The Root of Sin in “The Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale”

While the Pardoner believes that he is correct in stating “Radix malorum est Cupiditas,” his tale actually shows the real truth that evil is the root of all evil (line 426). The events of his tale highlight St. Augustine’s own writings in The Confessions. Augustine’s thoughts on the nature of sin would be common knowledge to all Catholics in the fourteenth century, which would include both Chaucer and his Pardoner. However, the Pardoner chooses to ignore it the exact way that Augustine describes of all humanity trying to do. The Pardoner also noticeably does not follow the Christian idea that Christians are also supposed to teach by good example, not by word alone. More specifically, the Pardoner actually inverts the way that a Christian sermon should progress, and by not following the Augustine’s directives on preaching, also fails to teach his moral lesson. However, because Chaucer does know how this sermon should progress, he manages to teach the lesson in the Pardoner’s tale, even though the Pardoner is completely oblivious to the lesson. Chaucer makes the Pardoner into a mockery, showcasing the foolishness of those churchgoers and priests who ignore the teachings of their own church.

Chaucer begins to show his problems with the Pardoner through the way that he describes the Pardoner in the General Prologue of The Canterbury Tales. James Hicks, an authority on medieval sermons, shows that Chaucer additionally inverts “Augustine’s recommendations on dignity, restraint, and moderation” in preaching through the description of his appearance, voice, and actions (Hicks 83). Chaucer appears to think very little of the Pardoner since his narrator
says he “trowe he were a geldyng or a mare” (line 691). He calls him either a woman or a neutered man. He thinks so little of the Pardoner that he questions his manhood. He informs the audience that the Pardoner:

For in his male he hadde a pilwe-beer,
Which that he seyde was Oure Lady veyl;
He seyde he hadde a gobet of the seyl
That Seint Peter hadde, whan that he wente
Upon the see, til Jhesu Crist hym hente.
He hadde a croys a latoun ful of stones,
And in a glas he hadde pigges bones. (lines 694-700)

It is made abundantly clear that the Pardoner is completely a fraud. All of the relics that the Pardoner has with him are completely fake. The Pardoner is only interested in making money off of people with these relics. The Pardoner “with feyned flaterye and japes, / He made the person and the peple his apes” (lines 705-706). He wants his readers to realize the awfulness of the Pardoner, and know that the Pardoner is only interested in the money he is making off these people, instead of actually trying to lead his flock to morality.

However, the Pardoner also shows the audience personally his faults and failings. The Pardoner, first and foremost, ignores the teachings of the Church, and because of that, lacks real understanding of his own tale. He claims that he is going to tell a moral tale about greed, since that is his vice. He tells the other pilgrims that “Therfore my theme is yet and evere was, / Radix malorum est Cupiditas” (lines 425-426). He tells them that he only sermonizes on this theme because this is what he truly believes, even though he does not practice it in his own life. “In the Pardoner’s hierarchy of offenders, the worst sinner was he that kept the tightest hold on his
purse-strings” (Bronson 17). This is because the sinner was not emptying his purse into the Pardoner’s own. He announces to the company that “I preche of no thyng but for coveityse” (line 424). He personally preaches for himself only to make money off his penitent congregation. This line showcases Chaucer’s talent at double meanings; the Pardoner preaches on greed to move his listeners to penance, but he also preaches on this subject, so they will satisfy his own greed, i.e. fill his own pockets. He “inverts the homily from ‘its proper nature’ and preaches ‘a sermon against avarice ..., gluttony, and lechery ... [which] becomes a sermon in financial support of them....’”. Instead of seeking to teach right or to correct wrong, the Pardoner sermonizes for his own worldly profit” (Hicks 87). Instead of preaching against such vices like avarice, gluttony, and lechery, his homily turns into a request that his congregation support his own sins. This is completely against the nature of what a sermon is supposed to do. He wants them “To yeven hir pens, and namely unto me / For myn entente is nat but for to wynne, / And nothyng for correccioun of synne” (lines 401-403). He flat-out says that he is only preaching for the money and cares nothing at all for helping people leave their lives of sin. The Pardoner is “the presumptuous man who, by his act of will, commits the unpardonable sin, not for the sake of, but in despite of, the kingdom of heaven” (Miller 49). His sin is not only one of greed; rather that is his excuse of embracing evil for the sake of evil, which is St. Augustine’s explanation. Besides this, the Pardoner also blatantly ignores St. Augustine’s command “that the preacher must charitably teach right and wrong. Augustine contends that the end of any sermon must be the promotion of caritas, the love of God and neighbor” (Hicks 85). The Pardoner does not admit that in order to actually teach his flock he needs to believe in and act on what he preaches. He believes that “But though myself be gilty in that synne, / Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne / From avarice and soore to repente” (lines 429-431). Instead of being a true and loving Catholic
preacher, “he becomes a caricature of cupidity” (Hicks 85). He sins by embracing evil for the sake of evil and does not diligently work to help those Christians that he is required to lead from sin. It is these sins on his part that blinds him to his misunderstanding of the true nature of sin.

The Pardoner’s misunderstanding of this Christian teaching is the reason why he does not realize what Death, and true evil is, in his own tale. He claims that greed is the king of all sins—that all sins ultimately result in greed. When the three dissolute gamblers in his tale find the pile of gold beneath the oak tree on their quest for Death, he takes especial care to describe the gold’s temptation:

Of floryns fyne of gold ycoyned rounde

Wel ny an eighte bussheles, as hem thoughte.

No lenger thanne after Deeth they soughte,

But ech of hem so glad was that sighte,

For that the floryns been so faire and brighte,

That doun they sette hem by this precious hoord. (lines 770-775)

He goes out of his way in describing the beauty of these gold coins. He wants to make it seem like it is for that reason that the three drunken gamblers are that tempted by them. However, according to Christian theology, that is not exactly true. St. Augustine writes in his own Confessions that sin does not happen because of temptation due to greed or any other sin. Rather it is because people just want to do what they are not supposed to do. He writes in his own personal experience with the pear tree that “I lusted to thieve, and did it, compelled by no hunger, nor poverty, but through a cloyedness of well-doing, and a pamperedness of iniquity. For I stole that, of which I had enough, and much better. Nor cared I to enjoy what I stole, but joyed in the theft and sin itself” (Augustine). This is the true reason that people sin—because they want
to do something that is forbidden. They are not tricked into it by temptation. Augustine even writes that these pears were “tempting neither in color nor taste” (Augustine). He explains that the real temptation is the human desire to turn from what God wants us to do, which is what the three gamblers are really doing with the gold.

Due to this misunderstanding on the Pardoner’s part, he does not understand who Death really is in his allegory. Since the pardoner has deluded himself into thinking that the greed is the source of all evil, he clearly believes that gold represents Death in this allegory. However, his allegory is not as simple as he thinks, thanks to Chaucer. Chaucer tricks his audience about the identity of death. While the pile of gold is a likely candidate for death because that is where the old man says they would find Death. He tells them, “Se ye that ook? Right there ye shal hym fynde” (line 765). Since Death is supposed to be at the oak, and that is where the gold is, it makes sense that the gold would represent Death. However, the oak tree is supposed to stand in as the tree of temptation as well, which makes that picture a bit fuzzy. Additionally, the old man himself appears to be Death because the tavernkeeper directs them to the path where they meet the old man. The argument could also be made that the three young men themselves are Death, since they serve as the instruments of Death for each other. The Pardoner says that:

Right so they han hym slayn, and that anon.
And whan that this was doon, thus spak that oon:
“Now lat us sitte and drynke, and make us merie,
And afterward we wol his body berie.”
And with that word it happed hym, par cas,
To take the botel ther the poison was,
And drank, and yaf his felawe drynke also,
For which anon they storven bothe two. (lines 881-888)

According to an Augustinian reading of this passage, the old man should be Death since the tree of temptation is just a distraction from the actual thing that brought them there. However, Chaucer does not make it as simple as that. Chaucer wants us to think about who Death really is, and ultimately leads the decision up to each reader. Chaucer complicates Death and evil as the allegory in the tale because that is how it is in real life.

Most importantly, however, is the way that St. Augustine’s tale relates to this part of the Pardoner’s tale. Chaucer appears to be drawing a connection between the three gamblers and Augustine and his companions of his youth. The evil of sin results not from the actual temptation, but from the desire of the sinners to do what they are not supposed to do. They all wish to have the money for themselves. When the youngest of three leaves to go get supplies and food, the remaining two men begin to plot to kill him, ostensibly so each of them has more gold.

The ringleader tells his partner that:

Arys as though thou woldest with hym pleye,
And I shal ryve him thurgh the sydes tweye
Whil that thou strogelest with hym as in game,
And with daggere looke thou do the same;
And thanne shal al this gold departed be,
My deere freend, bitwixen me and thee.
Thanne may we bothe oure lustes all fulfille,
And pleye at dees right at oure owene wille. (lines 827-834)

They plot to kill their compatriot not because they only want more gold—they do it because they can. These three men also set out to commit evil like Augustine and the companions of his youth
did. However, Augustine does not attempt to delude himself of his true purpose in sinning like the three gamblers, reminiscent of their creator, the Pardoner, do. Augustine writes that “some lewd fellows of us went, late one night (having according to our pestilent custom prolonged our sports in the streets till then), and took huge loads, not for our eating, but to fling to the very hogs, having only tasted them” (Augustine). Chaucer draws the connection between the two groups of young men to highlight the way that the Pardoner ascribes the same failing to his own creation, that is, keeping them from truly seeing the reasoning behind their sins.

The Host’s reaction to the Pardoner’s tale shows the audience Chaucer’s true feelings of the Pardoner and his tale, since the Host seems to loosely be Chaucer’s voice in these tales. His statements show “the degree of scorn for all the Pardoner openly represents” (Corsa 193). Since the Pardoner is only interested in lining his own pockets and entertaining his fellow travelers, he neglects to teach them, which is the whole point of giving a homily. Thus, he fails to accomplish both every homily’s goal and his own two personal goals:

While the sermonic exemplum is exquisitely well-wrought, the Pardoner neither teaches Christian wisdom nor persuades the pilgrims to sin. Since the Pardoner intends to please through his sermon, he necessarily fails to elicit the appropriate reaction from Harry Bailly …because as Augustine notes, instruction precedes persuasion. The Pardoner means to delight the pilgrims rather than to teach… (Hicks 90)

The Host thinks so little of the Pardoner’s story that he tells the Pardoner:

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 shrined in an hogges toord! (lines 952-955)
The Host is so furious with the Pardoner for offering his relics and pardons for sale after the end of his tale that the Host threatens to cut off the Pardoner’s testicles. That is how little he thinks of the Pardoner’s wares and his tale. He can see through the Pardoner and clearly knows and despises his motive for telling such a tale. Since it appears that Chaucer himself is speaking through his character, the Host, it seems clear that he also denounces the Pardoner for his beliefs and actions. However, Chaucer does not completely condemn the Pardoner. He ends the tale with “Anon they kiste, and ryden forth hir weye” (line 968). The Knight requests that the Host and the Pardoner forgive each other and continue on their journey. Chaucer realizes that the “Host and Pardoner can be reconciled because all are pilgrims on the same way, all in need of mercy” (Ames 254). While Chaucer definitely has condemned the Pardoner, by ending the tale this way, he shows one of the most important Christians beliefs: he acknowledges that they are all sinners in need for forgiveness. “In Chaucer’s view, justice would condemn not only the Pardoner but all of us” (Ames 255). Chaucer still manages to end the sermon with reconciliation and love like it should, in spite of the Pardoner’s many failings as a preacher. Even though the Pardoner is incapable of ending the sermon like a good Catholic cleric should, Chaucer does it himself, so his readers to get the completion of the moral lesson that the Pardoner completely failed to give them. He does not ride a high horse; instead he continues as humbly on the pilgrimage of life as he had before, and as he expects us all to do.

Chaucer’s Pardoner fails to understand the true nature of sin, the way Chaucer and Augustine do, and in this way fails to understand the importance of his own tale. By showing everything that the Pardoner does wrong, Chaucer is actually teaching his audience the correct lesson from this tale. He does this both through the description of him in the General Prologue and later in the Pardoner’s own Prologue and Tale. Chaucer also does this through the way he
twists the Pardoner’s sermon from the proper form it is supposed to have, yet manages to teach his own moral lesson despite the failings of the Pardoner. However, Chaucer does use the Pardoner as a tool to teach his audience Augustine’s idea that sin is the root of all sin, and not greed being the root of all sin, which is what the Pardoner believes. Chaucer contrasts the Pardoner’s belief with that of Augustine’s in order to really teach his audience the truth of Augustine’s thoughts. Since that is what the Pardoner believes, he lacks the understanding to know the true meaning of his tale, and he completely misses the allegory he is using. By highlighting the foolishness of the Pardoner, Chaucer teaches us not to make the same mistakes. Chaucer does end his tale with a reminder that the Pardoner, no matter how despicable he is, is still just a pilgrim like the rest of humanity, and because of that, everyone must still continue on their way with him, since all sinners are the same.
Works Cited


