

CHAUCER'S PARDONER:

A MARVEL OF NARCISSISTIC PORTRAITURE

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“The function of the poet is to set forth ... the forms,
habits, discourse and actions of all animate beings”

-- *Boccaccio, Giovanni. Boccaccio on Poetry, tr. Charles G. Osgood, p. 80*

Chaucer's Pardoner is an enigmatic but fascinating character, perhaps one of a kind. There is, however, continuing disagreement among critics as to what the poet intended him to be. Critics have taken two main views of the Pardoner: Some agree with Walter C. Curry in *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences* that Chaucer has combined in the person and the tale of his Pardoner “a complete psychological study of the medieval *eunuchus ex nativitate* (eunuch from birth) and a mordant satire on the abuses practiced in the church of his day” (p. 64). G.G. Sedgewick, in his 1940 *Modern Language Quarterly* article “The Progress of Chaucer's Pardoner, 1880-1940,” agrees with Walter C. Curry in that the Pardoner is a born eunuch (pp.431--58), whereas Robert P. Miller in his 1955 *Speculum* article titled “Chaucer's Pardoner: The Spiritual Eunuch, and the Pardoner's Tale” argues that the Pardoner is sterile in good work and spirit (pp.180-99). Others accept Gordon H. Gerould's view expressed in his 1952 article, included in *Chaucerian Essays*, that “Chaucer meant his Pardoner to be sexually abnormal [*sic*] in one way or another, but did not bother to be specific” (p. 60). In his 1970 *Chaucer Review* article, “Chaucer's Pardoner and the Progress of Criticism,” John Halverson suggests that the Pardoner's sexual reductionism is

responsible for his defensive bravura (pp.184-202). Donald Roy Howard, in *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (420 pages, 1976), says that Chaucer's line suggests that the Pardoner "is sexually peculiar -- that he *lacks* something: like a gelding the physical equipment, or like a mare the male gender-identity" (p. 343). And, John Gardener in *The Poetry of Chaucer* (1977) claims that the Pardoner's homosexuality "is obvious at a glance" (p.302).

Since the 1980s, the Deconstructive approach to literature has found new meanings in literary texts. The term "Deconstruction" originates from the writings of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who wrote his seminal works in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These works are *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), *Of Grammatology* (1967), *Writing and Difference* (1967), and *Margins of Philosophy* (1972). "Deconstruction" is used in the first three works; in philosophy, it calls into question the Western metaphysics concept of logocentrism and a transcendental signifier; in literature, it calls into question the received opinion of a literary text. The deconstructive critic exposes the tensions, contradictions, and inconsistencies, the so-called "blind spots" or "holes" in the text under examination, to challenge the conventional meaning and replace it with a new interpretation. As explained by Derrida, Deconstruction aims to dismantle the language of a text to reveal "the relational quality of meaning." To his detractors, Derrida's stance, as envisioned by the eminent literary critic Terry Eagleton, is "... not that truth is illusory, but that it is institutional" (Eagleton 1986). In Eagleton's words, "Deconstruction holds that nothing is ever entirely itself ... there is a certain otherness lurking within every assured identity" (GuardianUk.com). For Derrida, texts have no fixed meaning because the language by itself that texts use to communicate meaning is unreliable. According to Derrida, all meanings are "eternally deferred." He labelled the constant deferral of meaning *différance*, combining the words 'difference and 'deferral.'" It is applicable to those texts which contest their own meaning.

Of course, there are some texts that fall outside the scope of deconstructive criticism. One outstanding example is Chaucer's own poem titled "Merciles Beaute." In this song lyric, the persona affirms that "I speke right as I mene." A victim of the beautiful lady without mercy, he addresses her: "Your yen two wol slee me sodenly, I may the beautee of hem not sustene" (p. 659). However, Derrida cautions us that "deconstruction should never lead either to relativism—or to any sort of indeterminism" (*Limited Inc.*, p. 148).

Since the subject of this paper is concerned with Chaucer's Pardoner, a literary subject, we will focus only on its critical appraisals. "il n'y a pass de hors-texte," in French, and translated into English as "There is nothing outside of the text," is the crucial concept of Deconstruction, translated by G.C. Spivak into English as *Of Grammatology*, 1976 (p. 158). This statement that "there is nothing outside the text really means that there is nothing outside context" (Jeffrey G. Harpham, *Shadows of Ethics*, 1999, p. 56). The following are important articles on Chaucer's Pardoner from 1980s onwards: Monica E. McAlpine (*PMLA*, 1980), Carolyn Dinshaw (*ELH*, 1988), H. Marshall Leicester, Jr (California, 1990), Glen Burger (*PMLA*, 1992), Steven Kruger (*Exemplaria*, 1994), Diana E. Aspinall (e-Green, 1995), Richard E. Zeikowitz (*The Dalhousie Review*, 2002), and Alex da Costa (*Critical Survey*, 2017), with their brief overviews. Monica E. McAlpine in her 1980 article titled "The Pardoner's Homosexuality and How It Matters" points out that the Pardoner's physiognomy—his beardless face, thin neck, hare-like glaring eyes, and goat-like voice – reveals that he combines in him three categories of persons, namely 'effeminate,' 'hermaphrodite,' and 'eunuch,' and the Pardoner can be safely called a passive homosexual. McAlpine further contends that the Pardoner's physical characteristics make the poet wonder: "I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare" (*CTGP*, 1.691). However, she does not find the *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*) or *The Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*)

helpful because neither includes the meaning of 'mare,' which is relevant to Chaucer's context. OED does contain, however, the expression "presetes mare" and that was used contemptuously for a woman who sins with a priest, and cites the following two lines from Robert Mannyng of Brunne's "Handlyng Synne" (1303): "And shame hyt ys euer anywhere/ To be called a 'presetes mare.'" In the Middle Ages, the term 'mare' was applied not only to a woman who had an adulterous relationship with a man but also to a male who played the role of a passive homosexual to another male (p.20). Melvin Storm's 1982 article "The Pardoner's Invitation: The Quaestor's Bag or Becket's Shrine" offers another interpretation of the Pardoner's importance in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* scheme. In Storm's view, the Pardoner "enables Chaucer to make incisive reflections on the ideals of pilgrimage and their potential subversion" by unscrupulous pardoners (p. 810). He presents his central argument that "the Pardoner purports to carry relics akin to those that the pilgrims seek to honor in Canterbury but also indulgences themselves, potential substitutes for one of the benefits of pilgrimage" (p. 811). In his article titled "Reflections in a Golden Florin: Chaucer's Narcissistic Pardoner," Donald W. Fritz applies the Jungian archetypal approach to Chaucer's Pardoner and finds that the Pardoner fits into the archetype of *puer aeternus*, one who remains an eternal boy even in his adult life. He is someone who is "psychologically prevented in his youth from successfully uniting with the *senex*," with the result that they lack "a realistic perspective" about their actual merits and continue to live in their fantasy world." The Host reacts violently to the Pardoner's invitation to him to be the first to make an offering to his relics, as he is "moost envoluped in synne" (Pardoner's Tale, 1.942). The move backfires as the Host retorts that he would rather cut off the Pardoner's "coillons" for everyone to see than kiss his fake relics. The Host thus acts as a negative *senex*, whereas the

Knight, who acts as a peacemaker, plays the role of a positive senex by asking the two parties to cool down to be reconciled and kiss each other, to the Pardoner's satisfaction.

In "The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in *The Canterbury Tales*," H. Marshall Leicester Jr. puts forward the view that Chaucer is both amused and disgusted by the continuous reduction of the institutions of the 14th-century church to just a few rites, rituals, and practices.

The Pardoner deliberately shows the corruption of the clergy by making himself the best exemplar of the abuses by the clergy. Nor does the Pardoner seem to believe in the "consolation of religion," as it was offered at that time.

In her article titled "'I wol thee telle al plat': Poetic Influences in Chaucer's Pardoner," Diana E. Aspinall argues that Chaucer's Pardoner is a penitent figure whose self-perception has become so distorted that he constantly fights to control it. According to Aspinall, the Pardoner is motivated to confess his past sins, repent of them, and be guided by the church.

In his article "Kissing the Pardoner," Glen Burger argues that Chaucer's Pardoner is "not the other," as his detractors say. The cupidity they charge against him actually drives the mercantile economy. Thus, they are also guilty.

In "Eunuch Hermeneutics," Carolyn Dinshaw points out that even though fellow pilgrims know that the Pardoner is "sexually weird," they want no ribaldry but a moral thing, not minding that it will be fiction. They will be happy if it has verisimilitude, based on characters and incidents representative of real life.

In his article titled "Claiming the Pardoner: Toward a Gay Reading of Chaucer's Pardoner's Tale," Steven K. Kruger dismisses any allegorical or spiritual reading of the Pardoner's performance. In his attack on the Pardoner, the Host uses angry language, which connects the Host to his angry opponent. Though reduced to silence, the Pardoner here wins as

he can bring the Host down to his level. In a moment of homosexual panic, the Host draws away from the spiritual and firmly into the circle of the Pardoner's body.

In his article titled "Silenced but not Stifled: The Disruptive Power of Chaucer's Pardoner," Richard E. Zeikowitz avers that Chaucer's Pardoner is an excellent example of indeterminate queerness, and shows how "the queer power disarms heteronormativity," and that the eventual silencing of the Pardoner does not affect his character as a queer personality.

In his article "The Pardoner's Passing and How It Matters," Alex da Costa opines that the Pardoner is a woman who passes as a man. This interpretation is possible because the narrator doubts the Pardoner's gender identity.

The critiques mentioned above of Chaucer's Pardoner are perceptive. However, each of these views seems to solve but a part of the Pardoner's puzzle. A more comprehensive answer results when one realizes that the Pardoner's character and behavior pattern accord with the main components of a narcissistic personality structure. The Pardoner's self-aggrandizement, underlying his inflated ego, exhibitionism, exploitative mentality, and hypersensitivity to criticism reveals his narcissism. While striving for power and prestige, he flies higher and higher, and like Icarus, goes out of orbit and falls humiliated, but with his narcissistic libido still intact.

In 1889, two psychiatrists, Paul Nacke (German) and Havelock Ellis (British), used the term "Narcissism," independently of each other, to describe a person who treats their body in the same way as a sexual partner. Havelock Ellis was also the first to use the phrase "Narcissus-like" cases in which the patient's sexual emotion was absorbed and then entirely lost in self-admiration. The nymph Echo falls in love with Narcissus, but Narcissus cannot return her love because she is just his echo. As for Sigmund Freud, he first used the term "Narcissism" in 1910. In a letter to his friend Karl Abraham, Freud gives a succinct definition of Narcissism as "the libidinal

complement to the egoism of the self-preservative instinct" [sic] (Qtd. in Ernest Jones' *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 2, p. 303). It is noteworthy that "narcissistic object-choice," says Freud, [is] for homosexuality in men" (*A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. John Rickman, p. 115).

Furthermore, significantly enough, Erich Neumann adds in *The Origins and History of Consciousness* that Narcissism is "a symptom of immature consciousness," and an insecure ego, which cannot "consolidate" itself (p. 123). In other words, when the ego takes itself as an object and behaves as if it is in love with itself, a narcissist is born. It is, therefore, reasonable to suggest that only a person indulging in ego-libido will behave the way the Greek youth Narcissus did.

American Psychiatric Association (APA) has codified the results of research on personality traits and has provided a fine diagnostic instrument, DSM-5 (2013), to assess a narcissistic personality type. It may well be pointed out that APA removed homosexuality from the DSM in 1973, as it concluded, based on the new scientific research, that homosexuality is a normal aspect of human sexuality. According to DSM-5, a narcissistic personality will display five or more of the following characteristics: "Grandiose sense of self-importance or uniqueness," "fantasies of unlimited success," "exhibitionism," "cool indifference or marked feelings of rage ... in response to [negative criticism]," "entitlement in interpersonal relationships," and "lack of empathy."

These criteria for a narcissistic personality are fully applicable to the Pardoner's case. The poet's sketch of the Pardoner in the General Prologue and the Pardoner's self-portrait in the Prologue to his tale, coupled with his narrative strategy, show the salient features of a narcissistic figure. The Pardoner announces his arrival with fanfare by singing aloud in his soprano voice the duet "Come hider, love to me," accompanied by the powerful bass voice of the Summoner serving as

an accompaniment. Complementary to the DSM criteria, the *Scientific American*, in its September 2023 issue, published an article titled "What is Narcissism?" by Dianna Kwon, giving the results of the latest research on the subject. She shows us the two faces of Narcissism: one exhibiting "Approach-oriented (extraverted) traits" and the other "Avoidance-oriented (reactive) trait" (pp. 56-57). Both these types are present in Chaucer's Pardoner. For the extraverted, the direction of movement is toward the object of one's love. There are only two ways to choose the object of one's love. They are called objects corresponding with the picture of oneself or part of oneself, of what one used to be, or of what one liked to be." In the second case, where there is a connection with nonsexual attributes of the parents, the choice falls, according to the sex, on a woman who tends, supports, helps or a man who protects" (Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 2, pp. 305–306). In the reactive type, the narcissistic individual cannot brook any negative criticism from anyone and uses all their force to defame and disparage the adversaries.

A detailed examination of the Pardoner's narcissistic features based on the DSM criteria and Diana Kwon's, as well as the views of eminent analysts such as Paul Zweig, William Reich, Heinz Kohut, and Karen Horney, follows:

The most striking thing about Chaucer's Pardoner is his egocentricity, which is visible in his appearance and behavior, as they are expressive of his desire to pass for a unique individual and an exceptional pardoner. Paul Zweig has nicely expressed the idea of the pathological self-absorption of the narcissistic person when he asserts that "he [the narcissist] is the beginning and the end of his own story" (p. 243). Such an individual has, according to Freud and some other psychoanalysts, a strong homosexual tendency. Freud observes that "narcissistic object choice" is "for homosexuality in men" (*Selections from Freud*, ed. Eric Rickman, p. 115). However,

Freud did not consider homosexuality as a pathological illness, but no more than a form of variation in the developmental process of the sexual organs. David Holbrook supports Freud's claim: "Homosexuals are only more strongly fixed than other people in the narcissistic stage; the genital organ similar to theirs remains throughout life an essential condition for their love" (p. 94). Unlike the other ecclesiastical pilgrims, the Pardoner not only wears long hair but lets it hang straight on his shoulders from under a small cap, which has a vernicle (a reproduction of the handkerchief which bore the miraculous impression of Jesus Christ's face) sewn on to it. The Pardoner also tries to grab the attention of his fellow pilgrims by singing aloud in his soprano voice the duet "Com hider, love to me" with the powerfully bass-voiced Summoner. To establish his uniqueness, he tells his parishioners that his bag is full of pardons "comen from the court of Rome" (*CTGP*, l. 671). Among his relics are invaluable items such as Our Lady's Veil and a piece of the sail of St. Peter's boat wherein Peter went to sea before Jesus Christ rescued him. Apart from these sacred relics, he boasts, he has a unique bone which, when dipped in water, not only cures snake-bite and jealousy in husbands but also ensures an increase in material goods, and also a magical mitten which, when worn on the sower's hand, guarantees bumper crops. Over and above his acting as a very special pardoner, Chaucer's Pardoner creates a façade of extraordinary sexual virility in order to hide his sexual deficiency—which is characteristic of a narcissistic person's arrogating to themselves qualities they do not possess. Even though the Pardoner is sexually weak—as is evident from the implied reference to the unhealthy nature of his testicles in the Host's remark, he is masquerading as a regular Don Juan -- the legendary libertine (called by that name in Spanish), and Don Giovanni in Italian with an asymmetric libido, one who seduces women and considers them merely as "conquered objects." The Pardoner seeks that kind of reputation, when he avers: "Nay, I wol drynke licour of the vyne/And

have a jolly wenche in every toun!" (Pardoner's Prologue, ll. 452- 53). Again, the Pardoner interrupts the Wife of Bath in the middle of her Prologue to her tale to interject that after learning from her the responsibilities of a married man, he is having second thoughts on marriage; and this response is motivated by the same desire to proclaim his masculinity. When the Wife responds that he has not yet heard half of the woes of married life, the Pardoner urges her to continue her story: "Telle forth your tale, spareth for no man, /And teche us younge men of your praktike (Wife's Prologue, ll. 186-87). By emphasizing his youth, the Pardoner is building up an image of a sexually virile man without there being an adequate basis for it. The Pardoner feels gratified when in the Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale, the Host addresses him as "Thou beel amy" (l.318) because this appellation conforms to the image he wants to project to his fellow pilgrims.

Exhibitionism is another dominant narcissistic attribute behind the Pardoner's drive to build a grandiose self-image. Indicative of this trait is not only his overconcern about his looks, as noted earlier, but also the boastful relation of his cleverness and the tricks of his trade. Since the Wife of Bath has impressed the fellow pilgrims with her confession of how she has governed her five husbands successively, the Pardoner feels he must display a more remarkable cleverness.

Whereas the Wife succeeds in imposing only on her husbands, the Pardoner tells the fellow pilgrims how he can impose on large gatherings of "lewd people" (l.592], constituting his congregations. He tells fellow pilgrims that he knows his sermons by heart and that his text is always the same: "Radix malorum est Cupiditas" (Pardoner's Prologue, l. 426). He shows his cleverness by pointing out that he can persuade people to believe in things he, himself, never practices. The Pardoner affirms:

But though myself be guilty in that synne,

Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne

From avarice, and soore to repente

(Pardoner's Prologue, ll. 429-31)

The Pardoner reveals that his cleverest strategy is to warn his congregation that an actual criminal will not be able to offer anything to his relics, and thus, he compels all to be generous in self-defense.

The Pardoner's exhibitionism shows itself in his parade of narrative and rhetorical skills. Seeking to show his excellence in storytelling, he emphasizes the vices of the roisters, authenticity in use of dialogue, descriptive detail and imagery, as well as a swift denouement to achieve verisimilitude. He shows off his rhetorical skills by interspersing his narration with apostrophes and employing biblical allusions. His story is in literary parlance an exemplum, illustrative of a sermon on his favorite text.

Also noteworthy are the Pardoner's exploitative proclivity and total lack of empathy—the traits that demonstrate his narcissistic personality. To cite Pardoner's words: "For myn entente is not but for to wyne, /And nothing for correccion of synne" (Pardoner's Prologue, ll. 403-404).

The Prologue to his tale reveals two other critical, narcissistic characteristics in the Pardoner—namely, his self-adulation and defamation of his detractors. He indulges in self-admiration when he refers to his voice as loud and clear as "a belle" (Pardoner's Prologue, l. 331), and he further shows his excitement: "Myne hands and my tonge goon so yerne /That it is joye to se my bisynesse" (Pardoner's Prologue, ii. 398-99). He tells his audience that he settles his score with the individuals who oppose him by indirectly slandering them to the congregation as he is denouncing sins. The Pardoner's total lack of empathy for others' sufferings is evident from his statement:

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

(Pardoner's Prologue, ll. 448-451)

The Pardoner admits that he is utterly indifferent to what happens to the souls of the purchasers of his phony relics and pardons, self-aggrandizement being his sole motive. No wonder the Pardoner makes in a day what the local Parson makes in a month.

As the Pardoner is participating in the game of storytelling, he wants to be acclaimed as the master narrator and, therefore, deploys his narrative skills to that effect by inveighing against gluttony, gambling, and swearing as a preamble to his tale of three revelers, thereby condemning their covetousness. Furthermore, the Pardoner provides an appropriate setting to the narrative by laying its action in the ancient Flanders, notorious for the questionable morality of its people.

That the Pardoner succeeds in impressing his fellow pilgrims as a master narrator is evident from the fact that they listen to him with rapt attention without even interrupting him once.

The Pardoner's desire to tackle progressively difficult situations to gain self-admiration is yet another pointer to his narcissism. As Heinz Kohut points out, a narcissist is, as it were, "on a swing, swinging forward and backward," higher and still higher (p.5). This narcissistic characteristic of flying higher and higher is evident from the Pardoner's attempt to manipulate his fellow pilgrims into buying his phony pardons and fake relics. To accomplish his purpose, he changes his strategy by telling his fellow pilgrims that he seeks for them the benedictions of Jesus Christ -- "oure soules leche" (Pardoner's Tale, l, 916), thereby giving them the false impression that he is working for Jesus. By invoking the name of Jesus, he prepares them

psychologically for the sale of his spurious pardons. At this point, he promptly offers them his pardons and relics to insure them against accidents during their pilgrimage. He reminds them that they are fortunate to have a competent pardoner like him. In the Pardoner's own words: "It is an honour to everich that is hee That ye mowe have a suffisant pardoner" (Pardoner's Tale, ll,931-32). The cunning Pardoner calls upon the Host as the "one moost envoluped in synne," (Pardoner's Tale, l.942) to come forward and kiss the relics for a groat. (It is worth-noting that the Pardoner has already made indirect insinuations against the Host by referring to the Host's mixing cheap Spanish wine with French wine). The Pardoner aims at the public humiliation of the Host by asking him to make an offering to his relics. This action on the part of the Pardoner reflects his narcissistic personality because by controlling the umpire, he will be adjudged the best storyteller and followed by other pilgrims making their offerings. The Pardoner also wants to pull up the Host because the latter exemplifies "a manly man" in the company of pilgrims. However, the Host refuses to oblige the Pardoner and retaliates by attacking the Pardoner at his most sensitive point. Since the Host's retort pulls down the Pardoner's façade of sexual virility, the latter becomes speechless in anger. As Karen Horney rightly remarks about a narcissist's reaction to negative criticism:

Hypersensitivity to anything resembling criticism or questioning of motivations results predominantly from a disparity between the façade of perfection and the existing shortcomings or deficiencies. Since the façade has to be maintained, any questioning of its solidity is necessarily frightening or irritating. ---- *New Ways of Self Analysis*, p.328

Then, Chaucer, in his Pardoner, portrays a person who builds a fantasy of himself that he becomes his own hero. Like Narcissus, he derives enjoyment through self-admiration. His object choice falls on the Summoner because of the advantages accruing him from this relationship.

Freud points out that the root-cause of Narcissism should be sought in the child's upbringing by their parents. He uses the term "prime narcissism" about those children in whom "unlimited self-love dominates their psychic life, no less than that of primitive people." The neurologist Alexander Lowan agrees: "If a child believes himself a prince, it was because he was raised in that belief" p.21). Without *Erziehung*, a comprehensive German term meaning training, education, and upbringing, the adolescent ego cannot adjust to external reality and regresses to an earlier state when their parents adored them. As Jeffrey Kluger puts it in his September 2014 *Time* essay titled "The Little Narcissists": "We're all born to adore ourselves, but not all of us grow up" (p. 41). Those individuals who do not "grow up" tend to become narcissistic as adults. Such individuals consider themselves notable persons entitled to all rights but no duties or obligations. Chaucer's Pardoner best exemplifies a narcissistic person who makes every possible effort to wrest a most favorable opinion of himself from his fellow pilgrims. Nevertheless, while striving for power and prestige, he flies higher and higher, and eventually, like Icarus, falls defeated, but his narcissistic libido is still intact. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that Chaucer, who believes with Boccaccio that the function of the poet is "to set forth – the forms, habits, discourse, and actions of all animate beings," has in his Pardoner made a masterly presentation of a narcissistic personality.

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