corynthe in ful greet honour  
Fro Lacidomye to make hire alliaunce.  
And whan he cam, hym happede, par chaunce,  
That all the gretteste that were of that lond,  
Pleyynge atte hasard he hem found.  
For which, as soone as it myghte be,  
He stal hym hoom agayn to his contree,  
And seyde, 'Ther wol I nat lese my name,  
Ne I wol nat take on me so greet defame,  
Yow for to allie unto none hasardours.  
Sendeth othere wise embassadours;  
For, by my trouthe, me were levere dye  
Than I yow sholde to hasardourse allye' (VI. 603-16).

The Pardoner's story puts forth the idea that anyone who participates in gambling, a fairly common sin, is looked down upon by respectable people. His prologue also sets the stage for this type of fear for one's reputation by announcing that horrible sins should not be confessed for shame:

Goode men and wommen, o thyng warne I you:

If any wight be in this chirche now  
That hath doon synne horrible, that he  
Dar nat, for shame, of it yshryven be,  
Or any womman, be she yong or old,  
That hath ymaked hir housbonde cokewold,  
Swich folk shal have no power ne no grace  
To offren to my relikes in this place.  
And whoso fyndeth hym out of swich blame,  
He wol come up and offre a Goddes name,  
And I assoille him by the auctoritee  
Which that by bule ygraunted was to me (VI. 377-388).

In announcing such restrictions on those buying his pardons, the Pardoner in effect makes anyone who does not approach him look like a sinner. This is one of many examples of the Pardoner's calculated subversion of the process of confession put forth by "The Parson's Tale" and other penitential works as described in Chapter One. He is creating guilt in the members of his audience --- not the type of guilt that is a part of contrition, as the Parson describes it, the type that inspires a desire for forgiveness and a change of life. Through his preaching he pushes those that are guilty of sin either to avoid confession altogether or to make a false confession,

one that does not come from a desire to change and be a good Christian but from a need to put up a facade of piety, by presenting themselves as people “out of swich blame” (VI. 385).

Beneath all of that is a threat to expose members of the group in front of the others if they try to expose him or resist buying his pardons. In other words, not only will they make themselves look guilty by avoiding him, but also he will actively point them out in the course of his preaching:

For whan I dar noon oother weyes debate,

Thanne wol I styngge hym with my tonge smerte

In prechyng, so that he shal nat asterte

To been defamed falsly, if that he

Hath trespassed to my bretheren or to me.

For though I telle noght his propre name,

Men shal wel knowe that it is the same,

By signes, and by othere circumstances.

Thus quyte I folk that doon us displeasances;

Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe

Of hoolynesse, to semen hooly and trewe (VI. 412-22).

This is sharply in contrast to the discourse of the Parson, as he avoids connecting

any of the individual pilgrims with any of the sins he describes, even though some of them have blatantly exhibited their propensity for sin of a certain type in their own tales. Here the Pardoner clearly acknowledges his lack of hesitation in pointing out who is guilty of what, as he “stynge hym with his tonge smerte” (VI. 413).

This version of pastoral rhetoric is all part of the Pardoner’s attempt to entice his audience to partake of his immediate solution to the problem of sin. Rhetoric is an integral part of the Pardoner’s lifestyle, as it is his means for manipulating and intimidating his listeners.

The Pardoner uses rhetoric, in his own way, to create self-awareness and recognition of sin, as does the Parson, albeit with different intent. He does this by making the pilgrims aware of the possibility of imminent death, not only in the offer at the end of the “Tale,” but also in the main narrative itself, as the three revellers go off in search of Death and are found by it. The implication here is that the characters, as they delve deeper into the sin of avarice by plotting against one another to get the most treasure they can, bring Death to themselves as a result of their sin. This strain of the sales-pitch for the Pardoner’s wares is picked up again at the end of the “Tale” as he warns the pilgrims that death may be waiting around any corner along the way to Canterbury, as was discussed above (VI. 935-36).

He also tempts them with his verbal advertisements for duty-free absolution and salvation:

... preaching was a recognized activity of the pardoners . . . . But not only is Chaucer's Pardoner accustomed to the pulpit. His is also a skilled demagogic sermon to preach that will thoroughly fascinate his audience, which fact he later demonstrates in his own *Tale*; he knows how to read a lesson, too, or a series of lessons . . . so that suspicious minds will be closed and purses opened (Bowden 280).

The Pardoner's focus on avarice is part of his strategy to gain money. His repulsive description of himself as an avaricious man in the "Prologue" serves to push the pilgrims in the opposite direction in their own behavior, so as not to emulate what they loathe, and, therefore, be more generous with their money:

Of avarice and of swich cursednesse

Is al my prechyng, for to make hem free

To yeven hir pens, and namely unto me.

For myn entente is nat but for to wynne,

And nothyng for correccioun of synne.

I rekke nevere, whan that they been beryed,

Though that hir soules goon a blakeberyed! (VI. 400-06).

He makes himself as repulsive as he can by describing his despicable acts of greed and cruelty and revealing his subversion of a sacred institution. Inadvertently, then, by warning the pilgrims of the possibility of death on their journey together and by creating a repulsive image of himself as a sinner, the Pardoner is pushing his listeners toward the moral opposite of sin. But their motivation is to avoid dying without absolution or acting like the object of their revulsion, rather than a genuine interest in actively working to counteract their sins of the past in the eyes of God.

This theme in "The Pardoner's Tale," that avarice is the root of all evil, is completely self-serving for the Pardoner. By focusing on a common sin like greed, the Pardoner seeks to make his message appeal to a greater number of people. Many people who are basically good and avoid the major sins can discern in themselves a tinge of such a common sin, and in playing on this and the penitents' feelings of guilt and fear, the Pardoner opens the door for more customers wanting an easy way out of God's punishments. The characters in his narrative are guilty of all of these "popular" sins, as he describes in the opening lines of his "Tale":

In Flaunders whilom was a compaignye

Of yonge folk that haunteden folye,

As riot, hasard, stywes, and tavernes,

Where as with harpes, lutes, and gyternes,

They daunce and pleyen at dees bothe day and nyght,

And eten also and drynken over hir myght,

Thurgh which they doon the devel sacrificise

Withinne that develes temple in cursed wise

By superfluytee abhomynable.

Hir othes been so grete and so dampnable

That it is grisly for to here hem swere.

Oure blissed Lordes body they totere -

Hem thoughte that Jewes rente hym noght ynough -

And ech of hem at otheres synne lough (VI. 463-76).

So they are guilty of gambling, gluttony, lechery and swearing, four sins which few can claim to be entirely without. But the Pardoner presents sins like swearing as the greatest affronts to Jesus Christ, torturing him above and beyond what he endured at the hands of the "Jewes." The detestation the Pardoner hopes to create, not only in describing himself, but also the characters in his "Tale," is not to lead the people to contrition, but to tempt them to the immediate remedy.

Such is the case in his treatment of the sin of jealousy. His remedy for this sin is to make soup with water used to wash his false relics, as he describes in his "Prologue":

And, sires, also it heeleth jalousie;

For though a man be falle in jalous rage,

Lat maken with this water his potage,

And nevere shal he moore his wyf mystriste,

Though he the soothe of hir defaute wiste,

Al had she taken prestes two or thre (VI. 366-71).

Instead of creating revulsion through showing the consequences of sin and why the sin is inherently bad, he presents the sinner with an escape that requires no examination and no work --- no penance. There is, therefore, nothing to remedy the fault in the soul of the sinner. And beyond this, he offers ignorance of the sins of others, as the husbands, after eating their soup, will feel no jealousy because they will be unaware of their wives' indiscretions. (VI. 485-91).

The Pardoner's tools for manipulation and intimidation are the same tools used by the Parson to teach the ways of God and lead penitents through a successful examination and confession: *sententiae* and *exempla*. The Pardoner's appeal is almost completely addressed only to the pilgrims that are members of the rising middle class, and he uses the two elements combined so that the uneducated people can visualize what he is preaching:

Thanne telle I hem ensamples many oon



Of olde stories longe tyme agoon.

For lewed peple loven tales olde;

Swiche thynges kan they wel reporte and holde (VI. 435-38).

The following is an example of the *exempla* used in the beginning of the "Tale" to describe the evils of drunkenness:

Lo, how that dronken Looth, unkyndely,

Lay by his doghtres two, unwityngly;

So dronke he was, he nyste what he wroghte.

Herodes, whoso wel the stories soghte,

Whan he of wyn was repleet at his feeste,

Right at his owene table he yaf his heeste

To sleen the Baptist John, ful giltelees (VI. 485-91).

The Pardoner's descriptions of the drunken acts of others are intended make his preaching against gluttony real in the minds of the listeners, prompting them to think perhaps of their own drunkenness, to take heed of the warnings he gives of the consequences they may face as a result of that sin, and finally to open their purse strings and give him the money he's after in exchange for forgiveness.

The Pardoner's sermon focuses on portraying drinking, swearing, gluttony, avarice and gambling in a bad light, but in the last few lines before his tale begins,

he exhibits four of the five, excluding only gambling :

I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete,

Al were it yeven of the povereste page,

Or of the povereste wydwe in a village,

Al sholde hir children sterve for famyne.

Nay, I wol drynke licour of the vyne

And have a joly wenche in every toun.

... Now have I dronke a draughte of corny ale,

By God, I hope I shal yow telle a thyng

That shal by reson been at youre likyng.

For though myself be a ful vicious man,

A moral tale yet I yow telle kan,

Which I am wont to preche for to wynne (VI. 448-61).

So even in announcing that he will tell a moral tale, he subverts every one of his points in these last few lines, bragging that he can still put forth a good sermon, even though he is devoid of all Christian responsibility and the intent of the sermon is to fulfill his own greed. He is an *exemplum* himself, presenting his own story right along with the others that he hopes will create detestation for sin and prompt a desire for forgiveness.

In using *sententiae* from the saints, the Pardoner is careful to select those quotations that will satisfy the goal of the discourse, as was described above --- to create fear and revulsion:

The apostel wepyng seith ful pitously,

'Ther walken manye of whiche yow toold have I -

I seye it now wepyng, with pitous voys -

They been enemyes of Cristes croys,

Of whiche the ende is deeth; wombe is her god!'

O wombe! O bely! O stynkyng cod,

Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun!

At either ende of thee foul is the soun (VI. 529-36).

Here the exclamations and repulsive images of the belly full of dung, which are absent in the Parson's treatment of the same quotation, serve to create the destestation and revulsion the Pardoner is trying for under the guise of a credible statement from a saint, but, again, unlike the Parson, the Pardoner aims these negative feelings at the sinner instead of the sin. The Parson uses his *sententiae* to explain the nature of different sins to the penitents and why, individually, they are an affront to God. These quotations give both of the discourses on sin credence as voices straight from the Bible back up the teachings. But as the Pardoner's

quotations lend credibility to his dramatic warnings against sin, his *sententiae* mention nothing about *why* sins are bad --- they just affirm that they are, with no rational analysis of their inherently evil nature as we see in "The Parson's Tale."

All of these factors put together --- his social role as a pardoner, his admissions of corruption, his subversion of the role of the confessor, his manipulation of the tools of a confessor and his use of intimidation tactics to promote a completely superficial ritual of forgiveness --- present to us a character that is not new to medieval literature in the sense that the Pardoner, a man entrusted with the souls of his followers, turns to anti-Christian behavior in order to forward his own agenda. In going against the basic tenets of Christianity in his methods of preaching and confessing his own deviation from the standards he advocates in his "Tale," the Pardoner is inviting the others to partake in an escape from the confines and responsibilities that the Parson says are the only way to salvation. One cannot help but see similarities between Chaucer's Pardoner and the Gawain Poet's Sir Gawain. Sir Gawain is also representing the Church, with the pentangle within his shield as a symbol of the code he is to live by and promote among others through example. He puts his faith in the magical green garter, relying on it, instead of his strength and faith in the knightly code, to keep him alive. In doing so he compromises the code he has adopted as his own by undermining his faith in God

and in himself; basically, he takes the easy way out. In effect, the Pardoner performs the same action with his relics, except that it is not only his own soul that he puts in jeopardy; it is the souls of those tempted to follow his orders. He teaches that the easy way out, in this case putting faith in what he professes are magical relics, is the path they should take to salvation, undermining all of the teachings of Jesus that he has been charged with disseminating. And, as was the case with Sir Gawain, according to the Christian ideal, he should fail --- and he does. His attempts to get the pilgrims to buy his pardons at the conclusion of his tale bring him only harsh words from the Host, not the money he had hoped for.

All of this evidence supports the idea that "The Pardoner's Tale" is Chaucer's cynical view of corruption in the Church. "The Prioress' Tale," following shortly after, is another example of a representative of the Church gone astray from the teachings of the New Testament. She doesn't follow the apostolic way of life promoted by Jesus and the disciples, as Chaucer the Pilgrim shows us when he describes the roasted meat, a luxury many people couldn't afford, which she feeds to her lap dogs. Chaucer gives us not only the figure of the Lateran reform in the Parson, but also the object of that reform in the Pardoner. In effect, the Pardoner, as one who subverts the sacred practices of the Church and deceives his listeners with false relics and promises of work-free absolution, is Chaucer's

personification of the declining effectiveness of the Church and all of the reasons for that decline. He is a swindler working as a representative of the Church, and as such, he destroys the credibility of the institution by which he is employed:

Time and again [Augustine] argues that the religious teacher who lies not only makes himself ineffective by destroying others' trust in his word, but also undermines that trust in authoritative witnesses which is necessary if one is to accept revealed doctrine . . . . Once people lose faith in what others speak, they are at once immune to the illuminating teaching of the clergy and prone to multiply Sins of the Tongue in daily transactions and in the law courts (Craun 44-45).

As the Pardoner reveals more and more of the lurid details of himself personally, then goes on to quote the saints in his sermon, he not only destroys his own credibility, but that of the Church as a whole since he is one of its representatives. Of course corrupt pardoners were not the only reason that Christian values began to slip away from the laymen. As more and more people tried to gain money and possessions in an attempt to cross social lines, more and more people employed questionable ways of doing so. So as the middle class emerged in medieval England and prosperity - through any means - became more of an issue, the Christian and chivalric codes began to bow to capitalism, and the corrupt pardoner

became a catalyst for the decline of Christian values in society.

At first glance, "The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale" is Chaucer's representation of a religious figure gone astray, taking pleasure in sin as he deceives his listeners and takes their money with no desire to change. This is the Pardoner presented in Chapter Two. But a closer look at the Pardoner reveals a more complex character. His "Prologue" and "Tale" present a significant amount of evidence supporting various psychological ways of evaluating him as one of Chaucer's social representatives that reach far beyond that of the hypocritical preacher. We can do this by looking at other plausible motivations that drive him to make his "confession" in the "Prologue."

Instead of focusing on the content of "The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale," which was discussed in detail in Chapter Two, we can look to its source in an attempt to analyze his *character*. Why does the Pardoner speak as he does? To answer that question, we can examine the differences in treatment of particular sins between the Parson and the Pardoner, which reveal the Pardoner's attempt to use rhetoric to command authority and create a facade behind which he can hide his insecurity and anger and the lack of a place in society where he can be accepted. An examination of these three areas leads to many plausible readings of "The

### Chapter Three

As stated in Chapter Two, the Pardoner is guilty of many of the sins he preaches against in the "Tale," and he confesses them in the "Prologue." Two of these sins are drunkenness and swearing. The Pardoner's discourse against those sins, compared to that of the Parson, which is used here as the ideal presented by Chaucer, is revealing in its exaggerated disgust and emotionality presented in Chapter Two. But a closer look at the Pardoner reveals a more complex character. His "Prologue" and "Tale" present a significant amount of evidence supporting various psychological ways of evaluating him as one of Chaucer's social representatives that reach far beyond that of the hypocritical preacher. We can do this by looking at other plausible motivations that drive him to make his "confession" in the "Prologue."

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Pardoner's Tale."

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The Pardoner makes it clear from the start that he is a drinker. When he is first asked to tell a tale, he says, "It shal be doon, . . . by Seint Ronyon! / But first, . . . heere at this alestake / I wol bothe drynke and eten of a cake' (VI. 320-22). And as he wraps up his confessional "Prologue," he asserts that he "wol drynke licour of the vyne/ And have a joly wenche in every toun (VI. 452-53). The Parson's discourse on drunkenness, which falls under Gluttony, is a fairly clinical analysis of how and why it is a sin:

'Manye,' sieth Saint Paul, 'goon, of whiche I have ofte seyde to yow, and now I seye it wepyng, that been the enemys of the croys of Crist; of whiche the ende is deeth, and of whiche hire wombe is hire god, and hire glorie in confusioun of hem that is so savouren erthely thynges.' / He that is usaunt to this synne of glotonye, he ne may no synne withstonde. He moot been in servage of alle vices for it is the develes hoord ther he hideth hym and

resteth./ This synne hath manye speces. The firste is dronkenesse, that is the horrible sepulture of mannes resoun; and therefore, whan a man is dronken, he hath lost his resoun; and this is deedly synne (X. 819-21).

There are no exclamations or statements that chastise or shame the listeners.

Rather, the sin is broken down into species, and each is defined and typified through a rational analyzation of the connection between the behavior and God's command --- here, as the Parson relates in the words of St. Paul, the sinner holds his belly, his own appetites, before God. The Parson, as discussed in Chapter One, does not preach to shame his listeners, but to help them to understand themselves first, with the detestation following from that understanding. That detestation should not come from him but from within the penitent. But this is not the case with the Pardoner.

The Pardoner's discourse against the behavior that he has openly exhibited is far more passionate and emotional, as was touched on in Chapter Two. An example of this is found fairly early in the "Tale," as the Pardoner leans heavily on descriptive and emotional language, something which we don't see much of in the discourse of the Parson:

A lecherous thyng is wyn, and dronkenesse

Is ful of stryving and of wrecchednesse.

O dronke man, disfigured is thy face,  
Sour is thy breeth, foul artow to embrace,  
And thurgh thy dronke nose semeth the soun  
As though thou seydest ay 'Sampsoun, Sampsoun!'  
And yet, God woot, Sampsoun drank nevere no wyn.  
Thou fallest as it were a styked swyn;  
Thy tonge is lost, and al thyn honeste cure,  
For dronkenesse is verray sepulture  
Of mannes wit and his discrecioun.  
In whom that drynke hath dominacioun  
He kan no conseil kepe; it is no drede (VI. 549-61).

Here he is working on the emotional side of sin - the will, as described in Chapter One. He uses words like "wrecchednesse," "sour" and "foul," describes the sinner as a "styked swyn," and repeatedly points a figurative finger at the listener with his emphasis on "thou" and "thy," which are used in different forms eight times in the passage above. He does these things in order to create the revulsion that will make the sinner feel bad for committing the act, but not for the reasoning behind the action.

The Pardoner is preaching against drunkenness as, we presume, he is

drinking himself. He basically paints a picture of himself using this series of insults and repulsive comparisons, and then warns the other pilgrims that such a man is untrustworthy.

Using the Parson's discourse as a standard, the Pardoner's is explosive and deviates from the norm to an extreme. The two pilgrims do use some of the same *sententiae*, such as that of St. Paul, weeping as he speaks of these 'enemys of Cristes croys,' as we see in Chapter Two (VI. 532). But while the Parson focuses on the nature of the sin itself in a straightforward analysis without affected emphasis on the tragedy of sin, the Pardoner's main concern is shaming the sinner by relying on loaded exclamations such as we see above.

Another fundamental difference between the Parson and Pardoner at this particular point is that the Parson takes credit for none of his discourse. He simply organizes the viewpoints of various religious authorities and presents them as fact, using them to back up his teachings, which are based in the scriptures. Little to none of his discourse is original or personal commentary. The Pardoner, on the other hand, uses *exempla* and *sententiae* to back up his *own* assertions and his excessive ranting, as we see in this section of his discourse on gluttony:

'Mete unto wombe, and wombe eek unto mete,

Shal God destroyen bothe,' as Paulus seith.

Allas, a foul thyng is it, by my feith,  
To seye this word, and fouler is the dede,  
Whan man so drynketh of the white and rede  
That of his throte he maketh his pryvee  
Thurgh thilke cursed superfluitee (VI. 522-28).

He sprinkles *exempla* and *sententiae* throughout his discourse, a practice that he figures will give him the authoritative credence he needs to make his own judgments and proclamations. Saint Paul did not say that a man who drinks wine makes a toilet of his own throat, but his statement does support the Pardoner's assertion that man should not be gluttonous.

The same observations apply to the Parson's and Pardoner's treatments of swearing. Again, the Parson's discourse is almost entirely a compilation of statements from authority figures. He says, for example:

God seith, 'Thow shalt nat take the name of thy Lord God in veyn or in ydel.' Also oure Lord Jhesu Crist seith, by the word of Seint Mathew, / 'Ne wol ye nat swere in alle manere; neither by hevene, for it is Goddes trone; ne by erthe, for it is the bench of his feet; ne by Jerusalem, for it is the citee of a greet kyng; he by thyn heed, for thou mayst nat make an heer whit ne blak. / But seyeth by youre word 'ye,ye,' and 'nay, nay'; and what that is moore, it

is of yvel' - thus seith Crist (X. 587-89).

As this passage exemplifies, the Parson does not find a place in his speech for personal interjection. He takes no credit for what he preaches. He simply uses the words of authority to form a rational analysis of sin and to draw conclusions from those *sententiae* as to why particular sins are wrong. He doesn't use his preaching to create an authoritative image for himself. On the contrary, he attributes everything he has to say to another source. He does not presume that the pilgrims should believe what he has to say, but rather emphasizes that his lessons come from the Church and its doctrine.

But, once again, the Pardoner does not adhere to the standard. His discourse is full of exclamations based not on a rational approach to sin, but on the emotional response --- detestation. In doing so, he only says the sin is evil; he doesn't say why. Furthermore, in condemning the act of swearing, he swears himself as he gives examples of what he is preaching against. Such examples aren't necessary in this case for the pilgrims to understand what he is talking about, and, therefore, cannot be regarded as legitimate *exempla*, intended to further their comprehension of his preaching. And this is not the only instance of swearing we find in his discourse, as he promises to tell a good tale "by Seint Ronyon" and "by God" in his prologue (VI. 320, 457). In doing so, he is following perfectly the pattern he has

already established in his discourse on gluttony and drunkenness, as he preaches against his own behavior:

Gret sweryng is a thyng abhominable,

And fals sweryng is yet moore reprevable.

The heighe God forbad sweryng at al,

Witness on Mathew; but in special

Of sweryng seith the hooly Jeremye,

'Thou shalt swere sooth thyne othes, and nat lye,

And swere in foom and eek in rightwisnesse';

But ydel sweryng is a cursednesse. . . .

'By Goddes precious herte,' and 'By his nayles,'

And 'By the blood of Crist that is in Hayles,

Seven is my chaunce, and thyn is cynk and treye!'

'By Goddes armes, if thou falsly pleye,

This daggere shal thurghout thyn herte go!' . . .

Now, for the love of Crist, that for us dyde,

Lete youre othes, bothe grete and smale (VI. 631-38, 651-55, 658-59).

But why would he belittle and criticize his own actions so harshly before the other pilgrims?

This brings us to some plausible psychological readings of the "Prologue" and "Tale." It becomes obvious, after examining the differences between the Pardoner's discourse and that of the Parson, that the Pardoner's use of rhetoric to create this intense detestation against the defining characteristics we see in him must have some personal motive other than greed. We know the Pardoner is aware of his own sins, since he boasts about them in the "Prologue." So is it possible that the emotional preaching found in the "Tale" is an outburst of the detestation the Pardoner feels for his own behavior? In other words, is the sermon shaped by his own behavior and directed back at himself? This does seem possible, as the Pardoner deliberately presents himself in the "Prologue" as the representative of all he urges his listeners to detest in the "Tale."

Another possibility, however, is that the knowledge of his own sinful behavior has made him feel guilty and the "Prologue and Tale" are an attempt to present a more self-confident and authoritative devil-may-care image to the other pilgrims. This theory is one of many explored by scholar Lee Patterson in his article "Chaucerian Confession":

From the pilgrims the Pardoner covets not money, but admiration: his confession is designed to extract from the *gentils* a shocked respect and from Harry Bailly and his ilk the dubious title of 'a good felawe'. But, in fact, he



goes too far and defines himself as a man outside the human community, making his ultimate rejection inevitable and revealing a pattern of self-destruction that surfaces in the offer of the relics. More significant than the misjudgment of others' cynicism, however, is the genuineness and even vulnerability that the Pardoner reveals (Patterson 164).

In attempting to push away painful self-disgust, the Pardoner turns in the opposite direction and tries to impress the others. In doing so, he uses language in various forms --- as lewd jokes and as pious preaching --- to create rhetorical force and, he hopes, an image of authority. He describes his ability to speak in these different ways at the end of the "Prologue:" "For though myself be a ful vicious man,/ A moral tale yet I yow telle kan,/ Which I am wont to preche for to wynne" (VI. 459-61). Once again, Patterson speaks to this:

Language is the means by which he creates himself for others, whether it be the cocksure prattle with which he disguises his eunuchry or the witty and learned sermon, liberally embellished with impressive *exempla*, with which he established his authority before the 'lewed peple' (Patterson 163).

This theory would account for the passionate outbursts of detestation that characterize the Pardoner's sermon, such as, "O wombe! O bely! O stynkyng cod, / Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun!" (VI. 534-35). These exclamations are not

only self-chastising, but also create that image of an outraged authority figure preaching down from a righteous position to the lowly sinners, like a television evangelist, an image which the Pardoner describes himself in the Prologue:

I stond lyk a clerk in my pulpet,  
And whan the lewed people is doun yset,  
I preche so as ye han herd bifoore  
And telle an hundred false japes moore.  
Thanne peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke,  
And est and west upon the peple I bekke,  
As dooth a dowve sitting on berne (VI. 391-97).

The language he uses is carefully designed to create an emotional response in the listener --- a sense of shame --- and a desire to change, to be outside of the group that the speaker condemns and to be free of sin. The Pardoner tries to use language in this way to gain power and respect from the people he talks down to from his pulpit, bolstering his own self-image and keeping at bay the feelings of self-disgust that haunt him.

But the authoritative preaching of an accomplished speaker and the disgusted outbursts of an ashamed sinner can also combine to create one character playing two roles: that of confessor and that of penitent. In looking at the Pardoner and his

behavior from this perspective, one could argue that as the confessor, he is using his words to promote recognition of sin and detestation, as was explored in depth in Chapter Two; and as the penitent, he has acknowledged his own sin through self-examination and opened himself up for punishment. The sermon serves two purposes: it is the guiding examination aid of the religious figure or confessor and the examination itself, simply in an impersonal and detached rhetorical form in the sense that the Pardoner does not explicitly make the connection between his own sins and his sermon for the listeners. The detestation not only is the attempt of a preacher to elicit contrition and money from others, but also serves as the vehicle for the feelings of self-hatred in the sinner that come with recognition of sin. In this way, perhaps the discourse is used by the Pardoner in an attempt to push himself further into contrition and to motivate himself to pursue change and salvation.

The crucial element missing in that characterization as a penitent is the outward desire for, and intent to, change. In trying to protect himself from others' recognition of his vulnerability and unhappiness, the Pardoner presents himself as proud of his licentiousness and taking pleasure in sin. But bravado and self-revelation negate each other, in a sense, and the Pardoner's pitiful struggle becomes more clear. In the process, though, we see that the Pardoner, because of his shame for his sin and the bungled attempts to present himself as something other than he

is, does in fact recognize his deviation from the norm that *he* believes to be acceptable behavior, as Patterson argues:

This fugitive and embarrassed self-defense shows the Pardoner acknowledging in his spirit the values he subverts in his working, a complication that appears again in the benediction with which he closes the tale. In sum, he is by no means unambiguously impenitent, and his attempt to reduce himself to the simplicity of allegorical evil is best understood as an attempt to escape from a consciousness that is too painfully divided. The “Prologue”, then, by turns derisory and hesitant, vaunting and awkwardly candid, reveals in its very lack of clarity a soul in conflict (Patterson 164).

Indeed, it seems unarguable that the Pardoner does *not* recognize his own sins, since he so blatantly exhibits them and then turns around to preach against them. His sermon exhibits his knowledge of the sins and of *sententiae* as he makes use of many of the same quotations that the Parson does. But, like the old man searching for Death in his “Tale,” he may be aware of the path to salvation but is unable to find it himself (Patterson 166). If we assume that he is indeed wanting to be saved, despite his boasting, we can then evaluate his “Prologue” and “Tale” based on the emotional progression that is a part of the penitential process.

If we follow the model put forth in Chapter One, the first step toward

forgiveness is self-examination and acknowledgment of responsibility for sin, which is in evidence throughout "The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale," from his boasting and crude behavior in the "confessional" prologue to the righteous assertions in the sermon. He is definitely aware of his sins and of his conscious choice to perform them. And as a preacher, he has ample opportunity, while reciting his discourse on the deadly sins as he does in his "Tale," to ponder his own actions and relate them to the guidelines and remonstrations he recites. According to Patterson, "a true knowledge of himself humiliates the sinner . . ." This self-hatred, combined with a fear of God, usually brings a penitent to contrition (159). These negative feelings are an important part of penitence, but they are also very unstable and can become either contrition or despair (159-60). The Pardoner heads toward the latter. Instead of combining self-hatred and fear of God, the Pardoner combines his disgust with *anger* at God --- perhaps an anger spurned on by his lack of place in society.

There are many hints in *The Canterbury Tales* that the Pardoner is a eunuch, and it is a concept generally accepted by scholars. He is described by Chaucer the Pilgrim in the "General Prologue" as follows:

A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot.

No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;

As smothe it was as it were late shave.

I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare (I. 688-91).

As a eunuch, he is not wholly masculine, but not female either. Also, as discussed in Chapter Two, there is no concrete evidence that the Pardoner is a bonafide member of the clergy, but as a pardoner he is not considered a layman. In general, the Pardoner does not fit into any of the defining categories in medieval society since he has characteristics from both genders, such as his high pitched voice, and he doesn't fit into any of the three major social classes: aristocracy, clergy or the working class.

Therefore, it seems plausible that the Pardoner's self-disgust for sin, on its way to becoming contrition, which is made up of self-disgust and fear of God, gets diverted by his *anger* at God for not giving him a place. This sin of anger destroys its own cure, in a sense, in preventing the Pardoner from asking for mercy, as the Parson describes in his discourse on Ire: ". . . right so as fir is moore mighty to destroyen erthely thynges than any oother element, right so Ire is myghty to destroyen alle spiritueel thynges" (X. 546). This anger, then, condemns him to an existence in despair (Patterson 158):

[T]hinking himself lost, the man in despair refuses to ask for mercy; refusing to ask, he cannot receive; and not receiving, he becomes lost in deed as well

as thought (Patterson 160). The distortions and displacements of his

The Parson, in the section on Sloth, says of the despairing man, "Axe and have" (X. 704). But, as Patterson has explained, the asking is the problem. The Pardoner is so deeply ensconced in sin that a change of life seems impossible, a condition the Parson himself acknowledges:

Now cometh wanhope, that is despeir of the mercy of God, that cometh  
somytyme of to mucche outrageous sorwe, and somtyme of to much drede,  
ymaginyng that he hath doon so mucche synne that it wol nat availen hym,  
though he wolde repenten hym and forsake synne, / thurgh which despeir or  
drede he abaundoneth al his herte to every maner synne, as seith Seint  
Augustin (X. 692-93). he makes his offer to the Host.

In his attempt to combat this despair, the Pardoner throws himself into a defensive position, claiming first to take pleasure in sin, and later to be a religious authority figure to be respected. But his attempts to establish some sort of societal "place" for himself backfire. The Pardoner's roles as righteous clergyman and lecherous scoundrel each destroy the intended impact of the other and reveal the Pardoner as a vulnerable man struggling for acceptance but unsure of which way to turn for it:

At once defiant and self-hating, wretched in his licentiousness and yet  
hardened in sin, the Pardoner yearns toward the release of confession but it

unable to bring himself to it. The distortions and displacements of his speaking, then, are not superficial awkwardnesses or vestiges of irrelevant conventions, but the essence of his paradoxical meaning (Patterson 167).

It is conceivable to view the Pardoner in this way as a character torn between polarities. He has no place in society; he is not wholly masculine; he yearns for the freedom of confession but is trapped in sin by his own anger and despair. And, in addition to those troubles, he struggles with conflicting urges to avoid the self-inflicted criticism and sorrow that manifests itself as the boasting and self-assurance in the "Prologue" and to invite the punishment he knows he deserves from the other pilgrims, as we see in the "Tale" as he preaches on the evil of the sins he exhibits and, at the "Tale's" close, as he makes his offer to the Host.

This is where all of these psychological struggles erupt: at the end of the "Tale" as the Pardoner's despair is manifested in that one culminating action --- the offering of the relics to the Host. Instead of feeling the self-hatred and fear of God that usually combine to create contrition in the sinner, the Pardoner feels self-hatred and *anger* at God for all of the reasons listed above. These converge and are channeled into the insulting invitation to partake of his "wares":

I rede that oure Hoost heere shal bigynne,

For he is moost envoluped in synne.



Come forth, sire Hoost, and offre first anon,

And thou shalt kisse ther relikes everychon,

Ye, for a grote! Unbokele anon thy purs (VI. 941-45).

The Pardoner's motivation for selecting the Host invites much speculation. The Host is very outspoken and opinionated, and, as the leader of the pilgrimage, carries some authority. As a character so in control of his life and stable in his command, he is the ideal target for the Pardoner's wrath. He is the personification of all the qualities the Pardoner is striving to add to his own repertoire, and is, therefore, the obvious source of competition. Just before making the invitation, the Pardoner reaches the height of his sermon, using all of his rhetorical skill to establish himself as the religious authority figure with his affected preaching:

O cursed synne of alle cursednesse!

O traytours homycide, O wikkednesse!

O glotonye, luxurie, and hasrdrye!

Thou blasphemour of Crist with vileynye

And othes grete, of usage and of pride!

Allas, mankynde, how may it bitide

That to thy creatour, which that the wroghte

And with his precious herte-blood thee boghte,

Thou art so fals and so unkynde, allas? (VI. 895-903).

Here he reaches a peak as he hurls accusations and exclamations at the pilgrims, addressing “mankynde” as if he is not a part of it, and shaming the listeners for the sins he has described in his “Tale” and exhibited himself. Perhaps this brings him to what he thinks is a safe position in which to make his offer to the Host, as he has entranced his listeners with his pious words.

After such a revealing “Prologue” and the vulnerability that is exposed in his struggle to find acceptance, the question is: “Why would he choose to embarrass the Host and invite the harsh reply he receives?”. There are at least three possible answers to that question.

The confrontation could be an act of bravado on the part of the Pardoner. If so, the offer to the Host is a continuation of his attempts to assert himself as “one of the gang” with the likes of the Miller and the Reeve. This would explain his shocked reaction to the Host’s rebuff, which not only reveals the knowledge of the fake relics, but also asserts that the Pardoner is no more than a con-artist *and* touches on the embarrassing secret of his eunuchry. “This Pardoner answerde nat a word; / So wrooth he was, no word ne wolde he seye” (VI. 956-57). He expects to receive from the pilgrims the respect and fellowship he has tried to convince them he deserves, not the hatred that is hurled back at him.

The second possibility is that the offer is made with the expectation of a negative reply. By singling out the pilgrim most likely to react to his insulting proposal, the Pardoner is inviting the punishment he thinks he deserves for his sinful ways and refusal to change or ask for forgiveness, and he is bringing a close to his distorted version of the penitential process: he has felt guilt, he has confessed, and now he receives penance. Of course, this version of penitence falls far below the standard for an acceptable confession set up by the Church, as described in Chapter One, in that it does not come from a desire to change and set things right by seeking out the moral opposite of his actions. Rather he is delving deeper into the sin he should be renouncing. But it serves a purpose in prompting the punishment the Pardoner is looking for.

The final possibility, and the most plausible in keeping with the portrait of him above, is that the Pardoner acts, perhaps not completely consciously, from a combination of bravado and despair. From this perspective, the confrontation not only humbles the sinful Pardoner, but also serves as an attack on the man that represents what he envies most.

Even after all of this speculation, the question remains "What is the significance of all of this deviant behavior and why does the Pardoner use the process of penitence as a vehicle to demonstrate his anger and despair?". First it is

important to distinguish between the Pardoner's exposure of his deviant acts and an actual confession. The Pardoner's discourse is a false confession for many reasons, but most specifically we can point to a lack of intent to change his behavior. His speech comes from anger and self-hatred, not from contrition, fear of God, or a hatred for the sins themselves. He uses his confession and his discourse on sin in attempts to create different images for himself before the others that he hopes will win him acceptance. But beyond this, the Pardoner's subversion of the penitential process is possibly a shot at the God, and, therefore, the system that he blames for placing him outside of society and making him the "angry man" that the Host sees so clearly at the end of the "Tale" (VI. 959). In his discourse, the Pardoner makes the Church's process for recognition of sin and penance a mockery of the Christian values behind them. What better way to take revenge on the institution that is responsible for his tormented soul than to trample its fundamental principles under the guise of a religious authority figure?

In a sense, the Pardoner is successful in achieving one goal: as a representative of the institution he blames for his misfortune and unhappiness, he, through his own pathetic existence, casts a shadow on the Church itself. Thus, in front of the other pilgrims and as a part of Chaucer's popular and widely read collection of "Tales," the Pardoner presents not only the corruption and greed that

prompted reform in the thirteenth century, but also a soul in torment that fancies himself outside of God's reach. Meanwhile his counterpart, the Parson, brings the *Tales* to a more positive end as the figure of reform and as a representative of the way the Church was meant to be. The Parson, as the figure that escapes Chaucer's cynical and sarcastic tongue, is a representation of the Church as accessible to us all. He lacks the emotional and surface-level shaming that we see in the Pardoner, and he takes the gentle approach of the shepherd with his lambs that we see most specifically in Chaucer's portrait of him in the "General Prologue":

He sette nat his benefice to hyre  
And leet his sheep encombred in the myre  
And ran to Londoun unto Seinte Poules  
To seken hym a chaunterie for soules,  
Or with a bretherhed to been withholde;  
But dwelte at hoom, and kepte wel his folde,  
So that the wolf ne made it nat myscarie;  
He was a shepherde and noght a mercenarie (I. 507-14).