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The Pardoner as the First Nihilist

On "The Pardoner's Tale" by Geoffrey Chaucer

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From: Geoffrey Chaucer, Bloom's Major Poets.

It is a critical commonplace to link the Wife of Bath and Falstaff, but I have seen no speculation on the highly possible descent of Shakespeare's great villains, Iago in *Othello* and Edmund in *King Lear*, from the Pardoner. Marlowe's hero-villains, Tamburlaine the Great and even more Barabas, the wily Jew of Malta, clearly made a deep impression on Shakespeare's portrayal of Aaron the Moor in his first tragedy, the charnelhouse *Titus Andronicus*, and on that of Richard III. Between Aaron and Richard on the one hand and Iago and Edmund on the other, a shadow intervenes, and it seems to belong to the antithetical Pardoner, who is the outcast of the *Canterbury Tales*. Even his prologue and tale are outside the apparent structure of Chaucer's all-but-finished major poem. As a kind of floater, the Pardoner's Tale is its own world; it resembles nothing else in Chaucer, yet it seems to me his high point as a poet and in its way unsurpassable, at one of the limits of art. Donald Howard, musing on the difference between the Pardoner and his story and the rest of the *Canterbury Tales*, compares the Pardoner's intrusion to "the marginal world of medieval aesthetics, the lewd or quotidian drawings in the margins of serious manuscripts," forerunners of Hieronymus Bosch. So pungent are the Pardoner's presence and his narration that the marginal becomes central in Chaucer, inaugurating what Nietzsche was to call "the uncanniest guest," the representation of European nihilism. The link between the Pardoner and Shakespeare's grand negations, Iago and Edmund, seems to me as profound as Dostoevsky's reliance upon Shakespeare's intellectual villains as models for Svidrigailov and Stavrogin.

The Pardoner first appears with his horrible chum, the grotesque Summoner, toward the close of the General Prologue. The Summoner is the equivalent of the thought police who currently afflict Iran; he is a layman who drags supposed spiritual offenders into a religious court. A snooper into sexual relations, he rakes off a percentage of the earnings of all the prostitutes at work in his diocese and blackmails their customers. As narrator of the General Prologue, the Pilgrim Chaucer expresses appreciation for the Summoner's mildness at blackmail: a mere quart of strong red wine each year permits an ongoing sexual relation to continue. Irony for once seems overcome by Chaucer's reluctance to react to the Summoner's moral squalor, which merely helps to provide context for the far more spectacular Pardoner. The Summoner is just an amiable brute, a fit companion for the Pardoner, who plunges us into an inferno of consciousness more Shakespearean than Dantesque because mutable in the highest degree. Chaucer inherits the identity of pardoners and charlatans from the literature and reality of his own times, but the remarkable personality of the Pardoner seems to me his most extraordinary invention.

Pardoners traveled about selling indulgences for sins in defiance of canon law, but rather clearly with church connivance. As lay persons, pardoners were not supposed to preach, but they did, and Chaucer's Pardoner is a superb preacher, surpassing any televangelist currently on the American scene. Critics divide on the Pardoner's sexual nature: is he a eunuch, a homosexual, a hermaphrodite? None of the above, I venture; and in any case Chaucer has seen to it that we just don't know. Perhaps the Pardoner knows; we are not even certain of that. Of the twenty-

nine pilgrims, he is much the most questionable, but also much the most intelligent, in that regard almost a rival to Chaucer, the thirtieth pilgrim. The Pardoner's gifts are indeed so formidable that we are compelled to wonder about his long foreground, of which he tells us nothing. A knowing religious hypocrite, trading in spurious relics and daring to traffic in the redemption open through Jesus, he is nevertheless an authentic spiritual consciousness with a powerful religious imagination.

The heart of darkness that is an obscurantist metaphor in Joseph Conrad is all too appropriate a figure for the demoniac Pardoner, who rivals his fictive descendants as a kind of problematic abyss, depraved yet imaginative in the highest degree. One critic of Chaucer, R. A. Shoaf, brilliantly observes of the Pardoner, "He tells himself, his act, every day in his profession; but, to judge from the pattern of his obsession, he knows because he regrets that he cannot buy himself back." What he knows is that his performances, however astonishing, cannot redeem him, and we begin to suspect, as we ponder his spiel and his tale, that something beyond greed and the pride of preaching with power has driven him to his life's work as a professional deceiver. We can never know what it was in Chaucer that could create this first nihilist, at least in literature.

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