

# *The Pardoner's Tale*

## **What to read in your textbook:**

- Description of the Pardoner by the narrator in the General Prologue: p. 140-141
- Part of the Pardoner's Prologue: p. 151-152
- The Pardoner's Tale: P. 152-159

## **Notes on The Pardoner himself:**

- He is greedy and preaches "for want of gain" – not to better anyone's life or save anyone's soul, but rather just to make money.
- Ironically, he preaches about the dangers of greed – he says, however, that BECAUSE he is so greedy he is an expert and therefore highly qualified to preach about it.
- He carries religious RELICS with him that people pay to see:
  - A pillowcase that he claims is Mary's veil, pigs' bones that he claims are those of saints, etc.
  - He says that if people are uneducated and ignorant enough to believe him, it's their own fault (not his) for falling for it. He uses the words "yokel" and "up-country", and jokes about making "monkeys" of them.
- Physical appearance:
  - Descriptions of his hair:
    - "Yellow as wax", "like a hank of flax", "rat tails", "his shoulders overspread" (blonde, stringy, long)
  - He is sexually ambiguous:
    - "His chin no beard had harbored, nor would harbor/smoothen than any chin was left by barber" – He had no facial hair.
    - "He has the same small voice a goat has got." His voice is shrill and high-pitched.
    - He has "bulging eye-balls, like a hare."
  - Remember, in the Middle Ages people believed that your physical appearance was a direct reflection of your inner character!
- Associations:
  - He travels along with the Summoner (the one who is so gross he scares children!); they are described as "birds of the same feather".
- He's good at his job; he can make more money in one day than the Parson makes in a whole month (keep in mind, the Parson is the only church figure Chaucer describes in a positive light).

## Notes on his Tale:

- This is an EXEMPLUM: a story that illustrates a moral. Exemplums often focus on a particular behavior (i.e. one of the seven deadly sins) and demonstrates why it is undesirable. Many children's stories are exemplums.
- An exemplum is a more specific form of an ALLEGORY: a story that represents an abstract concept.
- Avarice = greed
- Three riotous young men go out in search of Death, who has been taking their friends and family
- Cultural context: The Black Plague
- They intend to kill Death when they find him.
  - (Keep in mind, they are at the tavern before breakfast when they decide to do this – so if it doesn't sound like the most realistic goal, this may explain why.)
  - This is part of what is satirized in the tale: the fact that humans often arrogantly think they can conquer that which cannot be conquered.
- The young men find an extremely old man and rudely ask him why he isn't dead.
  - He replies that he desires Death, but can't get Death to take him.
  - He advises the young men to look under an oak tree
  - They go to the tree, and find a large amount of gold.
  - Each plots independently to get all of the gold for himself
  - At the end, all three young men are dead – killed by their own greed.
    - They did indeed find Death, but rather than killing Death, Death killed them.
- Ironically, when the Pardoner concludes his tale he asks the other pilgrims to pay him.