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Chaucer Essay #2: The role of the Old Man in “The Pardoner’s Tale”

In his *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer presents the Pardoner as one of his most conflicted characters. An unapologetically corrupt clergyman, the Pardoner tells a tale preaching the dangers of avarice when he is guilty of being greedy. Instead of ministering to those who seek God, he amasses large sums of money by swindling rich and poor alike. The Pardoner seems to be preoccupied with enjoying a life of leisure, but he is really desperately and vainly trying to substitute his worldly possessions for the grace that he cannot access, and his obsession with material wealth only serves to underscore his deep despair at ever understanding the spiritual context for his life.<sup>1</sup> The Pardoner does not explicitly express this despair, but instead reveals it through the telling of his tale. Echoing the Pardoner’s despair is the character of the Old Man in the tale he tells to the pilgrims. Even though the Old Man yearns for death, the way in which he lives his life in search of death is an expression of his focus on this world and not the next. Like the Pardoner, the Old Man mistakenly believes substituting the physical for the spiritual can fulfill him, and so he too focuses only on the earthly, confusing mere physical death for the peace of eternal life in heaven. In “The Pardoner’s Tale,” the conflicting desires for the spiritual and the worldly in the character of the Old Man reflect the same dualities in the character of the Pardoner, and the Old Man serves as the vehicle through which the Pardoner reveals his true self to the rest of the pilgrims. Just as the Pardoner is obsessed with the worldly, so is the Old Man, and that obsession reveals the Old Man’s—and through him, the Pardoner’s—despair at ever attaining a relationship with God.

Like the Pardoner, the Old Man is associated with all things physical. The Pardoner’s materialism is his connection to the worldly. The Old Man is not as outwardly greedy as the

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<sup>1</sup> Adelman, Janet. Lecture 9/28/05 on “The Pardoner’s Tale.”

Pardoner, but he ties himself physically to the earth because he considers the earth his mother. He calls “the ground...my modres gate” (416). Through his mother the earth, the Old Man can be seen as the bodily “first man Adam” from St. Paul and the Corinthians (First Corinthians: 15: 45).<sup>2</sup> In First Corinthians, St. Paul refers to a first Adam who is “made a living soul...of the earth, earthy” (First Corinthians: 15: 45-47). This first Adam is then juxtaposed with a spiritual “second Adam” who is “made a quickening spirit...the Lord from heaven” (First Corinthians: 15: 45-47). The second Adam refers to Jesus Christ who descends from heaven while the first Adam refers to Adam of Eden and to his line of men who are born to the earth (in the same way that the Old Man is).

Like the first Adam, the Old Man has a counterpart in the Boy, who is very loosely constructed as the second Adam. The pair is linked through their roles in the rioters' journey and through their references to a mother figure. Although both the Old Man and the Boy serve as guideposts along the quest for Death of the rioters, their words stand in opposition to one another. When asked where Death is, the Old Man points the rioters “up the croked way...under...that ook [tree],” up to a earthly, materialistic—and therefore false—victory (448-52). The oak tree is traditional symbol of victory in Greek mythology, and under it, the rioters expect to find Death and conquer him. The rioters indeed find Death, as well as a material treasure in the pile of gold, but in finding them the rioters also find their own demise. Similarly, the Boy gives the rioters crucial information about Death, but unlike the Old Man, his words lack the duplicity of the Old Man's. He warns the three men of Death and tries to dissuade them from seeking him in the first place. The Boy tells the truth about Death to the rioters: how “in this contree all the peple [he] sleeth...with his spere [that] smoot his herte atwo” (363-4). Then he warns them, “be redy for to mete him everemore” (370). Even though the rioters do not listen, beneath these lines is an implicit dissuasion; the Boy is telling the rioters how dangerous and ever-present Death, and that because of this they should not seek him. In addition, both the Boy and the Old Man mention mother figures. The Old Man's mother

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<sup>2</sup> Adelman, Janet. Office Hours 10/6/05.

is the earth, only physical, unable to offer solace or wisdom. When he begs her to “leet me in,” she refuses him, denying him the comfort of death (418). The Boy’s mother is spoken of only once, when he reveals that his mother taught him to beware of death; however, she is endowed with a certain wisdom and security because of her advice. The heightened contrast between the Boy and the Old Man set them up as the contrasted pair of Adams from First Corinthians: 15, with the Old Man occupying the position of the first Adam, the earthly man who belongs in the domain of the physical.

In part because of his association with the earth, the Old Man seeks redemptive grace from the physicality of the earth instead of from the spirituality of heaven. There is a fundamental confusion in the Old Man’s faith that mirrors the Pardoner’s substitution of the material for the spiritual. The substitution the Old Man makes is in locating the source of grace in the physical instead of the spiritual. Although the Old Man appears devout, quoting from Scripture and blessing the rioters, when he asks for grace he asks it not of his heavenly Father but of his earthly mother. He tells the rioters that he wishes to die, but that his mother “wol not do that grace” (424). In essence, he is asking her for salvation, something that according to Christian doctrine is not hers but God’s to give. The three rioters, when they first meet him, refer to the Old Man as a “carl...with sory grace” (404). In this context, “sory grace” is an example of the rioters’ curse, but it can also be interpreted as a reference to the Old Man’s misunderstanding of salvation and his distance from God. The Old Man views his life in very corporeal terms. He sees himself in terms that are wholly physical, as “flesh, and blood, and skin...and a face...which is ful pal and welked” (419-425) and calls himself a “resteles caityf,” as if he is physically bound to life. The Old Man therefore seeks death not as access into an eternal afterlife in heaven, but as a merely physical rest. He laments life in purely physical terms, crying, “Allas! whan shul my bomes been at reste?” and refers to death in physical terms as well, calling it a chance to “chaunge my cheste...for an heyre clout to wrappe me” (420-3). Nothing beyond those earthly changes is mentioned. He sees death not reunion with his Father’s kingdom, but as reentry into his mother’s womb. The Old Man pleads for death, “knokk[ing] with

[his] staf bothe erly and late [on his] modres gate” (417-8). He cries to her, “Leve moder, leet me in!” (419). Again, there is no mention of God in any of this. That God does not factor into the Old Man’s view of his life or in his wish for death is indication of his alienation from the father. Furthermore, his hopelessness when it comes to being accepted by death—he says that “Deeth...ne wol nat han my lyf” (415)—is another indication of his distance from God. For if he did believe in God and even if he could accept grace from God, if the Old Man cannot physically die, how can he go on to an afterlife in heaven? Yet the Old Man himself is in denial of this. Outwardly, he believes in God. He quotes repeatedly from the Bible, and several times wishes the rioters, “God save yow” (453). He claims to submit to God’s plan, telling the rioters that he will resign himself to his fate for “as longe time as it is Goddes will” (413) and that he must leave them to “go thider as I have to go” (436). The Pardoner is much the same, as a clergyman without faith, and the denials of estrangement as well as the estrangement themselves are both characteristics that the Old Man and the Pardoner share.

Because they despair and because they are confused, both Pardoner and Old Man commodify salvation, expressing it in material terms. The most obvious examples of the Pardoner putting a monetary value on grace is his trade in selling relics and pardons in exchange for salvation, as well as his own practice of spending his time and money on this life instead the next; however, he puts God in the same position. The Pardoner, as he preaches near the end of his tale, describes God as one who “with his precious herte-blood thee boghte” (589). The Old Man uses a similar phrase when he bids the rioters farewell, saying to them, “God save yow, that boghte agayn mankinde” (453). Also, in begging grace from his mother, the Old Man makes grace a worldly good. In fact, the salvation he seeks is not spiritual but material; the Old Man seeks death so that he can be saved from the physical weariness of life and so that his “bones...[shul]...been at reste” (420). In addition, the salvation that the Old Man offers to the rioters (which in the end proves to be false) is the commodity gold. In the Christian religion, salvation can be regarded as man’s triumph over death by accepting God’s grace. The rioters too seek to triumph over death, although in literal terms by physically killing death. The

Old Man does not point the rioters in a direction that they are not already headed toward, but he does show them the way to what they think is salvation, to a pile of gold coins. In the same way that the Pardoner sells grace to the desperate in order to buy himself “salvation” from poverty, the “salvation” that Old Man points the rioters toward as well as the “salvation” that he seeks for himself are both material commodities.

Although the Pardoner is very forthcoming about himself in what he reveals to the pilgrims directly in the prologue and in his tale, it is what he reveals about himself through the character of the Old Man that is the most telling. It is through his tale and his prologue that the Pardoner admits to his greed, but it is through the character of the Old Man that the Pardoner admits, however indirectly, to his religious despair. Both the Old Man and the Pardoner are associated with materialism as opposed to spirituality. Through a comparison with the earthly first man Adam of St. Paul’s speech to the Corinthians, the Old Man is shown to be purely worldly and of this lifetime. Yet simply being created of this world is not reason enough for the Old Man—or the Pardoner—to despair of being able to reach God. St. Paul promises that “we shall be changed...and the mortal shall have put on immortality” (1 Corinthians: 15: 53-55). It is both of their inability to look beyond things created of this world that drives the Old Man’s and the Pardoner’s hopelessness. The Old Man’s obsession with seeking physical death reflects the Pardoner’s obsession with procuring a material livelihood. Similarly, the Old Man’s despair at ever finding death also reflects the Pardoner’s despair at ever finding spiritual redemption. Their materialism and their despair drive them both to view salvation and grace not as spiritual treasures to be worked toward, but as physical treasures that can be bought. Yet despite the parallels drawn, one important difference remains—that the Old Man exists within the world of *The Canterbury Tales* only in the Pardoner’s imagination, as the portion of the Pardoner’s life that troubles him most, as a thought that the Pardoner can barely confront directly by himself, let alone directly before the other pilgrims. As such, the Old Man becomes yet another substitution that the Pardoner makes in the course of his spiritual confusion; however, unlike the others, this one is rooted in truth, with the Old Man standing in as a mirror reflecting all of the religious despair in his heart that the Pardoner cannot quite openly acknowledge.