

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.*

670	<p>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." <sup>1</sup>          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 lockès 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 newè 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.<sup>2</sup>          His wallet lay before him in his lap          Bretfull of pardons, come from Rome all hot.<sup>3</sup></p>	<p><i>him = Summoner          colleague          had come directly          bass melody          trumpet          hank          By strands          clumps          bag          fashion          hair loose / bareheaded          eyes          A pilgrim badge          bag          Crammed full</i></p>
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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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;  
 690 As smooth it was as it were late y-shave. *recently shaved*  
 I trow he were a gelding or a mare. *guess*

*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 saidè was Our Lady's veil. *Our Lady's = Virgin Mary's*  
 He said he had a gobbet of the sail *piece*  
 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 haddè piggès' 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  
 Than that the parson got in monthès tway; *two*  
 705 And thus, with feignèd flattery and japes *tricks*  
 He made the parson and the people his apes. *fools, dupes*

*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 <sup>1</sup> *best of all*  
 For well he wistè when that song was sung *knew*  
 He mustè preach and well afile his tongue *polish his sermon*  
 To winnè silver as he full well could. *he knew how*  
 Therefore he sang the merrierly and loud.

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

<sup>1</sup> 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:

and lo, sirs, thus I preach.  
 And Jesus Christ, that is our soulès' leech,     *(physician)*  
 So grantè you His pardon to receive,  
 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:	<i>mad</i>
	"Harrow!" quod he, "By nailés and by blood! <sup>1</sup>	
	This was a false churl and a false justice.	<i>low fellow</i>
290	As shameful death as hearté may devise	
	Come to these judges and their advocates.	
	Algate, this silly maid is slain, alas.	<i>Still, this poor girl</i>
	Alas, too dearé boughté she beauty.	
	Wherefore I say all day, that men may see	<i>So I always say</i>
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	
300	Men have full often more for harm than prow.	<i>than benefit</i>
	But trully, mine owné master dear,	
	This is a piteous talé for to hear.	
	But natheless, pass over, is no force.	<i>it doesn't matter</i>
	I pray to God to save thy gentle corse	<i>corpse i.e.body</i>
305	And eke thy urinals and thy jordanes,	<i>also thy u. &amp; chamber pots</i>
	Thine Hippocras and eke thy Galiens <sup>2</sup>	

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 306: *Hippocras* and *Galiens* are the Host's words for what he thinks of as medicinal drinks.

	And every boistè full of thy lectuary —	<i>every box / medicine</i>
	God bless them, and Our Lady, Saintè Mary.	
	So may I thee, thou art a proper man	<i>thee = succeed / fine</i>
310	And like a prelatè, by Saint Ronian.	<i>church dignitary</i>
	Said I not well? I cannot speak in term,	<i>in technicalities</i>
	But well I wot, thou dost mine heart to erme	<i>well I know / to grieve</i>
	That I have almost caught a cardinacle.	<i>heart attack</i>
	By corpus bonès, but I have triacle, <sup>1</sup>	<i>unless / medicine</i>
315	Or else a draught of moist and corny ale,	<i>fine &amp; tasty</i>
	Or but I hear anon a merry tale,	<i>Or unless</i>
	My heart is lost for pity of this maid.	
	Thou bel ami, thou Pardoner," he said,	<i>good friend</i>
	"Tell us some mirth or japès right anon."	<i>jokes</i>
320	"It shall be done," quod he, "by Saint Ronion.	
	But first," quod he, "here at this alè stake,	<i>tavern sign</i>
	I will both drink, and eaten of a cake."	
	And right anon these gentles 'gan to cry:	<i>gentlefolk</i>
	"Nay, let him tell us of no ribaldry.	<i>dirty stories</i>
325	Tell us some moral thing, that we may lere	<i>learn</i>
	Some wit, and then will we gladly hear."	<i>wisdom</i>
	"I grant y-wis," quod he, "but I must think	<i>certainly</i>
	Upon some honest thing while that I drink." <sup>2</sup>	

### ***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>ladies &amp; gentlemen</i>
330	I painè me to have a haughty speech	<i>take pains / impressive</i>
	And ring it out as round as goes a bell.	

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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.

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

<sup>2</sup> 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. *know all by heart*  
 My theme is always one, and ever was:  
*Radix malorum est cupiditas.*<sup>1</sup>

*His "credentials"*

335 First I pronouncè whencè that I come  
 And then my bullès show I all and some. *papal letters*  
 Our liegè lordè's seal on my patent — <sup>2</sup> *on my letter*  
 That show I first, my body to warrant. *to guarantee my person*  
 That no man be so bold, nor priest nor clerk, *neither...nor*  
 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 predication *To flavor my sermon*  
 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 *glasses*  
 Y-crammèd full of clothès and of bones.  
 "Relics" be they, as weenen they each one. *they all think*  
 350 Then have I in latoun a shoulder bone *in brass jar*  
 Which that was of a holy Jewè's sheep.<sup>3</sup>  
 `Good men, say I, take of my wordès keep: *take notice*  
 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,<sup>4</sup>  
 Take water of that well and wash his tongue,

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

<sup>2</sup> 336-8: "Bull" (Latin "bulla"= a seal) is the name commonly given to official letters from popes, but also from others of high rank. "Liege 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.

<sup>3</sup> 351: This Old Testament holy Jew is conveniently nameless.

<sup>4</sup> 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, *healed at once*  
 Of pockès and of scabs and every sore  
 Shall every sheep be whole that of this well  
 360 Drinketh a draught. Take keep eke what I tell: *Heed also*  
 If that the goodman that the beastès oweth *the farmer who owns*  
 Will, every week ere that the cock him croweth *before cockcrow*  
 Fasting, drinken of this well a draught,  
 As thilkè holy Jew our elders taught, *As that*  
 365 His beastès and his store shall multiply.  
 And sirs, also it healeth jealousy.  
 For though a man be fall in jealous rage,  
 Let maken with this water his potáge,<sup>1</sup> *his soup*  
 And never shall he more his wife mistrust  
 370 Though he the sooth of her defaultè wost, *truth / knows*  
 All had she taken priestès two or three.<sup>2</sup> *Even if*

*A marvelous mitten*

Here is a mitten, eke, that you may see. *a glove also*  
 He that his hand will put in this mittén,  
 He shall have multiplying of his grain  
 375 When he has sownè, be it wheat or oats —  
 So that he offer pennies or else groats. *Provided / or silver*

*Serious sinners will not be able to benefit*

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

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<sup>1</sup> 368: "Let his soup be made with this water ... "

<sup>2</sup> 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 *I'll absolve*  
 Which that by bull y-granted was to me.' *by Pope's letter*

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

By this gaud have I wonné, year by year *this trick*  
 390 A hundred marks since I was pardoner.  
 I standè like a clerk in my pulpit, *a cleric*  
 And when the lewèd people is down y-set *ignorant congregation*  
 I preachè so as you have heard before  
 And tell a hundred falsè japès more. *amusing lies*  
 395 Then pain I me to stretchè forth the neck,  
 And east and west upon the people I beck  
 As does a dovè sitting on a barn.  
 My handès and my tongue go so yern *so fast*  
 That it is joy to see my busyness.  
 400 Of avarice and of such cursedness  
 Is all my preaching, for to make them free  
 To give their pence, and namely unto me. *pennies*  
 For my intent is not but for to win,  
 And nothing for correction of sin.  
 405 I reckè never, when that they be buried *I don't care*  
 Though that their soulès go a blackè berried. *picking blackberries*  
 For certès many a predication *sermon*  
 Comes oftentime of evil intention  
 Some for pleasance of folk and flattery *to please & flatter people*  
 410 To be avancèd by hypocrisy,  
 And some for vainè glory, and some for hate.

*His revenge on any enemy of pardoners*

For when I dare no other way debate, *respond, hit back*  
 Then will I sting him with my tonguè smart  
 In preaching, so that he shall not astart *escape*  
 415 To be defamèd falsely, if that he  
 Hath trespassèd to my brethren or to me. *offended my colleagues*  
 For though I tellè not his proper name, *actual*  
 Men shall well knowen that it is the same  
 By signès and by other circumstances.  
 420 Thus quit I folk that do us displeasances. *repay*

Thus spit I out my venom under hue *color*  
 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'll tell*  
 I preach of nothing but for covetise. *greed, avarice*  
 425 Therefore my theme is yet and ever was:  
*Radix malorum est cupiditas.*  
 Thus can I preach against that samè vice  
 Which that I use, and that is avarice. *which I practice*  
 But though myself be guilty in that sin,  
 430 Yet can I maken other folk to twin *to turn away*  
 From avarice, and sorè to repent,  
 But that is not my principal intent;  
 I preachè nothing but for covetise.  
 Of this matter it ought enough suffice.  
 435 Then tell I them examples many a one  
 Of oldè stories longè time agone.  
 For lewèd people loven talès old. *ignorant laymen*  
 Such thingès can they well report and hold. *retell & remember*  
 What? Trowè you that whilès I may preach *Do you think ...*  
 440 And winnè gold and silver for I teach *for teaching*  
 That I will live in poverte wilfully? *poverty*  
 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  
 445 Nor makè baskettès, and live thereby.  
 Because I will not beggen idly,  
 I willè none of the apostles' counterfeit.<sup>1</sup>  
 I will have money, woolè, cheese and wheat,  
 All were it given of the poorest page *Even if given by*  
 450 Or of the poorest widow in a villàge,

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

*Even if*

*But he can tell a moral tale*

But hearken, lordings, in conclusion,  
 455 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,  
 460 A moral tale yet I you tellè can  
 Which I am wont to preachè for to win.<sup>1</sup>  
 Now hold your peace. My tale I will begin."

*Ladies & gentlemen*

**THE PARDONER'S TALE**

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

<p>In Flanders whilom was a company                  Of youngè folk that haunteden folly,                  465 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                  470 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 Lordè's body they to-tear;                  475 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,</p>	<p><i>once upon a time</i>  <i>persisted in</i>  <i>gambling / brothels</i>  <i>guitars</i>  <i>to excess</i>  <i>excess</i>  <i>tear apart</i>  <i>tore</i>  <i>dancing girls</i>  <i>slim / fruit sellers</i></p>
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<sup>1</sup> 461: "Which I am accustomed to preach to make money."

Singers with harpès, bawdès, waferers, *pimps, wafer sellers*  
 480 Which be the very devil's officers *Who are ... agents*  
 To kindle and blow the fire of lechery  
 That is annexèd 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.  
 485 Lo, how that drunken Lot unkindely *unnaturally*  
 Lay by his daughters two, unwittingly,  
 So drunk he was he n'istè what he wrought.<sup>1</sup> *didn't know / did*  
 Herod (whoso well the stories sought)<sup>2</sup>  
 When he of wine replete was at his feast, *full of wine*  
 490 Right at his ownè table he gave his hest *order*  
 To slay the Baptist John full guiltèless.  
 Seneca says a good word doubtèless. *Roman philosopher*  
 He says he can no differencè find  
 Betwixt a man that is out of his mind  
 495 And a man which that is drunkelew, *drunk*  
 But that woodness y-fallen in a shrew *Except t. madness / wretch*  
 Persévereth longer than does drunkenness.<sup>3</sup> *Lasts*

*Gluttony was the original sin in Eden*

O gluttony! full of cursedness.  
 O causè first of our confusion!<sup>4</sup>  
 500 O original of our damnation, *origin (in Eden).*

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<sup>1</sup> 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).

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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

<sup>4</sup> 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 dearè — shortly for to sayn —  
 A-bought was thilkè cursèd villainy.<sup>1</sup>  
 Corrupt was all this world for gluttony.  
 505 Adam, our father, and his wife also  
 From Paradise, to labor and to woe  
 Were driven for that vice, it is no dread. *no doubt*  
 For while that Adam fasted, as I read,  
 He was in Paradise. And when that he  
 510 Ate of that fruit defended on a tree, *forbidden*  
 Anon he was outcast to woe and pain.

*Exclamatio !*

O Gluttony! on thee well ought us 'plain.<sup>2</sup> *complain*  
 Oh, wist a man how many maladies *Oh, if a man knew*  
 Follow of excess and gluttonies,  
 515 He wouldè be the morè measuráble *moderate*  
 Of his diet, sitting at his table.<sup>3</sup> *meals*  
 Alas the shortè throat, the tender mouth  
 Maketh that east and west and north and south,  
 In earth, in air, in water, men to swink *to work*  
 520 To get a glutton dainty meat and drink. *food*  
 Of this matter, O Paul, well canst thou treat:<sup>4</sup> *St. Paul*  
 "Meat unto womb, and womb eke unto meat  
 Shall God destroyen both," as Paulus saith. *belly*  
 Alas, a foul thing is it, by my faith *I Cor. vi, 13.*  
 525 To say this word, and fouler is the deed  
 When man so drinketh of the white and red *(wines)*  
 That of his throat he maketh his privy *toilet*  
 Through thilkè cursèd superfluity. *this cursed excess*  
 The Apostle weeping says full piteously: *Phil iii, 18-19.*

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

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

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

<sup>4</sup> 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).

- 530 "There walken many of which you told have I *of whom*  
 (I say it now, weeping with piteous voice),  
 That they be enemies of Christè's cross,  
 Of which the end is death. Womb is their God." *Belly,*  
 O womb! O belly! O stinking cod! *bag*
- 535 Fulfilled of dung and of corruption.  
 At either end of thee foul is the sound.  
 How greatè labour and cost is thee to find! *to feed*  
 These cookès! How they stamp and strain and grind  
 And turnen substance into accident <sup>1</sup>
- 540 To fulfill all thy likerous talent. *gluttonous desire*  
 Out of the hardè bonès knocken they  
 The marrow, for they castè naught away  
 That may go through the gullet soft and sweet.  
 Of spicery, of leaf and bark and root
- 545 Shall be his sauce y-makèd by delight  
 To make him yet a newer appetite.  
 But certès 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  
 550 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*
- 555 And yet, God wot, Samson drank never no wine. *God knows*  
 Thou fallest as it were a stickèd swine. *stuck pig*  
 Thy tongue is lost, and all thine honest cure, *self respect*  
 For drunkenness is very sepulture *tomb*  
 Of mannè's wit, and his discretïon. *man's intelligence*

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

560 In whom that drink has domination  
 He can no counsel keep, it is no dread. *no doubt*  
 Now keep you from the white and from the red, *(wines)*  
 And namely from the white wine of Leap *(in Spain)*  
 That is to sell in Fish Street or in Cheap. *for sale in Cheapside*

565 This wine of Spain creepeth subtly  
 In other winès growing fastè by <sup>1</sup>  
 Of which there riseth such fumosity, *fumes*  
 That when a man has drunken draughtès three  
 And weeneth that he be at home in Cheap, *and thinks*

570 He is in Spain, right at the town of Leap,  
 Not at the Rochelle nor at Bordeaux town, *(French wine towns)*  
 And then will he say: `Samsoun! Samsoun!  
 But hearken, lordings, one word, I you pray  
 That all the sovereign actès, dare I say, *greatest*

575 Of victories in the Oldè Testament,  
 Through very God that is omnipotent, *true God*  
 Were done in abstinence and in prayer.  
 Looketh the Bible, and there you may it lere. *learn*

*Some brief examples from the classics and Scripture*

580 Look Attila, the greatè conqueroúr,  
 Died in his sleep with shame and dishonoúr  
 Bleeding at his nose in drunkenness.  
 A capitain should live in soberness. *a general*  
 And over all this aviseth you right well *consider*  
 What was commanded unto Lemuel

585 (Not Samuel, but Lemuel, say I.  
 Readeth the Bible, and find it expressly)  
 Of wine-giving to them that have justice.<sup>2</sup>  
 No more of this for it may well suffice.

*Gambling*

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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."

590	And now that I have spoke of gluttony, Now will I you defenden hazardry. Hazard is very mother of leasings And of deceit and cursèd forswearings, Blasphemy of Christ, manslaughter, and waste also Of chattel and of time; and furthermore	<i>forbid gambling</i> <i>Gambling / of lies</i> <i>perjuries</i>
595	It is reproof and contrary of honour For to be held a common hazarder. And ever the higher he is of estate The morè is he holden desolate. If that a princè uses hazardry,	<i>of goods</i> <i>gambler</i> <i>rank</i> <i>held in contempt</i> <i>gambling</i>
600	In allè governance and policy He is, as by common opiniõn, Y-held the less in reputatiõn.	

*Some examples from history*

605	Stilbon, that was a wise ambassador, Was sent to Corinth in full great honour From Lacedaemon, to make their álliance, And when he came, him happenèd par chance That all the greatest that were of that land Playing at the hazard he them found. For which, as soon as that it mightè be,	<i>From Sparta</i>  <i>gambling</i>
610	He stole him home again to his country And said: "There will I not lose my name, Nor will not take on me so great defame You for to ally unto no hazarders. Sendeth other wise ambassadors,	<i>gamblers</i>
615	For, by my truthè, me were lever die Than I you should to hazarders ally. For you that be so glorious in honours Shall not allyen you with hazarders As by my will, nor as by my treaty."	<i>I had rather</i> <i>gamblers</i>  <i>ally yourselves</i> <i>diplomacy</i>
620	This wise philosopher, thus saidè he. Look eke that to the King Demetrius The King of Parthia, as the book says us, <sup>1</sup> Sent him a pair of dice of gold in scorn,	<i>also</i>

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<sup>1</sup> 622: "The book" is John of Salisbury's *Polycraticus*, a medieval treatise on government.

For he had uséd hazard therebeforn  
 625 For which he held his glory or his renown  
 At no value or reputation.  
 Lords may finden other manner play *other kinds of*  
 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 reprovabè.<sup>1</sup>  
 The highè God forbade swearing at all.  
 Witness on Matthew. But in special *Matt. V: 33-34*  
 635 Of swearing says the holy Jeremy: *Jerem. IV: 2*  
 "Thou shalt swear sooth thine oathès and not lie,<sup>2</sup>  
 And swear in doom and eke in rightwiseness."  
 But idle swearing is a cursedness.  
 Behold and see, that in the firstè table  
 640 Of Highè Godè's hestès honourable *commandments*  
 How that the second hest of Him is this:  
 "Take not My name in idle or amiss." *in vain*  
 Lo, rather, he forbiddeth such swearing  
 Than homicide or many a curséd thing.<sup>3</sup>  
 645 I say that as by order thus it standeth.  
 This knoweth that his hestès understandeth<sup>4</sup> *that = he who*  
 How that the second hest of God is that. *commandment*  
 And furthermore, I will thee tell all plat, *very plainly*

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<sup>1</sup> 631-2: As with 471-2 and elsewhere above the original pronunciation was probably closer to the French.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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)."

That vengeance shall not parten from his house  
 650 That of his oaths is too outragèous.  
 "By Godè's precious heart and by His nails  
 And by the blood of Christ that is in Hailes, *Hales Abbey*  
 Seven is my chance, and thine is cinque and tray. *my throw / 5 & 3*  
 By Godè's armès, if thou falsely play,  
 655 This dagger shall throughout thine heartè go." <sup>1</sup>  
 This fruit comes of the bitchèd bonès two: *cursed dice*  
 Forswearing, irè, falseness, homicide. *Perjury, anger ...*  
 Now, for the love of Christ that for us died,  
 Leaveth your oathès, bothè great and small. *Leave off*

*Back to the story of the three gambling and swearing young drunks.  
 One of their comrades has died of the plague*

660 But, sirs, now will I tellè forth my tale.  
 These rioterès three, of which I tell,  
 Long erst ere primè rang of any bell <sup>2</sup>  
 Were set them in a tavern for to drink,  
 And as they sat, they heard a bellè clink  
 665 Before a corpse was carried to his grave  
 That one of them 'gan callen to his knave:  
 "Go bet," quod he "and askè readily *his servant boy*  
 What corpse is this that passes here forby, *Go at once / quickly*  
 And look that thou report his namè well." *in front*  
 670 "Sir," quod this boy, "it needeth never a deal. *there is no need*  
 It was me told ere you came here two hours.  
 He was, pardee, an old fellow of yours, *by God*  
 And suddenly he was y-slain tonight *last night*  
 Fordrunk as he sat on his bench upright. *blind drunk*  
 675 There came a privy thief men clepeth Death *stealthy thief called*  
 That in this country all the people slayeth  
 And with his spear he smote his heart in two  
 And went his way withouten wordès mo'. *more*  
 He has a thousand slain this pestilence, *(during) this plague*

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<sup>1</sup> 651-55: Typical profane threats of dicing gamblers. *Hailes*: an abbey in Gloucestershire, reputed to have some of Christ's blood in a vial.

<sup>2</sup> 662: "Long before any bell began to ring for prime" (a designated prayer hour, about 9 a.m.).

680 And, master, ere you come in his preséncé  
Methinketh that it were necessary  
For to beware of such an adversary.  
Be ready for to meet him evermore.  
Thus taughtè me my dame. I say no more." *mother*

685 "By Saintè Mary," said this taverner,  
"The child says sooth; for he has slain this year *truth*  
Hence over a mile within a great villáge  
Both man and woman, child and hind and page. *laborer & servant*  
I trow his habitation be there.<sup>1</sup>

690 To be adviséd great wisdom it were, *it would be*  
Ere that he did a man a dishonour." *Before*

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

"Yea? Godè's armès!" quod this rioter. *this brawler*  
"Is it such peril with him for to meet?  
I shall him seek by way and eke by street, *by lane & also*  
695 I make a vow, by Godè's dignè bones. *holy*  
Hearken, fellows. We three be allones. *all one, united*  
Let each of us hold up his hand to other  
And each of us become the others' brother,  
And we will slay this falsè traitor Death.

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

705 And up they start all drunken in this rage  
And forth they go towards that villáge  
Of which the taverner had spoke before,  
And many a grisly oath then have they swore,  
And Christè's blesséd body they to-rent. *they tore*

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

*They meet a mysterious old man*

When they had gone not fully half a mile

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<sup>1</sup> 687: "I guess his dwelling is there".

Right as they would have trodden o'er a stile, *over a set of steps*  
 An old man and a poorè with them met. *a poor old man*  
 This oldè man full meekèly them gret *greeted*  
 715 And saidè thus: "Now, lordès, God you see."<sup>1</sup> *God protect you*  
 The proudest of these rioterès three *brawlers*  
 Answered again: "What, churl, with sorry grace.  
 Why art thou all forwrappèd save thy face? *wrapped up*  
 Why livest thou so long in so great age?"  
 720 This old man 'gan to look in his viságe,  
 And saidè thus: "For I ne cannot find *Because I*  
 A man, though that I walkèd into Inde, *even if I w. to India*  
 Neither in city nor in no villáge  
 That wouldè change his youthè for mine age,  
 725 And therefore must I have mine agè still  
 As long time as it is Godè's will.

*He laments his inability to die*

Nor Death, alas, ne will not have my life.  
 Thus walk I like a restèless caitiff, *wretch*  
 And on the ground, which is my mothers's gate,  
 730 I knockè with my staff both early and late,  
 And sayè: `Levè Mother, let me in. *Dear*  
 Lo how I vanish, flesh and blood and skin.  
 Alas, when shall my bonès be at rest?  
 Mother with you would I change my chest  
 735 That in my chamber longè time hath be,  
 Yea, for a hairècloth to wrappè me.<sup>2</sup>  
 But yet to me she will not do that grace,  
 For which full pale and welkèd is my face. *wrinkled*

*He rebukes them for their lack of respect*

But, sirs, to you it is no courtesy

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<sup>1</sup> 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."

<sup>2</sup> 736: A haircloth was a penitential garment also used as a shroud.

740 To spoken to an old man villainy *discourtesy*  
 But he trespass in word or else in deed. *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.<sup>1</sup> Wherefore I give you redde: *stand / advice*  
 745 Ne do unto an old man no harm now  
 No morè than that you would men did to you  
 In agè, if that you so long abide. *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*

750 "Nay, oldè churl, by God thou shalt not so,"  
 Said this other hazarder anon.  
 "Thou partest not so lightly, by Saint John.  
 Thou spoke right now of thilkè traitor Death *of this same*  
 That in this country all our friendès slayeth.  
 755 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,  
 For soothly, thou art one of his assent *truly*  
 To slay us youngè folk, thou falsè thief."  
 760 "Now, sirs," quod he, "if that you be so lief *so eager*  
 To findè 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.  
 765 See you that oak? Right there you shall him find.  
 God savè you, that bought again mankind,  
 And you amend."<sup>2</sup> Thus said this oldè man. *improve you*

*In search of Death the young men find a pleasant surprise*

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

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

<sup>2</sup> 766-7: "May God, who redeemed mankind, save you and improve you."

770 Of florins fine of gold y-coinèd round <sup>1</sup> *coins*  
 Well nigh an eightè bushels, as them thought. *nearly / it seemed to them*  
 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  
 775 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. *My wisdom / joke*  
 This treasure has Fortune unto us given  
 780 In mirth and jollity our life to liven.  
 And lightly as it comes, so will we spend.  
 Hey, Godè's precious dignity! Who wend *Who (would have) thought?*  
 Today that we should have so fair a grace? *good fortune*

*They plan to move their find secretly*

But might this gold be carried from this place  
 785 Home to mine house — or elsè unto yours,  
 For well you wot that all this gold is ours — *you know*  
 Then werè we in high felicity. *happiness*  
 But truly, by day it may not be.  
 Men wouldè say that we were thievès strong  
 790 And for our ownè treasure do us hung. *have us hanged*  
 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 *I advise / lots*  
 Be drawn, and let's see where the cut will fall, *lot*  
 795 And he that has the cut, with heartè blithe *light heart*  
 Shall runnè to the town and that full swithe, *quickly*  
 And bring us bread and wine full privily, *secretly*  
 And two of us shall keepen subtly *discreetly*  
 This treasure well, and if he will not tarry,  
 800 When it is night, we will this treasure carry  
 By one assent where as us thinketh best." *By agreement*

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<sup>1</sup> 770: "Round, newly minted florins (coins) of refined gold."

That one of them the cut brought in his fist *lots*  
 And bade them draw and look where it would fall,  
 And it fell on the youngest of them all,  
 805 And forth toward the town he went anon.

*The two guardians of the find plot against the absent one*

And all so soonè as that he was gone  
 That one of them spoke thus unto the other:  
 "Thou knowest well thou art my swornè brother.  
 Thy profit will I tell to thee anon.  
 810 Thou wost well that our fellow is a-gone, *Thou knowest*  
 And here is gold and that full great plenty,  
 That shall departed be among us three. *divided*  
 But, natheless, if I can shape it so  
 That it departed were among us two,  
 815 Had I not done a friendè's turn to thee?"  
 That other answered: "I n'ot how that may be. *I do not know*  
 He wot how that the gold is with us tway. *He knows / us two*  
 What shall we do? What shall we to him say?"  
 "Shall it be counsel?" said the firstè shrew, *secret / rascal*  
 820 "And I shall tellen thee— in wordès few —  
 What we shall do and bring it well about."  
 "I grantè," quod that other, "out of doubt *I agree certainly*  
 That by my troth I will thee not bewray." *betray*

*The plan: treachery during a wrestling bout*

"Now," quod the first, "thou wost well we be tway *you know / two*  
 825 And two of us shall stronger be than one.  
 Look when that he is set, thou right anon <sup>1</sup>  
 Arise, as though thou wouldest with him play, *wrestle*  
 And I shall rive him through the sidès tway, *stab*  
 While that thou strugglest with him as in game,  
 830 And with thy dagger look thou do the same,  
 And then shall all this gold departed be, *divided*  
 My dearè friend, betwixtè thee and me.  
 Then may we both our lustès all fulfill *desires*

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<sup>1</sup> 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 ownè will."  
 835 And thus accorded been these shrewès tway *two scoundrels*  
 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 <sup>1</sup>  
 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, *the Devil*  
 845 Put in his thought that he should poison buy  
 With which he mightè slay his fellows tway.  
 For why? The Fiend found him in such living *lifestyle*  
 That he had leavè him to sorrow bring.  
 For this was utterly his full intent  
 850 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 *druggist*  
 And prayèd him that he him wouldè sell  
 Some poison, that he might his rattès quell. *kill his rats*  
 855 And eke there was a polecat in his haw *also / yard*  
 That, as he said, his capons had y-slaw, *killed his chickens*  
 And fain he wouldè wreak him, if he might *And gladly get revenge*  
 On vermin that destroyèd him by night. *On pests*  
 The 'pothecary answered: "And thou shalt have *The druggist*  
 860 A thing that, all so God my soulè save, *all ... save = I swear*  
 In all this world there is no creäture  
 That ate or drunk has of this confiture *concoction*  
 Not but the montance of a corn of wheat *the size of a grain*  
 That he ne shall his life anon forlete.<sup>2</sup> *promptly lose*

---

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

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

865 Yea, starve he shall, and that in lessè while *shall die*  
 Than thou wilt go a pace not but a mile, *a distance of only*  
 The poison is so strong and violent."

*He borrows bottles and buys wine*

This cursèd man has in his hand y-hent *taken*  
 This poison in a box; and sith he ran *and then*  
 870 Into the nextè 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 *intended to work*  
 875 In carrying off the gold out of that place.  
 And when this rioter (With sorry grace!) *Damn him (?)*  
 Had filled with wine his greatè bottles three,  
 To his fellows again repaireth he. *returns*

*The denouement*

What needeth it to sermon of it more? <sup>1</sup>  
 880 For right as they had cast his death before *had planned*  
 Right so they have him slain and that anon. *promptly*  
 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."  
 885 And with that word it happened him "par cas" *by chance*  
 To take the bottle where the poison was,  
 And drank, and gave his fellow drink also,  
 For which anon they starven bothè two. *both died*  
 But certès I suppose that Avicen *certainly / Avicenna*  
 890 Wrote never in no Canon nor in no fen <sup>2</sup>  
 More wonder signès of empoisoning *symptoms*

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minutes any creature that ingests an amount no bigger than a grain of wheat. *starve* in l.865 means simply to die, not here of hunger.

<sup>1</sup> 879: "Why make a long story of it?"

<sup>2</sup> 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 homicidès 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 allè 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, mankindè! How may it betide, *How is it?*  
 That to thy Créator which that thee wrought *who made you*  
 And with His precious heartè's blood thee bought,  
 Thou art so false, and so unkind, alas?  
 Now, good men, God forgive you your trespass, *sin*  
 905 And ware you from the sin of avarice. *beware of*  
 My holy pardon may you all warice, *save*  
 So that you offer nobles or sterlings<sup>1</sup> *gold or silver*  
 Or elsè silver brooches, spoonès, rings  
 Boweth your head under this holy bull.<sup>2</sup>  
 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. *go*  
 I you assoilè by mine highè power, *absolve*  
 You that will offer, as clean and eke as clear *and also*  
 915 As you were born.<sup>3</sup>

*The Pardoner once more directly addresses his fellow pilgrims*

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

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<sup>1</sup> 907: "Provided you make an offering of gold or silver coins."

<sup>2</sup> 909: "Bull" (Lat. *bullā*, 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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 *bag*  
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 adown <sup>1</sup>  
And meekely receiveth my pardon,  
Or elsè taketh pardon as you wend *travel*  
All new and fresh at every milè's end,  
So that you offer always new and new *Provided / afresh*  
930 Nobles or pence which that be good and true. *Gold coins or pennies*

*He assures the pilgrims they are lucky to have him*

It is an honour to ever each that is here *to everyone*  
That you may have a suffisant pardoner *competent*  
T'assoilé you in country as you ride, *To absolve*  
For áventurès which that may betide. *accidents*  
935 Peráventure, there may fall one or two *Perhaps*  
Down off his horse, and break his neck in two.  
Look which a surety it is to you all <sup>2</sup>  
That I am in your fellowship y-fall  
That may assoil you, bothè more and less, *absolve*  
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 *I suggest*  
For he is most envelopèd in sin.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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."

- Come forth, Sir Host, and offer first anon  
 And thou shalt kiss the relics every one,  
 945 Yea, for a groat. Unbuckle anon thy purse." *groat=4 pennies*  
 "Nay, nay," quod he. "Then have I Christè's curse.  
 Let be," quod he, "it shall not be, so theeche. *I promise you*  
 Thou wouldest make me kiss thine oldè breech, *underpants*  
 And swear it were a relic of a saint,  
 950 Though it were with thy fundament depaint. *stained by y. anus*  
 But by that cross which that St. Helen found,  
 I wish I had thy collions in my hand *testicles*  
 Instead of relics or of sanctuary. *or relic box*  
 Let cut them off; I will thee help them carry. *Have them cut off*  
 955 They shall be shrinèd in a hog's turd."<sup>1</sup>

*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. *So angry*  
 "Now," quod our Host, "I will no longer play *joke*  
 With thee, nor with no other angry man."

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

- 960 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,  
 965 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*

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<sup>1</sup> 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.