The Pardoner, his Prologue, and his Tale
Here is the portrait of the Pardoner from the General Prologue

where he is accompanied by the disgusting Summoner who is his friend, his singing partner and possibly his lover. The even more corrupt Pardoner professes to give gullible people pardon for their sins in exchange for money, as well as a view of his pretended holy relics which will bring them blessings. He too is physically repellent: he has thin scraggly hair of which, however, he is absurdly vain, and his high voice and beardlessness suggest that he is not a full man but something eunuch-like, again a metaphor for his barren spiritual state.

With him there rode a gentle PARDONER

Of Rouncival, his friend and his compeer
That straight was comen from the court of Rome.
Full loud he sang "Come hither love to me." ¹
This Summoner bore to him a stiff burdoun.
Was never trump of half so great a sound.

   This pardoner had hair as yellow as wax
But smooth it hung as does a strike of flax.
By ounces hung his lockês that he had,
And therewith he his shoulders overspread.
But thin it lay, by colpons, one by one,

But hood, for jollity, wearèd he none,
For it was trussèd up in his wallet:

   Him thought he rode all of the newë jet,
Dishevelled; save his cap he rode all bare.
Such glaring eyen had he as a hare.

A vernicle had he sewed upon his cap.²
His wallet lay before him in his lap
Bretfull of pardons, come from Rome all hot.³

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¹ 672: The rhyme between "Rome / to me" may have been forced or comic even in Chaucer's day; it is impossible or ludicrous today. The Pardoner probably has not been anywhere near Rome; claiming so is simply part of his pitch to the gullible. His relationship to the Summoner is not obvious but appears to be sexual in some way.

² 685: Vernicle: a badge with an image of Christ's face as it was believed to have been imprinted on the veil of Veronica when she wiped His face on the way to Calvary. Such badges were frequently sold to pilgrims.

³ 686-7: He has filled his bag with bits of paper or parchment purporting to be pardons "hot"
A voice he had as small as hath a goat. thin
No beard had he nor never should he have;
recently shaved
As smooth it was as it were late y-shave. guess
I trow he were a gelding or a mare.

His "relics"

But of his craft, from Berwick unto Ware trade
Ne was there such another pardoner,
For in his mail he had a pillowber bag / pillowcase
Which that he saidé was Our Lady's veil. Our Lady's = Virgin Mary's piece
He said he had a gobbet of the sail
That Saintè Peter had when that he went
Upon the sea, till Jesus Christ him hent.
pulled him out
He had a cross of latten full of stones brass
And in a glass he hadd gobbets' bones.

But with these "relics", when that he found
A poorè parson dwelling upon land, in the country
Upon one day he got him more money two
Than that the parson got in monthès tway;
705 And thus, with feignèd flattery and japes tricks
He made the parson and the people his apes. fools, dapes

His skill in reading, preaching and extracting money from people

But truly to tellen at the last,
He was in church a noble ecclesiast. churchman
Well could he read a lesson and a story.
But alderbest he sang an offertory 1 best of all
For well he wisté when that song was sung knew
He musté preach and well afile his tongue polish his sermon
To winnè silver as he full well could.
Therefore he sang the merrierly and loud.

from Rome like cakes from an oven. Illiterate people are often impressed by any written document.

1 710: offertory: the point in the Mass when the people made their offerings to the priest, and to the Pardoner when he was there. The prospect of money put him in good voice.
THE PARDONER'S TALE

Introduction

The Pardoner is a sinister character, one of the most memorable on the pilgrimage to Canterbury and in the whole of English literature. The portrait of him in the General Prologue shows him as deficient in body and depraved in soul, his physical attributes or lack of them a metaphor for the sterile spirit that inhabits his body or lurks in it like a toad in a cellar. His appearance arouses not so much disgust as dis-ease, a profound uneasiness.

He is a confidence man operating a game that still flourishes — manipulating people's religious gullibility, their shame, greed, superstition, etc. Like many others after him, he uses a real rhetorical gift to "stir the people to devotion" so that they will give their pennies, and "namely unto me," as he says. Interestingly enough he knows that his eloquent preaching may in fact help people to turn away from their sins; that is all right, provided that he profits in the process, and his profits are not in the spiritual realm, but strictly material — money, wool, cheese, wheat, gold rings.

The Pardoner's trade grew out of a legitimate if dubious church practice that was difficult to understand and easy to abuse — the doctrine and practice of indulgences, the abuses of which were still causing trouble in the sixteenth century and which were the direct cause of Luther's challenge to the Catholic Church that led to the Reformation. The doctrine of indulgences was roughly this: Even when you had confessed your sins, expressed your regret and a determination to try to avoid them in the future, there was still something owing, penance of some kind, which could take various forms: fasting, going on a pilgrimage, saying certain prayers, giving money to the poor or to some other good cause like the building of a church. It was in the last-mentioned that a fatal slippage took place. Careless or unscrupulous people implied that if you gave money to a good cause, which they represented, that act in itself bought forgiveness for your sins, even without confession or contrition. This was not, of course, church teaching. But it was an idea widely disseminated and widely believed, because it satisfied at the same time the need for easy forgiveness in some, and the need for easy money in others. The Pardoner gave false assurances of God's pardon; the deluded sinner gave real money in exchange.
The Pardoner's Prologue is an astonishing soliloquy, a public confession, but a confession without a trace of the repentance that would make us or God want to forgive him. It is astonishing partly because some readers have difficulty believing that anyone would expose himself and his tricks so blatantly to a group of pilgrims of varying ranks in society and varying ranges of education. Critics of the older school who felt that all fiction should approximate the standards of realism of the nineteenth-century novel, found a plausible explanation for the Pardoner's indiscreet garrulousness in the fact that he has a drink of "corny ale" before he begins his tale.

But of course one no longer needs such "realistic" explanations. Two or three days glancing at daytime talk shows on television will convince anyone that some people will publicly confess to, even boast about, depravities most of us did not know existed. Before Chaucer's own time the confession of Faux Semblant in one of his favorite poems, The Romance of the Rose, provided a precedent for his Pardoner. He has literary successors too: look at Richard III in Shakespeare's play two hundred years later who is not unlike the Pardoner in some ways — physically and morally deformed and given to making confessional soliloquies. Look too at Iago or Shylock. They all tell us things about themselves that no person in his right mind would do. But they are not persons, only characters in fictions which expect the audience to share the conventions, in this case the Pardoner's dramatic soliloquy. We accept the convention that in a mounted procession of about thirty people on thirty horses everyone can hear every word of every tale told by any other. This is realistically unlikely. Neither do people tell tales in polished verse. Except in fiction.

At the heart of the sermon / tale that the Pardoner tells is an extended exemplum, a story told to illustrate a point that the preacher is making. Pardoners had a deservedly bad name for their moral depravity and their selling of religion; they were also known for telling lewd tales in church to keep their audiences amused so that they might be more forthcoming with money at offertory time. According to Wycliffe, many popular preachers, including Pardoners, were notorious for the filthiness of their exempla, more especially objectionable for being told in church. That is why, when the Host calls on the Pardoner for a tale, "the gentles gan to cry: Let him tell us of no ribaldry." Since the "gentles" have listened with enjoyment already to the very ribald tales of the Miller and the Reeve, they must have been expecting something really objectionable from the Pardoner. It is a delicious irony that this ugly but clever man disappoints their expectations so splendidly with a sermon that would have done credit to a devout and eloquent member of the Order of Preachers.

This story was old when Geoffrey Chaucer put it in the mouth of his Pardoner in
the fourteenth century. Like Shakespeare after him, Chaucer did not go in for the kind of "originality" which prides itself on creating new tales from scratch: all the good stories have already been told and lie ready to hand to be re-told and retailed by a new author in a new way for a new audience. That is the way Chaucer thought, — and B. Traven who novelized this tale in the early twentieth century as *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, and John Houston who filmed it in the movie of the same name. The originality is in the new way of telling an old story that rises above time and place to touch us again.

One of the striking things about this tale of Chaucer's is that the *exemplum* is told almost exclusively in dialogue, which gives an unusually dramatic flavor to a story that we would loosely call "dramatic" anyway because of its power. But still it is not realistic. Elements of almost pure allegory like the young drunks setting out on a quest to kill Death, and their meeting with the mysterious Old Man are mixed with elements we find realistic, like the youngest making arrangements to buy wine and bottles and poison, and the story he tells to the druggist to get the poison. The mixture is a very potent one. We do not need nineteenth century realism to make a powerful tale.

Having made a "confession" of his dirty tricks, and then told a moving moral tale totally at odds with the personality revealed in his "confession," he does something so odd that it has puzzled generations of critics. He finishes the *exemplum* about three bad lads and the untimely death that they bring upon themselves by their own behavior. Then he goes back to the sermoning of which it was a part, denouncing the sin of avarice that caused their death, and then turns to the congregation to ask for generous contributions for the pardons he will give out. This final plea is in line with all that he has told us about his motives in the prologue to his tale. Then suddenly he has three and a half lines that take us by surprise:

\[
\text{and lo, sirs, thus I preach.}
\]

\[
\text{And Jesus Christ, that is our soulès' leech, } \quad (\text{physician})
\]

\[
\text{So grantè you His pardon to receive,}
\]

\[
\text{For that is best. I will you not deceive.}
\]

What has happened? Has a ray of God's grace finally penetrated the soul of this hardened cynic? Such things happen. Has he been so moved by his own powerful sermon that finally he gets the point of it? One would like to think so. But as one is smiling at this satisfactory ending he turns on quite suddenly again his salesman's pitch for the relics he has earlier denounced as spurious to this very audience, and offers to give the Host first go — in return for money, of course. This turn questions our momentary conclusion that the Pardoner has finally seen a ray of light. But the
uneasy feeling persists that those three and a half lines were not part of a trick. Is the final pitch and the offer to the Host just the Pardoner's joke that the Host misunderstands or responds to in the wrong way? A number of explanations of the ending are possible, none of them totally satisfactory, leaving the Pardoner an enigma like the Old Man of his tale.

The invitation to the Pardoner to tell a story comes after the Physician has told a gory tale about a judge who abused his position to plot with a low fellow (churl) to abduct a beautiful young woman. Her father beheaded her rather than allow her to be raped. The Host vociferously declares his dissatisfaction with this thoroughly depressing tale, and wants to be cheered up.

The Words Between the Host and the Pardoner

Our HOST began to swear as he were wood: mad
"Harrow!" quod he, "By nailès and by blood! ¹
This was a false churl and a false justice. low fellow
290 As shameful death as hearté may devise
Come to these judges and their advocates.
Algate, this silly maid is slain, alas. Still, this poor girl
Alas, too dearè boughté she beauty.
Wherefore I say all day, that men may see So I always say
295 That gifts of Fortune and of Nature
Be cause of death to many a creature.
Her beauty was her death, I dare well sayn.
Alas, so piteously as she was slain.
Of bothé giftés that I speak of now
Men have full often more for harm than prow. than benefit
But truly, mine ownè master dear,
This is a piteous talé for to hear.
But natheless, pass over, is no force. it doesn't matter
I pray to God to save thy gentle corse corpse i.e.body
300 And eke thy urinals and thy jordanes, also thy u. & chamber pots
Thine Hippocras and eke thy Galiens ²

¹ 288-9: "Help! By (Christ's) nails and blood." The host here gives a demonstration of the careless swearing about which the Pardoner will soon speak so eloquently and hypocritically.

² 306: Hippocras and Galiens are the Host's words for what he thinks of as medicinal drinks.
And every boistè full of thy lectuary —
God bless them, and Our Lady, Saintê Mary.
So may I thee, thou art a proper man
And like a prelatê, by Saint Ronian.
Said I not well? I cannot speak in term,
But well I wot, thou dost mine heart to erme
That I have almost caught a cardinacle.
By corpus bonês, but I have triacle,¹
Or else a draught of moist and corny ale,
Or but I hear anon a merry tale,
My heart is lost for pity of this maid.
Thou bel ami, thou Pardoner," he said,
"Tell us some mirth or japês right anon."
"It shall be done," quod he, "by Saint Ronion.
But first," quod he, "here at this alê stake,
I will both drink, and eaten of a cake."
And right anon these gentles 'gan to cry:
"Nay, let him tell us of no ribaldry.
Tell us some moral thing, that we may lere
Some wit, and then will we gladly hear."
"I grant y-wis," quod he, "but I must think
Upon some honest thing while that I drink."²

THE PROLOGUE of the PARDONER'S TALE.

The Pardoner gives a boastful account of how he deludes credulous people with false documents, false relics and a fast tongue

"Lordings," quod he, "in churches when I preach,
I painè me to have a haughty speech
And ring it out as round as goes a bell.

In the next 10 lines or so the Host tries his heavy hand at making jokes about medical symptoms, doctors' vessels, prescriptions, and so forth. His confused oath "By corpus bones" is the Wittiest (though probably unwitting) part of his joke.

¹ 314: "By God's bones, unless I have some medicine (triaclë)." Corpus seems to be a confusion between the oath "God's bones" and the corpse that he associates with the physician.

² 328: On the significance of the pardoner's drink, and the objection of the "gentles" see Introduction to this tale.
For I can all by rotè that I tell.  
My theme is always one, and ever was:  
Radix malorum est cupiditas.¹

His "credentials"

335 First I pronouncè whencè that I come  
And then my bullès show I all and some.  
Our liegè lordè's seal on my patent — ²  
That show I first, my body to warrant.  
That no man be so bold, nor priest nor clerk,  
340 Me to disturb of Christè's holy work.  
And after that then tell I forth my tales.  
Bulls of popès and of cardinals,  
Of patriarchs and bishopès I show,  
And in Latin I speak a wordès few  
345 To saffron with my predicatïon  
And for to stir them to devotïon.

Among his "relics" is a bone that has miraculous powers when dipped in a well

Then show I forth my longè crystal stones  
Y-crammèd full of clothès and of bones.  
"Relics" be they, as weenen they each one.  
350 Then have I in latoun a shoulder bone  
Which that was of a holy Jewè's sheep.³  
`Good men, say I, take of my wordès keep:  
If that this bone be washed in any well,  
If cow or calf or sheep or oxè swell  
355 That any worm has eat or worm y-stung,⁴  
Take water of that well and wash his tongue,

¹ 334: "The root of (all) evils is greed." From the Epistle of St. Paul to Timothy VI, 10.

² 336-8: "Bull" (Latin "bulla"= a seal) is the name commonly given to official letters from popes, but also from others of high rank. "Lieg lord" is ambiguous (deliberately?) and might mean that he is claiming the king's protection or the bishop's or the pope's for his person.

³ 351: This Old Testament holy Jew is conveniently nameless.

⁴ 354-5: If any animal swells up that has eaten or been stung by a "worm", take water ...
And it is whole anon. And furthermore, Of pockēs and of scabs and every sore Shall every sheep be whole that of this well Drinketh a draught. Take keep eke what I tell: If that the goodman that the beastēs oweth Will, every week ere that the cock him croweth Fasting, drinken of this well a draught, As thilkē holy Jew our elders taught, He will never again mistrust his wife even if he knows about her infidelity, and even if she has had 2 or 3 priests as sexual partners" -- the basic plot of many a fabliau.

And sirs, also it healeth jealousy. For though a man be fall in jealous rage, Let maken with this water his potāge, And never shall he more his wife mistrust Though he the sooth of her default wost, All had she taken priestēs two or three.²

A marvelous mitten

Here is a mitten, eke, that you may see. He that his hand will put in this mittēn, He shall have multiplying of his grain When he has sown, be it wheat or oats — So that he offer pennies or else groats.

Serious sinners will not be able to benefit

Good men and women, one thing warn I you: If any wight be in this churchē now That has done sinnē horrible, that he Dare not for shame of it y-shriven be, Or any woman, be she young or old That has made her husband a cuckold — Such folk shall have no power nor no grace To offer to my relics in this place. And whoso findeth him out of such blame, He will come up and offer in God's name,

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¹ 368: "Let his soup be made with this water ..."

² 369-71: "He will never again mistrust his wife even if he knows about her infidelity, and even if she has had 2 or 3 priests as sexual partners" -- the basic plot of many a fabliau.
And I assoil him by the authority
Which that by bull y-granted was to me.'

I'll absolve
by Pope's letter

*His skill and astuteness in preaching against avarice brings him profit, pride and pleasure*

By this gaud have I wonn, year by year
A hundred marks since I was pardoner.
I standé like a clerk in my pulpit,
And when the lewèd people is down y-set
I preaché so as you have heard before
And tell a hundred falsé japés more.

Then pain I me to stretché forth the neck,
And east and west upon the people I beck
As does a dové sitting on a barn.
My handés and my tongue go so yern
That it is joy to see my busyness.

Of avarice and of such cursedness
Is all my preaching, for to make them free
To give their pence, and namely unto me.
For my intent is not but for to win,
And nothing for correction of sin.

I recké never, when that they be buried
Though that their soulés go a blacké berried.
For certés many a predication
Comes oftentime of evil intention
Some for pleasance of folk and flattery
To be advanced by hypocricy,
And some for vainé glory, and some for hate.

*His revenge on any enemy of pardoners*

For when I dare no other way debate,
Then will I sting him with my tongué smart
In preaching, so that he shall not astart
To be defaméd falsely, if that he
Hath trespassed to my brethren or to me.
For though I tellé not his proper name,
Men shall well knownen that it is the same
By signés and by other circumstances.

Thus quit I folk that do us displeasances.
Thus spit I out my venom under hue
Of holiness, to seemen holy and true.

*How to profit by preaching against greed, and taking offerings even from the poorest*

But shortly mine intent I will devise:
I preach of nothing but for covetise.
Therefore my theme is yet and ever was:
*Radix malorum est cupiditas.*
Thus can I preach against that same vice
Which that I use, and that is avarice.
But though myself be guilty in that sin,
Yet can I make other folk to turn away
From avarice, and sorè to repent,
But that is not my principal intent;
I preach nothing but for covetise.
Of this matter it ought enough suffice.
Then tell I them examples many a one
Of old stories long time ago.
For lewéd people loven tales old.
Such thingés can they well report and hold.
What? Trow you that whilès I may preach
And winnè gold and silver for I teach
That I will live in poverte wilfully?
Nay, nay, I thought it never truly.
For I will preach and beg in sundry lands.
I will not do no labor with my hands
Nor makè baskettés, and live thereby.
Because I will not beggen idley,
I willè none of the apostles’ counterfeit.¹
I will have money, woolè, cheese and wheat,
All were it given of the poorest page
Or of the poorest widow in a világe,

¹ 446-7: "Because I will ...": "Because I don't intend to beg in vain" or "Because I don't want to be an idle beggar [as distinct from a working preacher?], I want none of the counterfeit of the apostle /apostles. I want money, cheese, etc." "Counterfeit" here would be a noun meaning something unsubstantial and "useless" like a blessing. But counterfeit may be a verb meaning "copy, imitate": "I will imitate none of the apostles."
All should her children starvè for famine.
Nay, I will drinkè liquor of the vine
And have a jolly wench in every town.

But he can tell a moral tale

But hearken, lordings, in conclusion,
Your liking is that I shall tell a tale.
Now have I drunk a draught of corny ale,
By God, I hope I shall you tell a thing
That shall by reason be at your liking,
For though myself be a full vicious man,
A moral tale yet I you tellè can
Which I am wont to preachè for to win.¹
Now hold your peace. My tale I will begin."

THE PARDONER'S TALE

A story about three young men who gamble, drink, swear and frequent prostitutes

In Flanders whilom was a company
Of youngè folk that haunteden folly,
As riot, hazard, stewès, and taverns
Where, as with harpès, lutès and gitterns
They dance, and play at dice both day and night,
And eat also and drink over their might
Through which they do the devil sacrifice
Within that devil's temple in cursèd wise
By superfluity abominable.
Their oathès be so great and so damnable
That it is grisly for to hear them swear.
Our blessèd Lor'de's body they to-tear;
Them thought that Jewès rent Him not enough.
And each of them at others' sinnè laugh.
And right anon then comè tumblesters
Fetis and small, and youngè fruitesters,

¹ 461: "Which I am accustomed to preach to make money."
Singers with harpës, bawdës, waferers, pimps, wafer sellers
Which be the very devil’s officers Who are ... agents
To kindle and blow the fire of lechery That is annexed unto gluttony.

He slips into a sermon against excess in eating or drinking

The Holy Writ take I to my witness Bible
That lechery is in wine and drunkenness.

Lo, how that drunken Lot unkindly unnaturally
Lay by his daughters two, unwittingly, didn’t know / did
So drunk he was he n’istè what he wrought.¹
didn’t know / did
Herod (whoso well the stories sought) ²
When he of wine replete was at his feast, full of wine
Right at his owné table he gave his hest order
To slay the Baptist John full guiltëless.

Seneca says a good word doubtëless. Roman philosopher
He says he can no differencë find
Betwixt a man that is out of his mind

And a man which that is drunklelew, drunk
But that woodness y-fallen in a shrew Except t. madness / wretch
Persévereth longer than does drunkenness.³

Gluttony was the original sin in Eden

O gluttony! full of cursedness.
O causë first of our confusion! ⁴

O original of our damnation, origin (in Eden).

¹ 485-7: See Genesis 19, 30-36 for the unedifying story. Lot’s daughters got their father drunk so that they could copulate with him incestuously (“unkindly,” against “kind” = Nature).

² 488: “Whoever has consulted the story” in Matt. 14 or Mark 6, where he would find that Herod Antipas, Tetrarch (“King”) of Galilee, during a feast rashly promised the dancer Salome anything she asked for. Instigated by her mother Herodias, who hated John the Baptist for denouncing her adulterous relationship with Herod, Salome asked for the head of the Baptist on a dish. Herod accordingly had John executed.

³ Seneca, the Roman philosopher, says that he can see no difference between a madman and a drunk except that the lasts longer.

⁴ 497 ff: our confusion: our Fall. In this exemplum, the Original Sin that caused the Fall of mankind in Paradise was gluttony.
Till Christ had bought us with His blood again!
Lo how dearē — shortly for to sayn —
A-bought was thilké cursēd villainy.¹
Corrupt was all this world for gluttony.

Adam, our father, and his wife also
From Paradise, to labor and to woe
Were driven for that vice, it is no dread.
For while that Adam fasted, as I read,
He was in Paradise. And when that he
Ate of that fruit defended on a tree,
Anon he was outcast to woe and pain.

Exclamatio!

O Gluttony! on thee well ought us 'plain.²
Oh, wist a man how many maladies
Follow of excess and gluttonies,
Of his diet, sitting at his table.³
Alas the shortē throat, the tender mouth
Maketh that east and west and north and south,
In earth, in air, in water, men to swink
To get a glutton dainty meat and drink.
Of this matter, O Paul, well canst thou treat:⁴
"Meat unto womb, and womb eke unto meat
Shall God destroyen both," as Paulus saith.
Alas, a foul thing is it, by my faith
To say this word, and fouler is the deed
When man so drinketh of the white and red
That of his throat he maketh his privy
Through thilkē cursēd superfluity.
The Apostle weeping says full piteously:

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¹ 502-3: "Look how dearly (to state it briefly) this cursed sin was paid for (abought), i.e. with Christ's blood.

² 512: "O Gluttony, we certainly have good reason to complain about you."

³ 515-6: measurable / table: the rhyme in the original Middle English probably required something like a French pronunciation and stress.

⁴ 521-3: "O St Paul, you have written well on this matter (of gluttony). Food gratifies the belly and the belly enjoys the food. But both will die" (unlike the soul and spiritual food).
"There walken many of which you told have I of whom (I say it now, weeping with piteous voice), That they be enemies of Christe's cross, Of which the end is death. Womb is their God." Belly, O womb! O belly! O stinking cod!

Fulfilled of dung and of corruption. At either end of thee foul is the sound. How great labour and cost is thee to find! to feed These cookes! How they stamp and strain and grind And turnen substance into accident

To fulfill all thy likerous talent. Out of the hardé bonës knocken they The marrow, for they castë naught away That may go through the gullet soft and sweet. Of spicery, of leaf and bark and root

Shall be his sauce y-maked by delight To make him yet a newer appetite. But certës he that haunteth such delices he who indulges Is dead while that he liveth in those vices.

Excessive drinking

A lecherous thing is wine. And drunkenness Is full of striving and of wretchedness. O drunken man, disfigured is thy face, Sour is thy breath, foul art thou to embrace, And through thy drunken nose seemeth the sound As though thou saidest ay: "Samsoun! Samsoun!" continually

And yet, God wot, Samson drank never no wine. God knows Thou fallest as it were a stickëd swine. stuck pig Thy tongue is lost, and all thine honest cure, self respect For drunkenness is very sepulture tomb Of mannës wit, and his discretion. man's intelligence

1 539: A philosophical and theological joke. In philosophy "substance" meant the "isness" of a thing, that quality that makes it what it is and not something else, and which does not change. The "accidents" are those elements of a thing, e.g. color or shape, that can change without altering its fundamental sameness. In theology this concept was used to explain how, even after the Transubstantiation of the Mass, i.e. the changing of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, those things did not lose the "accidents" of bread and wine. Similarly the skill of cooks could totally transform ingredients.
In whom that drink has domination
He can no counsel keep, it is no dread.
Now keep you from the white and from the red,
And namely from the white wine of Leap
That is to sell in Fish Street or in Cheap.
This wine of Spain creepeth subtly
In other wines growing fastē by ¹
Of which there riseth such fumosity,
That when a man has drunken draughtēs three
And weeneth that he be at home in Cheap,
He is in Spain, right at the town of Leap,
Not at the Rochelle nor at Bordeaux town,
But hearken, lordings, one word, I you pray
That all the sovereign actēs, dare I say,
Of victories in the Oldē Testament,
Through very God that is omnipotent,
Looketh the Bible, and there you may it lere.

Some brief examples from the classics and Scripture

Look Attila, the greatē conqueroūr,
Died in his sleep with shame and dishonoūr
Bleeding at his nose in drunkenness.
A capitain should live in soberness.
And over all this aviseth you right well
What was commanded unto Lemuel
(Not Samuel, but Lemuel, say I.
Readeth the Bible, and find it expressly)
Of wine-giving to them that have justice.²
No more of this for it may well suffice.

Gambling

¹ 566: Chaucer, whose father was a wine-merchant near Fish St & Cheapside in London, here makes some sly reference to the illegal (?) practice of wine mixing. The Spanish wine just happens to creep into the wines growing (!) next to it. To judge from the next few lines, the mixture was very potent.

² 587: Proverbs 31, 4-5: "It is not for kings, O Lemuel, ... to drink wine ... lest they drink ... and pervert the rights of all the afflicted."
And now that I have spoke of gluttony,

590 Now will I you defenden hazardry.  
forbid gambling
Hazard is very mother of leasing
Gambling / of lies
And of deceit and cursed forswearings,
perjuries
Blasphemy of Christ, manslaughter, and waste also 
of goods
Of chattel and of time; and furthermore 

595 It is reproof and contrary of honour 
gambler
For to be held a common hazarder.
rank
And ever the higher he is of estate 
held in contempt
The moré is he holden desolate.
gambling
If that a princé uses hazardry, 

600 In allé governance and policy
He is, as by common opinïon, 

Y-held the less in reputation.

Some examples from history

Stilbon, that was a wise ambassador, 
From Sparta
Was sent to Corinth in full great honour 

605 From Lacedaemon, to make their allïance, 
From Sparta
And when he came, him happenéd par chance 
gambling
That all the greatest that were of that land 

610 He stole him home again to his country 
gamblers
And said: "There will I not lose my name, 
I had rather
Nor will not take on me so great defame 
gamblers
You for to ally unto no hazarders. 
ally yourselves
Sendeth other wise ambassadors, 
diplomacy

615 For, by my truthè, me were lever die 
I had rather
Than I you should to hazarders ally. 
gamblers
For you that be so glorious in honours 
ally yourselves
Shall not allyen you with hazarders 
diplomacy
As by my will, nor as by my treaty." 
also

620 This wise philosopher, thus saidè he. 

Look eke that to the King Demetrius 
The King of Parthia, as the book says us,¹ 
Sent him a pair of dice of gold in scorn,

¹ 622: "The book" is John of Salisbury's Polycraticus, a medieval treatise on government.
For he had usèd hazard therebeforn
625 For which he held his glory or his renown
At no value or reputation.
Lords may finden other manner play
Honest enough to drive the day away.

Swearing

Now will I speak of oathès false and great
630 A word or two, as oldè bookès treat.
Great swearing is a thing abominable,
And falsè swearing is yet more reprovable.¹
The highè God forbade swearing at all.
Witness on Matthew. But in special
635 Of swearing says the holy Jeremy:
"Thou shalt swear sooth thine oathès and not lie,²
And swear in doom and eke in rightwiseness."
But idle swearing is a cursedness.
Behold and see, that in the fistè table
640 Of Highè Godès hestès honourable
How that the second hest of Him is this:
"Take not My name in idle or amiss."³
Lo, rather, he forbiddeth such swearing
Than homicide or many a cursèd thing.⁴
645 I say that as by order thus it standeth.
This knoweth that his hestès understandeth ⁴
How that the second hest of God is that.
And furthermore, I will thee tell all plat,

¹ 631-2: As with 471-2 and elsewhere above the original pronunciation was probably closer to the French.
² 636-7: "You shall swear your oaths truthfully and not lie; and swear (only) in court and in rightful causes". This is not quite what modern renditions of the Jeremiah verse say.
³ 643/4: "Rather" goes with "than" of the next line, i.e. "He forbids swearing rather than (ahead of) homicide." The assumption is that the Commandments in the first "table" or group -- 1st, 2nd & 3rd, where the commandment against swearing occurs -- are of a higher order than the other 7 where the prohibition against murder is found.
⁴ 646-7: The syntax is a little snarled; the order of the phrases is as follows: "He who understands his (God's) commandments knows this: that the second commandment of God is against that (idle swearing)."
There came a privy thief men clepeth Death
That in this country all the people slayeth
And with his spear he smote his heart in two
And went his way withouten wordes mo'.
He has a thousand slain this pestilence,

Back to the story of the three gambling and swearing young drunks.

One of their comrades has died of the plague

But, sirs, now will I tellé forth my tale.
These rioterês three, of which I tell,
Long erst ere primè rang of any bell
Were set them in a tavern for to drink,
And as they sat, they heard a bell clink.

Before a corpse was carried to his grave
That one of them 'gan callen to his knave:
"Go bet," quod he "and aské readily
What corpse is this that passes here forby,
And look that thou report his namè well."

"Sir," quod this boy, "it needeth never a deal.
It was me told ere you came here two hours.
He was, pardee, an old fellow of yours,
And suddenly he was y-slain tonight
Fordrunk as he sat on his bench upright.

There came a privy thief men clepeth Death
That in this country all the people slayeth
And with his spear he smote his heart in two
And went his way withouten wordes mo'.
He has a thousand slain this pestilence,
And, master, ere you come in his presence
Methinketh that it were necessary
For to beware of such an adversary.
Be ready for to meet him evermore.
Thus taught me my dame. I say no more."

"By Saint Mary," said this taverner,
"The child says sooth; for he has slain this year
Hence over a mile within a great village
Both man and woman, child and hind and page.
I trow his habitation be there."

To be advised great wisdom it were,
Ere that he did a man a dishonour."  

The young men drunkenly vow eternal brotherhood in the quest to find Death

"Yea? God's armes!" quod this rioter.
"Is it such peril with him for to meet?
I shall him seek by way and eke by street,
I make a vow, by God's dignè bones.
Hearken, fellows. We three be allones.
Let each of us hold up his hand to other
And each of us become the others' brother,
And we will slay this falsé traitor Death.

He shall be slain, he that so many slayeth,
By God's dignity, ere it be night."
Together have these three their trothè's plight
To live and die each of them with other
As though he were his own y-bornè brother.

And up they start all drunken in this rage
And forth they go towards that village
Of which the taverner had spoke before,
And many a grisly oath then have they swore,
And Christé's blessèd body they to-rent.

Death shall be dead, if that they may him hent.

They meet a mysterious old man

When they had gone not fully half a mile

¹ 687: "I guess his dwelling is there".
Right as they would have trodden o'er a stile,
An old man and a pooré with them met.
This oldé man full meekely them gret
And saidé thus: "Now, lordés, God you see."¹
The proudest of these rioterés three
Answered again: "What, churl, with sorry grace.
Why art thou all forwrappéd save thy face?
Why livest thou so long in so great age?"

This old man 'gan to look in his viságe,
And saidé thus: "For I ne cannot find
A man, though that I walkéd into Inde,
Neither in city nor in no villáge
That wouldé change his youthè for mine age,
And therefore must I have mine agé still
As long time as it is Godê's will.

He laments his inability to die

Nor Death, alas, ne will not have my life.
Thus walk I like a restèless caitiff,
And on the ground, which is my mothers's gate,
I knocké with my staff both early and late,
And sayé: 'Levè Mother, let me in.
Lo how I vanish, flesh and blood and skin.
Alas, when shall my bonés be at rest?
Mother with you would I change my chest
That in my chamber longé time hath be,
Yea, for a hairécloth to wrappé me.²
But yet to me she will not do that grace,
For which full pale and welkéd is my face.

He rebukes them for their lack of respect

But, sirs, to you it is no courtesy

¹ 715 ff: The courtesy of the old man who addresses the young ones as lordes, i.e. gentlemen, is in marked contrast to their rudeness in addressing him as churl, low fellow. What, churl, with sorry grace (717) means something like: "Hey, you lowlife, damn you."
² 736: A haircloth was a penitential garment also used as a shroud.
In the presence of an old man with white hair upon his head, you should stand.

May God, who redeemed mankind, save you and improve you.

To speak to an old man villainy doesn’t discourage unless he offend. In Holy Writ you may yourself well read Lev. ix, 32. Against an old man, hoar upon his head, You shall arise. 1 Wherefore I give you redde: stand / advice.

Ne do unto an old man no harm now. No more than that you would men did to you last that long. And God be with you, where you go or ride. wherever I must go thither as I have to go.” to where

They abuse him again, and he tells them what they want to know

"Nay, oldé churl, by God thou shalt not so," said this other hazarder anon. of this same. "Thou partest not so lightly, by Saint John. Thou spoke right now of thilké traitor Death. That in this country all our friendés slayeth. Have here my troth as thou art his espy. Have ... troth = I swear / spy. Tell where he is or thou shalt it aby, suffer for. By God and by the Holy Sacrament, truly For soothly, thou art one of his assent. To slay us youngé folk, thou falsé thief."

"Now, sirs," quod he, "if that you be so lief so eager. To findé Death, turn up this crooked way, winding path. For in that grove I left him, by my fay, faith Under a tree. And there he will abide. stay Not for your boast he will him nothing hide. See you that oak? Right there you shall him find. God savé you, that bought again mankind, And you amend.” 2 Thus said this oldé man.

In search of Death the young men find a pleasant surprise

And ever each of these rioterés ran every one. Till he came to that tree. And there they found

1 743-4: "In the presence of an old man with white hair upon his head, you should stand"

2 766-7: "May God, who redeemed mankind, save you and improve you."
Of florins fine of gold y-coinèd round  
Well nigh an eighté bushels, as them thought.  
No longer then after Death they sought,  
But each of them so glad was of the sight  
For that the florins be so fair and bright  
That down they set them by this precious hoard.  
The worst of them, he spoke the firstè word:  
"Brethren," quod he, "take keep what that I say.  
My wit is great, though that I bourd and play.  
This treasure has Fortune unto us given  
In mirth and jollity our life to liven.  
And lightly as it comes, so will we spend.  
Hey, Ġodè's precious dignity!  Who wend  
Today that we should have so fair a grace?  
They plan to move their find secretly  
But might this gold be carried from this place  
Home to mine house — or elße unto yours,  
For well you wot that all this gold is ours —  
Then werè we in high felicity.  
But truly, by day it may not be.  
Men wouldè say that we were thievès strong  
And for our ownè treasure do us hung.  
This treasure must y-carried be by night  
As wisely and as slily as it might.  
They agree to draw lots to decide who should go to town  
Therefore I rede that cut among us all  
Be drawn, and let's see where the cut will fall,  
And he that has the cut, with heartè blithe  
Shall runnè to the town and that full swithe,  
And bring us bread and wine full privily,  
And two of us shall keepen subtlely  
This treasure well, and if he will not tarry,  
When it is night, we will this treasure carry  
By one assent where as us thinketh best."  

1 770: "Round, newly minted florins (coins) of refined gold."
That one of them the cut brought in his fist  
And bade them draw and look where it would fall,  
And it fell on the youngest of them all,  
And forth toward the town he went anon.

The two guardians of the find plot against the absent one

And all so soonë as that he was gone  
That one of them spoke thus unto the other:  
"Thou knowest well thou art my swornë brother.  
Thy profit will I tell to thee anon.

Thou wost well that our fellow is a-gone,  
And here is gold and that full great plenty,  
That shall departed be among us three.  
But, natheless, if I can shape it so  
That it departed were among us two,

Had I not done a friendë's turn to thee?"  
That other answered: "I n'ot how that may be.  
He wot how that the gold is with us tway.  
What shall we do? What shall we to him say?"

"And I shall tellen thee— in wordës few —  
What we shall do and bring it well about."

"I grantë," quod that other, "out of doubt  
That by my troth I will thee not bewray."

The plan: treachery during a wrestling bout

"Now," quod the first, "thou wost well we be tway  
And two of us shall stronger be than one.  
Look when that he is set, thou right anon  
Arise, as though thou wouldest with him play,  
And I shall rive him through the sidës tway,  
While that thou strugolest with him as in game,

And with thy dagger look thou do the same,  
And then shall all this gold departed be,  
My dearë friend, betwixtë thee and me.  
Then may we both our lustës all fulfill

---

1 826-7: "See to it that when he sits down, you get up and pretend you want to wrestle with him."
And play at dice right at our owné will."

835  And thus accorded been these shrewês tway
To slay the third, as you have heard me say.

_The third has a similar plan for the other two_

This youngest, which that went unto the town,
Full oft in heart he rolleth up and down ¹
The beauty of these florins new and bright.

840  "O lord," quod he, "if so were that I might
Have all this treasure to myself alone,
There is no man that lives under the throne
Of God that should live so merry as I."

And at the last, the Fiend, our Enemy.

845  Put in his thought that he should poison buy
With which he might slay his fellows tway.
For why? The Fiend found him in such living
That he had leave him to sorrow bring.
For this was utterly his full intent
To slay them both, and never to repent.

_He goes to the druggist to buy poison for "rats"_

And forth he goes — no longer would he tarry —
Into the town unto a 'pothecary ²
And prayéd him that he him would sell
Some poison, that he might his rattês quell.

855  And eke there was a polecat in his haw
That, as he said, his capons had y-slaw,
And fain he wouldé wreak him, if he might
On vermin that destroyéd him by night.
The 'pothecary answered: "And thou shalt have
A thing that, all so God my soulé save,
In all this world there is no créature
That ate or drunk has of this confiture
Not but the montance of a corn of wheat
That he ne shall his life anon forlete.²

² 859 ff: The druggist promises him a poison so powerful that it is guaranteed to kill within

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¹ 838-9: "He continually goes over in his mind the beauty of the bright new florins."

² 859 ff: The druggist promises him a poison so powerful that it is guaranteed to kill within
Yea, starve he shall, and that in lessè while
Than thou wilt go a pace not but a mile,
The poison is so strong and violent."

He borrows bottles and buys wine

This cursèd man has in his hand y-hent
This poison in a box; and sith he ran

Into the nexté street unto a man,
And borrowed of him largè bottles three,
And in the two his poison pourèd he.
The third he keptè clean for his own drink,
For all the night he shope him for to swink

In carrying off the gold out of that place.
And when this rioter (With sorry grace!)
Had filled with wine his greatè bottles three,
To his fellows again repaireth he.

The denouement

What needeth it to sermon of it more? ¹

For right as they had cast his death before
Right so they have him slain and that anon.
And when that this was done, thus spoke that one:
"Now let us sit and drink and make us merry,
And afterwards we will his body bury."

And with that word it happened him "par cas" ²
To take the bottle where the poison was,
And drank, and gave his fellow drink also,
For which anon they starven bothè two.
But certès I suppose that Avicen

Wrote never in no Canon nor in no fen

More wonder signès of empoinsoning
minutes any creature that ingests an amount no bigger than a grain of wheat. *starve* in 1.865 means simply to die, not here of hunger.

¹ 879: "Why make a long story of it?"

² 889 ff: Avicenna was an Arabic philosopher and physician well known to medieval Europe. According to Skeat, the "Canon in Medicine," his most famous work, was divided into sections called "fens."
Than had these wretches two ere their ending.
Thus ended be these homicidés two murderers
And eke the false empoisoner also.

Back to the sermon briefly, and to the confidence game on the Pardoner’s church audience

895 Oh curséd sin of allé cursedness!
Oh traitors' homicide! Oh wickedness!
Oh gluttony, luxury and hazardry! lust & gambling
Thou blásphemer of Christ with villainy
And oathès great of usage and of pride!

900 Alas, mankindé! How may it betide,
That to thy Créator which that thee wrought who made you
And with His precious hearté's blood thee bought,
Thou art so false, and so unkind, alas?
Now, good men, God forgive you your trespass, sin
And ware you from the sin of avarice. beware of save
My holy pardon may you all warice,
So that you offer nobles or sterlings¹ gold or silver
Or elsé silver brooches, spoonés, rings
Boweth your head under this holy bull.²

910 Come up, you wivès, offer of your wool.
Your names I enter here in my roll anon.
Into the bliss of heaven shall you gon.
gold or silver
I you assoile by mine highé power, absolve
You that will offer, as clean and eke as clear and also
As you were born.³

The Pardoner once more directly addresses his fellow pilgrims

"And lo, sirs, thus I preach.
And Jesus Christ, that is our soulé's leech, physician

---

¹ 907: "Provided you make an offering of gold or silver coins."

² 909: "Bull" (Lat. bulla, a seal) means a papal letter, almost certainly fraudulent; hence the phrase "this holy bull" translates by chance into our vernacular as an accurate account of the Pardoner's activity.

³ 915: In mid line, which I have split, Chaucer has the Pardoner return from the canned sermon that he gives regularly in church, and once again address the pilgrims directly.
So grantè you His pardon to receive,  
For that is best, I will you not deceive.  

But, sirs, one word forgot I in my tale:  

920  I have relics and pardon in my mail  
As fair as any man in Engeland,  
Which were me given by the Popè's hand.  
If any of you will of devotion  
Offer, and have mine absolution,  

925  Come forth anon and kneeleth here adown¹  
And meekèly receiveth my pardon,  
Or elsè taketh pardon as you wend  
All new and fresh at every milè's end,  
So that you offer always new and new  

930  Nobles or pence which that be good and true.  

He assures the pilgrims they are lucky to have him  

It is an honour to ever each that is here  
That you may have a suffisant pardoner  
T'assoilé you in country as you ride,  
For áventurès which that may betide.  

935  Peráventure, there may fall one or two  
Down off his horse, and break his neck in two.  
Look which a surety it is to you all²  
That I am in your fellowship y-fall  
That may assoil you, bothè more and less,  

940  When that the soul shall from the body pass.  

His joke at the Host's expense evokes a counter-joke  
about the Pardoner's "relics" and his sexuality  

I redè that our Host here shall begin  
For he is most envelopèd in sin.  

¹ 925 ff: come, kneeleth etc; the imperative plural form (which is also the polite singular) normally ends in -eth. But Chaucer's language permits dropping the -eth, so, as here, he uses either, depending on the form that best fits the rhythmic requirements.  

² 937-40: "See what a good thing it is for all of you that I have chanced to be in your company, I who can absolve the rich and the poor (more and less), when the moment of death comes."

I suggest
Come forth, Sir Host, and offer first anon
And thou shalt kiss the relics every one,
Yea, for a groat. Unbuckle anon thy purse."
"Nay, nay," quod he. "Then have I Christè's curse.
Let be," quod he, "it shall not be, so theech.
Thou wouldest make me kiss thine oldè breech,
And swear it were a relic of a saint,
Though it were with thy fundament depaint.
But by that cross which that St. Helen found,
I wish I had thy collions in my hand
Instead of relics or of sanctuary.
Let cut them off; I will thee help them carry.
They shall be shrinèd in a hog's turd."¹

The Host is surprised at the Pardoner's response

This Pardoner answered not a word.
So wroth he was, no word ne would he say.
"Now," quod our Host, "I will no longer play
With thee, nor with no other angry man."

The Knight, a man of war, intervenes to restore the peace

But right anon the worthy Knight began
When that he saw that all the people laugh:
"No more of this, for it is right enough.
Sir Pardoner, be glad and merry of cheer,
And you, Sir Host, that be to me so dear,
I pray you that you kiss the Pardoner.
And Pardoner, I pray thee, draw thee near,
And as we diden, let us laugh and play."
Anon they kissed and riden forth their way.

Here is ended the Pardoner's tale

¹ 952 ff: The gross sexual insult in the Host's heavy-handed joking leaves the Pardoner speechless, perhaps for the first time in his life. The Pardoner's deficient virility was more than hinted at in Chaucer's portrait of him in the General Prologue.