

IRONY AND HUMOUR IN *THE PARDONER'S TALE*

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Irony and humour are usually two basic ingredients of those literary works that ridicule vices and follies with a moral purpose. Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, confirms this idea when he says that "satire is irony which is structurally close to the comic..."¹ These two satirical elements are present in Geoffrey Chaucer's masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, whenever his intention is to hold up a person, an institution or society in general to ridicule. Irony and humour are especially abundant when he describes ecclesiastical types. A very significant example of this is to be found in the figure of the Pardoner and in his tale. The main aim of this paper is, therefore, to study the different types of irony that we can find in *The Pardoner's Tale* as well as the comic elements which characterize this particular individual's performance.

The whole tale is full of tensions between appearance and reality, between what "seems" to be and what really "is", or between the ideal and real view of human behaviour. But even before the Pardoner comes on the stage and tells his story, in *The General Prologue* this hypocritical rogue is ironically called "a gentil Pardoner" (671)² and "a noble ecclesiaste" (710). This is just a taste of what we are going to find in the tale later on.

The most striking ironies in *The Pardoner's Tale* are those which surround the figure of the Pardoner himself. His performance starts with a confession in which he describes his profession to the pilgrims. It is here that the incongruities of this character are clearly brought to light. A pardoner in the Middle ages was supposed to be a churchman with a license to sell papal indulgences and raise money for charitable purposes. He was supposed to be a good man, a model of virtue, with the

¹ *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957; rpt. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 224.

² Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, ed. A. C. Cawley (1958; rpt. London: Dent, 1984), p. 20. Subsequent citations refer to this edition and are in the text.

power to pardon people's sins.³ However, the character Chaucer introduces here is just the opposite: a greedy liar, an inveterate drunkard, a resentful thief who steals money from the poor and has a woman in each town. In short, he is a great sinner who pardons other people's sins. It is the irony of this character that he does not believe in the dogmas of the Church he represents. His job is to open the way to salvation, but he does not care about the souls of his congregation: "I rekke nevere, whan that they been beried, / Though that hir soules goon a-blakeberied." (405-406)

Nevertheless, the Pardoner involuntarily succeeds in his mission and is able to do good. Although thoroughly corrupt himself, he can change other people's behaviour and improve their spiritual life. He boasts that he can move others to repent of the very same sins that he practises: "Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne / From avarice, soore to repent." (430-431) But this is itself a joke at his own expense. We can see the limitations of his preaching when he is unable to convert himself. He is good at showing people the way to heaven, but he cannot save his own soul.

There are many other contradictions in this character. The mere fact of his forming part of a pilgrimage to Canterbury is rather incongruous. Why is it that this depraved irreligious person is going on a journey to a saint's shrine? These journeys are usually undertaken to gain supernatural help, as an act of thanksgiving or penance, or for the sake of devotion. None of these motives can be found in a Pardoner who makes fun of the Christian religion.

The different levels of irony in the Pardoner's confession have as a focal point the ironic situation of a man who preaches against the very vice he makes his living from: avarice. While he shows the dangers of being mean and greedy, his one and only intention is to get money from everyone:

I preche of no thing but for coveitise.
Therefore my theme is yet, and evere was,
Radix malorum est Cupiditas.
Thus kan I preche again the same vice
Which that I use, and that is avarice. (424-428)

³ In fact, they sold pardons, which are remissions of part of the temporal punishment for sin ("poena"), something that remained after confession and absolution had saved the sinner from eternal damnation by forgiving the guilt ("culpa"). See S. S. Hussey, *Chaucer: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (1971; rpt. London: Methuen, 1985), p. 109.

Yet cupidity is not the only sin this Pardoner preaches against and then commits himself. In the demonstration sermon that he gives to the pilgrims just before the story of the three revellers, he eloquently condemns the sins of the tavern: gluttony, drinking, lechery, gambling and blasphemy; the very sins he practices. One clear example is drunkenness. We see the Pardoner ask for a drink at the beginning of the tale and, just before the sermon, he confesses that he loves the liquor of the grape (452). The sin of blasphemy and irreverence toward God is also quite evident, since his whole life, vocation and occupation, as we have seen, are themselves a blasphemy. A. C. Spearing, in the introduction to his edition of *The Pardoner's Tale*, calls him a blasphemer because "his very way of life is a blasphemous parody of the divine values it ought properly to serve."⁴ As to the sin of lechery, he presents himself as a very devil with the women (453).

Furthermore, an additional irony in the demonstration sermon is provided by the setting. The Pardoner preaches against the sins of the tavern as if he were in the local parish church. His preaching reminds us of the ordinary homily given at a holy place of worship on a Sunday morning. But funnily enough it seems that this sermon occurs in the most unsanctified place possible: a tavern on the road to Canterbury.⁵

If the content of the sermon is in conflict with the setting and the Pardoner's actual way of life, its form is also disconcerting. The Pardoner is a very skilled preacher and makes excellent use of different "state of the art" techniques. His sermon is decorated with figures of rhetoric, illustrative stories, biblical references, different tones of voice, suspense, etc., achieving a great effect. How is it possible that one of the most indecent pilgrims is able to give the most brilliant and effective sermon?

The same type of question arises when we read the story that the Pardoner uses to illustrate his sermon. Again, we have a walking personification of vice telling an edifying and moral story about three young men who are punished for wrongdoing. This contrast between the teller and the tale is expressed by the Pardoner himself: "For though myself be a ful vicious man, / A moral tale yet I yow telle can" (l 459-60). Thus, he is able to see the irony of his position.

⁴ A. C. Spearing, "Introduction," *The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 41.

⁵ See Ralph W. V. Elliott, *The Nun's Priest's Tale and the Pardoner's Tale*, Notes on English Literature, (1965; rpt. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1982), p. 52.

Most of the ironies discussed up to now are explicit, so the reader does not have to make a great effort to identify them. The Pardoner himself is the one who names them when he admits his sins and confesses his own shortcomings to the rest of the pilgrims. He is quite honest in his confession, though there is no repentance, no regret. There are no excuses either; on the contrary, he is very proud of his own wickedness. Yet this show of self-knowledge and self-confidence ironically illustrates his own ignorance. He is not aware of other ironies such as the one of being "the living example and warning of the final truth of his sermon."⁶ Both sermon and story reveal a message that he is unable to understand. He dares to think that he is an exception to the moral of his Christian text ("Radix malorum est cupiditas") and he never grasps that justice will be done in the end. But the other pilgrims and the reader realize that one day his own arguments will turn against him.

All these ironies, explicit and implicit, serve Chaucer as a tool to show the corruption and the shocking practices of pardoners in the fourteenth century. They clearly expose how this medieval figure fails to perform the duties that the Church entrusts him with. The poet's theme here may be defined by the words "deception", "fraud" and "trickery", that is to say, things are not what they appear. Chaucer could not have found a better way to deal with this topic than the one he chooses: the use of irony, since irony is nothing more than the contrast between appearance and reality.

Thanks to the ironies in the Pardoner's confession and sermon, Chaucer reveals a vivid and believable character who really comes to life in his tale. Other pilgrims, such as the Knight and the Parson, do not develop their personalities in their tales; all we get are their portraits in *The General Prologue*, and after finishing their stories we have very little more. The Pardoner is a different case. Without doubt we understand this character better after having read his tale. And it is evident that irony plays a very important role in that characterization.

So far we have discussed how the use of irony in the Pardoner's confession and sermon offers a wholly satirical description of this character. Now we shall see how the Pardoner himself uses irony in the plot of his story or "exemplum" of the three hooligans from Flanders. To begin with, the three "rioters" set out to seek Death, but when they find him under the guise of a treasure, then they stop looking for him and forget about their first intention. And what is more, they do not

⁶ See Vance Ramsey, "Modes of Irony in *The Canterbury Tales*," in *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, ed. Beryl Rowland (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 299.

recognize him. They ironically think that it is Fortune rather than Death what they find under the oak tree. The reader knows that they are wrong and expects a tragic outcome. In fact, very soon the apparent good luck they had in finding the gold results in their killing one another. Thus, it is a great irony of fate that the three youngsters set out to kill Death, and in the end Death kills them.

The way in which they die is also dramatically ironic. After finding the treasure, the youngest rioter goes to town to fetch some bread and wine and he starts planning to kill his friends and keep all the money: "«O Lord!» quod he, «I so were that I myghte / Have al this tresor to myself allone,»" (840-481); but he is unaware that his two friends are making the same plans just a few yards behind. And indeed they kill him as soon as he comes back. Then, the two rioters left get ready for a celebration, and one of them says: "Now lat us sitte and drynke, and make us merrie, / And afterward we wol his body berie." (883-84). But their celebration turns into a tragedy when they drink the poison their friend had brought from the town.

This ironic ending becomes even more significant when we remember the oath of brotherhood which the three men swore as they started their journey a few hours before. Every now and then they address one another as "my deere friend" (832), and they solemnly swear "To lyve and dyen each of hem for oother" (703), but each of them dies at his "brother's" hand. The whole tale is full of oaths and swearing, since that is one of the sins of the tavern against which the pardoner is preaching. The revellers tear Christ's body to pieces with their oaths; this serves to create an irony by which the same revellers come under a divine judgment and punishment which they themselves invoke.

Another type of irony in this tale is implicit in the character of the Old Man that the three rioters meet on the way. First, it is interesting to see the contrast between these characters. The three young men are strong and full of life; they are arrogant and bullying, so they address the Old Man as an inferior. However, we know that they are ignorant and blind; they cannot see that their bad behaviour is leading to death. On the other hand, the Old Man is weak and helpless, but he can see the truth; he knows that his life or death is in God's hands; he can also see the difference between good and evil clearly. For this reason he proves himself to be superior to the three young men.

This character reminds us of the stock figure of late Greek comedy called "eiron", the ancestor of the modern term "irony". He was the self-effacing person who assumed simplicity and humility, but ironically manipulated those more highly

placed or those who appeared on the surface more clever than he was (the "alazons"). The Old Man certainly adopts an "eiron" role when he tells the three rioters the way they must follow to find Death. Besides, the Old Man says good-bye to the revellers with the words: "God save yow..." (766). Later we learn that God does not save them, but damns them.

An additional irony lies in the fact that both the Old Man and the young men are looking for Death; the first seeks Death because he wants to die and be at peace with himself, the other three seek Death in order to kill him. The result, as we all know, is rather arresting: Death takes the young rioters and lets the Old Man go on wandering restlessly.

With this story the Pardoner shows that he is in all ways a master ironist. The ironies of his tale are a fundamental ingredient to help to convey a profound meaning and a wise comment on life. The message of the Pardoner to the pilgrims is of mortality, damnation and death as the direct consequence of a sinful life. Death is not only seen as a punishment inflicted for wrongdoing, but as an intrinsic element of life - the stranger who kills a young person as he sits drinking or who does away with thousands of people during a plague. Moreover, Death can also be benevolent and desired, a grace, something given by God at the right moment.⁷ The ironies reinforce the message by adding an extra nuance. Thanks to these contrasts, for instance, the blindness of the revellers becomes absolute and their damnation more complete. A better understanding of the mysteries of life and death lies beneath these ironies. D. S. Brewer has stated, "There is not often this profundity of suggestion in *The Canterbury Tales*."⁸

At the end of *The Pardoner's Tale*, once the story of the three revellers is finished, we come across a final irony. The Pardoner again explains to the pilgrims how he uses the story to win money from his listeners and, all of a sudden, he tries to sell his pardons and relics to the pilgrims themselves; that is to say, the Pardoner tries to cheat those who have just listened to his account of dishonest practices. Furthermore, he wants the Host to be the first to offer money. The Host then refuses roughly and insults the Pardoner; curiously enough he insults the same person he

⁷ See Helen Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (London: Duckworth, 1983), p. 158; and Trevor Whittock, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* (1968; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 191-192.

⁸ D. S. Brewer, *Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (1953; London: Longman, 1973), p. 139.

addressed as his "bel ami" (good friend), when he called on the Pardoner to tell his tale.

What is more, after the Host's tirade and obscene language (the Host swears that he would rather have the Pardoner's testicles in his hands than relics), the Pardoner is so filled with rage that he will not speak another word. The ability to preach and make speeches that he has shown in his confession, sermon and tale disappears. This reflects ironically on the limitations of his rhetorical art. His cleverness and superiority also vanish. The joke he wants to play on the pilgrims turns against himself, which provides a sort of poetic justice at the end.

Some of the ironic situations in *The Pardoner's Tale* are quite amusing. Take the last scene, for example. Irony often serves as a comic cloak for moral criticism and Chaucer had a good eye for the humorous incongruities and ironies of life. This tale, as we have seen, is full of irony, and it is also rich in humour.

From the start, the Pardoner appears as a humorous person who has a reputation for amusing stories. That is why the Host, after having heard the Physician's sad tale about the poor Virginia, asks the Pardoner to tell a more cheerful story or some jokes at once: "Telle us som myrthe or japes right anon." (319) The Pardoner agrees to do this with great pleasure, but asks first for a drink. This helps to create the image of the typical comic charlatan who will surely make the pilgrims laugh or, at least, smile.

Examples of humour abound in the Pardoner's prologue. When he confesses his tricks to the pilgrims and describes his practices in churches, he does it in a very entertaining and amusing way. There are comical comparisons, as when he sees himself in the pulpit stretching out his neck and pecking like a pigeon in a barn (395-397). And the ability he shows to sell relics to his country audience is also quite funny. He seems to be playing to his audience "like an experienced comedian."⁹ He claims that his sheep's bone will cure husbands of jealousy. This, of course, is directed at the wives among his audience. If they make him a soup using that bone, the husband will never again suspect his wife. This will be so, despite the fact that he knows for certain she has been unfaithful to him, even if her two or three affairs have all been with priests (366-371).

There are also comic remarks in his demonstration sermon, which avoid the tediousness and monotony of such a long homily. There is a lively passage in which

⁹ Spearing, op. cit., p. 79.

the Pardoner describes a glutton's throat as if it were a lavatory (526-528). Then the Pardoner talks about the human stomach filled up with excrement and dirt, sending out foul smells and sounds at either end: "O wombe! O Bely! O stynkyng cod, / Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun! / At either ende of thee foul is the sound." (534-536) There is also a philosophical pun when he describes the arts of cooking. Using medieval philosophical jargon the Pardoner says that the cooks turn substance into accident (549) in order to make their food look appetizing and tempt people to the sin of gluttony. Another comic passage is the description of the drunkard whose breath stinks and whose snoring sounded something like "Sampsoun, Sampsoun!" (354). This onomatopoeic sound of the drunkard's heavy snores recalls the biblical hero Samson who, on the contrary, was a Nazarite, one set aside for God by a vow to abstain from, among other things, strong drink.¹⁰ We could also include in this catalogue of comic references the joke about of the wine-merchants who adulterate strong expensive wine by mixing in cheaper (562-572). The Pardoner here suggests that cheap Spanish wine from Lepe is to be found mixed, shall we say spontaneously, with expensive wine from the South of France because the vineyards are close together. And finally, the way he preaches, with the artificial rhetoric and techniques that he shows off also invites a smile.

Immediately after these comic references in the demonstration sermon, the tone of the Pardoner's speech turns serious and even macabre. There is no sound of humour in the story of the three revellers. The action is told with realism and gravity. The moral intention that lay beneath the jokes of the sermon is now achieved with sadness and sorrow. The Pardoner is very skilful at using different tones in his speech. He thus satisfies both the host who asked for a cheerful tale to brighten him up after *The Physician's Tale* and the other pilgrims who say they will listen to no filthy story. The Pardoner tells a serious moral tale with a touch of humour before and afterwards.

In the last scene we are led again from the sinister world of the story back to the cheerful world of the pilgrimage. The Pardoner's attempt to sell his relics to the pilgrims should be taken as a joke the Pardoner wants to play on them¹¹, though, in the end, it becomes a joke at his own expense. This comic ending dispels the sad tone used in the story of the three revellers and makes the reader aware of the

¹⁰ See the Book of Judges 13-16.

¹¹ See Hussey, op. cit., pp. 182-83; he comments on this topic and includes the opinions of some critics who agree and disagree with this idea.

existence of the Pardoner again. Thus, the reader's attention in *The Pardoner's Tale* focuses almost wholly on the comic scoundrel who tells the story, rather than on the story itself.

Chaucer's humour does not cause hearty laughter, it merely brings an amused smile to our face. He usually has his tongue on his cheek and uses exaggerations, understatements, double meaning, obscene comments, sudden shifts of mood. This humour arouses some sort of fascination, a feeling which has nothing to do with sympathy. Sometimes we even feel pity for the Pardoner and at the same time he provides us with enjoyment. We laugh *at* him and we also have a good laugh *with* him. As Professor Jill Mann suggests in her book entitled *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*: "Amusement, not disgust, is predominant in the final picture of the Pardoner..."¹² We still think that he is a complete rascal, but a very amusing one.

Chaucer's intention was to teach and entertain. It is beyond doubt that he succeeded in both aims when he created the figure of the Pardoner. This tale is a study of evil and stands out as a piece of comic social satire, whose target is not only the Pardoner, but also the ignorant and credulous society which permitted such false preachers to exist. And the depth of this satire lies in Chaucer's excellent use of irony and humour.

¹² Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 152.