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Dana E. Aspinall  
*University of Connecticut*

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**"I WOL THEE TELLE AL PLAT":  
POETIC INFLUENCE AND CHAUCER'S PARDONER**

Dana E. Aspinall

*University of Connecticut*

...a poet's stance, his word, his imaginative identity, his whole being, *must* be unique to him, and remain unique, or he will perish, as a poet... (Bloom 71).

Twentieth century critical discourse concerning Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* often appropriates the heuristics of Freudian psychoanalysis as a means of determining the motivations and character of both the fictional pilgrims and of Chaucer himself. G. L. Kittredge's *Atlantic Monthly* essay "Chaucer's Pardoner" breaks new ground in 1893 as the first attempt to delimit the Pardoner's quirky actions and innuendos by pseudo-psychological discourse, and still remains in many minds the traditionally accepted and final word on the Pardoner's behavior.

Kittredge claims that the Pardoner experiences a "momentary return to sincerity...accompanied by profound emotion," two separate psychosomatic responses both provoked by a newfound need for inclusion and acceptance. Obviously, however, this "most abandoned character among the Canterbury Pilgrims" demands a more clinical, scientific, psychological and literary interpretation than Professor Kittredge posited. In the past one hundred years, he has.

However true Kittredge's statements may be, the Pardoner attempts a much more intricate and conscious relinquishing of his "lost soul" status, both among his immediate audience and in his own mind, and an establishment of a more appealing persona for himself, for his precedence among this group of pilgrims, and for any other congregation he may meet in the future.

Donald W. Fritz recently pursued a Jungian analysis of the Pardoner, explaining that he suffers a *puer aeternus* phenomenon, i.e. he is psychologically prevented in youth from successfully uniting with the

*senex*...achieving a realistic perspective on his ...specialness and] continues to nourish fantasies of omnipotence and grandiosity (338).

Fritz's thesis certainly carries Kittredge's heuristic into a twentieth century discursive construct, but he too ignores the Pardoner's

consciousness of his evil nature—that all of his actions, speakings, and motivations find their aegis in his growing knowledge of a need for psychic divestment. And Derek Pearsall's comment that the Pardoner

...never once says 'I think' or 'I feel,' but only describes what he has done or what he will do, without soul, feeling, or inner being, he is a creature of naked will, unaware of his existence but in the act of will (361)

likewise misses the mark.

I believe the Pardoner is a penitent, yet a man whose self-perception has become so distorted he constantly fights to control it. Specifically, he is a member of the clergy who, straining under the subconscious influence of his secular and Biblical textual learning, his "precursors," perverts his role as a clergyman. In other words, the Pardoner's psyche rebels from the "Father" figure of God, relinquishes the role of priest, and adopts instead the identity of poet. His great rhetorical prowess is manipulated to achieve the exact opposite of what his role in the Church dictates. As Harold Bloom states, "Anxiety [of influence]...is unpleasure accompanied by efferent or discharge phenomenon among definite pathways" (57).

Throughout our observation of the Pardoner, we witness his growing consciousness of this incredible burden of influence over him that the Biblical Father maintains. The Pardoner gradually realizes his anxiety-laden ego through his interaction with the other characters and an intense self-analysis, and then attempts to change his behavior through confession. As we watch the Pardoner, and then listen not only to what he says but how he says it, an increasingly motivated desire to confess his past sins, repent, and move back under the inclusive blanket of the true Church emerges. Freud claims that society itself is a major influence in the shaping and reshaping of the ego, and further states that psychoanalysis requires an atmosphere where, "The patient is encouraged to transfer...the authority of his superego to the analyst" (*An Outline of Psychoanalysis* 37).

All these pilgrims, except the Ploughman and Parson, are city-bred and therefore immune to his usual ease in fleecing them, asserting their knowledge of his deceitful rhetoric even before any opportunity for it arises: "Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye!" ("Prologue" l. 324). What the Pardoner enacts mirrors the traditional Freudian practice of analyst/therapist relations:

The analytic physician and the patient's weakened ego, basing themselves on the real external world, have to band themselves together into a party against the enemies, the instinctual demands of the id and the conscientious demands of the super-ego. We form a pact with each other. The sick ego promises us the most complete candor—promises, that is, to put at our disposal all the material which its self-perception yields it (*Psychoanalysis* 30).

In the words of Robin Kirkpatrick, the Pardoner "insists that his audience should pay attention to his actual self" (222). He pairs himself with the disgusting Summoner, interrupts the Wife of Bath's "Prologue," and finally confronts the Host, each time with increasing clarity of language, revealing himself in a confessional stance.

Starting with the *General Prologue* we meet the Pardoner, drunkenly singing along with an equally drunk Summoner. Their song—"Com hider, love, to me!"—along with the Pardoner's less than respectable choice of riding/drinking/singing partner is the first sign of his overwhelmed creative impulse and also a hint at his repentant stance. Their song is a direct parallel to *Pearl's*

Cum hyder to me, my lemman swete,  
For mote ne spot is non in the (l. 763-4),

which has, as Sir I. Gollancz first discovered, its roots in the equally pious *Song of Solomon*:

You are all fair, my love; there is no flaw in you.  
Come with me from Lebanon, my bride; come with me  
from Lebanon.  
Depart from the peak of Amana, from the peak of Senir  
and  
Hermon, from the dens of lions from the mountains of  
leopards (IV; viii).

Obviously, love links these three works. The Pardoner knows this, and as we shall see, he knows love is lacking in his current psychical state. As Freud posits, however, love can at times be overwhelming:

It is that we are never so defenseless against suffering as  
when we love, never so helplessly unhappy as when we

have lost our loved object or its love (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 24).

Yet, there is a grating dissimilarity between *Pearl* and the *Song of Solomon*, and the Pardoner's song. In both *Pearl* and the *Song of Solomon*, love is sacred:

[The *Song of Solomon's*] inclusion in the Old Testament is to be explained from the prophetic figure of the Lord as the 'husband' of his people (Hos. 2; 16-19). In Christian tradition it has been interpreted as an allegory of the love of Christ for his bride, the church (Rev. 21; 2, 9), or as symbolizing the intimate experience of divine love in the individual soul (*Revised Standard Holy Bible* 815).

Conversely, in the Pardoner's song the emphasis clearly lies on physical, lustful, and possibly extra-marital love. Freud explains this:

The symptoms of neuroses are...without exception a substitutive satisfaction of some sexual urge...Most of the urges of sexual life are not of a purely erotic nature but have arisen from alloys of the erotic instinct with portions of the destructive instinct (*Psychoanalysis* 43).

Bloom posits a complementary literary explanation:

What divides each poet from his Poetic Father...is an instance of creative revisionism...The poet so stations his precursor...that the visionary objects with their higher intensity, fade into the continuum (42).

In other words, the Pardoner's neurosis is two-fold. First, the Pardoner senses a lack of spiritual love; he has through time so far removed himself—via his creative yearnings—from the Church's expectations and succumbed to his self-destructive id impulses that love cannot exist for him outside a physical realm. Of course, this perception places him at odds with the Church family, specifically his spiritual "Father." The Pardoner also experiences a great anxiety of influence from the Biblical sources of his perverted song.

In Bloom's phrasing, the authors of the Bible, by the arbitrary act of canonization into "sacred text," inherit an overwhelming power to shape thoughts and desires, thus causing the young poet, "to lose

himself" in the awing influence (19). This "covering Cherub" is the root of the Pardoner's anxiety. And what Freud means in using the term "substitution" Bloom more accurately call "clinamen:" a need by the "ephebe" to swerve away from the precursor's text and establish both superiority and uniqueness. In other words, "figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves...Self appropriation involves the immense anxieties of indebtedness" (Bloom 5). The Pardoner echoes Biblical text, yet perverts the sacred meaning almost every time, giving it his own individual stamp.

But the Pardoner not only perverts Biblical text; he also distorts the accepted forms of ecclesiastical practice to suit his own "ful vicious" intentions. The best means of illustrating this point is the Pardoner's sermon and his delivery of it. According to Robinson's research, the typical Medieval sermon consisted of six well defined parts: theme, protheme, dilatation, exemplum, peroration, and closing formula (729). The Pardoner's, however, consists of, at best, four: theme, found in "*Radix malorum est Cupiditas*" (l. 334); exemplum, the "Tale" itself (ll. 463-903); peroration, where the Pardoner implores the audience to repent by giving an offering to him (ll. 904-15); and his closing formula:

And Jhesu Crist, that is oure soules leche,  
So graunte yow his pardoun to recyve,  
For that is best; I wol yow nat deceyve (ll. 916-8).

Although, as Robert P. Merrix cites, medieval sermonizers never followed the six-part format as rigidly as Robinson opines (236), the problem with the Pardoner's straying from a long established format lies in what he substitutes for what is missing. Instead of a protheme or dilatation, which should follow the theme, the Pardoner launches into a diatribe about himself, lasting some 300 lines:

I stonde lyk a clerk in my pulpet,  
And when 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 (ll. 391-7).

Here he personifies an entertainer rather than priest (Chapman, "Preachers;" 180). More importantly, the Pardoner's sermon illustrates

an attempt to bury tradition and establish himself as the “strong poet.” Medieval rhetoricians, interestingly, were not completely unaware of the impulse for a poet to separate himself from his precursors any more than Bloom. Saint Thomas Aquinas realizes the instinctual drive for individuality and warns:

He who has to preach must make use of both eloquence and secular learning. The use of secular eloquence in Sacred Scripture is in one way commendable and in another reprehensible. It is the latter when one uses it for display or when one aims mainly at eloquence. He who strives mainly for eloquence does not intend that men should admire what he says, but rather tries to gain admiration for himself (as quoted by Harry Caplan; 62).

In order to alleviate this leaning as much as possible, scholars tried to impress the idea that complete submission to the “Sacred Scriptures” proved best:

The Monks of these orders [Dominicans and Franciscans] obeyed literally the words of the Founder of Christianity, and went into all the world and preached the Word to every creature (Chapman, “Medieval Sermon” 507).

In fact the “Founder of Christianity” himself stressed this practice: “Christ did not deign in his preaching to refuse to accept the theme of his *precursor* [God]” (Robert of Basevorn 126; emphasis mine). The tendency witnessed throughout these examples is one of rejection of individual creativity in order for the promulgation of the Church’s teachings: and a foreshadowing of what occurs at the end of the “Pardoner’s Tale.”

Bloom’s theory of the epebe’s need for individuality stems from Freud’s theory of parent/child relationship, wherein lies the explanation for the two-fold neurosis. The epebe seeks to vanquish the precursor’s long-standing domain over an idea much like the young son wants to rid himself of his father. The Pardoner’s “Father” here is God, not only in the spiritual sense but in the poetic sense as well. Notice how, once the Pardoner begins his “Prologue,” he immediately speaks of origins:

First I pronounce whennes that I come,  
And thanne my bulles shewe I, alle and some (ll. 335-6).

These origins all equate him with Church authority. The Church, obviously, is the Pardoner's origin and, just like a father, is his source of anxiety. For now, this is all the Pardoner is fully aware of, and he understandably attacks it to establish his own identity.

Subconsciously, however, the Pardoner is already grappling with another problem. In his actual sermon, the Pardoner speaks of three men looking for "Deeth," who acts as a "theef", or "appropriator" of life. These men then find a man also seeking death, but in this case for more precise, or to the Pardoner, "wish-fulfilling" reasons:

And on the ground, which is my moodres gate,  
I knokke with my staf, both erly and late,  
And seye 'Leeve mooder, leet me in! (ll. 729-31).

The Old Man attempts regularly to go back to his creator, to his "origins," thus relinquishing any control or influence over his own life. He acknowledges the earth as his source—mother—and strives to be one with it:

These two different strivings for death are exactly what the Pardoner struggles with throughout. The three young men, through their riotous behavior, drunkenness, and greed also show the same self-destructive impulses that the Pardoner manifests—the repressive resistances that Freud speaks of. The Old Man is the other side of the coin. He is the Pardoner's desire to be rid of the self-destructive tendencies which, if not checked, lead to an eventual and complete destruction of respect for the Church, which also represents the "Father."

If we read further through his self-description, we cite several more Church or Church-related sources. Yet, when comparing a contemporary description of what the Church expected of a priest:

For of such great virtue is preaching that it recalls men  
from error to truth, from vices to virtues, raises...hope,  
enkindles charity...and fosters the honorable (*A Late  
Medieval Tractate on Preaching*, trans. Caplan; 71),

with what the Pardoner tells about his own behavior in the pulpit, we sense a quite different equation:

By this gaude have I wonne, yeer by yeer,  
An hundred mark sith I was pardoner (ll. 389-90)

...



I preche so as ye han herd bifoore,  
And telle an hundred false japes moore (ll. 393-4)  
...  
For myn entente is nat but for to wynne,  
And nothyng for correccioun of synne  
I rekke nevere, for whan that they been beryed,  
Though that hir soules goon a-blakeberyed! (403-6).

These actions, intents, and attitudes illustrate perfectly the anxiety of influence:

By the time [the ephebe] has become a strong poet...he seeks to exorcise the necessary guilt of his ingratitude by turning his precursor into a fouled version of the later poet himself. But that too is a self-deception and a banality, for what the strong poet does is to transform himself into a fouled version of himself, and then confound the consequence with the figure of the precursor (Bloom 62).

The Pardoner's actual tale, or theme, focuses on his ability to love, only this time for things pecuniary. More importantly, we notice the actual extent to which the Pardoner's phrasings rely on Biblical influence, this time in particular from I Timothy vi, 10. Both the song and the sermon topic illustrate examples of Freud's theory of transference through repression (*Psychoanalysis* 38), which often will lead to the "clinamen" spoken of above. The Pardoner is the most Biblically learned member of the group. Yet, true Christianity, or love, lies deeply hidden behind illicit allusions.

Another example is the Pardoner's alliance with the Summoner, culminating in the line: "This Somonour bar to hym a stif burdoun" ("General Prologue" l. 673). P.R. Orton's research shows the word "Burdon" in Middle English also could mean, detractingly, "phallus" (3). Also he ends his own sermon by inviting the women to, "Cometh up, ye wyves, offreth of youre wolle!" ("Pardoner's Tale" l. 910), again showing carnal transference in a perversion of the Christian symbolic relationship between shepherd and sheep.

The most blatant perversion, however, is in the Pardoner's "Prologue": when asked for a tale, he replies, "It shal be doon...by Seint Ronyon!" (l. 320). Not only is the Pardoner fully conscious of his evil bent, but by his audience's reaction: "Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye!" they too possess an equally full knowledge. In fact, his very choice of words reeks of spiritual oblivion: "Ronyon" is

synonymous with "colloins" (Miller 236). This passage also illustrates how the Pardoner can not only pervert Biblical text, but can pervert the Church fathers by creating such lewd names for them and "swerving" from their true intent, creating his own sexual or material misreadings. The Pardoner chooses two alternate thematic hermeneutics over those provided by their sources, the authors of the Bible.

Consciously, the Pardoner seeks to "foul" his precursors' versions of truth, strengthening his own position. Subconsciously, however, he seeks something which calls us back to the idea of origins. As Freud states, the "substitution" that a neurotic discharges often involves a sexual aspect: a product of an anxiety brought on by a parent figure and attributed to a rebellion against it. The Pardoner traces his source of family romance anxiety and poetic anxiety back to the overwhelming influence of the Church, yet he can not shake its hold on him, especially its hold on his rhetorical prowess. Yet, he tries to release himself first by confronting the other pilgrims with his discovery of what the Church has made him and then in the end by becoming silent, eliminating the Church's major tool of manipulation over him. Silence, especially from the Pardoner, looms larger than any rhetoric. It means to him a total surrender, a submission to powers greater than his. As Bloom states, "Poetic influence...is a destruction of desire" (38). And the Pardoner's desire for carnal and material life ends with his sermon.

Let it be noted that the Pardoner quickly abandons all associations with the Summoner. Instead, he moves from the Wife of Bath to Harry Bailey to the Knight, looking for life lessons. What he learns, however, is that he must undertake this transformation alone. With the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner seems to *almost* transform into a sincere student. He is seduced by the Wife's less than exegetic scriptural interpretations and responds eagerly, calling her "prechour" (l. 165) and urging her to "teche us yonge men" (l. 187). The Pardoner now sends his ego back into conflict through intercourse with the Wife, simultaneously showing a natural inclination to resist and a need to learn from some one who seems to know what she's talking about.

Moreover, the Pardoner is reaching out, seeking a means to improve, creating more freedom from the anxiety caused by his old habits. By choosing words such as "prechour" and "teche," and also phrasing his words first as a question and then as a petition for knowledge, we see now what Freud had intended as the product of analysis:

...we assure the patient of the strictest discretion and place at his service our experience in interpreting material that has been influenced by the unconscious. Our knowledge is to make up for his ignorance and to give his ego back its mastery over lost provinces of his mental life...he is to tell us too what *he does not know* (*Psychoanalysis* 30, 31; emphasis mine).

The Pardoner also steers away from his inclination for poetic uniqueness—his overwhelming impulse to appropriate from the Biblical covering Cherub, in tandem with his clinamen impulse—and in fact to put to rest all poetic desires. No longer does he take the stance of rhetorical or poetic creator; instead, he becomes student, both as Freudian analysand and as Bloomian strong poet.

The Pardoner, by surface impression at least, chooses the right person in the Wife of Bath to solicit. No one in the *Canterbury Tales* has as much “experience” or “knowledge” in *les affaires de cour* as she. The Pardoner’s only problem is that her knowledge and experience are *literally* only in matters of the flesh. This less than comic situation (for the Pardoner anyway) is another indication of the strong self-destructive impulse of the neurotic persona. After this encounter, the Pardoner will for a span of time again withdraw back into the fold of the crowd, searching for some other means of legitimate self-expression. In fact, he waits until his turn to speak.

Soon after, at the Host’s invitation, the Pardoner then begins his discussions of origin, then moves on to his honest display, description and explanation of Papal Bulls, relics, cure-alls, etc. Yet, before the Pardoner brings us to his complete confession:

Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe  
Of hoolynesse, to semen hooly and trewe (ll. 420-1),

he asserts,

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 ymaad hir housbonde cokewold,  
Swich folk shal have no power ne nor grace  
To ofren to my relikes in this place  
 (“Prologue” ll. 378-84).

This statement shows us, all at once, his need for "omnipotence and grandiosity" (Fritz 346), Freud's reluctant repression tendency, and his Bloomian need to vanquish his precursors by manifesting a superiority over them through a discarding of their authority. But we can also view the Pardoner in his "Prologue" and "Tale" as gradually purging these impulses from his psyche by one last time running through the entire gamut of the manifestations of his self-asserting creative drive and juxtaposing them with condemningly honest confessions of what these creative yearnings have made him: "...a ful vicious man." We notice that throughout his sermon, there appear statements such as, "Looketh the Bible, and ther ye may leere" (l. 578), echoing his more submissive stance in the Wife's "Prologue." These statements culminate at the end of the text in his closing formula of:

And Jhesu Crist, that is our soules leche,  
So graunte yow his pardoun to receyve,  
For that is best; I wol yow nat deceyve.

The audience really has no need to fear his initial slide into resistance, where he coaxes them to buy the relics he has already confessed as being false; even if some are still swept up in the climax of his nearly perfect rhetorical flourish we have Harry Bailey, an adept listener and analyst, to remove the last remnant of resistance with his most insulting rejoinder:

I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond  
In stide of relikes or of seintuarie.  
Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;  
They shul be shryned in an hogges toord! (ll. 952-5).

The Pardoner has, throughout his rhetoric, displayed the complex struggle between id and ego and their relation to his profession. Like the Old Man of his sermon, he seeks a death, and his death is of his creative impulses. And then the silence, which, although an angry one now, relieves the Pardoner of all guilt related to the father, and allows him to remove the laurels of the poet. The Knight, one well versed in both following a liege's orders and in knowing one's social place, initiates the re-socialization with a kiss.

#### NOTES

As for riding with the Summoner upon leaving the tavern,  
what better way to convey to both God and fellow riders the need

Summoner's (whose face shows scars of leprosy and maybe even venereal disease) also lends quite well to showing the Pardoner's stance as a poet rather than priest.

Most readers view the Pardoner as physically ugly. But why then did Chaucer actually describe some of this Pardoner's physical attributes favorably? First of all, we are told that, "This Pardoner hadde heer as yelow as wax,/But smothe it heeng as dooth a strike of flex" ("General Prologue" ll. 675-6). Walter Clyde Curry argues that, "'Yellow as wax' is *not* ugly" (14). It seems odd that the narrator would give a character meant to be portrayed so rebukingly as much description, all quite positively, of his hair, the one attribute most payed attention to by his contemporaries. Granted, the Pardoner's lack of beard, bulging eyes, and soft, high pitched voice are all detrimental qualities given by this same narrator, illustrating, respectively, impotency, alliance with Satan, and homosexuality (Curry 36, 61, 71). But, with the narrator's last point of description, his rhetorical proweess, we suddenly find ourselves thrown back into complimentary observation.

According to Walter Clyde Curry, in the Middle Ages, "Eloquence of speech is spoken of in terms of highest praise" (73). It seems Chaucer wants us to see a character with equal allotments of positive and negative personality traits. To continue in Freudian terms, we see through these traits the infinite struggle between the id and ego. Up until this pilgrimage, the id clearly dominates the battle. The Pardoner, however, possesses enough (even physical) attributes to begin to take control of his id.

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