

PARDON MY GREED!
A Canterbury Tale

A Play in One Act

by

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Cast of Characters

<u>Chaucer:</u>	The poet.
<u>Pardoner:</u>	A person authorized, through the sale of indulgences, to grant remission from punishment for sins.
<u>Merek:</u>	A wastrel.
<u>Carac:</u>	A wastrel.
<u>Brom:</u>	A wastrel.
<u>Priest:</u>	A clergyman.*
<u>Old Man:</u>	An elderly pauper.*

* These two roles can be played by the same actor and can be cast gender-neutral.

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SETTING: The floor of the stage is painted to represent a meandering dirt road. The audience is seated alongside the road. In neutral clothing, all the ACTORS except for CHAUCER are sitting among the audience. When characters enter the story, acting out what CHAUCER or the PARDONER describes, the ACTORS put on an appropriate costume piece and jump up from the audience, returning to it when they have finished their scene. At one end of the road are a wooden table and chair.

AT RISE: The stage is dark. In the darkness, we hear the sound of rain. A small pool of light, as if coming from a candle, comes up on a man in a long robe seated at the table, which is covered with sheets of parchment, an inkwell, pens, and the candle. The man is writing.

CHAUCER

(Reading what he has just
written.)

Whan that Aprille with his shoures sote
The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote,

(To the audience.)

I think you'll find it needs no more explaining
To simply say it's spring and that it's raining.
And when the leaden sky is streaming tears,
Repentance for the sins of reckless years
Demands heartfelt atonement for what's owed,
And makes of man a pilgrim on the road.
Plain English? When the heavens start to drip,
Good sinners know it's time to take a trip.
So I, one year, unshriven, full of rue,
Was moved to make a journey, and, like you,
I found myself upon the path to grace,
And there did meet all kinds of men – debased,
Corrupt, and foul – by Lucifer enslaved –
On pilgrimage and wanting to be saved
From hellfire, their reward for doing evil.
Salvation's full of pain – how medieval!
And what is evil's source, its root and seed?

PARDONER

Well, I can tell you that – the culprit's greed.

CHAUCER

The Pardoner was one I met, and he
Would save your sinful soul, but for a fee.

PARDONER

We're talking greed, we're talking gluttony. We're talking
gluttony, we're talking intemperance. Intemperance – I'll drink
to that!

(He takes a flagon out of the
large bag he's wearing and
takes a hefty swig.)

Radix malorum est cupiditas.

CHAUCER

He speaks the truth – *in vino veritas*.
Rapacity, voracity, avidity, and lust.
It takes an expert to engender trust.

PARDONER

And let's throw in a pie for good measure.

(He wolfs down a pie.)

See, here's how it works. I got this great arrangement with the
Church. It's my job to scare the hell out of you with stories of
how if you do even one eensy teensy little thing wrong during
the miserable moth-eaten existence we call life on earth,
instead of spending eternity lounging on a cloud of soft pillows
with an unending supply of mead, you'll be cast down into the
pit of hell, where hundred-headed demons with reeking breath
will sink their venomous teeth into your bowels and grind them
up for sausage meat. And that's on a good day. So, anyway, once
I've laid out the general scheme of things, I give you this
fantastic way out: an indulgence.

(He whips out a piece of
paper from his sack.)

One measly scrap of stinking goatskin and your soul's washed
clean as a newborn lamb. Everyone's a sinner, my friends, but
you, too, can be the proud new owner of a pristine soul. Step
right up, lords and ladies, peasants and serfs, and get yourself
an indulgence – signed by a bishop, signed by a patriarch, even
signed by the Pope. And all it costs is a single, solitary
groat. Four paltry little pennies, one-third of a shilling, and
the skids to eternal bliss are greased like the back end of a
Sodomite. Your complete satisfaction is guaranteed. In other
words, if you end up at the stake, a sizzling pile of smoldering
ash despite the piece of parchment, you get your money back.

CHAUCER

Indulgences should only be remission
Of punishment for mortal sin's commission.
But salvation's what the Pardoner avouches
So simple folk will empty out their pouches.

PARDONER

And, friends, that's not all I got. I got relics. Gen-u-ine,
bona fide relics. Be the first on your fief to take home the
holy body part of your dreams. Just take a look at these red-hot
babies.

(He upends his sack and
several items fall out.)

Here you got the shoulder bone of a sheep, given to me by a
converted Jew on his way back from Jerusalem. Dip it in your
well – the bone that is, not the Jew – and watch your cattle's
maggots wither right away.

CHAUCER

It's nothing but some sanctified hearsay.

PARDONER

And then there's Saint Teresa's crop-increasing mitten.

CHAUCER

The greasy membrane from a still-born kitten.

PARDONER

Saint Peter's brain, the fount of holy power.

CHAUCER

Looks like a head of moldy cauliflower.

PARDONER

All right, wise guy, don't take my word for it. I got witnesses.
"The Dangers of Greed: A Morality Play in Five Really Quick
Acts." Act 1, A Tavern. Three wastrels: Merek, Carac, and Brom.

MEREK

Let's dance a jig!

CARAC

Let's fuck a pig!

BROM

Let's gamble and whore and drink ourselves sick!

MEREK, CARAC, BROM

(Dancing, drinking, and
carousing.)

More! More! Bring on the stuff!

By the blood of Christ, I can't get enough!

PARDONER

So the three wastrels are cursing and dicing and wenching,
swigging ale and cramming meat pies down their gullets, when all
of a sudden they hear the pealing of a bell and a voice like the
crack of doom.

PRIEST

Ding dong, ding dong. Make way. Corpse coming through. Fresh as
a daisy and riddled with sores. Make way for the corpse. Ding
dong, ding dong.

MEREK

Hey, brother, who's in the sack?

PRIEST

Churl by the name of Fendrel.

CARAC

Fendrel! Why, he was our pal. We were raping and pillaging
together just the other day.

PRIEST

Don't blame me. Death's been on plague duty.

BROM

Poor Fendrel! I say we find this Death fellow and teach him a
lesson! Are you with me, friends?

PARDONER

And so, despite the fact that Death had been having a field day,
rampaging over the land, mowing down everyone in his path
without regard to age or station or worldly goods – despite the
fact that the Grim Reaper is nobody to fool around with – our
three wastrels swear an oath to be true to each other, find
Death, and kill him.

MEREK, CARAC, BROM

One for all and all for one,

We won't give up 'til Death is done!

PARDONER

No sooner do they set out on their valiant quest than they meet a poor old man, all wrapped in rags and tatters.

OLD MAN

God be with you, good sirs.

MEREK

Say, old man, isn't it time you found yourself an unused shroud?

OLD MAN

Believe me, my sons, I've tried, but not even Death will take my weary bones.

CARAC

Did he just say the magic word?

OLD MAN

All I said was that not even —

MEREK, CARAC, BROM

Death!

MEREK

You're in league with Death!

BROM

Sorry, friend, but that was the magic word.

MEREK

And if you don't tell us where Death is hiding, we'll run you through like a piece of rancid meat.

OLD MAN

I don't know why you're in such a hurry. Death will find you sooner or later. But if you really can't wait for Death, check under the oak tree around the corner. That's where I saw him last.

PARDONER

And the old man hobbles away as fast as his shriveled shanks can carry him. The three wastrels go tearing around the corner to the oak tree —

MEREK, CARAC, BROM

This one's for Fendrel!

PARDONER

And come to a screeching halt.

MEREK

Well, will you look at that – an enormous pile of golden coins!

CARAC

And not a soul in sight.

BROM

Not even –

MEREK, CARAC, BROM

Death!

MEREK

Anybody here see Death?

CARAC

Nope.

BROM

Not me.

PARDONER

And they forget all about Death and fall on the pile of gold like a pack of ravenous beasts.

MEREK

All right, brothers, let's get organized. According to the law of finders-keepers, this gold belongs to us. But we can't carry it home by daylight lest we be accused of theft.

BROM

So, what do we do?

CARAC

We carry it home after dark, you idiot.

MEREK

I'll break this stick in three, and whoever draws the shortest piece shall run into town and bring back bread and wine to sustain us. The other two will stay and guard the treasure, and when night falls, we'll take the treasure home, divide it equally amongst ourselves, and live like kings for the rest of our lives.

(MEREK breaks a stick into two long pieces and one short one. He holds the short piece out to BROM.)

MEREK

Here, Brom, you draw first.

BROM

But —

MEREK

Right. That's settled. See you tonight, brother.

PARDONER

And Brom runs off. Meanwhile, Merék and Carac hatch a plot to stab Brom when he returns and thus get bigger shares of the gold. At the same time, Brom cooks up a scheme to slip deadly nightshade into his friends' wine and keep all the gold for himself. So when Brom returns —

CHAUCER

Your time is up, I can't sit here all day.
Let's have the denouement without delay.

PARDONER

(Speaking very quickly.)

Act 2: Wastrels One and Two stab Wastrel Three. Act 3: Wastrel Three, before he gives up the ghost, offers Wastrels One and Two the secretly poisoned wine as a token of his forgiveness. Act 4: Wastrels One and Two, not wanting to appear ungrateful, drink the wine and die an agonizing death. So, the three wastrels, cursèd sinners that they are, reap the just rewards of their avarice and are cast down into the pit of hell, where hundred-headed demons with reeking breath sink their venomous teeth into their bowels and grind them up for sausage meat.

CHAUCER

The wastrels, full of avarice and greed,
Evil through and through in thought and deed,
Earned everlasting torment for their pact —
Is this the moral in the final act?

PARDONER

The moral is: get yourself some fire insurance. This is what I preach from the pulpit. I stand there just like a priest and warn the ignorant ninnyhammers in the congregation that if they don't forsake the sin of avarice and practice the virtue of

PARDONER (CONT.)

charity – especially to me – they'll be cast down into the pit of –

CHAUCER

We know this bit, we've learned it all by heart,
Just tell us what's the secret of your art.

PARDONER

(Laughing uproariously.)

Secret? Art? That's a laugh! It's all perfectly straightforward. I'm lying through my teeth. And I make no bones about it. I'm a cheat, a charlatan, a cozener, and a crook. And if you don't believe me, just ask the hundreds of gullible addlepates who fork over their hard-earned pennies in the belief that their sins will be forgiven only to find themselves wallowing in a bog of boiling brimstone until the end of time. But that's not my problem. Once they're dead, it's none of my business. I don't care about their souls, all I want is their money. See, the trick is to practice what you preach. I preach against greed, and then I practice it! What could be more convincing?! So I say to you, you're all sinners – treacherous, lecherous, blasphemous malefactors, enmeshed in the trammels of greed and gluttony, and mired in a morass of evil, and if you don't fill my purse with silver, you know the horrible fate that awaits you. Would I lie to you? Of course I would! But you'll bite anyway, because who wants to take a chance when eternity's at stake? So step right up, lords and ladies, peasants and serfs – buy your way into Heaven. And may Christ have mercy on your soul – because sure as God made man in his image, nobody else will.

(Through CHAUCER'S final
speech, the PARDONER mimes
hawking his wares as the
ACTORS – in dumbshow – crowd
around him to buy the
indulgences and relics.)

CHAUCER

O tempter – cunning, slippery, and shrewd!
Cajolery that cannot be eschewed!
For would you not believe a canny liar
Who promises salvation from hell's fire
Through purchase of a papal dispensation
Than live a life of pain and abnegation?
Now some may think my tale a flight of fancy
Because I am a poet, but God grants he
Flourishes who heeds my artful preacher,

CHAUCER (CONT.)

For fiction will e'er prove the wisest teacher.
This world is but a thoroughfare of woe,
And pilgrims all, we're passing to and fro.
God gave people humor for a reason:
To help them navigate through every season.
So if you cannot laugh through life's chagrin,
This rejection of God's gift's another sin.
Now fare you well, I bid you all good night.
Canterbury calls, and I have tales to write.

(CHAUCER goes back to his
writing and the lights fade
to black.)

THE END