

The Pardoner as Huckster: A Dissent from Kittredge

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As early as 1893, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Mr. George Lyman Kittredge offered a theory of the Pardoner's character which remains virtually intact to the present day. It is not a theory for which the facts of the case would seem to offer unqualified support, but it is a theory which probably finds its basis more upon Mr. Kittredge's established stature as a scholar than upon the actual events of "The Pardoner's Tale." I propose to provide an explanation which, if not unquestionable, is at least as satisfactory and demonstrable as that of Mr. Kittredge. Here, in part, is Mr. Kittredge's supposition concerning the Pardoner in reference to the supposed revelation of lines 916–918. It is taken from *Chaucer and His Poetry*:

The Pardoner has not always been an assassin of souls. He is a renegade, perhaps, from some holy order. Once he preached for Christ's sake; and now under the spell of the wonderful story he has told and of recollections that stir within him, he suffers a very paroxysm of agonized sincerity. It can last but a moment. (p. 216)

Mr. Kittredge has surely overstated his case. The word *paroxysm*, for example, is a very strong epithet to apply to the words which the Pardoner actually mouths. The imputation of sincerity (to say nothing of agonized sincerity) is likewise suspect. But here are the lines to which Mr. Kittredge refers:

I you assoile by myn hy power,
You that wol offre, as clene and eek as cleer
As ye were born—And lo! sires, thus I preche.
And Jhesu Crist, that is oure soules leche,
So graunte you his pardon to recyve;
For that is best—I wol you not deceyve!

There is nothing in these lines which would warrant the use of such extreme and intense terms as *agony* and *paroxysm*. Mr. Kittredge's use of terms descriptive of such strong passions may have been dictated by a certain constraint to embroider upon an inference rather than by any pertinence of the facts inhering to the passage in question. Words do not always say what they ostensibly mean. They must be judged in context. We perpetually strive to arrive at both the letter and the spirit of meaning; but as we are sometimes in danger of not looking deeply enough, so we are sometimes guilty of looking deeper than common sense should permit. Thus, too

great a subtlety may be as subject to error as a paucity of depth perception. Our standard interpretation of the Pardoner is perhaps overly subtle. The Pardoner is assumed to have undergone a revulsion of feeling against the lamentable and perhaps unavoidable circumstances of his present hypocritical existence. It is assumed that his better nature has, for the moment, asserted itself and that he now speaks in dead earnest when he says, "And Jhesu Crist, that is our soules leche, / So graunte you his pardon to receyve, / For that is best—I wol you not deceyve." I would submit that there is nothing in these pious lines to which any pious hypocrite might not subscribe as a matter of policy, a policy ready-made for use at the most opportune moment. One bent upon malpractice would naturally want to assure his victims that nothing is further from his mind than deception. In the course of his machinations, in order to assure ultimate acceptance of his design, he may well speak recognized truths. But every man who cries "Holy! Holy!" need not be sanctified; nor need we assume, with Kittredge, that an honest, though passing, change of heart has taken place. The Pardoner's recommending his auditors to Christ's grace need not obviate the possibility that he is as great a scoundrel as always, and that he may yet hope to profitably dispose of his relics. The Pardoner's object is to sell for profit. He is not personally concerned with ethics. "I wol you not deceyve!" he says. But can we doubt that he would deceive if he could? Whether the Canterbury Pilgrims believe in the efficacy of his baubles or not is of no great concern to the Pardoner. He may sell relics to scoffers and unbelievers as well as to the humbly pious. We know that not every man who buys a rabbit's foot is convinced of its efficacy. Cuff-links and pendants enclosing four-leaf clovers are sold to others than the Irishman and the superstitious. Not every man who throws salt over his shoulder does so from faith or conviction. Nor need every man who buys from the Pardoner be motivated by faith or conviction. This, the Pardoner knows full well.

In *Chaucer and His Poetry* Mr. Kittredge makes this comment upon the necessity which constrains the Pardoner towards the use of frankness in the Prologue:

"I know I am a rascal," he says in effect, "and you know it; and I wish to show you that I know you know it!" Like many another of us poor mortals the Pardoner is willing to pass for a knave, but, he objects to being taken for a fool. To deceive mankind is his business, but this time no deception is possible, and he scorns the role of a futile hypocrite.

The interpretation is on the whole plausible, but there are some minor and major qualifications that can be made. I would suggest that not for a moment does the Pardoner actually lay aside the role of hypocrite, for hypocrisy is not a character part he plays. It is the hypocrite in him which underlies the only role he really assumes: that is to say, the role of the open, frank,

hale-fellow-well-met. Nor does he feel that the final effect of his speech is to be futile and without its appropriate influence upon his listeners. The whole subterfuge of frankness is intended for effect, and that effect is not frankness for its own sake but frankness for the sake of financial advantage. He is a man of unlimited gall, utterly confident in his ability ultimately to influence his auditors in whatever direction he should choose. If he seems to make concessions as in the Prologue and in lines 916–918, he does so only as a tactical strategy in order to allay doubts and establish a community of interests and ideas. It is a stratagem, calculatingly conceived in order to take in and subvert his listeners. He makes no ultimate concession. He makes motions towards concessions which he intends to take back and recoup. His only ultimate intention is to domineer and impose upon his listeners. To accomplish this end, he will take whatever means the present situation may call for. He has unshakeable faith in himself and his powers of eloquence. He has not a groat of respect or reverence for any individual. He is (in his way) a type of the modern huckster, a foot-in-the-door-salesman. His gall and self-esteem are boundless. Whatever powers of reason and learning he may possess are so utterly self-centered that he is incapable of fully appreciating that the quality and learning of some of his auditors may so completely transcend his own abilities as to nullify the purpose of his efforts, however cleverly conceived and executed.

The Pardoner is an insistent, assertive, domineering salesman who has underestimated the quality of some of his auditors—chiefly because he is incapable of properly evaluating them. He has over-estimated his own powers and has overstepped the proprieties of the occasion. His own arrogance prevents a just appraisal, either of his auditors or of the occasion. An arrogant man fully convinced of the efficacy of his eloquence and trusting in the usefulness of a rattling patter of salesmanship can be made to spume and sputter with inward fury when brought sharply to account by an exasperated Harry Bailly, righteously indignant at the temerity and assertiveness of the Pardoner of this world. Mr. Kittredge assumes that the Pardoner is silent and angry at Harry Bailly's rough jocularly because the Pardoner has suffered a regenerative, but evanescent, emotional crisis in lines 916–918. Mr. Kittredge further assumes that the Pardoner would have paid Harry Bailly "tit for tat" were it not for the evanescent emotional crisis of lines 916–918. Here is the pertinent passage from *Chaucer and His Poetry*:

Under ordinary circumstances the Pardoner would simply have paid him tit for tat. But the moment is too intense tot poise. With another revulsion of feeling, the Pardoner becomes furiously angry, so angry that words stick in his throat. (p. 217)

Thus, the Pardoner is believed to have experienced two emotional upheavals, and the second revulsion is assumed to have had its origin in the first. This

crisis, says Kittredge, speaking of the first, "can last but a moment." Yet when it is the Pardoner's turn to make some reply to Harry Bailly, we are at line 956, some thirty-eight lines and three hundred words following upon the earlier putative regenerative impulse. Substantially more than a moment elapsed. It would seem that sufficient time elapses for one so quick-witted as the Pardoner to recover his equilibrium after his first loss of balance during his "agonized paroxysm of sincerity." But that any loss of equilibrium occurs prior to Harry Bailly's rebuke is sheer inference based upon events which will bear other interpretations of equal validity with the standard position long supported by custom and usage. The Pardoner's inability to answer seems to stem more from the formidable nature of Harry Bailly's rebuke and character than from any genuine, though momentary, regeneration in the Pardoner's heart. Harry Bailly's personal power and force of character is sufficient reason to account for the Pardoner's anger and speechlessness: anger because Harry Bailly should have had the effrontery to refuse the Pardoner's inane importunities, and, speechlessness because of the force of Harry Bailly's character and invective. To assume that the Pardoner's anger is the result of his being misunderstood is to assume more than the events would seem to warrant. It is precisely the obverse of this which is true. It is rather because he was so thoroughly understood that the Pardoner is speechless—so overcome with surprise and anger. It is because he has been thwarted in his object to make the Pilgrims either purchase or venerate his relics, though they know them to be false. Surprise and anger are the only reactions available to the arrogant under the circumstances which obtained. Let us also acknowledge that Harry Bailly could have held his part in a repartee with any man. In view of the Pardoner's silence it would seem rather foolhardy to contend that the Pardoner could have given as good as he received in a battle of wits with Harry Bailly. Our Host must have had unlimited experience in jocular banter and in dealing with obstreperous, wine-besotted celebrants. The Host, Harry Bailly, who holds the center of the cavalcade, is a first-rate character, and his jokes are no trifles; they are always (though uttered with audacity) equally free with the Lord and the Peasant; they are always substantially and weightily expressive of knowledge and experience. Harry Bailly was keeper of the greatest inn of the greatest city, for such must have been the Tabarde Inn in Southwark, near London; our Host was also in his way a leader of the age. Such a man could well have cut short any speaker. It is difficult to believe that the Pardoner was much too clever a rascal to have received a setback at the hands of Harry Bailly. We need not suppose that only an unappreciated "agonized paroxysm of sincerity" prevents him from replying to Harry Bailly.

The Pardoner's opinion of God and society may be discovered in his description of the authenticity of his credentials:

Our lige lordes seel on my patente
 That shew I first, my body to warente
 That noe man be so bold, ne preest ne clerk,
 Me to destourbe of Christes hooly werke.

Mr. Alred L. Kellog, writing in the *Speculum* of July, 1951, provides an unequalled interpretation of precisely these lines. He avers that

The Pardoner proclaims the complete superiority of his evil will to God or man. He laughs at human law because it protects him; at the parish priest because he is powerless; at the "lewed people" because they cannot see behind his hypocrisy; at God because he, a miserable mortal, parodies Christian doctrine with complete impunity. Order is turned upside down. (Vol. 26, p. 472)

In spite of this most cogent interpretation Mr. Kellog has found it possible to support Mr. Kittredge's earlier inference. Mr. Kellog's article entitled "An Augustinian Interpretation of Chaucer's Pardoner" will probably remain as the classic analysis of the Pardoner for many years to come. It is expertly written, giving evidence, from first to last, of a profound and incisive understanding; but at whatever point he touches the earlier interpretation he is upon equivocal ground. His seconding evaluation of the Kittredge thesis is beautifully written and marvelously expressive, and I should like very much to accept it both on stylistic and moral considerations if it were not that some of the assumptions are so readily susceptible to challenge and doubt. Here at some length is Mr. Kellog upon the subject of a suffering and tormented Pardoner who succumbs to the promptings of his better nature:

In the prologue one finds a concentrated study of the evil destructive side of the Pardoner: his aversion from God through pride, his defiance of the judgment of God. In the Tale, which is told as a continuation of this defiance of Divine providence, there is conveyed paradoxically the power of Divine Providence: one begins to see emerging through the Pardoner's defiance the inevitable judgment of God, the tormenting struggle of good and evil, of humility and pride, to which his aversion has made him heir. In the final confession (lines 916-918) there springs forth suddenly fully disclosed the side of the Pardoner's being he has been striving to conceal—the nature, created good, suffering, indestructible, whose very presence makes the Pardoner's existence a hidden torment and his whole way of life, folly. Of the final judgment of God, Chaucer tells us nothing. (p. 478)

This, at many points, is an unequalled interpretation. The Pardoner becomes invested with a dignity which we, as ethical, moral beings, would rejoice to find in any soul lost in sin. But the investment of such dignity would seem to be superimposed upon actuality by the warm and sympathetic natures of the Pardoner's commentators rather than from any demonstrable qualities residing within the heart of the Pardoner himself. It is comforting to believe that all men may be saved and that the germ of regeneration lies within the reach of the blackest and most diabolical natures. But whether

this be so or not Chaucer tells us nothing. The rest is conjecture. It is not surprising to find that Mr. Kittredge was the first to expound the necessity of dignifying the Pardoner. In his *Atlantic Monthly* article of 1893, Mr. Kittredge provided the following disclosures:

Nothing but a ribald story appears possible from him. But, by showing us the man in a moment of moral convulsion, Chaucer has invested him with a sort of dignity which justifies the poet in putting into his mouth one of the most beautiful as well as one of the best told tales in the whole collection. (p. 833)

The beauty or interest of a tale need not correspond to the goodness or rascality of its teller. Mr. Kittredge cannot have forgotten that Chaucer himself tells so poor a tale that our Host is forced to stop him. Because a tale is "beautiful" and well told need not lead us to believe that it was above the powers of an unregenerate Pardoner to tell. Indeed, the Pardoner knows the story by heart and may have repeated it a hundred times. The poet is justified in permitting the Pardoner to tell his tale on a more substantial basis than on Mr. Kittredge's supposition that Chaucer intended to dignify the Pardoner and thus prepare for his putative "moral convulsion." Mr. Kittredge believes and would have us believe that without a supposed "moral convulsion" Chaucer would hardly have been justified in permitting the Pardoner to tell so fine a tale. But the tale is beautifully appropriate to the Pardoner whether regenerate or unregenerate. I would submit that the Pardoner is a hypocrite from beginning to end. That he is an unreformed rake and scoundrel. It is my own belief (and it would seem to me an inescapable position) that the story illustrates the Pardoner's ruling passion for material gain. The story is perfectly suitable to the Pardoner since it illustrates and emphasizes his own cynicism and hypocrisy. Furthermore, it does not seem to be Chaucer's purpose to show moral growth or moral development in any of his characters. All of the Canterbury Pilgrims are depicted as completely formed individuals as of the time of their delinication. Nowhere else in *The Canterbury Tales* does he show either a complete, partial, or momentary alteration in the basic character make-up of the pilgrims. Nor does he do so in the case of the Pardoner. The Wife of Bath with her insistence upon sovereignty over men does not alter her character or position one jot, though she is perhaps in even greater need of rehabilitation than the Pardoner. The Miller, the Monk, the Franklin, the Sumpnor do not change, though they could well benefit by even the smallest change. Nor does the Pardoner change. None of the evidence which Mr. Kittredge introduces is final or unquestionable. The Pardoner, in common with all salesmen, is feeling his way, seeking to find a method of approach suitable to the pilgrims' prejudices and knowledge, in his effort to clinch a final sale. He is a peddler who cannot lay his trade aside. He would combine business with pleasure at every opportunity. He is shrewd

enough to recognize that frankness is disarming. His shift from early frankness to the apparent sincerity in lines 916–918 can be accounted for by his attempting to offer something in his speech which will please everyone. That is one possibility. It is also possible that he may have recognized the incongruity of lines 916–918 with the tenor of his earlier sentiments. Perceiving that others may also discover the incongruity, he shifts again precipitately into a style and subject matter more in keeping with the earlier professions of his prologue. The Pardoner is a skillful enough salesman to recognize that consistency in his statements will be expected of him from the scholars and “gentles” of the company. Thus, for Mr. Kittredge’s putative regeneration of heart I would suggest the following possibilities:

1. Desire from beginning to end to put something over on the Pilgrims.
2. Desire to offer sentiments which are likely to find acceptance.
3. Recognition of incongruity—thus, the shift to his first approach.
4. The whole motivated by his recognition that frankness is disarming, and that the sentiment of lines 916–918 is a blunder which would be immediately recognized as insincere.