

## Forum

Members of the Association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the Editor, and the authors of articles discussed will be invited to reply.

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### Chaucer's Pardoner

To the Editor:

Readers of *The Canterbury Tales* will have less trouble "placing" the Pardoner, thanks to Melvin Storm's "The Pardoner's Invitation: Quaestor's Bag or Becket's Shrine?" (*PMLA* 97[1982]:810–18). I admire the way Storm puts the bountiful harvest of historical scholarship on the Pardoner to practical critical use by establishing "the one lost soul among the Canterbury pilgrims" as a kind of epicenter in the narrative and highlighting the ways in which the Pardoner's Tale is analogous to the narrative in which it is embedded.

One bit of "historical evidence," however, calls for comment:

We should observe, moreover, that the Pardoner's practice of carrying false relics was unusual, although not unknown. As Kellogg and Haselmayer point out, it was "an abuse so rare that no contemporary manual even discusses it, while allusions to the practice are only very infrequently to be met with elsewhere" (228). It would seem, then, that in including such an unlikely detail Chaucer is deliberately emphasizing the Pardoner's function as fraudulent substitute. (811)

Was "the Pardoner's practice of carrying false relics" really "unusual"? Is Chaucer "deliberately emphasizing" something that would have been "unlikely"? According to Wycliffe (pseudo-Wycliffe?), writing in the 1380s (?), pardoners bearing false relics were not unusual, nor were they lacking "false curates" (the main objects of Wycliffe's attack) to serve as their accomplices: "for whanne there cometh a pardoner with stollen bullis & false relekis, grauntynge mo yeris of pardon than comen bifore domes day for yevynge of worldly catel to riche placis where is no nede, he schal be sped & reseyved of curatis for to have part of that he getith . . ." (F. D. Matthew, ed., *The English Works of Wyclif*, EETS, os 74, 154; I have modernized the spelling slightly; other Wycliffite tracts, both Latin and English, would probably yield corroborating

evidence). It seems to me, then, that the particular exercise of ingenuity in the application of historical scholarship to interpretation that I have quoted isn't really necessary (nor, I should hasten to add, is it essential to Storm's argument)—Chaucer might well have known false-relic-bearing pardoners from life.

Whether or not this is so, it is well worth noting that, in addition to lashing out against corrupt pardoners, the Lollards frequently denounced the corrupted fourteenth-century institution of pilgrimage, and the pilgrimage to Canterbury and veneration of the relics of Saint Thomas of Canterbury in particular (see Anne Hudson, ed., *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978], 153–54). From a Lollard perspective, at least, the sharp opposition that Storm sets up between the Pardoner's relics and the relics at Canterbury evaporates. To take a Lollard perspective on this particular aspect of Storm's reading of the Pardoner and his Tale may be contentious; but there are, after all, a number of allusions in *The Canterbury Tales* to the Lollards and their beliefs. Indeed, Storm himself invokes the Lollard perspective in his explication of the Summoner-Pardoner relationship:

The General Prologue hints broadly at a homosexual relationship between the Pardoner and the Summoner and, if there is one, the Summoner provides an appropriate, albeit extraordinary, image of the pilgrims who are deflected from the proper goal of pilgrimage, of the penitents who invest in the Pardoner's indulgences and have their offerings go no further and produce no fruit. . . . Such a comparison need not be construed as merely the offspring of the twentieth-century imagination. As Terrence McVeigh reminds us, Wycliffe in the *Tractatus de Simonia*, dealing with another financial abuse in the church, "draws an analogy between the seed lost in carnal sodomy and the seed of the word of God wasted by the simoniac" (56). (813)

Is Chaucer on all fours with the Lollards in the matter of "seed lost in carnal sodomy" but not on the question of pilgrimage and false relics?

Storm's fine article will prove to be seminal, I think, not only because it does such a nice job on the Pardoner and his Tale but because it also raises some interesting questions about literary history and the interpretation of *The Canterbury Tales*.

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Reply:

When reading Chaucer, Lawrence Besserman, like Harry Bailly, evidently smells "a Lollere in the wynd." Although I welcome the inducement to think momentarily about the Pardoner's Tale from a Wycliffite perspective, I suggest that such a perspective should be applied to Chaucer's work only with great caution. This is not the place, however, to reopen the old discussion of Chaucer's relationship with the Lollard knights and Wycliffism. There are other, simpler grounds on which I must disagree with Besserman's two main points, loath as I am to do so in the face of his kind remarks about my article.

First, Besserman argues, on the basis of a single comment in a Wycliffite tract, that the association of false relics with pardoners was common. This is a statement not of doctrine but of purported fact, and the preponderance of available documentation on pardoners indicates that it was simply not so. There were false relics, to be sure, and there were vicious pardoners, but the two were rarely joined in the documents of the day. Various enactments of the church to curb abuses by unscrupulous pardoners describe pardoners as carriers of relics but do not usually dispute the validity of the objects; it is the validity of the letters of indulgence that they most often question. (See, e.g., Henry Charles Lea 3:284–95. I provide documentation for Lea and the other authors cited in this paragraph on pp. 817–18 of my article.) Alfred L. Kellogg and Louis A. Haselmayer suggest that traffic in false relics may have been the most effectively controlled abuse among pardoners because of the particularly stern attitude the church took toward it (233–34). Jusserand, although he discusses false relics in his chapter on pardoners, is constrained to go to the later satires of Lindsay and Heywood to find specific parallels to that part of Chaucer's description (326). Arnold Williams, we might note, setting out to supplement Jusserand's collection of documents on pardoners, has found parallels to all the elements of malfeasance in Chaucer's portrait of the Pardoner except one—faked relics (205). We might ask also why the poet of *Piers Plowman*, surely meaning to

leave no evil undenounced in his diatribe against pardoners (B. Prol. 68–82), says nothing about false relics. Finally, I cannot resist citing an instance of twentieth-century polemics regarding pardoners, if only because it involves a striking coincidence. Herbert Thurston, in his retrospective defense of the institution of indulgences, points out as an example of "demonstrably false" statements made by medieval assailants of the papacy the very passage quoted by Besserman (527).

Besserman's second point entails a highly questionable premise that, if granted, must lead inescapably to an utterly indefensible conclusion. Besserman suggests that because the Lollards denounced pilgrimage to Canterbury and veneration of Becket's relics, so too must Chaucer. In consequence the relics of the "hooly blisful martir" must be, to Chaucer, as debased as the Pardoner's "pigges bones" and the entire pilgrimage a vain, corrupted enterprise. I do not think it necessary to debate the degree of Chaucer's sympathy with elements of Lollard thought to determine that such a conclusion is preposterous, for it involves the wholesale repudiation of the Canterbury pilgrimage framework. If we believe that Chaucer so condemns his pilgrimage context we must revise the whole history of *Canterbury Tales* scholarship and impugn either the motivations or the intelligence even of Chaucer's "good" pilgrims. For example, I cannot believe Besserman intends that we should judge Chaucer's Parson a charlatan or a fool for going on pilgrimage and then using the occasion of "this viage" to show the other pilgrims the way "Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage / That highte Jerusalem celestial" (ParsT 49–51). (And this, we recall, is the same Parson the Host accuses of being a Lollard.) Even the *Retraction*, as Donaldson reminds us, does not reject the pilgrimage framework but instead is incorporated into it (*Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader* [New York: Ronald Press, 1958], 950). That Chaucer held some views in common with the Lollards does not mean that he necessarily held all, and to attribute to him condemnation of Canterbury pilgrimage must surely strain credulity. Can we not more fruitfully read the pilgrimage framework as a touchstone against which the different pilgrims can be judged? Pilgrimage can, certainly, be abused, and some abuse it; but the glory of its positive side (wherein, as the Parson reminds us, it reflects the pilgrimage to the celestial Jerusalem) provides the light by which we can see the abusers—such as the Pardoner—for what they are.

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