

# “Allas, the shorte throte, the tendre mouth”: the sins of the mouth in *The Canterbury Tales*

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## 1. “In confusioun of hem that so savouren erthely thynges”

The subject of this work is the capital vice gluttony and its manifold and complex presence in two of Chaucer’s tales, *The Pardoner’s Tale* and *The Parson’s Tale*.<sup>1</sup> The following is one of the many interpretations possible and, undoubtedly, cannot and does not claim to be exhaustive. Precisely because the medieval debate on this vice – and the sins derived therefrom – is rich and abundant,<sup>2</sup> I have attempted to focus on the wider social and cultural aspects of the two tales where the various levels of significance that they express are set, as well as on the peculiar linguistic-literary characteristics used to express these concepts. In effect, it is in such a wider perspective that looks beyond the pure textual aspects that we can construe the many varieties of relationships and exchanges between fact and fiction, or, more to the point, between historical fact and literary fact in a world and in an era where fact

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<sup>1</sup> All references to the two tales and relative quotations have been taken from Benson (ed.) (1988). From now on, they will be referred to as Pd (*Pardoner’s Tale*) and Ps (*Parson’s Tale*), followed by the indication of the line referred to; similarly, GP stands for Chaucer’s *General Prologue*. The quotation in the title is taken from Pd 517, and the subtitles of the sections 1 and 2 from Ps 820 and Ps 818 respectively.

<sup>2</sup> It would seem appropriate at this point to quote a compulsory text for the study of this subject, that is Bloomfield (1952); also significant are two collections of essays: Newhauser (ed.) (2005) and (2007). Burger (2003) and Minnis (2008) have also proved of special interest to this work.

and fiction intersect, intertwine and mirror each other until they merge together. A kind of play on roles is thus created, where words and characters move around expressing thoughts, doubts, desires, passions, anxieties and limits of their human nature.

Both tales are based on a tradition derived from the production of religious writings for didactic purposes aimed at both the clergyman and the layman. This tradition, which pervaded throughout the Middle Ages, and not only in England, was revived and intensified at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century:

After the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 made private confession an annual requirement for all Christians, discussions of the sacrament of confession developed a truth technology focused not only in general terms on the care of the self, but also more specifically on the care of the laity. Standardization of the sacrament in the century or so after the council, but most fully in the series of penitential manuals for confessors (like the *Parson's Tale*) that flourished up to the Reformation in England and other Protestant countries and after in those countries that remained Roman Catholic. [...] confession achieves its status as dominant medieval truth technology precisely because of its own performative nature and the variety and complexity of material conditions by which the sacrament is made “universally” meaningful (Burger 2003: 191-192).

During this period, the Church began to define and establish its doctrine, urging evangelisation and the divulging of important foundations of theology, thus promoting the proliferation and dissemination of collections of sermons and homilies for preaching, as well as treatises and manuals for confessors. The foundations of Christianity are systematically listed and discussed in these works, and of these the seven cardinal vices<sup>3</sup> have pride of place. The

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<sup>3</sup> It is necessary at this point to briefly introduce the conceptual reality to which the (seven) capital or cardinal vices refer – or originally referred to – with respect to the multiple and multiform concrete realities represented by the more numerous deadly sins, with which, especially after the 4<sup>th</sup> Lateran Council of 1215, the capital / cardinal vices overlapped and got confused with both on the conceptual level (more strictly on a practical and popular level, not the theological one) and the linguistic level. To this end, it is interesting to quote the *incipit* of the third section of the *Parson's Tale*, entitled “Sequitur de septem peccatis mortalibus et eorum dependenciis, circumstanciis, et speciebus”. This *incipit* illustrates, on the conceptual level, the need for a distinction between the two macro-realities, despite



extensive use of vices by preachers and confessors made them extremely popular in the layman’s imagination. Vices certainly came to occupy a greater space than that accorded by theology. And so it is not by chance that literature exploited these subjects, contributing in turn, to sanction their notoriety (see Bloomfield 1952: 91-93).

From this point of view, Chaucer does no more than borrow and re-propose some highly debated themes of medieval society. His originality lies in his sensitivity in the exploitation of the language used to express common knowledge and is pursued within genres that are also coded by tradition. The contents, and the forms needed to express them, are not separable; both contribute – or should contribute – to the expression of the meaning:

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the fact that at the lexical level there is an overlapping and intersection between ‘vices’ / ‘sins’ and ‘cardinal’ / ‘capital’ / ‘deadly’:

Now is it bihovely thyng to telle whiche been the sevene deadly synnes, this is to seyn, chieftaynes of synnes. Alle they renne in o lees, but in diverse maneres. Now been they cleped chieftaynes, for as mucche as they been chief and spryng of alle othere synnes. / Of the roote of these sevene synnes, thanne is Pride the general roote of alle harmes. For of this roote spryngen certein braunches, as Ire, Envye, Accidie or Slewthe, Avarice or Coveitise (to commune understondynge), Glotonye, and Lecherye. / And everich of these chief synnes hath his braunches and his twigges, as shal be declared in hire chapitres folwyng.” (Ps 387-389).

“[T]he sevene deadly synnes” which the Parson mentions are, in actual fact, the seven ‘capital / cardinal vices’. In effect, the equivalent is immediately given in order to make it clear which concept is referred to, i.e. “chieftaynes of synnes”. They are therefore seven tendencies or inclinations, sources of numerous concrete manifestations of deviant behaviour (i.e., proper sins): “everich of these chief synnes hath his braunches and his twigges”. The ‘vices’ (i.e. the disposition, inclination to sin / sins) are called ‘capital’ or ‘cardinal’ because each one of these constitutes a source that may lead to different ‘deadly sins’ – those sins that lead directly to damnation –, and also to ‘venial sins’ which are less serious but still faults to be redeemed. They are ‘capital’ or ‘cardinal’ because they constitute a node and “spryng” for various possible ramifications: “braunches” and “twigges”. This ‘confusion’ (between capital / cardinal vices on the one side, and deadly sins on the other) arose following the Council, with the profusion of the works of divulgence – i.e., the manuals for confessors and penitents – that encourage the exemplification of the cardinal vices into long lists of sins – deadly or venial – helping to approach and then merge, in a certain sense, ‘theory’ and ‘practice’.

The categories of medieval literature, [...] although they have not been completely listed and defined, refer to primarily formal characteristics: the debate, the dream vision, the letter, the play, the short lyric, the complaint, the epic, the romance, and many more. [...] the medieval categories do not lend themselves so much to mixing unless the work is of a special kind, the frame story with many stories incorporated, like the *Canterbury Tales*, [...]. Even here the genres do not mix: they are merely placed together in a fictional container, so to speak, and this sort of organization itself becomes a genre in its own right. [...] the included forms bring with them all the connotations of their form [...]. But Chaucer does not need to spell out these connotations. Because literary genres are classified by their formal properties, and because traditional forms have traditional associations, his employment of these genres gives immediate effect to his intended meaning without his explicit intervention (Bolton 1993: 20).

*The Pardoner's Tale*, which narrates the adventures of three youths addicted to the follies of earthly pleasures, may be considered a sermon from the point of view of both structure and rhetoric / style. On the structure level, the announcement of the theme (usually a quotation from the Bible that is systematically recalled) is followed by an explanation, which in turn is followed by an *exemplum* and the summary; in other words,

those elements were: (1) theme, (2) protheme, (3) the introduction to the theme, (4) the division of the theme, (5) the subdivision, and (6) the discussion. According to the treatise writers, these elements were to be developed systematically so that each element would rise naturally out of the preceding one (Merix 1983: 236).

According to Merix, this sequence is fully complied with in the *Pardoner's Tale*.<sup>4</sup> On the rhetoric-stylistic plane, it can be considered a

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<sup>4</sup> Merix (1983: 239-240) states that "A breakdown of the *Pardoner's Tale* clearly reveals structural parts quite similar to those posited by Basevorn and Waleys in their treatises. [...]":

333-334 *Theme*.

335-462 *Protheme*: Prologue. The Pardoner's Confession.

463-482 *Introduction to the theme*. Introduction to the Flanders tavern scene.

483-660 *Division, subdivision and discussion of the theme*.

661-894 *The major exemplum*: the rioters' search for death.

895-915 *Recapitulation and 'application'*: repeats the sins and asks that "God forgeve yow youre trespas."



sermon for its use of formal embellishments, digressions, expansions, repetitions, examples taken from the Scriptures or from the Church Fathers, as well as for the dramatization of the exposition: the interest of the preacher, as that of the poet, is to expand and give space to given ideas and make them more effective for his audience (see Gallick 1975: 458) in the most appropriate form to the theme being treated.

Such techniques were well-known and widespread in that period both to those who used them such as preachers, compilers of anthologies and poets, and to the medieval audience that had to ‘accept’ being led towards the “good life”.<sup>5</sup> The Pardoner is skilful in his use of words which he habitually exploits to obtain the money necessary to satisfy his appetite for worldly goods, in contrast with what he preaches to the faithful: “moneie, wolle, chese, and whete, [...] licour of the vyne [...] and [...] a joly wenche” (Pd 448, 452-453). Because form and content refer to each other in the Middle Ages (see Bolton 1993: 20), the deviance of the Pardoner is announced and anticipated in his external appearance: his bright eyes are symptom of a gluttonous, debauched, drunken man; his long hair, loose over his shoulders, his high-pitched voice like that of a goat’s, and his smooth, hairless face associate him with lust.<sup>6</sup> Even though

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The subdivisions are as follows:

483-504 *Drunkenness*

505-588 *Gluttony*

589-628 *Gambling*

629-659 *Swearing*

<sup>5</sup> Gallick (1975: 458-459): “The personality of the preacher may be absent from many written sermons, but their subject was given considerable attention in the *artes praedicandi* and sermon literature of the Middle Ages. In many cases the personal qualities of the preacher were so important that they took precedence over such formal matters as the duties of the priest or the ways to compose and deliver sermons. [...] The medieval preacher was a teacher or instructor whose purpose was to persuade his congregation with evidence and eloquence that they should lead a good life.”

<sup>6</sup> Burger (2003: 128-129) maintains that “In such a scenario, obviously, neither gender, nor sex, nor sexuality can be securely founded on or fixed by a biological body, nor are sex and sexuality the crucial axes of difference in determining identity that they are in modern society. Instead, the body registers the shifting variables of a socially defined set of distinctions around masculinity and femininity that determine successful identification and care of the self. Thus, the process of identification that happens in modern discursive regimes along parallel essentializing axes of sex (male / female), sexuality (homo / hetero), and race (white / black), might more likely take



he narrates a ‘moral’ tale (that nonetheless ends with revenge), the contrast between what he says, his appearance and his behaviour is evident. The medieval debate on the truthfulness, validity and effectiveness of the words proffered by a ‘bad minister’ is particularly complex. Anyway, the Pardoner himself states that “For certes, many a predicacioun / Comth ofte tyme of yvel entencioun” (Pd 407-408). Therefore, it is a question of establishing whether the words of a dissolute preacher – who nevertheless is considered “in chirche a noble ecclesiaste” (GP 708) – may be used as tool for salvation for those who listen to him (and who may be unaware of whom they have in front of them). According to Minnis (2008: 41 ff.), who quotes the views of the Carmelite monk Gerard of Bologna, the bad preacher should remain silent since it is extremely improper for a minister of God not to practice what he preaches. However, if the audience is not aware of his sins and is willing to listen to him, then “it is better, or at least less evil, to preach than to be silent” (Minnis 2008: 41), since in any case the iniquitous preacher is only a tool that spreads the word of God (and not his own), despite the fact that the word is used in an outrageous way. If the sin is known and the audience is not willing to listen, then again, it would be better for the preacher to remain silent. If, instead, the sin is known and the audience is willing to listen all the same, it is difficult to establish what is best to do:

The obvious solution, of course, is that the sinner in question should renounce his evil life and thus preach in the appropriate manner. If this is not done, there is no obvious solution. [...] Distinctions are drawn between preaching *ex officio* and preaching in special circumstances, and between sins which are public knowledge and those which are secret. The sinner who, not required to preach by virtue of office, actually does so out of devotion or owing to the wish of another, does not sin by preaching, providing that his sinful state is

place in medieval practice along the axis of gender (masculine / feminine). Essentialized gender difference provides the stabilizing foundation by which medieval dominant culture regulates ‘the natural’. In doing so, the suppressed / oppressed category of the feminine inscribes and identifies a greater variety of othered bodies – women’s, heretics’, Jews’, Saracens’, effeminates’, sodomites’ – than is the case in modern Western regimes of representation. [...] Such a model of ‘the natural’ presupposes for the male or female body, or by analogy the sexualized textual body, a structuring gendered frame that either authorizes its inherent truthfulness as ‘the natural’ or condemns its lack as perversity.”



concealed. If, however, his sin is manifest, then, irrespective of whether he is preaching *ex officio* or not, he sins mortally on account of the scandal he creates (Minnis 2008: 42).

Therefore, a man like the Chaucerian Pardoner would do well to keep silent, since the sole intention of his preaching is deceit: “For myn entente is nat but for to wynne. / And nothyng for correccioun of synne” (Pd 403-404). In the case of the Pardoner, the *ars praedicandi* is only “feyned flaterye” (GP 705) to “wel affile his tonge / To wynne silver, as he ful wel koude” (GP 712-713). With his voice, that reverberates like a bell while he stretches from the pulpit, he has to confound his audience to persuade them to buy the pardon he is selling.<sup>7</sup> His words are nothing other than a confirmation of this:

[...] in chirches whan I preche,  
I peyne me to han an hauteyn speche,  
And ryngge it out as round as gooth a belle, (Pd 329-331)

And after that thanne telle I forth my tales; (Pd 341)

And for to stire hem to devocioun. (Pd 346)

Thanne peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke,  
And est and west upon the peple I bekke,  
As doth a dowve<sup>8</sup> sittynge on a berne. (Pd 395-397)

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<sup>7</sup> Minnis (2008: 74, 90-91) explains that “An indulgence may be understood as the remission – or, better, the payment by others – of a sinner’s debt of punishment (*poena*) for sins already forgiven through the sacrament of penance, wherein moral guilt (*culpa*) was removed. An indulgence, then, was concerned solely with the satisfaction due for the requisite penitential punishment. [...] absolving in the tribunal of penance is a greater thing than absolving by means of indulgences, which release only from *poena*, not from *culpa*. [...] No remission of punishment can occur if *culpa* remains, [...] and since indulgences do not remit the *culpa* of those living in mortal sin, therefore none of their *poena* is remitted either.”

<sup>8</sup> The dove is, both in Gower and in Chaucer – a symbol of lechery. The Pardoner is associated to many animals both in the General Prologue and in his tale: the “hare” (GP 684) is the symbol of wrath / anger – as for example during the squabble between the Pardoner and the Host at the end of the tale. The “goot” (GP 688) represents gluttony and lechery. The Snake – “Thanne wol I stinge hym with my tonge smerte” (Pd 413) – symbolises a number of vices such as wrath / anger, avarice, gluttony and lechery. For other associations between vices and animals see Bloomfield (1952: 245 ff.).

*Radix malorum est Cupiditas.*

Thus can I preche again the same vice

Which that I use, and that is avarice.

But though myself be gilty in that synne,

Yet can I maken oother folk to twynne

From avarice and soore to repente.

But that is nat my principal entente;

I preche nothing but for coveitise. (Pd 426-433)

I wol noon of the apostles countrefete;

I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete, (Pd 447-448)

Nay, I wol drynke licour of the vyne,

And have a joly wenche in every toun. (Pd 452-453)

The Pardoner subverts the order of the *rectitudo intentionis*, i.e. the aim that a good preacher should pursue: his “principal entente” (Pd 432) is not, in fact, the salvation of the souls but personal gain.<sup>9</sup> However, it is surprising how he himself declares that “an immoral man can tell a moral tale just as well as a good man can, indeed better than many good men can, since they may lack the necessary technical skills” (Minnis 2008: 132 ff.), i.e. that “craft” that he, on the contrary, does have. This is Chaucer’s transposition and explanation of the Schoolmen’s comment on “the authoritative words of the immoral preacher” (Minnis 2008: 132 ff.) which decisively sets the English poet as orthodox.<sup>10</sup>

The situation in *The Parson’s Tale* is different. It does not have the characteristics of a sermon, but those of the innumerable manuals for confessors in circulation in medieval England with

<sup>9</sup> According to Minnis (2008: 127), “The Pardoner’s declared primary intention is preaching ‘for coveitise’, while making other folk turn away from avarice is a possible secondary intention. That is a flagrant reversal of the proper order of things. The schoolmen usually define primary intention in terms of improving the audience, of making its members good. Personal benefit was sometimes described as an acceptable secondary intention: [...] one may receive the necessities of life, [...]. What is utterly unacceptable [...] is the mercenary man who preaches principally on account of earthly goods, on account of reputation (i.e., vainglory) and material reward. [...] In Chaucer’s text, what might be acceptable (to the schoolmen) as a secondary intention – personal benefit – is defined by the Pardoner as his primary intention, and therefore is quite reprehensible, the intentions being in the wrong order.”

<sup>10</sup> The Lollards were of a different opinion. According to them, the deviance of a minister vitiated his every action and word, voiding them of all efficacy.



which Chaucer was certainly familiar. If it is true that both sermons and confessors' manuals usually started with a Biblical quotation setting the theme (verbal unit), then it is also true that in the sermons the various parts of these quotations mark the key points of the sermon. This is not the case for the manuals where there is no systematic recall of the initial quotation which serves rather as a general setting:

To introduce the 'theme' in this looser sense of a treatise with a biblical quotation and then to divide it into several main parts which are subsequently developed at length was a favorite practice among writers of penitential (and other) handbooks [...] In precisely the same fashion does the *Parson's Tale* begin with a scriptural quotation, whose main image of 'the way' is applied to the topic of penitence, which is then divided into six parts that are developed in due order. Its opening paragraph, then, places the *Parson's Tale* firmly in the genre, not of the formal sermon, but of the penitential handbook or treatise (Wenzel 1982: 249, 250-251).

*The Parson's Tale* is essentially divided into three parts, each treating the three stages of confession: Contrition (*Penitence*, “verray repentance of a man” Ps 86), Confession (*Confessioun*, “shrift of mouthe” Ps 87; “signe of contricioun” Ps 316) and Satisfaction (*Satisfaccioun*, “almesse and [...] bodily peyne” Ps 1029). It is in the second part – where the capital vices that the faithful must learn to recognize and flee are listed and explained – that the snares of excessive attachment to earthly goods are treated.

As opposed to the Pardoner, the Parson is “hooly [...] and vertuous” (GP 515), “a shepherde and nought a mercenarie” (GP 514). His mission is truly to save souls: “riche he was of hooly thought and werk. / He was also a lerned man, a clerk.” (GP 479-480). He in fact cares nothing for earthly pleasures, neither does he preach out of greed. In effect: “he koude in litel thyng have suffisaunce” (GP 490), and his life is as telling example for the faithful as his teaching. His words do not hide debauchery and is not used deceitfully for other ends (“feyned flaterye and japes” GP 705), and so they are not dangerous,<sup>11</sup> “ne of his speche daungerous ne digne” (GP 517):

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<sup>11</sup> As previously mentioned, the words of a bad minister are not necessarily false and deceitful, since the words uttered are not those of the minister but of God

[...] Cristes gospel trewely wolde preche;  
His parisspens devoutly wolde he teche. (GP 481-482)

This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf  
That first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte (GP 496-497)

For if a preest be foul, on whom we truste,  
No wonder is a lewed man to ruste; (GP 501-502)

He was to synful men nat dispitous,  
Ne of his speche daungerous ne digne,  
But in his techyng discreet and benygne. (GP 516-518)

The Pardoner, on the other hand, is artful and cunning, – “of his craft, [...] / Ne was ther swich another pardoner. [...] Wel koude he rede a lessoun or a storie, / But alderbest he song an offertorie;” (GP 692-693, 709-710) – he (economically speaking) invests in his art and exploits the *officium praedicatoris* to satisfy his love of earthly goods. Conversely, the Parson gives all he has to this fold: “But rather wolde he yeven, out of doute, / Unto his povre parisspens aboute / Of his offryng and eek of his substaunce” (GP 487-489). The “erthely thynges” (Ps 336), such as money and food only interest him from the point of view of survival, or for sharing lovingly with his parishioners.

## 2. “Glotonye is unmesurable appetit to ete or to drynke”

Of the “erthely thynges” (Ps 336), what seems more directly to evoke, represent and be almost ‘spontaneously’ linked to the vice of gluttony, though not its only and exclusive ‘instrument’ – is food. Food, in its twofold nature of ‘meat and drink’, is a highly controversial subject in the medieval context, and consequently the debate surrounding gluttony is often lively and contradictory. In effect, although food is recognized as an indispensable means of

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Himself. Therefore, where there is discrepancy between what is taught and what is practised, the sin is purely personal, i.e. it lies with he who commits the bad action. The word of God in the mouth of a scoundrel may nevertheless be the word of salvation for the listener, as long as there are a number of conditions present, such as, for example, the secrecy of the preacher’s debauchery. For a detailed discussion see Minnis (2008).

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sustenance, it carries with it an original sin: that of being the accessorial cause of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden (Casagrande & Vecchio 2000: 125-126) and the damnation of man “Til Crist hadde boght us with his blood agayn!” (Pd 501). Gluttony – that becomes the symbol of excessive desire, of Adam’s disobedience and of his fall that reverberates through all mankind – is not necessarily linked to ‘overeating’, is not only a need of the flesh but a desire for rebellion of the spirit that brings with it other excessive desires and other inevitable falls:

The distinct character of gluttony in the Middle Ages can be seen in medieval interpretations of Genesis. Although the sin of Adam and Eve is most often discussed in the context of sexuality or gender hierarchy during this time, some writers suggested that the first sin is that of gluttony. That one bite of the apple could suffice to render the first humans guilty of gluttony certainly defies our contemporary understanding of gluttony as overeating, and points to the idea that gluttonous behavior includes more than overindulgence. [...] since the first act of gluttony resulted in Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Aquinas argues that gluttony is, indeed, a most serious sin. [...] the gluttonous act of Adam and Eve was less about the apple itself, and more about ‘the abuse of divine things’ that becomes ‘the occasion of other sins’ (Hill 2007: 59-60).

When the need to eat exceeds natural – and consequently acceptable – limits, until it expands as if under a magnifying glass and becomes an insatiable desire (which is above all a pleasure), it slides inexorably towards the excesses (of the sin) of gluttony. So, food – seen with suspicion as a possible source of pleasure and transgression – becomes the object of attention for those who needed to restrain or mortify these excesses, and subjects for discussion for those didactic-religious (and also literary) works so popular at the time.

The *peccata oris*, the sins of the mouth / tongue, that inevitably make one think of food and its overindulgence, represent the close tie that exists between “erthely thinges” (Ps 336) and the insidious words that are used to obtain them; the indissoluble close tie that exists between insatiable and implacable desire of the spirit and the flesh, and the instruments that an avid man uses to satisfy this desire in a never-ending effort. The brief satisfaction aroused by overeating is mirrored in the medieval illustration of the glutton,

often represented with a long neck (like a swan's, or like the Pardoner's, stretching over the pulpit, "peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke" Pd 395) in his desire to prolong his pleasure; while his tender palate, addicted to refined dishes, ignores and rejects the restrictions that also apply to the preparation. Pleasure and refinement in food are evidence of an anomalous behaviour for those moral obligations (which are religious obligations) that are recognized and accepted by medieval culture. It is the subversion of the social foundations, of the regulations of the community of the living, it is the deviance that jeopardizes the constituted order, that counters it, challenges it, and in some way reveals its limitations and its uglier aspects:

Medieval discourse on gluttony [...] draws attention to a particular understanding of social limits and a spiritual deficiency that threatens those limits, for the health of the individual mirrors that of the community throughout the Middle Ages. [...] For Cassian, gluttony is an affront to the norms of communal harmony in the coenobium that depends on individual discipline, while in the work of Gregory the Great *gula* poses problems of discernment in knowing when eating fulfils the necessity of nature and when it is merely a matter of desire. Among lay authors of the Middle Ages [...] gluttony remains a threat to the social order, but now because it leads to a loss of rationality or withdraws resources from the community for the misuse of one individual alone (Newhauser 2007: 11).

What these excesses are for the two narrators – and for the society that they represent – is described very clearly by the Parson:

After Avarice comth Glotonye, which is [...] unmesurable appetit to ete or to drynke, or elles to doon ynogh to the unmesurable appetit and desordeynee coveitise to eten or to drynke. (Ps 818)

to which the Pardoner replies:

O glotonye, ful of cursednesse!  
 O cause first of oure confusioun!  
 O original of oure dampnacioun, [...]  
 Corrupt was al this world for glotonye. (Pd 498-500, 504)

Excessive desire and the excessive attempt to satisfy this desire can only be identified with gluttony; this is the sin – the Parson also



states soon after his general definition of “Glotonye” (Ps 818) – that “corrumped al this world” (Ps 819).

In correspondence to the Parson’s assertion is the Pardoner’s dramatic representation when, at the beginning of his tale, he introduces the “compaignye / Of yonge folk that haunteden folye” (Pd 463-464). He also says about the young (or rather the youths) that

[They] eten also and drynken over hir might,  
[...] in cursed wise,  
By superfluytee abhomynable. (Pd 468, 470-471)

It is, in fact, the “desordeynee coveitise” (Ps 818) of the superfluous, especially of wine, that makes this transgression “abhomynable”<sup>12</sup> (Pd 471). Therefore, overindulgence in food is accompanied by a much more serious excess – that of “licour of the vyne” (Pd 452) – which deprives the human being of his rational faculties, leading him to “folye” (Pd 464). When the Parson continues with his explanation of the sin of gluttony and announces the exposition of its various manifestations, he allocates drunkenness first place (see Ps 822 and the quotation here below).

If overeating derives from a distortion of a natural need, there is no justification for overindulgence in wine, but only the conscious choice of transgression, which is even more serious because the object of desire is definitely not necessary for survival. The abyss that opens up for he who is addicted to wine is so deep that warnings against this practice occur repeatedly and insistently in both Tales. In the measured tones of he who had announced he intended not to tell a story – “Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me, / [...] and swich wrecchednesse. [...] / I wol nat glose” (Ps 31, 34, 45) but rather “moralitee and vertuuous mateere” (Ps 38), the Parson explains the consequences of drunkenness, working into

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<sup>12</sup> In Middle English, and until the 17th century, the spelling of today’s *abominable* (< L. *ab+ōmen*: ‘to be deprecated’, ‘loathsome’) was changed to *abhomynable* since it was thought that this word derived from the L. *ab+homine* and should be understood semantically as ‘not human’, ‘bestial’, an interpretation which fits perfectly in the Chaucerian passage. See also *Oxford English Dictionary online*, s.v. *ABOMINABLE*.

these few lines a lexical chain that has the effect of an echo in the mind of he who listens:

This synne hath manye speses. The firste is dronkenesse, that is the horrible sepulture of mannes resoun; and therefore, whan a man is dronken, he hath lost his resoun; and this is deedly synne. / But soothly, whan that a man is nat wont to strong drynke, and peraventure ne knoweth nat the strengthe of the drynke, or hath feblesse in his heed, or hath travailed, thurgh which he drynketh the moore, al be he sodeynly caught with drynke, it is no deedly synne, but venyal. / The seconde spece of glotonye is that the spirit of a man wexeth al trouble, for dronkenesse bireveth hym the discrecioun of his wit (Ps 822-824).

and which is reflected in the ‘verbal’ condemnation – but not true and substantive to him – of the Pardoner’s:

For dronkenesse is verray sepulture  
Of mannes wit and his discrecioun.  
In whom that drynke hath dominacioun  
He kan no conseil kepe; it is no drede.  
Now kepe yow fro the white and fro the rede (Pd 558-562)

Idolising food – and above all wine – not only sullies the soul of the sinner, leading him to spiritual death, but also brings physical and psychological decay. It is an absolute evil that leads to oblivion and the surrender to one’s instincts: reason – “caught with drynke” (Ps 823) – now captive in the “devels hoord ther he hideth hym and resteth” (Ps 821) – in the devil’s refuge, where he hides and awaits – loses all power of intervention. In the *Pardoner’s Tale* – narrated with the mastery of a preacher accustomed to deceit and to the exploitation of the *ars predicandi* for his own ends,<sup>13</sup> – the dangers announced by the Parson take shape. The conditions

<sup>13</sup> Minnis (2008: 164) explains that “The Pardoner is, above all else, a pardoner or fundraiser. That is what he does for a living, that is what (he says) he is good at. For him it goes far beyond just doing a job; he takes real pride in his trade (though he practices it in a deviant form) and his realization of his professional self is central to his performance of subjectivity. [...] He publishes his greed, pride and vainglory openly, indeed reveling in their revelation – these are not ‘screen sins’ but blatant, offensive moral deviancies. [...] Some preach for the cupidity of earthly reward or the desire of human applause [...]. The Pardoner is guilty on both the counts”.



resulting from the excesses of gluttony (in its twofold sense of “mete and drynke”, Pd 520), its assumptions and its consequences, all take form in the dissolute lives of the youths, who, giving themselves over to drink, pursue “folye” (Pd 464). The tavern, the devil’s temple, is the den of iniquity, and the language the Pardoner uses in its description becomes almost palpable in the vortex of irresponsible behaviour that takes place therein:

In Flaundes whilom was a compaignye  
Of yonge folk that haunteden folye,  
As riot, hasard, stywes, and tavernes,  
Where as with harpes, lutes, and gyternes,  
They daunce and pleyen at dees bothe day and nyght,  
And eten also and drynken over hir myght,  
Thurgh which they doon the devel sacrificise  
Withinne that develes temple, in cursed wise,  
By superfluytee abhomynable.  
Hir othes been so grete and so dampnable  
That it is grisly for to heere hem swere. (Pd 463-473)

And ech of hem at otheres synne lough.  
And right anon thanne comen tombesteres  
Fetys and smale, and yonge frutesteres,  
Syngeres with harpes, baudes, wafereres,  
Whiche been the verray develes officeres  
To kyndle and blowe the fyr of lecherye,  
That is annexed unto glotonye. (Pd 476-482)

The rapid pace, sustained by alliteration and rhyme, with which the actions and characters follow one after the other as in a chase, gives the feeling of a relentless fall from one iniquity to another through to the first violent invective against gluttony:

O glotonye, on the wel oghte us pleyne!  
O, wiste a man how manye maladyes  
Folwen of excesse and of glotonyes,  
He wolde been the moore mesurable  
Of his diete, sittynge at his table.  
Allas! The shorte throte, the tendre mouth,  
Maketh that est and west and north and south,  
In erthe, in eir, in water, men to swynke  
To gete a gloutoun deyntee mete and drynke! (Pd 512-520)

“Mete unto wombe, and wombe eek unto mete,  
 Shal God destroyen bothe”, as Paulus seith.  
 Allas; a foul thyng is it, by my feith,  
 To seye this word, and fouler is the dede,  
 Whan man so drynketh of the white and rede  
 That of his throte he maketh his pryvee  
 Thurgh thilke cursed superfluitee. (Pd 522-528)

“Of whiche the ende is deeth, wombe is hir god!”  
 O wombe! O bely! O stynkyng cod,  
 Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun!  
 At either ende of thee foul is the soun. (Pd 533-536)

Exquisite foods – the glotoun deyntee[s] mete and drynke”/ “glotonyes” (Pd 520, 514) craved for to exhaustion – slide down from the “mouth” to the “throte” (Pd 517) (which is also alluded to as a “pryvee”, Pd 527, i.e. toilet, rhyming with “superfluytee”, Pd 528) down to “wombe” (Pd 522). The stomach is reduced to a god / foul container (“god” rhymes with “stynkyng cod”, Pd 533-534), full of dung and corruption, only capable of producing disagreeable sounds, in some way hinted at by some of the recurring phonemes in these lines. The parts of the body, now rebellious, live (or seem to live) a life of their own. “Gluttony has been visualized in the sermon as parts of the body that have taken on a kind of independent life of their own as in the fable of the rebellious members” (Speirs 1984: 159). With gorging there is no respite because the glutton – lured into his pleasure / vice – is continuously searching for “delicaat mete or drynke” and for “curiositee, with greet entente to maken and apparailen his mete” (Ps 828-829), says the Parson. The cooks are quick to satisfy this need, and in their anxiety to please they would agree to any compromise in order to satisfy the most whimsical requests and encourage others. The Pardoner continues:

Thise cookes, how they stampe, and streyne, and grynde,  
 And turnen substaunce into accident,  
 To fulfille al thy likerous talent!  
 Out of the harde bones knocke they  
 The mary, for they caste noight away  
 That may go thurgh the golet softe and swoote.  
 Of spicerie of leef, and bark, and roote  
 Shal been his sauce ymaked by delit,



To make hym yet a newer appetit.  
But, certes, he that haunteth swiche delices  
Is deed, whil that he lyveth in tho vices.  
A lecherous thyng is wyn, and dronkenesse  
Is ful of stryvyng and of wrecchednesse. (Pd 538-550)

The cooks, whose trade is condemned because it is difficult to practice without committing the sin of gluttony (see Le Goff 1977: 57), or without encouraging it, pound / “stampe” (Pd 538), strain / “streyne” (Pd 538), grind / “grynde” (Pd 538), transform substance / “turnen substaunce” (Pd 539) and make it slide delicately and softly / “softe and swoote” (Pd 543) down the gullet / “golet”<sup>14</sup> (Pd 543) with delicious spiced sauces that stir desire. As in a metaphysical rite – often compared in Chaucer criticism to the Eucharistic mystery of transubstantiation – the cooks “turnen substaunce into accident” (Pd 539), transform the raw material, its natural essence, into the outward aspect by which it is known:

A fantastic-comic effect is produced by the virtual dissociation of the belly and the gullet – as, just before, of the throat and mouth – from the rest of the body, their virtual personification and consequent magnification; and by the impression of the wasted labour and sweat of the cooks in the contrasting metaphysical phrase – ‘turnen substaunce into accident’. The vigorous coarseness and the metaphysics come together, momentarily, in the term ‘corrupcioun’ (Speirs 1984: 158-159).

The glutton’s loose living, as already mentioned above, is not limited to the satiety of the stomach and to the satisfaction of one’s own desire. In fact, drunkenness, the curse that persecutes the glutton and renders him unaware of himself, incites him to other vile transgressions: inebriated with wine and delights / vices of the table – “delices (Pd 547) rhymes with “vices” (Pd 546) – he yields to the pleasures of lust (“a lecherous thyng is wyn”, Pd 549) without perceiving the approach of definitive “wrecchednesse” (Pd 550) in spiritual and physical death. That gluttony and lust are

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<sup>14</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary online*, s.v. *GULLET*: “1. The passage in the neck of an animal by which food and drink pass from the mouth to the stomach; the oesophagus.” Man is gluttonous, and so is indirectly associated to the animals whose behaviour he adopts.

strictly connected,<sup>15</sup> and that “dronkenesse” (Pd 549) contains the seed of death, is stressed both by the Parson, when he says that “after Glotonye thanne comth Lecherie, for thise two synnes been so ny cosyngs that ofte tyme they wol not departe” (Ps 836), and the Pardoner, when he says “That luxurie is in wyn and dronkenesse” (Pd 484).<sup>16</sup> The Parson in particular, when introducing and explaining the two vices, links them together and compares them to the hands of the devil:

In oother manere been distinct the speses of Glotonye, after Seint Gregorie. The firste is for to ete biforn tyme to ete. The seconde is whan a man get hym to delicaat mete or drynke. / The thridde is whan men taken to muche over mesure. The fourthe is curiositee, with greet entente to maken and apparailen his mete. The fifthe is for to eten to gredily. / Thise been the fyve fyngres of the develes hand, by whiche he draweth folk to synne.[...] This is that oother hand of the devel with fyve fyngres to cacche the peple to his vileynye. The firste fynger is the fool lookynge [...]. The seconde fynger is the vileyns touchinge in wikkede manere. [...] The thridde is foule wordes, [...]. The fourthe fynger is the kysynge;<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> In this context, consider for example the contiguity of *Gula* and *Luxuria* in the list of vices circulating in the Middle Ages, and their numerous variants. Among the most widespread is the list made by Cassian (360-435) within the monastic context (where ‘sins’ of the flesh were more difficult to eradicate): *Gula*, *Luxuria*, *Avaritia*, *Ira*, *Tristitia*, *Acedia*, *Vana Gloria* and *Superbia* (known as *glaitavs*); and that of pope Gregory the Great (535-604) that highlights as source of all vices the rebellion against the established order (be it human or divine), i.e. Pride: *Superbia*, *Ira*, *Invidia*, *Avaritia*, *Acedia*, *Gula* and *Luxuria* (known as *siiaagl*). Although both *Gula* and *Luxuria* are located respectively at the beginning and at the end of the two lists, according to the context, both vices are strictly connected, underlining the contiguity of the stomach and the sexual organs which, according to Gregory, are aroused by excess food. For a detailed treatment see Bloomfield (1952).

<sup>16</sup> In this case, “luxurie” may be interpreted as ‘excess’ – of any kind – due to overindulgence in food and wine, and cause of unrestrained behaviour. However, the context of this verse makes one think that this ‘excess’ is essentially lechery: “And right anon thanne comen tombesteres / [...] Whiche ben the verray develes officeres / To kyndle and blowe the fyr of lechery, / That is annexed unto glotonye. / The holy writ take I to my witsse / That luxurie is in wyn and dronkenesse. / Lo, how that dronken Looth, unkyndely, / Lay by his doghtres two, unwityngly; / So dronke he was, he nyste what he wroughte” (Pd 477, 480-487).

<sup>17</sup> At the end of the tale, the Pardoner – as if to seal his innate deviance and offer a new challenge – asks the pilgrims to kiss the (false) relics that he carries with him. He invites the Host first (Pd 943-968). This triggers a violent reaction from the Host appeased only by the intervention of the Knight, who proposes a “kiss of



[...]. The fifthe fynger of the develes hand is the stynkyngede dede of Leccherie. / Certes, the fyve fyngres of Glotonie the feend put in the wombe of a man, and with his fyve fyngres of Lecherie he gripeth hym by the reynes, for to throwen hym into the fourneys of helle, / [...] (Ps 828-830, 852-863).

Drunkenness does not allow for escape from “folye” (Pd 464), and it is this very “folye” that eradicates itself into one’s intimacy and transforms it once and for all: in fact, Seneca – through the Pardoner – says that there is no difference between a man “out of his mynde” and one “that is dronkelewe” (Pd 494-495). However, the “folye” (Pd 464) that takes control of a poor wretch remains longer than the wine: “he kan no difference fynde / Bitwix a man that is out of his mynde / And a man which that is dronkelewe, / But that woodnesse, yfallen in a shrewe, / Persevereth lenger than doth dronkenesse” (Pd 493-497). It becomes a habit, a lifestyle that survives the fumes of alcohol – albeit having its resource there – and it shows itself in speech. So, in the medieval mind, the glutton is also he who – unmindful of himself for “foryetelnesse by to muchel drynkyng” (Ps 827) – gambles with the dice and his own life (or perhaps with the salvation of his soul), he lies, swears and lies under oath, offering a profane sacrifice to the devil who in his temple (the tavern)<sup>18</sup> awaits him and entraps him:

Now wol I yow deffenden hasardrye.  
Hasard is verray mooder of lesynges,

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peace” – “an ‘official’ image of the Pardoner as a kind of paxboard that the Host can kiss with impunity” (Burger 2003: 143) – of different tenor from that urged by the Pardoner, that is “an icon of carnal desire, of *luxuria* and *cupiditas*, as much as of the Holy Spirit and *caritas*” (Burger 2003: 143). In this way, the Knight tries to restore those social-cultural relationships strongly challenged by the Pardoner both in his appearance and in his tale. For a detailed treatment see “Kissing the Pardoner”, in Burger (2003: 140-156).

<sup>18</sup> The presentation of the tavern is explicit as a place of sin in *The Book of Vices and Virtues*: “Þe tauerne is þe deueles scole hous, for þere studieþ his disciples, and þere lerneþ his scolers, and þere is his owne chapel, þere men and women redeþ and synged and serued hym, and þere he doþ his myracles as longeþ þe deuel to do. [...] For whan a glotoun goþ to þe tauerne he goþ riȝt ynow, and whan he comeþ out he ne haþ no fot þat may bere hym; and whan he goþ þidre he hereþ and seeþ and spekeþ and vnderstondeþ, and whan he comeþ þennes-ward alle þes ben y-lost, as he þat haþ no witt ne resoun ne vnderstondyng. Þes ben þe myracles þat þe deuel doþ” (Nelson (ed.) 1942: 53-54).

And of deceite, and cursed forswerynges,  
BlaspHEME of Crist, manslaughter, and wast also. (Pd 590-593)

Now wol I speke of othes false and grete  
A word or two, as olde bookes trete.  
Gret sweryng is a thyng abhominable,  
And fals sweryng is yet moore reprevable.  
The heighe God forbad sweryng at al,  
Witnesse on Mathew; but in special  
Of sweryng seith the hooly Jeremye,  
“Thou shalt swere sooth thyne othes, and nat lye,  
And swere in doom, and eek in rightwisnesse”;  
But ydel sweryng is a cursednesse. (Pd 629-638)

These are the odious ‘sins of the mouth / tongue’ that join the adoration of the stomach and are committed in adoration, just like the disjointed, false and diabolic sermons of the Pardoner. As products of the same organ that swallows food and wine, verbal disorder emerges because inside the mouth food, wine and words meet / clash – and stimulate each other – no longer restrained by reason. So, adulation, slander and useless chatter are transformed into obscenities and oaths and end in brawls (Casagrande & Vecchio 2000: 136-137).

Yeager (1984: 42) maintains that the approach to the sin of gluttony in *The Pardoner’s Tale* is surely a good starting point for understanding what it represented for medieval theologians and artists:

[...] the Pardoner may be said merely to be describing a commonplace phenomenon. Drunkards do, after all, swear more roundly than most sober citizens. On the other hand, we must not miss the vital connection between behavior and inward state which justifies the Pardoner’s sketching of what drunks do. We know a man by his actions; if he drinks overmuch, we call him a drunk. In the Middle Ages, we probably would have called him a glutton, and [...] we no doubt would have mentally consigned him to the third circle of the Hell, along with Dante’s Ciacco.

The important point here, then, is that if we look back over the Pardoner’s picture of behavior in the tavern, we find in close association several elements: overeating, which seems the hallmark of gluttony to modern sensibilities; drunkenness, which most recognize as central to the medieval notion of gluttony; and two



others, great swearing, and ‘devel sacrificise / Whithinne that develes temple.’ The question the Pardoner raises for us, then, concerns the last pair of wickednesses. Are we to conclude that, for Chaucer, blasphemous oath-taking and devil-worship were somehow practices linked with the cardinal sin of gluttony? (Yeager 1984: 43-44).

We can only answer this question in the affirmative: in the late Middle Ages, there was a tradition that included – as an expression of gluttony – not only excess food and wine, but also perjury, swearing, sorcery and devil worship (Yeager 1984: 45). For these reasons, the glutton may be compared to the heretic because he unleashes his verbal instincts against the truth behind the scorned sacred symbols, doubting the entire universe of medieval man. The same type of association – food / wine / disorder of speech – is often found in treatises of the period. For example, *The Book of Vices and Virtues* states that:

þe mouþ hæþ tweie offices, wher-of þat on serueþ to þe swelewyng of mete and drynke, þat oþer serueþ to speche, and þerfore is þis pryncipally departed in two; þat is to seye, in þe synne of glotonye, þat is in mete and drynke, and in þe synne of wikkede tonge, þat is to speke folye (Nelson (ed.)1942: 46).

It is clear at this point that Chaucer was not only acquainted with the educational works – the collections of sermons, manuals for confessors, treatises on the foundations of faith,<sup>19</sup> etc. – that could provide such information, but he also shared the collective imagination of the society in which he lived and where he set his characters.

However, the chain of wicked actions has no limits, it continues in a vortex that engulfs everything in its fury. The abominable

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<sup>19</sup> To give just one example, we can quote the anonymous treatise of the late Middle Ages preserved in the British Library ms. Harley 1197, ff. 28v-48v which – among other fundamental principles of the Christian faith – deals with the seven capital vices. Here mention is made of “glotounys & dronkelew folk þat, bi exces of mete and of drink lesin here witte, skill and resoun & so fallyn in hard temptacioun & many synns. Also, men and wommen þat bi mys-gysis and nyce contynauce & foly speche drawen folk to leccherie and alle þo þat willinge and wytinge zeuyn hem to wickid companye & nout wilen flen occasioun of synne” (Lonati (ed.) 2000: 111).

words of the ‘foul tongue’ (“a deslavee tonge sleeth”, Ps 629), that the Parson places as a consequence to wrath, call out loud to “Deeth”, hailed many times by the Pardoner as the final objective of the glutton and scorned by the arrogant youths. “Deeth” arrives punctual as a just reward for the “shrewes” (Pd 835) who only look for “myrthe and joliftee” (Pd 780) in life because

[...] vengeance shal nat parten from his hous  
That of his othes is to outrageous. (Pd 649-650)

This fruyt cometh of the bicched bones two,  
Forsweryng, ire, falsnesse, homycide. (Pd 656-657)

Lete youre othes, bothe grete and smale. (Pd 659)

From the “glotonye” (Pd 482 ff.) of “mete and drynke” (Pd 520), to the “folye” (Pd 464) of “dronkenesse” (Pd 484 ff.) and from this to the dances that incite to lust, to “hasardrie” (Pd 590), to “othes grete” (Pd 899), to “ire” (Pd 657), to “vengeance” (Pd 649) and “homycide” (Pd 657), the excessive love of earthly pleasures is heading for a verbal and human catastrophe. The Parson discusses the disorders of speech as a consequence of wrath (and the accompanying loss of reason) in a long and articulated treatment that includes all the insane manifestations that the Pardoner talks about (and of which he is a conscious victim).

This synne of Ire [...] is wikked wil to been avenged by word or by dede [...] Of ire comen this stynkyng engendures: hate [...] manslaughtre [...] homycide [...] bakbitynge [...] yevynge of wikked conseil by fraude [...] he that [...] despiseth God and alle his halwes, as doon this cursede hasardours in diverse contrees [...] attrayng [...] sweryng [...] lesynges [...] flaterynge [...] cursyng [...] chidyng and reproche [...] deslavee tonge [...] scornynge [...] double tonge; siche as speken faire byforn folk, and wickedly bihynde; or elles they maken semblant as though they speeke of good entencioun, or elles in game and pley, and yet they speke of wikked entente [...] manace [...] ydel wordes [...] janglyng [...] the synne of japers, that been the develes apes [...] conforten the vileyns wordes and knakkes of japeris hem that travaillen in the service of the devel. These been the synnes that comen of the tonge that comen of ire and of othere synnes mo (Ps 535-653).



There is no way out for he who does not abandon the pleasures of the flesh – at the end of *The Pardoner’s Tale* all three youths are killed by their excesses, crushed by that very same death they wanted to destroy (one dies stabbed by his friends, the other two drink poisoned wine):

Thus ended been thise homycides two,  
And eek the false empoysonere also.  
O cursed synne of alle cursednesse!  
O traytours homycide, O wikkednesse!  
O glotonye, luxurie, and hasardrye!  
Thou blasphemour of Crist with vileynye  
And othes grete, of usage and of pride!  
Allas; mankynde, how may it betide  
That to thy creatour, [...]   
Thou art so fals and so unkynde, allas? (Pd 893-901, 903)

The flood of words in the Pardoner’s second and final invective leaves no doubts on the consequence of the “folye” (Pd 464) that begins with man enslaved by his stomach and ends with murder. These consequences are summarized in an image of extreme compactness where we are reminded that it is all of mankind that goes astray each time a glutton repeats Adam’s base deed.

Food and speech are indissolubly linked in the medieval world. If moderation (in any form) is the reflection of a profound truth, even verbal, which the Parson bears witness to, excess desire and the effort (also excessive) made to satisfy this desire change the relationship between human language and the redeeming reality that it should communicate, even though orthodox thinking held that “the evil life of a preacher does not necessarily destroy his preaching; *per consequens* the evil life of the Pardoner does not destroy the morality of his tale” (Minnis 2008: 134). The Parson has nothing that shows his individuality, his message is one with his being and his actions. There is no discrepancy between what he says, what he does and his external appearance.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the Pardoner (although corresponding to a well-known type of the times) talks and acts, feels, loses his temper and inveighs, narrates his tale and tells of his frauds. He is an individual who places

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<sup>20</sup> The Parson is presented and described in the General Prologue at lines 477-528.

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himself voluntarily outside the community because he lives in this community and embodies its sins, he does not dismiss them nor does he contain them:

Thus, medieval attitudes towards food, eating and excess focus primarily on the role of food in an individual's struggle to create balance between desire and necessity, which in turn helps to create and maintain a balanced, healthy community. [...] Indeed, the most injurious acts of gluttony are those which violate the carefully fashioned boundaries of Christian society, especially those which deflect a person's attention from God (Hill 2007: 69).

Words are the Pardoner's means of support, and there is no doubt that he can use them shrewdly. But they are also words distorted by the insolent declaration of "yvel entencioun" (Pd 408) that dominates his world and that originates from a life of disorder and "ribaudye" (Pd 324). This is why the "gentils" (Pd 323) – the noble pilgrims that have to listen to him – get intolerant of him, even before his confession in the *Prologue*: he destabilizes their universe from within; they are shocked and horrified because they are forced to confront the darkness of the society in which they live, the darkness of mankind, and the darkness on the self.<sup>21</sup> The Pardoner is the deviance we would like to keep hidden but which unexpectedly explodes. It is frightening because it is uncontrollable in its reproduction and representation of "a familiar set of binaries – proper / improper, orthodox / perverse, natural / unnatural – that regularly works to establish the supposed hegemony of a (largely clerically articulated) medieval imaginary" (Burger 2003: 120). The Pardoner too, like the glutton, drinks and eats before speaking:

"But first", quod he, "heere at this alestake  
I wol bothe drynke and eten of a cake" (Pd 321-322)

he drinks while he eats:

"Now have I dronke a draughte of corny ale" (Pd 456)

<sup>21</sup> According to Burger (2003: 150), "What is transgressive about the Pardoner, what provokes the violent responses of his audience, is precisely the way that he is *not* other, most obviously the way that the cupidity his audience attempts to fix in him alone actually fuels the discursive economy of the dominant culture."



and he admits he has drunk and that he will continue to do so, no matter what the consequences are:

“I wol have moneie, wolle, chese and whete” (Pd 448)

“I wol drynke licour of the vyne” (Pd 452)

His words cannot be an instrument of truth because his wickedness is so obvious, it has been clearly revealed to his audience:

His actions and his very demeanor are an affront to common belief, a shocking (but not, alas, atypical) deviation from pious ideals which were shared by high and low, learned and lewd. The structural significance of the Pardoner’s self-exhibition within the project of Chaucer’s fictional pilgrimage is crucial: for this character threatens to travesty, brings into ridicule, reduce to absurdity, every major spiritual reason for the expedition to Canterbury. If the real-life equivalents to Chaucer’s pilgrims are anything to go by, there they expect to acquire authentic indulgences (as opposed to the possibly suspect ones which the Pardoner is offering), to offer the authentic relics of St. Thomas à Becket (as opposed to the shoddy fakes which the Pardoner is carrying), and to hear good sermons from godly men (a major improvement on the Pardoner’s deficient *vita*, which threatens to undermine his fine *verba*) (Minnis 2008: 165).

His are barren words, that scandalize and that will not bring salvation because they have been corrupted and definitively disassociated with the contents they would describe. The contents are lost in the Pardoner’s verbal and gestural rhetoric – he too may be affected by the excesses of wine – as well as in his appearance<sup>22</sup> and his confession – which is not a contrition and will not have satisfaction. Such ‘satisfaccioun’ was crucial for medieval man to return to the Parson’s fold from which he had strayed. In this perspective, gluttony cannot be reduced to a mere carnal sin, it is first of all a laceration of the spirit, a loss that comes from the innermost part of our being.

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<sup>22</sup> The Pardoner is presented and described in the General Prologue at lines 669-714.

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