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## Hyperreal Blessings: Simulated Relics in *The Pardoner's Tale*

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*This article argues that reading the relics Chaucer's Pardoner carries through the lens of Jean Baudrillard's definition of simulacra illustrates the potential existence – and subsequent dangers – of a simulated hyperreality to the spirituality of the fourteenth century. Juxtaposing “The Pardoner's Prologue” from *The Canterbury Tales* and Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* lends meaning to both the machinations of Chaucer's (arguably) most corrupt pilgrim, and to the postmodern idea of simulated realities. Rather than doubles or imitations of an original image or conception of reality, Baudrillard's simulacra are indistinguishable replacements for the real, as the Pardoner would have us believe of his relics. Understanding the Pardoner's relics as simulacra allows us to see Chaucer's awareness of the danger of simulation to faith in medieval Christian society. By insinuating the idea of false relics to his audience through fiction, Chaucer suggests to his audience that all relics could be fakes, throwing into question the business of relics, indulgences, and possibly salvation. Further, Chaucer's invention of the Pardoner in a fiction that influences reality makes *The Canterbury Tales* a layering of hyperreality, offering a weighty, consequential example of a simulation so real that the real threatens to become non-existent.*

Chaucer's Pardoner is a picture of incongruity. Scholars have analyzed his physical, spiritual, and psychological peculiarities, and called into question his sexuality, his morality, and his belief structures.<sup>1</sup> Just as interesting as the man himself, however, are the tools of his trade: the indulgences and relics he carries with him. The artificiality of his possessions does not hinder his attempts—often successful—to use them like “the real thing,” even to the point of allowing his own lies to seduce him into a kind of belief as well. This belief in the absence of truth adds layers of complexity to the way we understand his relics, and the effect they have not only on the pilgrims in the *Canterbury Tales*, but on Chaucer's reading audience as well. Because they are not true saints' remains but they can—and

1 For a good overview of diverse interpretations in the 1950s and 1960s, see Stephen A. Khinoy, “Inside Chaucer's Pardoner?,” *The Chaucer Review* 6, no. 4 (1972): 255-56.

are—still used as and believed to be real, the Pardoner’s relics can be read as what Jean Baudrillard calls simulacra: “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”<sup>2</sup>

Not only are the Pardoner’s relics not the priceless remains he claims them to be, they are also not “real” animal bones or rags. They are just words on a page. Yet the generational power of language makes them not only “real” for the pilgrims, but suggests the power of simulacra to an audience: because this same hyperreality could exist outside the fiction of *The Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale*, I will show that the Pardoner’s relics hold the potential to upset an entire religious system through a mere suggestion injected by fiction. Treating the Pardoner’s relics as simulacra reveals fiction’s dangerous influence over reality, and blurs the boundaries between what is “true” and what is “real.” Complicating and furthering this blurring, Chaucer himself tangles the real with the hyperreal he has created by placing a version of himself in the story. This creation of a hyperreality through the *Canterbury Tales* makes restricting the Pardoner’s fakes to the printed page more difficult. Thanks to the many layers of truth and cunning overlapping with reality Chaucer has created they take on life of their own.

While the Pardoner’s relics can be read through Baudrillard’s ideas, this is clearly an unusual and unlikely pairing of texts. Pardoners were prominent figures in pre-Reformation Europe, and Baudrillard is most often embraced and applied to postmodern topics. Baudrillard posits that simulation “is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance,” but the generation of hyperreality, that is, a creation of a new reality placed upon the real in such a way that the difference is obscured. Simulation is “no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.”<sup>3</sup> If we do not know the real is no longer real because a

2 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1

3 Baudrillard, 13.

hyperreal has replaced it, we continue to believe in the existence of reality despite its absence. Rather than creating doubles or imitations of an original image or conception of reality, Baudrillard posits that simulacra are operational, generational replacements for the real, and because we cannot tell the difference between this simulated reality and “real” reality, the simulation becomes the real for us. An image, Baudrillard claims, either “reflect[s]... a profound reality,” “masks and denatures a profound reality,” “masks the *absence* of a profound reality,” or “has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum.”<sup>4</sup> The final principle – that an image can simulate reality without having any relation to it – suggests the creation of a false reality indistinguishable from what we consider real, and Baudrillard uses examples like Disneyland’s relation to Los Angeles, or “reality” television’s connection to the reality lived by its audiences to explain his concepts. But an opportunity for comparison to the Pardoner is opened when Baudrillard explains the danger of unmasking images through religious context, presenting the danger Chaucer seems to suggest in his tale: fiction can create doubt, and doubt can change how we understand reality.

Baudrillard cites iconoclasts to present the danger of religious simulacra. He asks “what becomes of the divinity when it reveals itself in icons, when it is multiplied in simulacra? Does it remain the supreme power that is simply incarnated in images as a visible theology? Or does it volatilize itself in the simulacra that, alone, deploy their power and pomp of fascination—the visible machinery of icons substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God?”<sup>5</sup> He describes a fear that beneath these repeated created images that represent truth, no truth exists. Despair, he says, “came from the idea that the image [of God] didn’t conceal anything at all, and that these images were in essence not images, such as an original model would have made them, but perfect simulacra, forever radiant with

4 Baudrillard, 6.

5 Baudrillard, 4.

their own fascination.”<sup>6</sup> That is, the images represent not a hidden truth, but only themselves – models without a truth-based origin. The idea that sacred objects might disguise the absence of the sacred links Baudrillard’s postmodern, abstract theories to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, and lends Baudrillard’s ideas historical weight. Reading through the lens of the simulacrum allows us to see issues of truth and reality as indistinguishable from fiction, and vice versa, in fourteenth century literature and religion as well as twentieth and twenty-first century reality television and theme parks. Because Chaucer’s Pardoner carries fakes that cannot be distinguished from actual relics, the suggestion emerges that even “real” relics—those held by shrines and churches in the fourteenth century—could be fake as well.<sup>7</sup>

Chaucer unmasks this disturbing possibility through his depiction of the Pardoner as a fictional character that matches well the unmasking of image Baudrillard discusses in the case of the iconoclasts, and carries clear implications of the dangers that the exposure of simulacra as a concept hold for religion as well as society. If onlookers cannot tell the difference between “truth” and “fiction” when they look at an object, and if even the Pardoner himself is able to be convinced by his own falsehood, how can authenticity be guaranteed, if at all?

To see clearly the weight Chaucer’s suggestions carry, it is necessary to establish the kind of person he caricatures with the Pardoner. Pardoners were deeply enmeshed in Christian rites, and involved in the project of salvation through providing an opportunity for a public display of penance. In the fourteenth century, Pardoners

6 Baudrillard, 5.

7 Khinoy has suggested that the Pardoner holds a similar power, but couches his argument in an examination of the man, not his relics. He posits that at the moment the Pardoner asks the pilgrims to offer to his relics, “the Pardoner has succeeded in implicating *us*” (264). If we reject the Pardoner’s offer, “we must reject him, and his relics and pardons, too. Yet if we throw out not only the joker, but also the things he has made a joke of, what becomes of the church and of faith? In the age of Wyclif and the Great Schism, these questions are central; and here they are couched in terms that must bring the points home to everyone” (265).

sold indulgences or “pardons,” which were believed to reduce purgatorial punishment for sins.<sup>8</sup> Forgiveness from sin required two steps: contrition and punishment. If you had repented and received absolution, your sin was forgiven, but the need for punishment still remained. A pardon acquired after absolution guaranteed you a shorter stay in Purgatory, mitigating some of the punishment you were promised while also allowing you to do the good deed of donating money to the Church. Thus while working to buy your way out of Purgatory was theoretically possible, pardons were intended to reduce, not eliminate, a purgatorial sentence. Further, because pardons did not relieve the moral guilt accrued by sinning, they did not guarantee salvation, and thus to allow parishioners full forgiveness, the elements of individual penance and clerical absolution were supposed to be required to earn a pardon.<sup>9</sup>

Chaucer’s Pardoner is well stocked with pardons to sell.<sup>10</sup> His Papally approved indulgences and involvement in the pilgrimage to Canterbury are not unusual for the fourteenth century; Melvin Storm points out that due to the connection between shrines and indulgences, the profession of pardons was linked strongly to pilgrimage.<sup>11</sup> Pilgrims could buy pardons by making an offering to a relic or a holy site, and with many of these sacred locations, the destination point of pilgrimages, it was not unusual that pilgrims would acquire indulgences there as part of their journey. Having the Pardoner along on the Canterbury pilgrimage introduces another facet to the business of indulgences. The practice arose in the tenth century of carrying relics through the countryside to collect money,

8 Alastair Minnis, *Fallible Authors: Chaucer’s Pardoner and Wife of Bath* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 4.

9 Minnis, 73-75.

10 He also, as Eugene Vance points out in “Chaucer’s Pardoner: Relics, Discourse, and Frames of Propriety” *New Literary History*, 20, no. 3 (1989) claims to be able to provide absolution to confessors, so he can attend to both contrition and punishment for the pilgrims as they wend their way to Canterbury (741).

11 Melvin Storm, “The Pardoner’s Invitation: Quaestor’s Bag or Becket’s Shrine?” *PMLA* 97, no. 5 (1982): 810-818.

which was intended to be used for construction: repairs or additions for a church or other ecclesiastical building.<sup>12</sup> The Pardoner's association with Rouncivale, a hospital at Charing Cross, suggests his primary task is to collect alms for the hospital, which he would acquire by showing and receiving offerings to the relics he carries.<sup>13</sup> An offering from a pilgrim would buy a pardon, which would decrease his time in Purgatory while providing needed help to a church project.

Because, however, professional pardoners like Chaucer's character were sometimes driven more by greed, pride, or the need to fill a quota than by the desire to help their congregation, it is not unimaginable that they would raise prices on or exaggerate the importance and power of their wares. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council tried to limit the abuse of indulgences by declaring a pardon granted for consecration of a church could remit no more than one year from a purgatorial sentence, and for other acts the indulgence was not to exceed forty days.<sup>14</sup> Despite this, false documents and corrupt pardoners still circulated, making extravagant claims that certain indulgences could take hundreds or even thousands of years off a stay in Purgatory.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to his indulgences, Chaucer's Pardoner also possesses the famous collection of relics he eagerly displays to his fellow pilgrims. Though relics were sometimes clothing or possessions of deceased saints, more often they were fragments of the body such as bones or hair. Patrick Geary has cited relics as passive objects, lacking any extra-cultural significance: "although

12 Patrick Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 25.

13 Geoffrey Chaucer, "General Prologue," *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Larry D Benson, ed (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company) 1987, ln 670.

14 "62. Regarding saint's relics." Fourth Lateran Council – 1215: Constitutions, <<http://www.legionofmarytidewater.com/faith/ECUM12.HTM>> Accessed 5 Oct. 2011.

15 Fr. Enrico dal Covolo, "The Historical Origin of Indulgences," *Catholicculture.org*, <<http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=1054&CFID=99824089&CFTOKEN=34039761>> Accessed 5 Oct. 2011.

symbolic objects, they are of the most arbitrary kind, passively reflecting only exactly so much meaning as they were given by a particular community.”<sup>16</sup> For the fourteenth century, this meaning was intense and driven by the desire to ensure grace. Anxious pilgrims often divided up the bodies of dead saints as holy souvenirs not only to prove they had traveled to visit the saint’s remains, but to gain access to the divine by owning a piece of a person who had definitely received salvation. Even in death, in this way saints remained intercessors, providing a link between the laity and the transcended divine.

The limited number of saints—and therefore limited number of legitimate relics—ensured that most surviving pieces were either enshrined in sacred locations like Thomas à Becket’s shrine at Canterbury, or carried by the clergy, as in the case of the Pardoner. Because true relics were in short supply, and high demand for access to them from the laity coupled with people like the Pardoner looking to gain material profit, schemes like the Pardoner’s would guarantee financial gain for corrupt churchmen, and simultaneously create a need for questions about the “truth” of holy objects. Storm avers that the Pardoner’s practice of carrying fake relics was historically unusual, though not unheard of. It would have been, however, such a perfidious, and therefore rare, activity that Chaucer must intend his audience to pay particular attention to it as they digest the Pardoner’s character.<sup>17</sup>

The Pardoner is at once a compelling and disturbing figure. The *Canterbury Tales* narrator takes care to establish his position and attempts to grant him some authority by assuring in the General Prologue portrait that the Pardoner “Bretful of pardoun comen from Rome al hoot,” and that “of his craft, fro Berwyk into Ware / Ne was

16 Geary, 5.

17 Storm, 811. For a conflicting perspective, see Robyn Malo’s “The Pardoner’s Relics (and Why They Matter the Most),” *The Chaucer Review* 43, no. 1 (2008): 82-102. Malo details several European analogues to the Pardoner, suggesting the practice of relic forgery was at least common enough to have found representation in the literatures of multiple vernaculars (89-92).

ther swich another pardonor.”<sup>18</sup> However, immediately after this justification of the Pardoner’s position and skill, the narrator reveals that “in his male he hadde a pilwe-beer, / Which that he seyde was Oure Lady veyl; / He seyde he hadde a gobet of the seyl / That Seint Peter hadde, whan that he wente / Upon the see... He hadde a croys of latoun ful of stones, / And in a glas he hadde pigges bones.”<sup>19</sup> In the prologue to his tale, the Pardoner himself not only admits, but practically brags that after stirring his audience to devotion, “Thanne shew I forth my longe cristal stones, / Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones – / Relikes been they, as wenen they echoon. / Thanne have I in latoun a sholder-boon / Which that was of an hooly Jewes sheep.”<sup>20</sup> The Pardoner, then, is carrying a collection of worthless scraps. Rather than displaying a precious finger joint once belonging to a saint, he has pig and sheep bones encased in latten<sup>21</sup> and glass that he openly admits are not true relics.

It is this deception, and the way the Pardoner and his unfortunate customers treat it, that resonates with Baudrillard’s definition of simulacra: “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it.”<sup>22</sup> A simulacrum “is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, the Pardoner does not attempt with his relics to reconstruct real saints’ remains, but simply to perform the same task without relying on a dubious “real” to do so. This question of task is also crucial to Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra, which he sees as not only not

18 “General Prologue,” 687, 692-693.

19 “General Prologue,” 694-700.

20 “The Pardoner’s Prologue,” *The Riverside Chaucer* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), ll 347-351.

21 Larry D. Benson in *The Riverside Chaucer* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987) cites “latoun” as a brass-like alloy (34).

22 Baudrillard, 1.

23 Baudrillard, 2.

reconstructive, but also not representational. Simulacra are purely operational, and are the “resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared.”<sup>24</sup> In the case of relics, whether they are fake or not, it is their use that is important rather than their substance.

When faced with the prospect of buying forgiveness, the specific identity of the saint whose remains are claimed to be contained within a decorated vial becomes trivial, and the original function of the body part, whether it was a finger or an ankle bone, no longer matters. The crucial element is their figurative value. Their function as things, repurposed from an instrumental body part into an instrument of forgiveness, erases their former substance. They are sacred because they are believed to be sacred, and their existence generates its own meaning unconnected to their previous, organic function. Indeed, as the Pardoner claims, his chunks of crystal stuffed with animal bones are relics “as wenen they echoon,” that is, because his audience believes them to be.<sup>25</sup> They are operative because their audience believes in their veracity, not because of any preexisting inherent characteristic.

One of Baudrillard’s caveats about simulacra is that they cannot simply be a dissimulation or a pretending. He says that “pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary.’”<sup>26</sup> Though at first glance the Pardoner’s fakeries might look like dissimulations, they remain simulacra because of the method and effects of their use. Though the Pardoner himself admits his collection is primarily rags and animal bones, making it clear that for the purposes of his job he pretends these objects are sacred, there is an element of belief in his own behavior as well.

24 Baudrillard, 7.

25 “The Pardoner’s Prologue,” 349.

26 Baudrillard, 3.

After revealing his deception and then telling his moral tale to make his fellow pilgrims happy, he launches into a sermon and seems to forget that he has already bragged about his use of waste products as sacred objects. He offers to absolve the sins of the entire company and recommends that “oure Hoost here shal bigynne, / For he is moost envoluped in synne. / Com forth, sire Hoost, and offer first anon, / and thou shalt kisse the relikes everychon / ye, for a grote!”<sup>27</sup> The Host remembers the “truth” about the Pardoner’s collection, but the Pardoner himself is so swept up by his own sermonizing that the relics become real for him. Though he is soundly berated by the Host for his attempt and therefore fails to collect any profit in the form of money or belief, both he and the narrator have already averred how successful he is in this simulation of sacredness. He explains that those who “fyndeth hym out of swich blame, / he wol come up and offre a Goddes name, / And I assoille him by the auctoritee / Which by the bulle ygraunted was to me. / By this gaude have I wonne, yeer be yeer, / An hundred mark sith I was pardoner.”<sup>28</sup> This too seems as if it could be pretending, because given the bad luck the Pardoner has had convincing the Canterbury company of his relics’ veracity, it seems possible he might always get carried away by his own cunning and reveal his secrets.

Looking back to the *General Prologue*, however, it is clear from the narrator’s admission that “with thise relikes, whan that he fond / A povre person dwellynge upon lond, / Upon a day he gat hym moore moneye / than that the person gat in monthes tweye” that the Pardoner is an expert at his job.<sup>29</sup> That is, though he admits they are actually worthless, the Pardoner’s relics are effective. Despite their status as profane objects, as both he and the narrator reveal, people pay to see and touch them, viewing them as objects capable of granting pardon. That they are treated identically as

27 “The Pardoner’s Tale,” *The Riverside Chaucer* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987) ll. 941-944.

28 “The Pardoner’s Prologue,” 385-390.

29 “General Prologue,” 701-704.

“real” relics by people who believe them to be authentic shows that operationally, any difference between “true” relics and “false” relics has been erased, verifying Baudrillard’s explanation.

While the way the Pardoner’s fakeries are treated as “true” sacred relics makes them simulacral, it also raises an overarching concern about veracity that gives this comparison weight. Baudrillard uses iconoclasts and the idea of God as a simulacrum to make the claim that “it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them.”<sup>30</sup> This seems to be an effect of setting up the Pardoner’s relics as simulacra. By revealing to his fellow pilgrims that his relics are fakes, the Pardoner erases any chances he may have had of reaping financial benefit from his travel mates. By enacting this unmasking before the Pilgrim Chaucer, who is narrating and commentating the voyage, the Pardoner’s chances of being able to re-mask his deception become even less likely. In fact, because he has spent so long deprecating his worthless baggage to show how convincing and conniving he is, when he is pulled into his own hyperreality and tries to fool his companions he is not only refused and ridiculed, but threatened with violence. The Host responds to the Pardoner’s offer vehemently, exclaiming:

Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech,  
And swere it were a relyk of a seint,  
Though it were with thy fundament depeint!  
But, by the croys which that Seint Eleyne fond,  
I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond  
In stide of relikes or of seintuarie.  
Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;  
They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!<sup>31</sup>

Not only has he failed to impress his audience, since he has already unmasked his deception, but both the Pardoner’s individual authority, and by extension the authority of his profession, have been thrown into question by the Host’s outburst. The Pardoner

30 Baudrillard, 5.

31 “The Pardoner’s Tale,” 948-955.

brags about the simulacral value of worthless objects. The Host, however, escalates possibility of simulation, insinuating that not only can rags and animal bones serve as relics, but actual bodily waste products could ostensibly be claimed as sacred. Melvin Storm points out that the Host swears by a true relic—Saint Helena’s cross—which in juxtaposition with the Pardoner’s relics reminds the other pilgrims and the audience that the abuse of relics leads to an abuse of pilgrimage.<sup>32</sup> However, this same juxtaposition raises the possibility that all relics could be false, just as the Pardoner’s are; what is the guarantee that Saint Helena’s cross is any more real than the pillowcase the Pardoner says is “Oure lady veyl”?<sup>33</sup>

Blending the reality with the profane stand-in, as the Host does here when he speaks of Saint Helena’s cross in proximity to the Pardoner’s “coillons” enshrined in pig feces, speaks to the generational power of language Seeta Chaganti references in her examination of the inscription and performativity of relics. Chaganti explains that the Host “speaks into being a structure, a visual and material language” when he expresses his wish to enshrine the Pardoner’s genitalia.<sup>34</sup> That the Host can create a reliquary like this in his audience’s mind simply by speaking it into being insinuates others could create such structures just as easily.<sup>35</sup> In fact, Chaucer

32 Storm, 815.

33 Robyn Malo’s assessment of the differing visibility between notable and non-notable relics seems to affirm this insecurity. Though the Pardoner’s relics, by virtue of their small size and the anonymity of their supposed former owners, are non-notable relics and therefore would not have been regarded as seriously as relics enshrined in churches or cathedrals even if they were genuine, they are at least visible to their audience, which both avers their existence and makes it theoretically possible to see their inauthenticity. Notable relics, however, were only visible to select important individuals, and ordinary pilgrims like the Canterbury group would not have been permitted to approach near enough to see them. Without the verification of visibility, there was no sure way to know there even were relics behind the altars or screens that hid them, much less whether those relics, if present, were really from a saint (85-86).

34 Seeta Chaganti, *The Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary: Enshrinement, Inscription, Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 149.

35 One of the earliest and most influential *translatio* stories – that is, hagiographic narratives of the relocation of sacred relics – was of the very cross the Host swears by (Geary 13). That the Host chooses this particular relic seems another suggestion both of the power of language to create, and of the power of fiction to sway perception: because the cross was moved and its status and power as a relic averred upon arrival to its new location, there is no way outside of faith to determine its validity.

himself has done just this in his creation not only of the characters in the *Canterbury Tales*, but of the stories they tell—the *Tales* themselves. The Pardoner's relics are not what he claims they are when he is lying or telling the truth. They are just fiction: words on a page Chaucer has written into being, which through language's creative power become "realities" in the minds of his readers. This ease of creation reveals the danger of fiction's influence on reality: how is an audience to know what is real and what has been generated, or spoken into being, by imagination?

The Host's utilization of the language of relics to speak of waste products – something even more profane than the Pardoner's collection – can clearly be linked to Baudrillard's discussion of fiction as dangerous. If the "truth" of a simulation is exposed as hyperreal instead of real, this has a corresponding effect on the "real" itself. He explains of the Lascaux caves that due to the construction of an exact replica used to view the site without causing damage or degradation to the original, "from now on there is no longer any difference: the duplication suffices to render both [original and copy] artificial."<sup>36</sup> Since the Pardoner has admitted the possibility of fake relics to a group of pilgrims bound for a site that contains relics, the implication now exists that the veracity of the relics at Canterbury – the relics some of them might already be planning to offer to – could also be in question. Because the Pardoner has been successful in his job in the past, and makes a comfortable living from claiming the authenticity of his simulations, there seems to be no way of telling whether a relic is "real" in the sense that it actually came from a saint, or fake as those the Pardoner carries, unless we are told outright. With no way of determining falsity without direct admission from someone who knows, not only is veracity always in question, but in some cases it can never be determined. Though he as a character is a fiction, and though perhaps, as Storm contends, the deceptive practices he enacts were rare, the presentation of the Pardoner as successful in this heretical behavior plants a seed of possibility and therefore doubt in Chaucer's readers that extra-textual referents for

36 Baudrillard, 9.

the Pardoner could exist, and extra-textual instances could as well, hidden only because their truth has not been or cannot be revealed by an instigator.

Since there appears to be no way of determining whether any individual relic is real or a simulation unless the possessor of that relic unmasks his dissimulation and tells us, it is possible that all relics could be fakes. Robyn Malo argues that through his creation of the Pardoner, “Chaucer works within a literary and historical tradition that was concerned with whether pilgrims and laypeople would get too close to relics on the one hand, and concerned on the other hand that, when pilgrims or other laypeople were offered the chance to get close to non-notable relics, the relics could well be fakes.”<sup>37</sup> Offering to and believing in relics—especially notable or famous relics like St. Helen’s cross or Becket’s bones—was such an established tradition by the time Chaucer was writing that the only connecting thread the medieval laity had to the relics’ origin—the bodies of the saints long dead—was that very tradition or cultural belief. Cultural application of authenticity in the form of inscription, authenticating documents, or an oral or written tradition, was needed to link the otherwise arbitrary object to a specific saint.<sup>38</sup>

Because many reliquaries completely obscured visibility of the relic enclosed within, and in some cases crucial elements like inscriptions or identifications were added to reliquaries long after they were made, the question of how to determine veracity for the pieces inside—if indeed there were any—remains.<sup>39</sup> Because the medieval audience had only existing traditions as proof, for them, the model comes before the reality, and the possibility exists that there could be only models, like the Pardoner’s equipment, and no “real” sacred objects left, if there were any to begin with.

37 Malo, 86.

38 Geary, 6.

39 Chaganti, 22, 12.

The idea that relics could be faked, and thus that aspects of a parishioner's search for forgiveness could be inauthentic without his awareness, has at least two larger implications, relating to indulgences and to penance. As Minnis points out, the theory behind indulgences was not only related to preaching, but also interwoven with theological ideas about the Eucharist, penance, baptism, and absolution, making it integrally related with most of the fundamentals of Catholicism.<sup>40</sup>

Thus if the Pardoner's relics are questionable, his whole authority becomes speculative, including the indulgences he carries. If his relics are fakes but sometimes he claims they are real, there is no way to be sure his claimed papally approved indulgences are necessarily what he says they are either. After all, he does say that "Bulles of popes and of cardynales, / Of patriarkes and bishops I shewe," but he makes this seemingly authoritative statement immediately after telling his audience that "thane telle I forth me tales."<sup>41</sup> If we stretch this linear proximity a bit, it could insinuate that perhaps the papal bulls and indulgences themselves are part of the tales the Pardoner tells. If not only his relics, but also the pardons he carries are simulacra, this has clear implications for Catholicism at large; it raises the question of which ideas the laity has been asked to follow based on faith are actually true.

In relation to penance, if the relics and possibly the indulgences the Pardoner offers are fake, it is also possible to question whether the real penance a parishioner offers has any effect. Though the results of penance and pardons differed—penance was required to obtain absolution from sin while pardons reduced time in Purgatory—because both involved a person's eventual spiritual placement, they were frequently linked. Since, as noted, the linked process involves two steps to actually have any impact on purgatorial punishment, if the public half (the pardon) is fake but the private half (the penance)

<sup>40</sup> Minnis, 163.

<sup>41</sup> "The Pardoner's Prologue," 342-343, 341.

is true, it cannot be determined whether the effect is the same as it would have been if both penance and indulgence were “real.”<sup>42</sup> Storm emphasizes that though the effectiveness of the Pardoner’s indulgences is uncertain, the possibility that they might not work, even if penitents believe they will, does open the door for questions about whether true penance can work in the absence of true clerical absolution.<sup>43</sup> Returning to Baudrillard’s warning that simulations can eradicate the distance between “the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary,’” the question of whether a fake sacred object can dispense “real” spiritual results becomes a concern.<sup>44</sup> Because living a life without sin was practically impossible, the medieval laity depended in some part on indulgences to aid them in attaining salvation. Introducing the idea that this penance for sale might not actually reduce their time in Purgatory throws their faith in the established ecclesiastical system off balance.

The fictionality of both the Pardoner and his simulacra also have a considerable overarching implication on medieval society. Not only does the Pardoner assert that his relics are rags and animal bones that do the work of saints’ remains within his story, but he tells the story within the frame of a pilgrimage narrative, directed and structured by the Host’s commands, narrated by a fellow pilgrim, and written by Chaucer the author. This dizzying collection of frames only serves to emphasize how far from “truth” the Pardoner and his relics actually are.

This is an invented character, only “alive” through the generative power of language as it is read and imagined by real people. Thus the descriptions of the simulacra he carries are only textual images. However, the power and the danger of the Pardoner’s fiction, and the fiction about the Pardoner, is that it contains the suggestion of something that could actually happen. As mentioned above, because the “real” saints’ relics pilgrims could offer to were

42 Or, conversely, if both the indulgence and the penance are inauthentic.

43 Storm, 814.

44 Baudrillard, 3.

enshrined long before Chaucer's time, and probably without a large lay audience present to establish their veracity, the relics pilgrims traveled to see might only be "real" because they were believed to be. Chaucer has offered the suggestion to his fourteenth century audience that relics could be fictions, and he has done so in a fictional work. The fact that the Pardoner and his misdeeds exist in a text means they have nothing solid as their base; they are fictional fictions and purely generative, as they have the power to create in the minds of Chaucer's readers the idea that the realities outside of this fictional model might actually be fictions as well.

While he does not necessarily contribute to the theological doubt the Pardoner's practices raise, Chaucer's existence within the *Canterbury Tales* as a character adds a final layer of complexity to the hyperreality of the *Tales* themselves. As the Pilgrim Chaucer, the voice of the narrator through whom all our readings are funneled, Chaucer offers a version of himself that can neither be trusted nor ignored. As he relates his portrait of the Pardoner in the *General Prologue*, the Pilgrim Chaucer reveals the Pardoner's secret before the Pardoner has a chance to do so himself. Thus we as readers never have the opportunity to be fooled by the Pardoner's claims, though we must ask whether the Pilgrim Chaucer has.

Not only do some of the Pilgrim Chaucer's observations seem at once naïve and impartial, but the *Tales* as a whole, and therefore the portraits in the *General Prologue*, are retrospective for the narrating character. He relates his observations only after he has had the opportunity to write them down, and therefore we cannot know whether the Pilgrim Chaucer recognized the Pardoner's equipment as fake before being told or not.<sup>45</sup> If our narrator's authority is uncertain, we know one of two things may be true. On one hand, Chaucer's lack of authority means the Pardoner's relics are truly

45 See the "General Prologue," where Chaucer promises to tell his observations only after "hadde I spoken with hem everichon," and that he will provide portraits of his fellows "whil I have tyme and space, / Er that I ferther in this tale pace" (31, 35-36). His references to reading and turning pages also indicate his reflections are being written down at some distance from the action they depict ("The Miller's Tale," 3176-77, "The Retraction").

simulacral: capable of fooling anyone and therefore potentially upending all trust in the practice. On the other, it means the Pardoner is such a good liar that the Pilgrim Chaucer believes—or gives no indication he does not believe—everything the Pardoner says. That would raise the possibility that the Pardoner is not successful in his deception, that he does not reap the quantities of profit he claims, and that perhaps he always meets the kind of violence and rejection he receives from the Host. Like relics, we cannot know which is true unless we are told directly, and even then we still must depend on the credibility of the teller to decide whether this “truth” is valid.

That we cannot know for sure which of these scenarios is true for Chaucer’s characters, and that this injection of an unreliable narrator identical in name to the poet himself has the potential to confuse what is real with what is fictional, makes the *Canterbury Tales* as a project a journey into the hyperreal. The portraits Chaucer offers range from specific to stereotypical: the existence of a real innkeeper named Harry Bailley with a hostelry in Southwark in the same company as a monk who exemplifies all the negative characteristics critiqued about the vocation muddies the borders of the picture we are offered.<sup>46</sup> Is it intended to represent the society that was, complete with caricatures of “real” people, or is it intended to critique and parody that society by describing corruption and virtue at extremes that may never have existed? What results is a hyperreality: a fiction almost more real than reality, inhabited by larger-than-life characters who replace our perception of their extra-textual referents and therefore have as much, if not more, influence over our understanding than the real people. After reading this Pardoner, all Pardoners become suspect, just as all relics and indulgences might also lose their veracity after hearing how easily the Pardoner has replaced them with simulacra.

46 Benson, 853 (Note to line 4358).

Though his motives are purely selfish, driven by a desire for material gain, Chaucer's Pardoner and his fake relics have the capacity to create ripples throughout the framework of medieval Christian society. Though he admits his collection is made up of fakes in his prologue, the Pardoner's ability to effectively mask them as true sacred objects which are believed in and treated as true by his indulgence-seeking customers marks them not as parodies or imitations, but as simulacra. Using Baudrillard's definition to explain how the Pardoner's relics operate within his fictional society not only helps us understand the intricacies of the idea of simulation, but reveals a very real danger of fiction Chaucer seems to highlight in his presentation of this character: even a simulation can have a lasting impact on a society, because even the suggestion of a fiction within a fiction can be adopted and believed in the "real" world.

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*Chaucer as Pilgrim*

*From the Ellesmere Manuscript, Huntington Library*