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*Chaucer's Pardoner's Tale and Its 2003 BBC Adaptation*

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Historical Linguistics and Literature at Ghent University. It presents a comparative study of Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale* and its 2003 BBC adaptation. Along with my supervisor, prof. Dr Guido Latré, I was able to narrow down my focus and eventually answer the research question that was laid out. I believe that this dissertation has allowed me to grow not only as a student, but as a person in general.

In this brief preface, I also want to take the opportunity to thank everyone who has helped and supported me throughout the many months of work. Some people in particular deserve a special mention.

Special thanks go to my supervisor prof. Dr Guido Latré for his guidance and helpful feedback during the process of research and writing. Advice was always given when needed and my questions were answered in the best possible way.

I also want to express my gratitude to my family for their unconditional support and advice. They have kept me motivated, even during the more difficult times. Without them, this dissertation would not have been possible.

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I hope you enjoy your reading.

Birgit Ampe
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(20,482 words)
Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to compare Chaucer’s Pardoner’s Tale to its 2003 BBC adaptation, and to determine how the change to a modern society has influenced the representation of sin, the Pardoner’s sexuality, and the Old Man in the adaptation.

In the first part, a discussion of Chaucer’s Pardoner’s Tale is presented. The theme of sin is first discussed in the broader context of the fourteenth century and in relation to Chaucer’s life. A close reading of the text will then reveal the techniques used by Chaucer to present the Pardoner’s sinful nature and his amorality. Next, the biological eunuchry of the Pardoner is explained as a symbol for his spiritual impotence. Finally, the strengths and weaknesses of previous interpretations of the Old Man are examined and a new reading of the Old Man in relation to the Holy Trinity is proposed.

The second part provides a comparison with the BBC adaptation. The results indicate that the change to a modern society had an impact on the techniques used to represent the protagonist’s sinful nature and amorality. Nevertheless, the adaptation remained true to the original ideas. Furthermore, the protagonist is represented as equally spiritual impotent, but as a result of a different set of motives. Finally, the results reveal that the change to a young girl is used as a means to oppose criminal acts with innocence and to give the victims of such acts a voice.

Pardoner, sin, sexuality, old man, society
Abstract

Het doel van deze scriptie is om een comparatieve studie te presenteren tussen Chaucers Pardoner’s Tale en de BBC adaptatie uit 2003. Bovendien wordt onderzocht op welke manier de moderne maatschappij een invloed heeft gehad op de representatie van zonde, de Pardoners seksualiteit en de oude man in de adaptatie.

Het eerste deel behandelt Chaucers Pardoner’s Tale. Het thema van zonde wordt eerst besproken in de algemene context van de veertiende eeuw en Chaucers leven. Daarna onthult een gedetailleerde studie van de tekst een aantal technieken die Chaucer gebruikte om het zondige en amorele karakter van de Pardoner aan te tonen. Vervolgens wordt een connectie vastgesteld tussen de Pardoner als biologische eunuch en zijn spirituele impotentie. Ten slotte worden de sterke en zwakke punten van mogelijke interpretaties nopens de oude man onder de loep genomen en een nieuwe lezing van de oude man met betrekking tot de Heilige Drievuldigheid wordt voorgesteld.

Het tweede deel focust op de vergelijking met de BBC adaptatie. De bekomen resultaten tonen aan dat de overgang naar een moderne maatschappij een impact heeft gehad op de technieken die het zondige en amorele karakter van de protagonist aanduiden. Men bleef echter wel trouw aan het originele gedachtegoed. Daarnaast werd ook vastgesteld dat de protagonist evenzeer spiritueel impotent is, maar dat dit zijn oorsprong vindt in andere beweegredenen. Ten slotte werd geconstateerd dat de ommekeer naar een jong meisje als doel heeft oppositie te bieden aan criminele activiteiten in de vorm van onschuld en om de slachtoffers van dergelijke activiteiten een stem te geven.

Pardoner, zonde, seksualiteit, oude man, maatschappij
1. Introduction

Adapting British fiction for the silver screen is nothing new. Already as early as the 1910s, directors recognized its potential. It is only in recent years that a new trend has started to emerge. Instead of setting the film in the same time period as the original story, some directors decided to place the story in a more modern context of the twenty-first century. Baz Luhrmann, for example, reinterpreted Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet as a love story between two members of opposing Los Angeles mafia families in Romeo + Juliet (1996). In 2009, the Royal Shakespeare Company adapted Hamlet for the screen with a brilliant performance of David Tennant reciting the famous soliloquies through the eyes of multiple security cameras. And in the television series Sherlock (2010-present), the famous detective is reimagined as he solves crime in present-day London alongside his trusted partner and Afghan war veteran John Watson.

With many more examples to give, it is safe to say that this approach has proven to be a successful one. It therefore came as no surprise that when the BBC released a miniseries with a modern take on Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, it was an instant success. Immediately following its release in 2003, the series was praised by the general audience as well as the critics, and it even managed to win a BAFTA award the following year. The series provided viewers with the first modern retelling of the tales that at the same time remained true to the original plots and themes (Forni 175). Of Chaucer’s initial twenty-two tales, six were chosen to be adapted for the screen by distinguished screenwriters. Sally Wainwright decided to turn the Wife of Bath into a Hollywood celebrity dealing with age issues, and Peter Bowker transformed the Miller into a con artist at a karaoke bar. The Sea Captain’s Tale was reimagined by Avie Luthra who transposed the story to that of a British Asian immigrant community and Olivia Hetreed used the same approach for The Man of Law’s Tale by focussing on a Nigerian refugee in Britain. The final two tales, The Knight’s Tale and The Pardoner’s Tale, both deal with social outcasts. Tony Marchant sets the former in prison where two working-class men fall in love with the same woman and Tony Grounds turns the three Flemish rioters into outcasts on the edge of society in present-day Rochester, Kent.

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1 Examples include Frankenstein (1910) and Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1910).
Despite its interesting new take on *The Canterbury Tales* and its popularity, not many scholars have taken the opportunity to analyse the adaptation in detail. Nor have there been any serious attempts at comparing it to Chaucer’s original. This would, however, prove to be a very interesting field of study. Screenwriters have their own interpretation of the story they adapt. A comparison to the original might reveal the different ways and techniques used by these screenwriters to present their own version. Moreover, since the BBC adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales* is a modern retelling, it could provide some new insights as to how people today interpret Chaucer. I therefore propose that scholars should follow this new trend of modern adaptations and use comparative studies to gain new insights into modern societies and their relation to literature.

With this dissertation I hope to provide a first detailed comparison between Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and its 2003 BBC adaptation. In order to provide such a detailed comparison, I will only focus on one of the six tales, that of the Pardoner. The character of the Pardoner and his ability to captivate an audience with his grim tale of three rioters on a quest to slay death is still as fascinating today as it was in the fourteenth century. The BBC series picked up on this fascination, but as a modern retelling it provides a new perspective on some of the themes in the original.

Comparing all the themes that have been discussed so far by critics in relation to *The Pardoner’s Tale* would prevent me from making a detailed comparison. I will therefore only focus on the ones I believe are most relevant to the BBC adaptation. A first one is the theme of sin. Greed – or sin in general – plays a central role in Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale*. A comparison to the theme of sin in the BBC adaptation is therefore indispensable. A second topic is the Pardoner’s sexuality. This well-known and widely discussed subject is also worth comparing to the adaptation. Finally, the identity of the Old Man must be looked at in more detail. In the adaptation, the Old Man has been replaced with a young girl. Such a change is both radical and meaningful, and must be examined further. By means of a comparative study of these themes, I hope to illustrate the impact of the twenty-first-century setting on the adaptation. The first part of this dissertation will be primarily concerned with Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale*. A study of the criticism along with a close reading of the text will be used to formulate my own interpretation of the tale. The second part will focus on the BBC adaptation and how it compares to the original.
2. Chaucer’s *The Pardoner’s Tale*

*The Pardoner’s Tale* begins when the Host, deeply affected by the unhappy ending of *The Physician’s Tale*, asks the Pardoner to tell “som myrthe or japes right anon” (Riverside Chaucer 194, l. 319). His proposition is met with some protest from the other pilgrims who want to hear “som moral thyng” (RC 194, l. 325). The Pardoner agrees to comply to their wishes after he has had a draught of ale and some cake. In his Prologue, he takes the opportunity to boast about his cunning and wit in abusing his office. He explains in detail to his companions how he preaches to a gullible audience in order to trick them with his false relics and indulgences. Even though he claims his motto is *Radix malorum est Cupiditas*, he makes it quite clear that he preaches “nothyng but for coveitise” (RC 195, l. 433).

After this moment of self-revelation, the Pardoner tells his Tale. He sets the scene in a tavern in Flanders where three rioters indulge in the so-called tavern sins, i.e. gluttony, gambling and swearing. The Pardoner goes on to condemn these sins in what Cooper has accurately described as “some of the most high-flown rhetoric found anywhere in the Tales” (273). He then tells his exemplum of three rioters on a quest to slay death. Upon hearing one of their friends has died, the three rioters make a pact to “sleen this false traytour Deeth” (RC 199, l. 699). On their quest, they meet an old man whom they accuse of being Death’s spy. The old man directs them to a nearby oak tree where they discover a treasure. Deciding that it is too dangerous to move the treasure in daylight, they send the youngest after food and wine to pass the time while they wait for the cover of darkness. Meanwhile, the others plot to kill the youngest rioter so they can have the treasure to themselves. Unaware of his fate, the youngest rioter poisons the wine with the same intention. When he arrives back at the oak tree, he is murdered by his two companions. His killers decide to celebrate with a draught of wine which proves to be fatal. In the end, their greed became their doom.

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2 All quotations from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* are taken from Chaucer, Geoffrey, and Larry Dean Benson. *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed., Oxford: Oxford university press, 2008. Subsequent references to page number and lines are included parenthetically in the text and are referred to with RC.

3 This story was already well-known and widespread before Chaucer used it as an exemplum in *The Pardoner’s Tale*, but the quest for Death is his own addition (Cooper 264). Chaucer also drew on a number of other sources for *The Pardoner’s Tale* in general, including the first elegy of Maximian, Innocent’s *De miseria*, Jerome’s *Adversus Jovinianum* and the *Roman de la rose* (Cooper 265). For a more extensive discussion of the sources and analogues, see Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales* (1996), pp. 264-5; Frederick Tupper, “The Pardoner’s Tale” in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales* (1958), pp. 415-38; Robert M. Correale & Mary Hamel (ed.), *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*, vol. I & II (2002, 2005).
When he has finished his grim tale, the Pardoner turns his attention to his fellow pilgrims and tries to convince them to buy his indulgences, starting with the Host who is apparently “moost enveloped in synne” (RC 202, l. 942). However, he makes a mistake and confuses his ‘imagined’ audience with his ‘real’ audience to whom he has just explained his malpractices. In return, he is greeted with a most angry retort from the Host who threatens to cut off his testicles and have them enshrined in a dog’s turd. Eventually, the noble Knight intervenes and after a kiss between the Pardoner and the Host, the pilgrims “ryden forth hir weye” (RC 202, l. 969).

In the following chapters, I want to take a closer look at The Pardoner’s Tale. The theme of sin will be explored first, followed by a discussion of the Pardoner’s sexuality. Finally, the identity of the Old Man will be examined.
2.1. The Pardoner’s Sins in Context

Sin in all its forms plays an important role in *The Pardoner’s Tale*. The following chapter will therefore deal with the theme of sin in the tale and try to place it in the broader context of the fourteenth century. After discussing the relationship between sin and religion in the Middle Ages, I will briefly focus on Chaucer’s life and his sinful past. Then I will examine the different techniques used by Chaucer to represent the Pardoner’s sinful nature. Finally, the Pardoner’s amorality will be analysed in relation to the moral exemplum.

2.1.1. Sin in the Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, sin played a crucial role in the teachings of Christianity. Especially its contrast with virtue was important as it was employed by the Church to spread their ideas on moral righteousness ("Virtues and Vices" DMA). It is within this context that the notion of the seven deadly sins developed. Also called the cardinal or capital sins, the seven deadly sins were described as “headings under which all evil actions and tendencies could be ranged” and comprised of pride, envy, sloth, anger, gluttony, lust and avarice (“Seven Deadly Sins” DMA). Committing one of these sins was believed to result in spiritual death (“Seven Deadly Sins” DMA).

However, it did not necessarily lead to eternal damnation. If the sinner followed certain steps, he could be absolved. Brundage (295-6) explains that the sinner first had to repent and show true contrition. Then he had to confess his sins to an ordained priest. The priest could grant him forgiveness in the name of God and give him a punishment as a form of penance. The penance could be performed in the present life, or in purgatory if the sinner neglected to do so (“Indulgences” DMA). Brundage also mentions that besides this ‘inner court’ where a priest judged over the sinner’s soul in private, there was an ‘outer court’ where canonical judges punished ecclesiastical crimes (296).

There was also another way to repent besides confession: buying indulgences or pardons from a pardoner. The idea was that God had established an infinite Treasury of Grace on earth for

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4 The majority of the following explanation is taken from Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales* (2009), p. 58. Other works that I used to explain the Treasury of Grace include A. C. Spearing, “The Canterbury Tales IV: exemplum and fable” in *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer* (2003), p. 201; “Indulgences” in *The Dictionary of Middle
the pope to watch over. Indulgences could be drawn from this treasury and sold to repentant
sinners, who would be freed from punishment and penance in return for money. The money
that was collected by the pardoners would then go to the poor. Important to point out is that
when the sinner bought a pardon he was only freed from his punishment, but not absolved of
his sin. Only God has the power to absolve, or an ordained priest who acts in his name
(Cooper 58; “Indulgences” DMA; Shaffern 50). Although the system was created with good
intentions, it soon became liable to corruption. According to Cooper, pardoners claimed they
could absolve sin, forged papal indulgences and made their way into churches uninvited or
without being in orders (58).

In the fourteenth century, sin and punishment became increasingly relevant with the outbreak
of the bubonic plague. The Black Death raged over Europe from 1347 to 1351 and reached
the shores of England in September 1348 (“Black Death” DMA). Whoever contracted the
disease got boils in the groin and armpits and black lumps on the rest of the body, and would
usually die within three days or less (Pearsall, Life 25). The cause was the bacillus Yersinia
pestis, which was spread via fleas on black rats that came to Europe on trading ships from the
Middle East (Pearsall, Life 25). This was, however, unknown to medieval physicians. Many
people therefore resorted to different explanations.

Some of those theories include earthquakes, an unfortunate position of the planets, a Plague
Maiden or even Jews poisoning the wells (Beidler, “The Plague” 262). According to Beidler,
the most widespread explanation for the plague was that “it was a punishment by God for
man’s sins” (“The Plague” 262). This theory was accepted by many God-fearing Christians
from all layers of society (“Black Death” DMA). The Dictionary of the Middle Ages
mentions for example Pope Clement VI who organized processions in the honour of the
Virgin Mary in the hope that she would temper God’s wrath, and the introduction
of a new
plague saint, St. Roch⁵, in addition to the older St. Sebastian (“Black Death”). This in turn
illustrates the importance of sin in everyday life in the Middle Ages and its close relationship
to religion and the Church.

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⁵ St. Roch is usually depicted lifting up his clothing in order to reveal a bubonic boil in his groin. He is often
accompanied by a dog holding a piece of bread in his mouth. This refers to the legend in which St. Roch was
exiled after he contracted the plague and was helped by a dog that brought him bread and licked his wounds.
2.1.2. Chaucer’s Sinful Past

Throughout the centuries, Geoffrey Chaucer has been regarded as a gentle poet and the majority of his biographers have referred to him as “a decent sort of fellow” (Pearsall, “Introduction” 8). However, it is often forgotten that Chaucer had a crime-related past. The father of English poetry was not only a victim of crime, he also seems to have committed some himself. It is therefore interesting to discuss this part of Chaucer’s life before examining the theme of sin in his Pardoner’s Tale.

In the year 1390, Chaucer became the victim of crime when he was robbed by highwaymen of approximately twenty pounds, some horses and other goods (Carlson 31). Unfortunately for Chaucer, the money he was carrying did not belong to him. At the time of the robbery, he was Clerk of the King’s Works and was carrying the payroll for the builders of the royal palace of Eltham, meaning the money belonged to the King (Carlson 33). In the end, Chaucer was forgiven for having lost the money and the robbers were tried in court and eventually outlawed (Carlson 40).

But perhaps more interesting is Chaucer’s own involvement in crime. Although some biographers of Chaucer simply choose to ignore his criminal past, he did in fact have one. He was, for example, no stranger to extortion and assault6. Furthermore, he was involved in a case of contempt and trespass. The only document we have regarding this event dates back to 1379 in which Chaucer appoints an attorney to defend him in court against a plea of contempt and trespass brought against him by Thomas Stondon (Pearsall, Life 134). Due to the lack of any further documents surrounding the case, it is impossible to tell whether Chaucer actually committed the crime and of what aspect of trespass he was accused. As Bellamy points out: “trespass included such crimes as assault, breaking into houses, taking goods, issuing threats, abduction, conspiracy, extortion, obstruction of sewers and dykes, resisting officials, forestalling, and using non-standard weights and measures” (33).

But the episode in Chaucer’s life that raised perhaps most eyebrows is the supposed rape of Cecelia Chaumpaigne. In 1873, Frederick James Furnivall discovered a document in which Cecelia Chaumpaigne released Chaucer from “all manner of actions such as they relate to my

6 Regarding the latter, Chaucer supposedly attacked a Grey Friar in Fleet Street. However, Carlson points out that this attack may not have happened at all since the episode is poorly evidenced (29).
rape or any other thing or cause” (Cannon 74). The document was enrolled in the court of Chancery on 1 May 1380 and Cecilia acknowledged the document three days later, on 4 May, in the presence of witnesses (Pearsall, Life 135). The actual phrasing in the document is ‘omnimodas acciones tam de raptu meo tam de aliqua alia re vel causa’. Especially the phrase ‘de raptu meo’ has sparked up debate because in the fourteenth century ‘raptus’ could be used to indicate both rape and abduction (Cannon 75).

One of the scholars who believes the phrase refers to rape – and not abduction – is Derek Pearsall. According to him, in the case of abduction the common phrasing is ‘rapuerunt et abduxerunt’, whereas rape is referred to by just the word ‘raptus’ (Life 135). Furthermore, he argues that abduction refers to “the forcible appropriation of the powers of guardianship over a minor” (Life 135). Cecelia was probably no longer a minor at the time, given the fact that her father died twenty years earlier and that the release was acknowledged by herself and not a legal guardian (Life 135-6). It is therefore improbable that she accused Chaucer of abduction and, as a result, more plausible that she meant rape. However, Pearsall also points out that this does not necessarily mean that Chaucer actually raped Cecelia; she could also have threatened Chaucer with a charge of rape in order to come to some sort of (financial) settlement (Life 137).

2.1.3. The Pardoner’s Sinful Nature

The Pardoner’s Tale was written in the last decade of Chaucer’s life and has perhaps the strongest connection to sin than any other tale in The Canterbury Tales. First introduced to the reader as “a gentil pardoner” (RC 34, l. 669), the main character is not as harmless as suggested. Throughout the Tales, Chaucer uses a whole range of techniques to reveal the Pardoner’s sinful nature, either explicitly or implicitly.

A first technique already presents itself in the General Prologue. As the pilgrims set out on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, the fictional Chaucer describes each one of them, including the Pardoner. He is described last, which may hint at his ambiguous position in the group. The fictional Chaucer relates that the Pardoner is singing a love song with his companion the Summoner (RC 34, l. 672), that he has long blond hair like wax which hangs on his shoulders like a clump of flax (RC 34, ll. 675-6) and that he rides without a hat (RC 34, l. 683). This description already reveals certain aspects of his nature. A pardon was supposed to be a
religious man, yet he is singing a suggestive love song loud and clear. Along with the unflattering description of his hair, he is presented as a character one does not want to be associated with. He also does not wear a hat because he believes that is the latest fashion (RC 34, l. 682), but in reality he is making a fool of himself.

Furthermore, the Pardoner’s relics are explicitly exposed as fake. The Virgin Mary’s veil is simply a pillow case (RC 34, ll. 694-5) and the ‘stones’ he is carrying are mere pig’s bones (RC 34, ll. 699-700). According to the fictional Chaucer, the Pardoner is able to collect more money in a day with his false relics than a noble parson is able to do in two months (RC 34, ll.701-4). Moreover, “with feyne flaterye and japes / He made the person and the p eple his apes” (RC 34, ll.704-5). The Pardoner is revealed as a fraud and a loathsome character.

Interestingly, the fictional Chaucer also hides his own opinion in the description of the Pardoner. He says, for example, that the Pardoner has glaring eyes like those of a hare (RC 34, l. 684), and a voice like that of a goat (RC 34, l. 687). These animal references have been discussed often in relation to the Pardoner’s sexuality, but according to D. W. Robertson, “one common medieval device for illustrating lechery is to depict a man riding a goat and either carrying or pursuing a rabbit” (255). David Benson adds that the references may have been used to represent the Pardoner as “a more general example of unspecified lust” (341-2). Although these are his own impressions, the fictional Chaucer presents them as if they were facts. Another instance where the hidden opinion reveals itself is in the line “I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare” (RC 34, l. 691). This line has often been interpreted as denoting the Pardoner’s eunuchry or homosexuality. In chapter 2.2., the Pardoner’s sexuality will be discussed more in detail.

A final clue in the General Prologue is given at the very beginning when it is said that the Pardoner comes from Rouncivale (RC 34, l. 670), which is a reference to the hospital of St. Mary Rouncivale. In his article “St. Mary Rouncivale, Charing Cross: The Hospital of Chaucer’s Pardoner”, David Maxfield explains the connection. In order to support themselves financially, hospitals often relied on pardoners to collect alms (Maxfield 149). This was a common and legal practice as long as the pardoners were authorized by the Church. However, there were also a number of illegal pardoners who took advantage of the situation. Whenever the hospital had political or economic problems and had to cease its activities, illegitimate
pardoners seized the opportunity to sell false indulgences in the name of the hospital in order to line their own pockets (Maxfield 153).

It is possible that Chaucer’s Pardoner may have been one of these illegitimate pardoners, but there is another possibility as well. Maxfield mentions the Chronicle of the Benedictine monk John of Reading in which the monk accuses the hospital of paying for a new chapel with the money collected from selling false indulgences (153). Although Maxfield acknowledges that this testimonial may be false and written out of envy, he also refers to the year 1422 when Pope Martin V declared that “all but one of the bulls used by the Hospital of St. Mary Rouncivale, Charing Cross, definitely were forgeries” (156-7). He thus concludes that Chaucer’s Pardoner may have been legitimate, but his indulgences were in all likelihood fake, which is in turn proven by his connection to the hospital (157).

Another technique used by Chaucer to present the Pardoner’s sinful nature are the few words spoken before *The Pardoner’s Tale* actually begins. After the pitiful story of the Physician, the Host asks the Pardoner to “telle us som myrthe or japes” (RC 194, l. 319). Right away, the other pilgrims protest and exclaim: “Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye! / Telle us som moral thyng, that we may leere / Som wit, and thanne wol we gladly heere” (RC 194, ll. 324-6). This reaction implies that the pilgrims already suspect the Pardoner’s sinful nature (Halverson 186). The Pardoner then agrees to tell his tale, “[b]ut first,’ quod he, ‘heere at this alestake / I wol bothe drynke and eten of a cake’” (RC 194, ll. 321-2). The whole scene thus takes place in a tavern. As Sedgewick has already argued, Chaucer used this setting to add a further layer of irony to the tale because the Pardoner is in this way indulging in the exact same sins he is preaching against (442).

After this brief interlude, Chaucer moves on to his next technique, the Pardoner’s Prologue. This is perhaps the best illustration of the Pardoner’s sinful nature as it is the Pardoner himself who explicitly and in detail explains his sinful character. He is boasting to his fellow pilgrims about his malpractices and explains step by step how he tricks his audience:

*First* I pronounce whenne that I come,
*An thanne my bulles shewe I, alle and some.*
[…]
*And after that thanne telle I forth my tales;*
Although he keeps reminding us that *Radix malorum est Cupiditas*, the Pardoner states multiple times that he preaches “nothyng but for coveitise” (RC 195, l. 433). Moreover, he explicitly states that “[o]f avarice and of swich cursednesse / Is al my prechyng, for to make hem free / To yeven hir pens, and namely unto me. / For my entente is nat but for to wynne, And nothyng for correccioun of synne” (RC 195, ll. 400-4). The Pardoner’s Prologue can thus be seen as the ultimate revelation of his sinful nature.

Finally, the Pardoner’s sinful nature is revealed through his corruption of the moral exemplum. The exemplum is set in a tavern a mile away from a village that was desolated by the plague, and focusses on three rioters who end up murdering each other out of greed. Both of these elements are meant to strike fear into the hearts of his audience so that they would willingly part with their money. As Beidler explains:

> The end of the world is at hand. The deadly plague stalks sinners. The way to avoid it is to abandon your money, which can only infect you with death and damnation. But I can give you in exchange for that corrupting gold the pardon which will wash you clean from sin. Do not be like the three rioters who, because of their greed, died young and unready to meet God. Give your money to me (“The Plague” 261).

In the next chapter I will further examine the ways in which the Pardoner corrupts the morality of the exemplum and how it reveals his amorality.
2.1.4. Moral Universality and the Pardoner’s Amorality

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, an exemplum is “an illustrative or instructive story” (“exemplum”) and is told to convey a moral lesson. One of the most important elements of an exemplum is its focus on universality. Its power lies in its general truth and its ability to “condemn a whole way of life rather than three individuals” (Cooper 275). As Spearing points out: “Traditional societies live on proverbs, pithy generalizations that transmit the structure of their culture, and cannot therefore be repeated to often” (197).

This is exactly what happens in the Pardoner’s exemplum. No specific location is given apart from Flanders, just a few descriptive adjectives are used, the rioters are merely referred to as the “proudeste” (RC 199, l. 716), the “worste” (RC 200, l. 776) and the “yongeste” (RC 200, l. 804), and Death – the only character that is named – implies universality rather than individuality (Cooper 275). Moreover, the rioters’ deaths are not dwelled upon for very long, which indicates they are not important as individuals (Cooper 268).

Bruce Johnson acknowledges the story’s lack of particularities concerning the location, and adds that the landscape can be read symbolically. In his article “The Moral Landscape of the Pardoner’s Tale”, he elaborates on this idea. According to him, the rioters Flemish nationality is used to illustrate their sinful behaviour (55-6). Furthermore, the setting in a tavern is of some importance. Johnson refers to the metaphor of the tavern-temple, in which the tavern represents a temple or church where food and alcohol are consumed in parody of the mass (56). He also draws attention to the crooked way and the oak tree. The crooked way presents the “path of sin that leads to death” and the oak tree might refer to despair, death, idol worship, murder, the tree of wisdom in the garden of Eden and so on (Johnson 56). Finally, he mentions the importance of the stile in line 712 (RC 199). The stile can symbolize a turning point or an “ethical crossroads” (Johnson 57). Moreover, it can only be crossed by human beings, not by animals, which indicates the difference in reason (Johnson 57). The rioters never get to cross the stile due to their encounter with the Old Man, which illustrates their spiritual deadness and lack of reason (Johnson 57). The stile is also associated with death and could thus symbolize the rioters’ denial of a Christian burial by the Old Man (Johnson 58).

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7 For further information on the use of Flanders in The Pardoner’s Tale, see J. M. Manly, Chaucer’s (1928), p. 617, and D. M. Norris, “Chaucer's Pardoner's Tale and Flanders” in PMLA 48.3 (1933), pp. 636-641.
All these elements illustrate the exemplum is a moral tale. The Pardoner, however, uses it with an immoral reason: “Stories in sermons [...] were supposed to be morally profitable; the Pardoner has discovered that they can also be financially profitable” (Cooper 262). He twists the meaning of the exemplum to satisfy his own greed. The following excerpt is of some importance in this respect:

Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice
Which that I use, and that is avarice.
But though myself be gilty in that synne,
Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne
From avarice and soore to repente.
But that is nat my principal entente;
I preche nothyng but for coveitise.
Of this mateere ot oghte ynoth suffise.
Thanne telle I hem ensamples many oon
Of olde stories longe tyme agoon.
For lewed peple loven tales olde;
Swiche thynges kan they wel reporte and holde.
(RC 195, ll. 427-38)

The Pardoner explicitly states that he preaches against the same vice he is guilty of and that he can make people give their money to him by means of stories. It is in this context that we should interpret the exemplum. The exemplum condemns greed and makes people unbuckle their purses, but the money is used to feed the Pardoner’s own greed. As a result, the moral exemplum becomes immoral as it turns from a tale against greed into a tale to sustain the Pardoner’s greed. As Cooper says:

In itself, it [the Pardoner’s exemplum] is a powerful moral tale against avarice and the tavern sins. Spoken by the Pardoner, it becomes deeply immoral – not only as a revelation of his own vice, but as a means to advance his own love of money (268).

The exemplum is not the only element which loses its meaning in the mouth of the Pardoner. When the Pardoner preaches against the tavern sins, he strengthens his arguments with Bible quotations: “The hooly writ take I to my witnesse” (RC 196, l. 483). But not all quotations are used in the same way as they are in the Bible. The apple in Genesis, for example, is used to denounce gluttony:
Adamoure fader, and his wyf also,
Fro Paradys to labour and to wo
Were dryven for that vice [gluttony], it is no drede,
For whil that Adam fasted, as I rede,
He was in Paradys; and whan that he
Eet of the fruyt defended on the tree,
Anon he was out cast to wo and peyne.
O glotonye, on thee wel oghte us pleyne!
(RC 197, ll. 505-12)

The apple becomes the symbol of gluttony, which in turn becomes the sin that brought about the fall of mankind. In Genesis, however, this is not the case. Adam and Eve are warned not to eat from the Tree of Wisdom and the serpent says that “in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.” (21st Century King James8, Genesis 3.5). Adam and Eve thus ate the apple to have God’s wisdom. It is therefore the symbol of pride, and not gluttony.

Another example occurs when the Pardoner says that “‘Mete unto wombe, and wombe eek unto mete, / Shal God destroyen bothe,’ as Paulus seith” (RC 197, ll. 522-3). This is a quotation from Saint Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians: “‘Meats for the belly, and the belly for meats,’ but God shall destroy both it and them” (1 Corinthians 6.13). Although the quotation is correct, the meaning that the Pardoner assigns to it is not the one Saint Paul had in mind. Saint Paul meant that there is a danger in human beings having to eat in order to survive because they can become “slave[s] to natural necessity” and thus “show an improper appreciation of our ultimate destiny” (M. Miller 564). The Pardoner, however, goes a step further and claims that Saint Paul had a disgust for gluttony and food. According to Mark Miller, this “bewildered disgust [is] aimed much more squarely at the sheer need for food than Paul would ever condone” (M. Miller 564).

When we consider these arguments, it becomes clear that the Pardoner twists the meaning of all moral things. He is, in fact, “the ultimate corrupter of meaning” (Latré 262). The moral exemplum and the Bible quotations lose their original purpose when told out of the Pardoner’s greed. Eventually, they are turned into an “overt rejection of religious values” (Cooper 262).

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8 All further quotations are taken from the 21st Century King James Version.
2.2. The Pardoner’s Spiritual Impotence

One of the most widely discussed elements surrounding the Pardoner is his sexual orientation. The subject was first introduced by W. C. Curry in 1919 in his article “The Secret of Chaucer’s Pardoner”, where he claimed he had discovered the Pardoner’s secret, namely that he is a eunuch. From then on, many different interpretations have been suggested for the notorious line “I trowe he were a Geldyng or a mare” (RC 34, l. 691).

The majority of scholars have focused primarily on the word ‘geldying’. The generally accepted explanation is recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary: “a gelded person, a eunuch” (“gelding”). W.C. Curry looked at the description of the Pardoner in the General Prologue from a physiognomic angle and concluded that the Pardoner is a ‘eunuchus ex nativitate’ (597). After examining his sources, Curry stated that the eunuch by birth, like the Pardoner, has a mind that is “full of deceit, arrogant, sensual and lustful, dissolute, avaricious, and studious of all kinds of depravity” (598). Curry’s article was not exempt of flaws, however, and has harvested a lot of criticism since its publication. Even so, it is still considered a paramount work and has been cited by many scholars ever since.

Although the interpretation of the Pardoner as a eunuch has become a widely accepted one, there are also scholars who plead for a reading of the Pardoner as a homosexual. These scholars suggest a shift in focus from ‘geldying’ to ‘mare’. One of them is Monica McAlpine. She argues that the Pardoner is a homosexual rather than a eunuch, especially when one takes into account his suggestive relationship with the Summoner. McAlpine also refers to Jill Mann, who points out a text by Walter of Châtillon where the word ‘mare’ is used to indicate homosexuals (Mann 146).

Some scholars have tried to take this argument a step further and have classed the Pardoner as a hermaphrodite. Beryl Rowland, for example, argues that the Pardoner is a pseudo-hermaphrodite, and more specifically a “testicular pseudo-hermaphrodite of the feminine type” (58). Although such an interpretation provides an interesting point of view, one must be careful not to take it too far.
Not all scholars agree on using the famous line as evidence for the Pardoner’s supposed deviant sexuality. David Benson is one of the scholars who reacts to the entire concept of seeing the Pardoner as something other than heterosexual. He criticizes the many different interpretations and shows the weaknesses in their arguments. According to him, the Pardoner is a heterosexual man who is meant to function as a “general example of unspecified lust” (341-2). Richard Firth Green agrees with Benson and characterizes the Pardoner as a womanizer: “[t]o be effeminate in the Middle Ages (...) was primarily the mark of a womanizer” (“Further evidence” 307).

This short summary is not meant to be exhaustive and only presents a few of the many different views that have arisen since 1919. One of these interpretations in particular provides an interesting – and what I believe to be correct – take on the Pardoner’s sexuality. Robert P. Miller argues in his article “Chaucer’s Pardoner, the Scriptural Eunuch, and the Pardoner’s Tale” that the Pardoner’s eunuchry needs to be read as a symbol for his spiritual impotence. He uses Curry’s ‘eunuchus ex nativitate’ as a starting point for his own explanation of the word ‘geldyng’, but he tries to go beyond the idea that the Pardoner is a mere scientific phenomenon (R. Miller 45). For his argument, Miller turns to the Bible and biblical exegesis. He cites Rupertus Tuitiensis who combines three biblical texts\(^9\) that deal with the figure of the eunuch and so arrives at a distinction between three types of eunuchs.

A first type is the congenital eunuch or what Curry referred to as the ‘eunuchus ex nativitate’. There are also eunuchs “who, by an act of will, lead the life of chastity for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (R. Miller 47). Eunuchry is interpreted here as a spiritual rather than a physical state. The third type of eunuch is also spiritual, but not as “praiseworthy” (R. Miller 47) as the other kind. These eunuchs willfully refuse good works and thereby cut themselves off from God’s Grace (R. Miller 48-9). According to Miller, the Pardoner is a perfect example of the latter type:

> It is evident that by his [the Pardoner’s] act of will he has cut himself off from virtue and good works, and that this act has been performed, not ‘amore Christi’, that is, through charity, but through its antithesis, cupiditas (R. Miller 53).

In the next few paragraphs, I want to elaborate on this quote and connect it to some relevant passages from *The Canterbury Tales*.

\(^9\) Deuteronomy 23.1, Isaiah 56.3-5 and Matthew 19.12.
As explained in chapter 2.1.1., the practice of selling indulgences was initially created with good intentions. The money that the pardoner collected would go to the poor, thus establishing a Treasury of Grace. The pardoner would in this way perform good works and ensure God’s Grace not only for himself but also for his audience. It was only later that corrupt pardoners kept the money for themselves. As Miller points out in the above cited quote, Chaucer’s Pardoner turns away from the good works he is supposed to perform. The money goes straight into his own pockets: “Of avarice and of swich cursednesse / Is al my prechyng, for to make hem free / To yeven hir pens, and namely unto me” (RC 195, ll. 400-2).

Moreover, instead of helping his audience achieve grace, he turns them into his apes: “And thus, with feyned flaterye and japes, / He made the person and the peple his apes” (RC 34, ll. 705-6).

Good works is not the only thing the Pardoner turns away from. He also turns his back on virtue and in doing so he eventually becomes its opposite: the embodiment of sin. Throughout his Prologue and Tale, the Pardoner displays all seven cardinal sins:

That the pardoner is so angry [after the Host’s outburst], however, adds the final sin of wrath to complete the list: pride, in his contempt for God and his fellow-men; gluttony, in his fondness for wine, and which he himself has associated with the Fall; lechery, in his boasting about wenchers, and his other more doubtful sexual practices; envy, in backbiting and defamation; sloth, in his spiritual deadness; and above all, avarice (Cooper 270-71).

Furthermore, he is blasphemous in many ways. For example, the image of the holy dove is mocked at a certain point. The Pardoner compares himself in his Prologue to a dove when preaching: “Thanne peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke, / And est and west upon the peple I bekke, / As dooth a dowve sittynge on a berne” (RC 195, ll. 395-7). He also swears a great deal throughout his Tale. Although he pretends he is warning against this kind of blasphemy, in reality he revels in it (Latré, Ghent lecture, 2016). He is thus completely cut off from virtue.

According to Miller, the Pardoner deliberately chooses to follow the wrong path. His awareness of this choice is visible in his Prologue, when he boasts to his fellow pilgrims about his malpractices:
The Pardoner explicitly makes the choice not to follow in the footsteps of the apostles, but instead to do the opposite of what a religious man is supposed to do. He will not be chaste, nor will he live in voluntary poverty. He will have plenty of everything, even if it is at the expense of the poor he is supposed to help. From this passage we can deduce that the Pardoner is aware of what a good example is, but deliberately refuses to follow it.

Miller then concludes that the Pardoner acts out of greed. It is not difficult to find evidence in the text to support this statement. The Pardoner often makes his motives explicit, for example in line 433: “I preche nothyng but for covetoise” (RC 195)10.

After his lengthy discussion of the word ‘geldyng’, Miller only briefly touches upon the meaning of ‘mare’. He cites Rabanus Maurus to explain that a mare is “one of those who ‘through idolatrous worship soften into women’” (R. Miller 55). Although Miller does not comment on it any further, I believe this statement deserves some more attention. In my opinion, the practice of idolatrous worship can be linked to the Pardoner’s relics.

More than a century after Chaucer wrote The Canterbury Tales, the worshipping of relics would be seen as a Catholic practice and idolatrous from a Protestant point of view. The Pardoner may then even be called “a forerunner of the Reformation” (Cooper 271). What is important to keep in mind, however, is that the relics the Pardoner is carrying are false. They are not the bones of martyrs but pig’s bones (RC 34, l. 700). Mary’s veil is just a pillow-case (RC 34, ll. 694-5). They are simple, secular objects. The Pardoner, however, attributes to them an absolute meaning (Latré, Ghent Lecture, 2016). They become divine objects with which he can absolve people from sin – or so he claims:

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10 See also ll. 400-4 and ll. 423-4 (RC 195).
And whoso fyndeth hym out of swich blame,
He wol come up and offer a Goddes name,
And I assoille him by auctoritee
Which that by bulle ygraunted was to me

(RC 195, ll. 385-8)

He claims to have a power that in orthodox Christianity belongs to God only, and in doing so he places himself at the same level. I believe that in this way the Pardoner is worshipping himself rather than God. This might present a possible interpretation for the Pardoner’s idolatrous worship.

The second part of Maurus’ statement is that due to such idolatrous worship men would soften into women. The Pardoner indeed pays a lot of attention to his outer appearance, something that was considered to be feminine behaviour:

This Pardoner hadde heer as yelow as wex,
But smothe it heeng as dooth a strike of the flex;
By ounces henge his lokkes that he hadde,
And therwith he his shuldres overspradde;
But thynne it lay, by colpons oon and oon.
But hood, for jolitee, wered he noon,
For it was trussed up in his wallet.
Hym thoughte he rood al of the newe jet;
Dischevelee, save his cappe, he rood al bare.

(RC 34, ll. 675-83)

His hair is carefully arranged over his shoulders and he does not wear a hat because he wants to look attractive and he believes it is the latest fashion. This attention for his outer appearance may be linked to his self-worshipping. Moreover, the Pardoner is described as quite effeminate. He has long blond hair and “no berd hadde he, nevere sholde have” (RC 34, l. 689). His idolatrous worship has softened him into a woman.
Although Miller mainly focusses on the line “I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare”, there is other evidence in the text as well that suggests the Pardoner is spiritually impotent. Helen Cooper\textsuperscript{11} points to the final passage in *The Pardoner’s Tale* when the Pardoner tries to convince the Host to kiss his relics. The Host vehemently refuses and even threatens to cut off the Pardoner’s testicles so they can be used as one of his false relics. He angrily shouts: “Lat kutte hem of” (RC 202, l. 954). Cooper believes this line hints at the Pardoner’s spiritual eunuchry and states that “his Prologue and Tale have insistently deprived things of their potential spiritual meanings, and the Host’s threat would show in physical form his lack of spiritual fruitfulness” (270).

In my opinion, there are two main elements that are deprived of their potential spiritual meaning: the Pardoner’s relics and the exemplum. As I have already mentioned, the worshipping of relics was a standard practice in medieval Christianity. The Western Church believed relics to be holy objects with an important spiritual meaning. The Pardoner subverts this belief by passing off fake relics as divine objects. As a result, the practice of worshipping relics is deprived of its spiritual meaning.

The exemplum is also debased in the hands of the Pardoner. The tale about three Flemish rioters is meant to be a moral story to warn people against the dangers of greed. When placed next to the Prologue and Tale, however, the exemplum appears to be used for different reasons. In his Prologue, the Pardoner boasts about his skill in misleading an audience and he explicitly states that he tells his exemplum in order to gain money. His corrupt intentions are again confirmed at the end of the Tale when he tries to trick the Host into buying his false pardons. The Pardoner thus tells the exemplum out of greed. Its meaning is therefore reversed as it is no longer a tale against greed, but a tale out of greed. Its spiritual meaning has become worthless in relation to the Pardoner’s intentions.

The Pardoner’s lack of spiritual fruitfulness is also worth elaborating on further. Miller states that the spiritual eunuch is “sterile in good works, impotent to produce spiritual fruit” (50). On the basis of the writings of St. Augustine, he concludes that these spiritual fruits or good

\textsuperscript{11} Unlike Miller, Helen Cooper believes the line “I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare” indicates that the Pardoner is a womanizer. See also David Benson and Richard Firth Green. Benson, David C., “Chaucer's Pardoner: His Sexuality and Modern Critics” in *Mediaevalia* 8, (1982), pp. 337-349; Green, Richard Firth, “The Sexual Normality of Chaucer's Pardoner” in *Mediaevalia* 8 (1982), pp. 351-358; Green, Richard Firth, “Further Evidence for Chaucer's Representation of the Pardoner as a Womanizer” in *Mediumaevum* 71.2 (2002), pp. 307-309.
works can be read as spiritual offspring (50). He refers to Genesis 1.28 when God tells Adam and Eve to ‘increase and multiply’. Two meanings can be discerned. The first one is literal: Adam and Eve have to produce children to populate the earth. The second interpretation is a spiritual one. God has charged them with the multiplication of virtues and the number of the faithful (R. Miller 51).

This type of multiplication is exactly what the Pardoner fails to do. First of all, he does not produce good works. He tricks his dupable audience and takes their money to fill his own pockets instead of giving it to the Treasury of Grace, no matter the cost\(^\text{12}\). The Pardoner also does not multiply in the literal sense (since he is a ‘geldyng’ or a ‘mare’), and neither does he multiply in a spiritual sense. Instead of showing the good example and spreading virtue, he is the embodiment of greed and displays all the seven vices throughout the Prologue and Tale. And finally, the Pardoner does not multiply the number of faithful. Instead he leads his audience astray, just as the Old Man leads the rioters up the “croked wey” (RC 200, l. 761). He makes them believe his relics are real and that he himself can absolve them from sin. This makes the people buy his fake pardons instead of giving it to a good cause. In that sense they too follow the wrong path.

Melvin Storm argues that the Pardoner is not only impotent and sterile himself, but that he extends his sterility to his audience (813). The Pardoner makes the people buy his false pardons and so takes the money that could have been used for good works. The Pardoner is thus “not only (...) [sterile] himself (...), he is also the barren ground on which others waste their seed” (Storm 813). The people pay for the Pardoner’s indulgences, but the money does not go to the Treasury of Grace. Instead it goes to the pockets of the corrupt Pardoner and so “their offerings go no further and produce no fruit” (Storm 813).

Storm then applies this to the pilgrims on their way to Canterbury and takes the Summoner as an example of what would happen if the other pilgrims joined the Pardoner on the misleading path. For his argument, Storm cites the following line: “This Somonour bar to hym a stif burdoun” (RC 34, l. 673). He believes that it does not only refer to the song that the Summoner is singing, but also – and more importantly – to a pilgrim’s staff. The ‘burdoun’ can be connected to the common fourteenth-century metaphor of a staff as a phallus. Storm

\(^\text{12}\) See for example ll. 448-51 (RC 196).
then explains the relationship between the Summoner and the Pardoner as a relationship between respectively the pilgrim-lover and the shrine-beloved. So the Summoner is on a ‘love pilgrimage’ towards the Pardoner. However, this pilgrimage will end in fruitlessness. Storm concludes that “the Summoner is the paradigm, and if the other pilgrims were deceived by the Pardoner's relics and indulgences, taking them as adequate ends, the result would be spiritual waste, the sterile conclusion of what we might call, as Wycliffe called simony, ‘spiritual sodomy’” (813).

To end this chapter, I would like to focus on the analogy between the Pardoner and the Flemish rioters in the exemplum. Miller (62-8) proposed such an analogy in his article. As already explained, Miller asserts that the Pardoner refuses to perform good works and so chooses to follow the path that leads away from heaven. Moreover, he is a “seeker after false treasure” (R. Miller 63), which means his purpose is to gain money and not eternal bliss in heaven. Miller then states that this can also be applied to the three rioters. As they set out on a quest to slay death, the rioters encounter an Old Man who directs them to a treasure underneath an oak tree. The Old Man leads the rioters away from heaven and instead tells them to “turne up thi croked wey” (RC 200, l. 761). As a result, the rioters, just as the Pardoner, follow the wrong path away from heaven. This path leads them to a hoard of money, which is what Miller terms ‘false treasure’. Both the Pardoner and the rioters prefer earthly treasure to heavenly treasure. Miller then concludes that this false treasure leads to the rioters’ deaths, because they kill each other out of greed. Their deaths, however, are not just physical, but also spiritual. Their physical death emphasizes their spiritual death, just as the Pardoner’s eunuchry emphasizes his spiritual impotency. In this way, Miller establishes an analogy between the Pardoner and the rioters.

As one can gather from the discussion above, the Pardoner’s sexuality has been a topic of debate for a long time and probably will continue to be. However, the interpretation that I find the most compelling was put forth by Robert P. Miller. He looked beyond the Pardoner’s physical features and established a link between his sexuality and his spiritual state. To classify the Pardoner as a spiritual eunuch is a fruitful approach because it does more justice to the complexity of Chaucer’s writing.
2.3. The Identity of the Old Man

The Old Man is one of the most mysterious characters to feature in the Pardoner’s exemplum. His identity has puzzled both audiences and critics alike. Many interpretations have already been put forward, but the Old Man seems to evade any attempt at categorization. He has been read allegorically, literally and even in relation to the Pardoner himself. In the following chapter, I want to summarise some of the most well-known interpretations and highlight their strengths and weaknesses. In a next chapter, I also propose an additional interpretation of the Old Man in relation to the Holy Trinity.

2.3.1. The Old Man’s Ambiguity

In a first attempt to explain the Old Man, many scholars turned to the allegorical. They looked for similarities with other, already existing allegorical figures. One such interpretation was proposed by Mary Flowers Braswell who connected the Old Man to Judas Iscariot. Peter Beidler on the other hand, recognized in the Old Man the figure of Noah. Although he does not claim that the Old Man is Noah, he does believe that “Chaucer and at least some in his audience would have thought of the Pardoner’s old man as a kind of contemporary Noah who reminded them that sin does not go unpunished” (“Noah” 253). Still in the biblical context, Alexandra Olsen argued that the Old Man could also be the Devil himself.

The interpretations did not limit themselves to the Bible however, nor to Christianity. Some scholars turned to other works of literature to explain the Old Man. Many pointed out his similarity with the Wandering Jew\(^\text{13}\), Derek Pearsall in “Chaucer’s Pardoner: the Death of a Salesman” compared him to ‘False Semblant’ from the *Roman de la rose* and Marie Padgett Hamilton drew attention to the resemblance with the character Elde from Langland’s *Piers Plowman*. Robert Barakat went beyond the realm of Christianity and into that of Norse mythology when he compared the Old Man to Odin, the Norse God of Death.

But by far the most popular interpretation is that of the Old Man as Death or as Death’s messenger. The idea was first proposed by Kittredge in his book *Chaucer and his Poetry*

(1915) and many scholars have since followed in Kittredge’s footsteps. However, on closer inspection, this theory cannot hold. The Old Man simply cannot be Death, since that is what he most desires:

Ne Deeth, allas, ne wol nat han my lyf.
Thus walke I, lyk a restlees kaityf,
And on the ground, which is my moodres gate,
I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late,
And seye ‘Leeve mooder, leet me in!
[…]
Allas, wan shul my bones been at reste?’
(RC 199, ll. 527-33)

Moreover, “part of the point of the tale, paradoxically, is that death is not a material thing that can be found”; the treasure brings death to the rioters but only because of their greedy nature (Cooper 269).

As one can gather from this short overview, the allegorical interpretations of the Old Man are often at odds with one another. These discrepancies led some scholars to oppose the idea that the Old Man is something more than just an old man. W. J. B. Owen for example, in his article “The Old Man in ‘The Pardoner's Tale’”, rejected the idea of the Old Man as Death or Death’s messenger. Instead, he argues that the Old Man is just “an old man and nothing more” (52). With this interpretation in mind, he explains the meeting between the Old Man and the rioters in a different way (50-1). The Old Man encounters the young rioters and is afraid of what they might do in their anger. In his haste to get away, he comes up with a trick and directs the rioters to a supposed treasure underneath an oak tree. According to Owen, the fact that the Old Man did not know of the existence of such a treasure is important for the dramatic irony of the tale: in sending the rioters away with a trick, the Old Man in fact leads himself away from his own possible death (51-2).

Although Owen’s interpretation presents an interesting new perspective, his explanation of the encounter with the rioters poses some issues. As explained above, Owen believes the Old Man was ignorant of the existence of the treasure, because otherwise he would have sought it

for himself in order to find the death which he so desires. However, even though the Old Man is aware of the relation between cupidity and death (Steadman 78), the treasure would not have meant death to him since he “can see beyond this materialism” (Cooper 269). He is willing to give up his worldly treasure in order to die: “Mooder, with yow wolde I chaunge my cheste / That in my chambre longe tyme hath be, / Ye, for an heyre clowt to wrappe me!” (RC 199, ll. 734-6). As a result, the treasure would not have led to the Old Man’s death. It is, therefore, more likely that he knew of the existence of the treasure and knowingly led the rioters to it. As Cooper points out, “the gold is death to the rioters, but only by metonymy for the self-destruction they bring with them” (269).

Another scholar who opposed an allegorical reading of the Old Man was John Steadman. In his article “Old Age and Contemptus Mundi in the Pardoner’s Tale”, he proposed to define the Old Man as a universal type for all old men and thus the representation of Old Age (73-74). According to Steadman, the real significance of the Old Man lies in the contrast with the young rioters. He list eight moments in which this contrasts reveals itself (74-81):

1. The Old Man’s age vs. the rioters’ youth
2. Their different attitude towards death: the Old Man sees Death as a release, whereas the young rioters see Death as an enemy
3. The encounter with the Old Man as a moment for the young rioters to repent
4. The Old Man’s wisdom vs. the young rioters’ folly
5. Their different attitude towards the treasure: the Old Man deliberately shuns the treasure because he knows about the relation between cupidity and death, and he does not want to die through his own agency, whereas the young rioters are avaricious
6. The Old Man’s Contemptus Mundi vs. the young rioters’ Mundi Dilectores
7. The Old Man’s meekness vs. the young rioters’ pride
8. The Old Man’s acceptance of man’s miseries and his resignation to the divine vs. the young rioters’ quest to slay Death

15 Although this poses an interesting explanation, I am inclined to follow Cooper’s interpretation that the treasure does not mean Death to the Old Man because materialism is not important to him.
16 I do not agree with Steadman on this final point. In my opinion, the Old Man has not accepted man’s miseries, nor has he resigned himself to the divine. Instead, he tries to exchange his old age for youth: “For I ne kan nat fynde / A man, though that I walked into Ynde, / Neither in citee ne in no village, / That wolde chaunge his youthe for myn age” (RC 199, ll. 721-24). Furthermore, he is actively seeking death: “And on the ground, which is my moodres gate, I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late” (RC 199, ll. 729-31).
Christopher Dean (46-7) also realised the importance of discussing the Old Man in relation to the rioters, but he places the encounter in the broader context of the three warnings. Throughout the tale, the rioters are warned three times to beware of Death. The first warning is given by a young boy at the inn who learned it from his mother. The innkeeper provides the second warning from his own experience. The third and final warning is presented by the Old Man and comes from his deepest emotional experience and his own suffering. Dean claims that the intensity of the warnings increase every time because they come from “successively older people and from successively deeper sources of experience” (47). He argues that this results in a growing contrast between the importance of the warnings and the rioters’ spiritual blindness (47).

This element of spiritual blindness was further elaborated on by Elizabeth Hatcher. She believes the Old Man illustrates “what life would be like if the revellers were to succeed in their quest”, namely that “Death will die indeed, but Old Age will live on forever. Thus physical immortality will be a curse, not a blessing” (247). The incapability of the rioters to see this truth indicates their increasing spiritual blindness.

Apart from allegorical or literal interpretations of the Old Man, there are also some scholars who have pointed out similarities with the Pardoner. Gudrun Richardson for example, focusses on the passage where the Old Man knocks with his staff on Mother Earth and asks her to let him in. He starts his discussion with a possible interpretation of Mother Earth and argues that she is not the Virgin Mary – “the Christianized version of Mother Earth” – but rather the ancient earth goddess (325-7). Mary has been given the role of Goddess of Life by the Church and thus cannot give the Old Man what he seeks (Richardson 327). That is why the Old Man must appeal to the earth goddess with her strong affiliation to death in what Richardson terms “a calculated rejection of the Church” (327). Richardson then proposes the following link with the Pardoner:

Perceiving himself beyond redemption he [the Pardoner] rejects God and the Church; so, too, the Old Man rejects the Virgin Mary as intercessor in favour of the earth goddess whose influence extends beyond Christianity. The Old Man in his despair verbalizes the Pardoner’s own desire for death as the only possible resolution. (331)
Although Richardson’s statement that the Pardoner rejects God and the Church may hold some truth, I do not believe this is case with the Old Man. When the rioters first meet the Old Man, he greets them with “[n]ow, lordes, God yow see!” (RC 199, l. 715) which means as much as ‘may God look after you’. He uses the same phrasing when he parts with them: “God save yow, that boghte agayn mankynde, / And yow amende” (RC 200, ll. 766-7). Moreover, he follows “Goddes wille” (RC 199, l. 726) and is able to quote from the Bible (RC 199, ll. 742-4). This evidence suggests that the Old Man has not rejected God, nor the Church.

Another scholar who examined the passage where the Old Man knocks on Mother Earth is Beryl Rowland. Her article “Animal Imagery and the Pardoner’s Abnormality” deals mainly with the Pardoner’s characterization as a hermaphrodite, but she briefly touches upon a possible connection with the Pardoner. She states that “[t]hrough the Old Man, knocking with his staff at his mother’s gate, longing to be let into his mother’s womb, he [the Pardoner] seems to convey the anguished realization of his male impotency” (59). This final remark again ties in with the Pardoner’s spiritual impotence as discussed in the previous chapter.

Robert P. Miller sought for similarities with the Pardoner in another passage, namely the moment when the Old Man leads the rioters up the “croked wey” (RC 200, l. 761). According to him, both the Pardoner and the Old Man are examples of the Pauline vetus homo. Following the advice of the vetus homo leads to spiritual death (R. Miller 66). Hence, the Old Man leads the rioters up the crooked way and to their spiritual death, just as the Pardoner leads his audience and their souls astray (R. Miller 67). In this way, the Old Man “assumes a position in the tale suggestively analogous to that of the teller” (R. Miller 66). However, Cooper refutes Miller’s argument by stating that the Old Man cannot be the “vetus homo, unredeemed or sinful man, since he knows all about the Redemption, quotes Holy Writ, and sees himself as following ‘Goddes wille’” (269).

From this discussion, it is clear that the Old Man refuses to be categorized. But perhaps it is best to leave him undefined as part of his importance lies in his ambiguous nature. Scholars should accept the possibility that he can be many of the interpretations at once. However, this is not a plea to put an end to any new attempts at explaining him. In fact, in the following chapter I want to present my own interpretation of the Old Man in the hope that it will offer a new perspective and perhaps spark up some further debate.
2.3.2. The Old Man and the Holy Trinity

For my own interpretation of the Old Man, I want to turn to the broader context of the three warnings. As already explained above, Christopher Dean believes that the intensity of the warnings gradually increase. In line of this, I want to argue that these warnings do not come from merely ‘successively older people’, but that they are being issued each in turn by one member of the Holy Trinity. In such an interpretation, the young boy might symbolize Christ, the innkeeper God and the Old Man the Holy Spirit. This symbolical rendering of the Holy Trinity stands in contrast with the ‘unholy trinity’ formed by the three rioters.

The exemplum begins with three rioters in a tavern who hear a funeral procession pass by. Upon discovering that it is one of their friends who has died and that Death was his killer, they make a pact to “sleen this false traytour Deeth” (RC 199, l. 699). One of the rioters exclaims:

I shal hym seke by wey and eek by strete,  
I make avow to Goddes digne bones!  
Herkneth, felawes, we thre been al ones [own emphasis]  
(RC 199, ll. 694-6)

In this final line, the rioter mocks the Holy Trinity (Latrê, Ghent Lecture, 2016). He claims they are one person, just as Christ, God and the Holy Ghost are believed to be one and the same in Catholicism. Such a claim is blasphemous in itself, but is made worse by the rioters’ gambling, swearing and drinking. Furthermore, the parody gets additional meaning when we interpret the people who warn them as the three members of the Holy Trinity. The contrast provides a further layer of irony and the insult is intensified as the rioters mock the Holy Trinity in the very face of its members.

A first one of these members is the young boy. When asked by one of the rioters to find out who has died, he says he already knows and that his killer was “a privee theef men clepeth Deeth, / That in this contree al the peple sleeth” (RC 199, ll. 675-6). He adds that “it were necessarie / For to be war of swich an adversarie. / Beth redy for to meete hym evermoore” (RC 199, ll. 681-3); a wisdom he learned from his mother. His remark reminisces of Christ’s warning to mankind to be ready for death at all times. This warning appears for example in
the Gospel of Matthew. Christ’s disciples ask him to “[t]ell us, when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of Thy coming and of the end of the world?” (Matthew 24.3). They are referring to the Second Coming of Christ and the Day of Judgement. On this day it is believed that Christ will once again come down to earth to judge both the living and the dead. This belief was recorded in the Nicene Creed\textsuperscript{17}: “He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead. His kingdom will never end” (Nicene Creed).

Christ answers his disciples that they should “[w]atch […] for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come” (Matthew 24.42). He explains this further by means of the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25.1-13)\textsuperscript{18}. The same message is also reiterated in the Gospel of Luke\textsuperscript{19}. Although Christ tells of the return of the ‘Son of Man’, it may also be applied to Death. On Judgement Day, it will be decided who will go to heaven and who to hell, implying that all people will die. Consequently, Christ asks them to be ready for death.

Furthermore, Christ states that he will arrive at an unforeseen hour, which means he can be likened to a ‘privee thief’. Interestingly, both Luke, Matthew and Marc refer to the Second Coming by drawing a parallel with a household that is surprised by a thief in the night:

> And this know, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not have suffered his house to be broken into. Be ye therefore ready also, for the Son of Man cometh at an hour when ye think not (Luke 12.39-40).

> But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched and would not have suffered his house to be broken into (Matthew 24.43).


\textsuperscript{18} In this parable, ten virgin await the coming of Christ. They stand watch holding oil lamps. The five wise virgins brought extra oil with them in case the lamps would go out, whereas the other five, foolish virgins did not. After a while, they all fall asleep to be awakened by the coming of Christ. The wise virgins are able to relight their lamps with the oil they brought, but the foolish virgins have to leave in order to find and buy oil. In doing so, they miss the arrival Christ.

\textsuperscript{19} “Let your loins be girded about and your lights burning; and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their lord when he will return from the wedding, that when he cometh and knocketh, they may open unto him immediately” (Luke 12.35-36).
Watch ye therefore, for ye know not when the Master of the house cometh — at evening, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning — lest coming suddenly, He find you sleeping. And what I say unto you, I say unto all: Watch! (Mark 13.35-37).

Saint Paul uses the same phrasing when he says in his letter to the Thessalonians that “[f]or you yourselves know perfectly that the Day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night” (1 Thessalonians 5.2). He adds that “ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that Day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light and the children of the day; we are not of the night, nor of darkness” (1 Thessalonians 5.4-5). The Christians who lead a religious life have nothing to fear as they are never in the darkness and Judgment Day cannot surprise them.

In the Book of Revelation, something similar happens when God explicitly states that he comes as a thief: “Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame” (Revelation 16.15). Although this verse refers to God, the idea remains the same. Interestingly, it is mentioned in relation to the “seven angels holding the seven last plagues, for in them is filled up the wrath of God” (Revelation 15.1), which reminisces of Death in Chaucer’s exemplum who killed a large number of people by means of the plague: “He hath thousand slayn this pestilence [own emphasis]” (RC 199, l. 679).

The above cited evidence reveals a possible connection between the young boy and Christ. There might also be a link between the innkeeper and God. When the boy has stopped speaking, the innkeeper gives a second warning and states that death “hath slayn this yeer, / Henne over a mile, withinne a greet village, / Bothe man and womman, child, and hyne, and page” (RC 199, ll. 686-8), and that “[t]o been avysed greet wysdom it were, / Er that he dide a man dishonour” (RC 199, ll. 690-1). The innkeeper mentions a village that has been rendered desolate and where all inhabitants have perished. In the Bible, many passages can be found where God (threatens) to destroy cities.

As early as Genesis, God demonstrates his power in bringing down his wrath upon the unfaithful when he destroys the cities of Sodom and Gomora (Genesis 18.20 – 19.29). Later in the Bible, in the Book of Obadiah, God lays waste to Edom because the Edomites rejoiced in the destruction of Jerusalem. This episode is also mentioned in the Book of Ezekiel (25,
35), Jeremiah (49) and Isaiah (34). But God does not just destroy cities. Most of the cities receive a warning first. Jonah, for example, was given the task to warn the citizens of Nineveh (Book of Jonah).

The innkeeper’s remark about the desolated village is meaningful in relation to God’s power to destroy cities. Moreover, the innkeeper says that “[t]o been avysed greet wysdom it were” (RC 199, l. 690), which ties in with the warnings the cities receive before being wiped out. Furthermore, I believe that it is no coincidence that the innkeeper exclaims “[b]y Seinte Marie!” (RC 199, l. 685). He could have picked any number of saints, but he chose the Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ. Significantly – if we accept a reading of the young boy as Christ – this line is spoken right after the boy says “[t]hus taughte me my dame [mother]” (RC 199, l. 684).

The third and final warning is given by the Old Man. Throughout the exemplum, there are certain parallels that can be drawn with the Holy Ghost. When the rioters encounter the Old Man, they have already been warned twice. The Old Man thus presents them a final chance at redemption. He greets the rioters with “God yow see” (RC 199, l. 715), but they answer “with sorry grace!” (RC 199, l. 717), meaning ‘bad luck to you’. The Old Man rebukes them for their rude reply and quotes Leviticus 19.32 where it is said to respect an old man. By giving them a chance to apologize, he implicitly tells them what to do in order to return to the right path and to receive redemption.

The rioters refuse this opportunity and continue to insult the Old Man by accusing him of being Death’s spy. The Old Man therefore points out the crooked way that will lead to their death. In the Gospel of Luke it is said: “And whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but unto him that blasphemeth against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven” (Luke 12:10). The rioters have blasphemed against the Old Man and thus against the Holy Ghost. As a result, they are led to their death. However, this is not the end of their encounter. After directing them to the treasure, the Old Man leaves with the words “God save yow, that boghte agayn mankynde, / and yow amende!” (RC 200, ll. 766-7). At this final moment, the Old Man still offers a chance at redemption. He continues to remind the rioters that it is never too late to ask for forgiveness.
Forgiveness is a theme that often recurs in the Bible. Christ, for example, tells Peter to forgive his brother until seventy times seven (Matthew 18.21-22; Luke 17.3-4), forgives Mary Magdalene’s sins as she washes his feet (Luke 7.47-48) and asks God to forgive the men who crucify him because “they know not what they do” (Luke 23.34). Even in his final moments, Christ forgives the criminal who hangs on the cross besides him:

And one of the malefactors who was hanged railed against Him, saying, “If thou be Christ, save thyself and us!” But the other answering rebuked him, saying, “Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds. But this Man hath done nothing amiss.” And he said unto Jesus, “Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy Kingdom.” And Jesus said unto him, “Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with Me in Paradise. (Luke 23.39-43)

Although forgiveness is in most cases mentioned in relation to Christ, it is an important theme in Catholicism. Moreover, in the Gospel of John the following is mentioned: “But the Comforter, who is the Holy Ghost whom the Father will send in My name, He shall teach you all things and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you” (14.26). The Holy Ghost thus proclaims the same values as Christ and is as a result equally forgiving. This in turn reinforces the connection with the Old Man who offers redemption to the rioters.

The resemblance between the Old Man and the Holy Ghost is reinforced further by the behaviour of the former. The Old Man is clearly living in God’s Grace and his Spirit. As Cooper points out: “he knows all about the Redemption, quotes Holy Writ, and sees himself as following ‘Goddes wille’” (269). The first element she mentions is supported by the discussion above. The second point refers to his quotation in lines 743-4 (RC 199). The Old Man quotes correctly from the Book of Leviticus as can be seen in the following comparison:

Agayns an oold man, hoor upon his heed, / Ye sholde arise [own emphasis] (RC 199, ll. 743-4)

Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head and honor the face of the old man [own emphasis]
(Leviticus 19:32)

He uses scripture to guide the rioters back onto the right path, not to mislead them. This distinguishes him from the Pardoner who twists quotations from the Bible to suit his own purposes. Finally, the Old Man also follows God’s will since he roams the world “[a]s longe
tyme as it is Goddes wille” (RC 199, l. 726). Moreover, he does not care about worldly possession: “Mooder, with yow wolde I chaunge my cheste / That in my chambre longe tyme hath be, / Ye, for an heyre clowt to wrappe me!” (RC 199, ll. 734-6). As it is said in the Gospel of Luke, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth” (Luke 12.15). The Old Man leads a life in accordance to God’s Word and the Bible.

When comparing Chaucer’s text to the Bible, I believe a reading of the Old Man as analogous to the Holy Ghost is plausible. Especially when one examines the broader context of the three warnings. The warning of the young boy bares some interesting similarities to Christ’s warning to beware of death and the innkeeper’s remark about the desolated village reminisces of God’s power to destroy cities. The warnings can therefore be seen as being issued each in turn by one member of the Holy Trinity.
3. The BBC’s *Pardoner’s Tale*

In 2003, a modern remake of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* aired on BBC One. Its goal was to reflect society in present-day Britain. Laura Mackie, BBC head of drama serials, stated that they “were looking for a piece that reflected life in the new century” (Myerson). The series producer, Kate Bartlett, further explained that “Chaucer held up a mirror to the 14th century and we intend to do the same for the 21st, exploring themes such as the cult of celebrity, bigotry and the obsession with youth” (Pile).

The series consisted of six tales, each rewritten for the screen by a distinguished screenwriter. As regards *The Pardoner’s Tale*, the producers opted for Tony Grounds. He established a reputation for himself with series such as *Births, Marriages & Deaths* and *Bodily Harm*. But when asked to adapt *The Pardoner’s Tale* to the screen, he refused. Never having read any Chaucer, he felt unable to write it, until his eleven-year-old son persuaded him (Pile). He decided to focus on the exemplum and turned the tale of three Flemish rioters into a story of three lowlifes on the edge of society in Rochester, Kent. In the end, he managed to retain the theme of avarice while at the same time making it appealing to a contemporary audience.

The adaptation is set in Rochester at the time of the disappearance of a young girl named Amy Healy. At the start of the episode, we are introduced to three outcasts, Arty, Baz and Colin, who appear to be small time criminals as they steal people’s wallets, ride a supermarket trolley around town and pull their trousers down in front of a restaurant window. However, there is more going on than these petty offences. Arty, the leader of the group, seems to have psychological issues. He struggles to suppress flashbacks to his childhood and has an insatiable need to become famous. To satisfy this need, he collects money for the missing girl, to feel as holy as he did when he sang in the church choir. But instead of giving the money to the people who are actually looking for the girl, he keeps it for himself.

While talking to his friends about his holy feeling, another young girl passes by. Arty follows her, tries to seduce her and eventually brings her to his house. There, the girl tells him where he can find the missing girl’s killer. Seeing this as an opportunity to become famous, Arty rounds up his two companions to go to the house indicated by the girl. When they arrive, they discover that no one is there. In their anger they decide to demolish the room. In doing so,
they expose gold bars underneath the floor boards. Arty decides to have the gold valued, while Baz and Colin stay behind and watch television.

That evening’s news reports that the missing girl, Amy, was found raped and murdered. Along with Baz and Colin, we discover that Arty was her killer. Overcome by anger, they plot to murder Arty when he gets back and to keep the money for themselves. Arty unknowingly arrives back at the house and is beaten to death as he enters. Baz and Colin decide not to waste the food Arty brought with him, but they soon die as well as Arty had the food poisoned. A final shot of the television reveals the mysterious girl to be Arty’s first victim, Kitty Norman. Together with Amy, we see her heading up the stairs of the cathedral and – we can only assume – to heaven.

The BBC’s *Pardoner’s Tale* shows some similarities to Chaucer’s tale, but also some significant differences. In the following chapters, I will therefore examine these differences and try to illustrate how the change to a modern setting has influenced the adaptation. The same themes will be discussed as in chapter 2, beginning with sin, followed by Arty’s sexuality and ending with the change from an old man to a young girl.
3.1. Arty’s Sins in Context

In the fourteenth century, Christianity was ubiquitous. The Church controlled daily life and, as a result, sin came to play an important role. This is, however, no longer the case in the twenty-first century. The following chapter will therefore examine the position of sin in a modern society. It will also focus on the theme of sin in the BBC adaptation of *The Pardoner’s Tale* and try to determine the techniques used by screenwriter Tony Grounds to establish Arty’s sinful nature. Finally, I will discuss Arty’s amorality in relation to the change from universalism to individualism.

3.1.1. Sin in Modern Society

In the Middle Ages, the Church dominated everyday life. In fact, “life was saturated in the influence of the church, its practices, regulations, writings and daily and seasonal rhythms” (Pearsall, *Life* 262). Today, it has lost some of that importance. Churches are dealing with a decline in churchgoers, a lot of couples no longer feel they need to be married by a priest, and people can have their names removed from the baptismal register. Although Christianity is currently the largest religion in the world, it is not as prevalent in everyday life in Western society as it was in the Middle Ages. Instead, secularization is gaining ground and “individualism, diversity and egalitarianism in the context of liberal democracy undermine the authority of religious beliefs” (Bruce 30).

Due to this loss of importance, the role of sin in society has also changed. Sinners are no longer punished by an ecclesiastical court and the seven deadly sins are not considered as ‘deadly’ anymore. As Forni points out: “in a capitalist economy the popular perception is that, as Oliver Stone’s Gordon Gecko puts it, ‘Greed … is good’” (179). Furthermore, sin is no longer used as an explanation for calamities such as earthquakes, tornados or diseases. Instead, science provides the answers. The creation of earth, for example, is no longer attributed to God, but to the so-called big bang. Science has become the new religion.

These changes have also had an impact on how readers interact with Chaucer. Harty states that “Chaucer’s lack of popular appeal is not easily explained, though it may be that he has

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20 For an overview of the largest religious groups worldwide in 2010, see appendix A.
proven too easily and singularly associated with Roman Catholicism to be embraced by successive ages of dissent and doubt” (13). The result is a different approach to Chaucer, which is also reflected in the 2003 BBC adaptation.

3.1.2. Arty’s Sinful Nature

When asked to adapt Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale* for the screen, Tony Grounds chose to focus on the exemplum. As a result, the General Prologue, Pardoner’s Prologue and Epilogue are not represented. He tried, however, to compensate for the loss of the Pardoner by providing some analogies with the protagonist of his adaptation, Arty. They both have a similar sinful nature, but different techniques were used to illustrate it.

A first difference results from the absence of the General Prologue. The description of the Pardoner in the General Prologue was an important element in illustrating his sinful nature. The fictional Chaucer did not only provide the reader with facts, but also implicitly gave his own opinion. The line ‘I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare’ and the association with the hospital of St Mary Of Rouncivale are only some of the examples. Whereas a factual description of Arty is not necessary since he is shown on the screen, the subtle opinion of a narrator is lost in the adaptation. Besides the voice-over at the beginning, there is no narrator in the adaptation. Instead, more emphasis is put on Arty’s appearance. By means of Arty’s dishevelled clothes and silver tooth, Tony Grounds tried to incorporate the subtle hints a narrator would normally provide.

The Pardoner’s Prologue is another important element that has been left out in the adaptation. The Pardoner’s boasting to his fellow pilgrims is the ultimate revelation of his true intentions and his sinful nature. Due to the absence of the Pardoner’s Prologue in the adaptation, there is no such explicit self-revelation. Tony Grounds opted to have Arty’s motives presented in a more implicit way. The viewer must derive Arty’s intentions from the flashbacks and the things he says throughout the episode. Although Arty explicitly states that he wants to be famous, his real intentions are more deeply rooted. I will explain this further in chapter 3.2.,

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21 The voice-over repeats the following line from Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale*: “There they found gold florins, newly minted and round, thenceforth it was no longer death they sought, each of them was so happy at the sight” (BBC’s *Pardoner’s Tale*).
but for now it suffices to say that the real reason for Arty’s behaviour is not mentioned explicitly. Instead, we must derive it from the clues given throughout the episode.

A final difference lies not in their sinful nature, but in the nature of their sinfulness. The Pardoner’s boasting and his use of the exemplum were part of a technique to illustrate his greed and cunning. Even though he turns out to be too clever for his own good, the Pardoner is represented as quite cunning as he is able to use a whole asset of tricks to satisfy his greed. As I mentioned, Arty’s motives are more complicated and deeply rooted. As a result, Tony Grounds resorted to a different technique. The flashbacks to Arty’s childhood and the subsequent beating on the head indicate his psychological issues.

Although Tony Grounds used different techniques to illustrate Arty’s sinful nature, he is still very similar to the Pardoner. In the following chapter, I will discuss Arty’s amorality more in depth which will illustrate their resemblance even further.

3.1.3. Psychological Depth and Arty’s Amorality

Individualism and diversity have become important values in the twenty-first century (Bruce 30). This explains the shift from a moral exemplum with a focus on universality in Chaucer’s Pardoner’s Tale to a story with individual characters and psychological depth in the adaptation. The main characters are no longer referred to as ‘the youngest’, ‘the proudest’ or ‘the worst’. Instead, they are given names and each have their own distinctive look. Arty presents himself as the leader of the group and is easily recognizable by his silver tooth. Baz and Colin are clearly subordinate to Arty. Baz can be recognized by his burned face and Colin by his distinctive posture. Furthermore, more characters are present in the adaptation than in Chaucer’s exemplum, and some are even named. Arty’s victims, Kitty Norman and Amy Healy, are given a prominent role, as well as their parents and those of Arty.

Another interesting result is that the three main characters are presented as real human beings. For example, when Baz and Colin are waiting at the house for Arty to return with Indian food, the viewer is let in on part of their past:
Baz: “Do you wanna know how I burned my face? No?”
Colin: “What’s all this about? Just ‘cause he said… You don’t know anything about me and I
don’t know anything about you.”
Baz: “I do know some things about you.”
Colin: “Like what?”
Baz: “You had a sister, who died in that lake when she was little.”
Colin: “Yeah, well, we all’ve got things that have happened to us.”
Baz: “I suppose.”
Colin: “Your mum probably slopped a cup of tea on your face by mistake, or you pulled a cord
on the kettle when you were little…”
Baz: “It was a fire in a shop. There were these presents in the window, the window display, and
I’d taken one…”
[…]
Baz: “Those presents, in the shop, they were pretend, full of cotton wool, I set light to them, and
they… woosh.”
(BBC’s *Pardoner’s Tale*)

Colin’s dead sister and Baz’s burned face make them appear more human than the anonymous
rioters in Chaucer’s tale. They are still loathsome characters, but with more psychological
depth. The same is true for Arty. His past is revealed through flashbacks to his childhood. We
see him stealing his brother’s present on Christmas day, watch his moments of holiness at
church and are made aware of his difficult teenage years. These flashbacks help Tony
Grounds to create a more complex character with psychological issues.

The change to a modern society transformed the universal exemplum with anonymous
characters into a story that has real human beings with psychological depth. In Chaucer’s
*Pardoner’s Tale*, the Pardoner was able to use the moral exemplum for his own greed, thus
turning it into an immoral tale and revealing his own amorality. Arty cannot do the same,
since he is himself part of the exemplum, but they are still equally amoral in the sense that
they misuse quotations to suit their own purposes.

Whereas the Pardoner quotes mainly from the Bible, Arty gets his inspiration from a whole
range of different works: Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, Charles Dickens’ *Dombey and Son*,
William Blake’s *The Tyger* and Douglas Adams’ *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. The
diversity of these works reflect a postmodern, twenty-first-century attitude.
The first time Arty quotes from one of these works is when he is preaching to a group of tourists in front of Rochester cathedral. He recites the often quoted passage from Shakespeare’s *Richard II*:

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,  
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,  
This other Eden, demi-paradise,  
This fortress built by Nature for herself  
Against infection and the hand of war,  
This happy breed of men, this little world,  
This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happier lands,  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,  
This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,  
Fear'd by their breed and famous by their birth  
(Riverside Shakespeare 813, ll. 40-52)

This excerpt is part of a longer speech given by John of Gaunt on his deathbed. Arty does not quote the end of the speech, which consists of the following lines:

Is now leased out – I die pronouncing it –  
Like to a tenement or pelting farm.  
England, bound in with the triumphant sea,  
Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege  
Of wat’ry Neptune, is now bound in with shame,  
With inky blots and rotten parchment bonds:  
That England, that was wont to conquer others,  
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.  
(Riverside Shakespeare 813, ll. 59-66)

John of Gaunt is lamenting the decline of England under King Richard II’s rule. When placed in the larger context of the play, the speech can be read as a moral warning. After John of Gaunt delivers this speech, Richard the II enters the room. John of Gaunt tries to persuade him to change his behaviour but Richard refuses to listen, which will eventually lead to his downfall. By only reciting the first part of the speech, Arty leaves out the moral meaning and
the speech loses its original purpose. Moreover, Arty’s recitation is meant to distract the tourists while Baz and Colin steal their wallets. The speech therefore becomes immoral and worthless when recited by Arty.

A second quotation worth discussing is given when Arty tries to seduce Kitty. Arty keeps following Kitty, when she suddenly stops and asks “Why are there horrible people?” (BBC’s *Pardoner’s Tale*). Arty replies: “It’s tigers and lambs. And when the stars threw down their spears, and watered heaven with their tears, did he smile his work to see, did he who made the lamb make thee?” (BBC’s *Pardoner’s Tale*). He is quoting from William Blake’s poem ‘The Tyger’, which was published in 1794 in *Songs of Experience*. It was written as a counterpart to ‘The Lamb’, written eighteen years before and published in *Songs of Innocence*. The lamb is presented as the symbol of innocence and joy and the tiger represents its opposite. His terrifying frame and ‘fearful symmetry’ (129, l. 4) lead Blake to ask the question ‘did he who make the Lamb make thee?’ (130, l. 20). He struggles to comprehend that a benevolent and omnipotent God who created the innocent lamb, could also give life to a tiger. It is the same question Kitty is struggling with. But when Arty recites the same lines, the tone changes. Spoken by a criminal – a tiger – these lines suddenly become sinister. Arty embodies evil in the world and he belongs to those ‘horrible people’. The poem therefore gets a different meaning when spoken by him. This is another instance where Arty uses a quotation in a twisted way.

Arty’s ability to misuse quotations puts him on the same level as the Pardoner. The moral meaning of the quotes are undermined by his immoral intentions. In this way, Arty is also a corrupter of meaning and his amorality can therefore be compared to that of the Pardoner.
3.2. Arty’s Spiritual Impotence

In chapter 2.2., I argued that the Pardoner’s physical eunuchry can be interpreted as a symbolical rendering of his spiritual eunuchry. The theme of spiritual impotence is worth examining in the BBC adaptation of *The Pardoner’s Tale*, since Arty bears a resemblance to the Pardoner. In the following chapter, I want to argue that even though Arty is not a biological eunuch, he is spiritually impotent. However, his state is brought about by a different cause than that of Chaucer’s Pardoner.

Since the publication of Robert P. Miller’s article in 1955, scholars have come to accept that the Pardoner’s physical eunuchry acts as a mirror for his spiritual impotence (Halverson 190). Such a reading implies that he is at the same time a biological and a spiritual eunuch. This is, however, not the case with Arty. There is no evidence in the BBC adaptation to suggest he is a biological eunuch. Arty is clearly capable of having sexual relations, so Curry’s ‘eunuchus ex nativitate’ cannot be applied here. Other interpretations that contradict a heterosexual reading are equally improbable. Arty can for example not be a homosexual because he is attracted to women. In theory, he could be bisexual, but there is not a single hint that he is. His claim that Kitty is his girlfriend and his exclamation “I need you to love me back” (BBC’s *Pardoner’s Tale*) implies that he has fallen in love with her. It is also unlikely that Arty is a pseudo-hermaphrodite. Nowhere in the adaptation is this mentioned or even hinted at. Perhaps the most convincing interpretation can be found with David Benson and Richard Firth Green. They believe that the Pardoner is a womanizer, and it does not seem far-fetched to interpret Arty in the same way. Be that as it may, there is not enough evidence to support such a claim.

Although such interpretations are not supported by the adaptation itself, it is not unlikely that screenwriter Tony Grounds may in some way have hinted at Arty’s ‘undefinable’ sexuality. After Arty went to bed with Kitty, he asks her: “Did you enjoy that? You didn’t scream, so. Guess it weren’t euhm” (BBC’s *Pardoner’s Tale*). Here he seems to express some self-doubt about his own sexual performance. I believe this might be a reference to the Pardoner’s sexuality and the scholars’ inability to agree on it. Whether Tony Grounds actually meant for this line to be interpreted in such a way, I will leave open to debate. As Tony Grounds himself says: “I’m not coming at this from an academic viewpoint, I’ve never read any Chaucer before” (Grounds, BBC interview).
Now that I have established that Arty is not a biological eunuch, I want to focus on the other aspect: his spiritual impotence. For my discussion, I will refer to the same passage in Miller’s article which I used to explain the Pardoner’s spiritual impotence:

It is evident that by his [the Pardoner’s] act of will he has cut himself off from virtue and good works, and that this act has been performed, not ‘amore Christi’, that is, through charity, but through its antithesis, cupiditas (R. Miller 53).

Just like the Pardoner, Arty refuses to perform good works. This is already evident at the beginning of the episode. When a woman informs Arty about the missing girl, he goes collecting money. But instead of giving it to the people who participate in the search – and in doing so perform a good work – he keeps it for himself and his companions. He could have given the money away, but instead, ‘by an act of will’, he turns away from good works.

He also turns away from virtue, but not in the exact same manner the Pardoner does. Throughout the tale, the Pardoner displays all seven deadly sins. Arty does not, but he is still a “nasty piece of work” (Grounds, BBC interview). The explanation for this difference can be found in our modern society. Tony Grounds states that “I’ve had to make my version a lot nastier […] You can’t just kill off people on TV these days for being greedy – our threshold is a lot higher. I needed to make the central characters very nasty pieces of work” (Grounds, BCC interview). Moreover, the idea of the seven deadly sins has become irrelevant in a society where religion no longer plays a crucial role. Sins such as gluttony are no longer seen as leading to eternal damnation as they were in the fourteenth century. As a result, Arty’s sins differ from those of the Pardoner. They do, however, have the same result: both the Pardoner and Arty deliberately turn away from virtue and good works.

A scene that illustrates the ‘act of will’ is Arty’s flashback to Christmas when he was a boy. We see a young Arty unwrapping Christmas presents at night to see what he will get in the morning. When he discovers that he will get a Bible and his brother a toy car, he decides to switch them. He thus deliberately turns away from religion, just as the Pardoner refuses to follow in the apostles’ footsteps.

So far, Arty resembles the Pardoner as a spiritual eunuch. The main difference, however, lies in the cause of their spiritual impotence. Whereas the Pardoner’s greed leads to his spiritual
impotency, Arty’s stems from his need to be loved and his inability to distinguish love from fame. Throughout the series, Arty mentions that he wants to be loved and admired, yet he fails to realize that his parents already love him. The following scene illustrates this:

Arty: “He called me nasty.”
Mother: “Come in and sit down.”
Arty: “You think I am nasty as well then?”
Mother: “You do nasty things but you can’t understand why.”
Arty: “I won’t bother you again, dad, ‘till I come back famous.”
Father: “For what though?”
Arty: “You don’t believe me do you? I look into your eyes and I can see I am not the son you wanted.”
Father: “You are my son.”
Arty: “I swear, with every last drop of blood in my body, that you never see me again until I’ve made it.”

(BBC’s *Pardoner’s Tale*)

The parents are represented as caring and understanding. Especially the father loves his son and feels that Arty should not prove himself (“For what though?”). Nevertheless, Arty insists that they do not love him and that he will be famous no matter what. This final point illustrates that he confuses ‘being loved’ with ‘being famous’. He cannot see that they are not necessarily the same. Consequently, when the treasure is found and he wants the money for himself, he does not act purely out of greed, but he sees it as a means to get famous. His greed is interwoven in a more complex pattern of psychological issues.

Arty’s psychological issues are a result of the shift to a twenty-first-century society. As I have already pointed out in chapter 3.1.3., the adaptation allowed more psychological depth. Tony Grounds was therefore able to integrate more of Arty’s past and problems into the story. This concern for the psychological explanation of the characters’ behaviour results from the continuing popularity of psychoanalysis, first introduced by Sigmund Freud in the nineteenth century. Film directors used this technique to portray characters struggling with their inner feelings. Some directors even went a step further and depicted psychopathic behaviour. Probably the most famous example is Alfred Hitchcock’s Norman Bates in *Psycho* (1960).
Something similar happens in the 2003 BBC adaptation of *The Pardoner’s Tale*. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term psychopath is used to refer to “a mentally ill person who is highly irresponsible and antisocial and also violent or aggressive” (“psychopath”). This is also the case with Arty. He is mentally ill, which can be deduced from his multiple flashbacks and the subsequent banging on the head, and in his delusional mind he is incapable of distinguishing between love and fame. He is also violent and aggressive as he has raped and murdered two girls. Furthermore, he has a total lack of empathy. For example, when he is following Kitty, they suddenly stop in front of a window where they see Amy’s parents holding each other. Arty does not seem to care about their misery. Instead, he uses it as an opportunity to get Kitty to his house. This moment also illustrates his lack of empathy for his victims. He fails to see that Kitty does not want to be seduced and that Amy desperately wants to go home. Finally, he has no empathy for his friends as he mixes rat poison in their food with a smile. In a society where people are very much aware of their mental health, a character like Arty is more interesting than a corrupt and greedy pardoner selling false indulgences.
3.3. The Identity of the Young Girl

A notable difference between Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale* and its BBC adaptation is the change from an old man to a young girl. This change is meaningful and multiple explanations could be put forward based on the already existing theories surrounding the Old Man. Such an exercise would produce interesting insights, but it may not be necessary since writer Tony Grounds explained his intentions in an interview with the BBC:

> In Chaucer, death appears in the form of an old man who may or may not be a ghost. In my version, something very similar happens. I’ve tried to make it as Chaucerian as possible, while giving audiences something that stands alone as TV drama whatever its origins (Grounds, BBC interview).

Although Grounds remains somewhat vague by suggesting that ‘something very similar happens’, two possible interpretations of the young girl present themselves. Firstly, the young girl might be a ghost. Tony Grounds believes the Old Man is Death, but adds that he could also be a ghost. It is true that the rioters are the only people the Old Man interacts with and his knowledge of the treasure does seem to suggest he is something other than human. If in the BBC adaptation something similar happens, the young girl might be interpreted as a ghost as well. A first element to support this is the fact that Kitty is dead at the time the events take place. Even though the viewer only discovers this at the end of the episode, Kitty was Arty’s first victim. As a murdered girl it would be possible for her to return as a ghost in search for revenge. Furthermore, not everyone is able to see her. Her parents, for example, fail to notice Kitty when they walk past her at the beginning of the episode. Similarly, when they are inside the house in the same room as Kitty, they can neither see or hear her. In fact, only Arty and his friends – the objects of her revenge – are able to see Kitty. It is significant that each interaction between the girl and the three outcasts happens when nobody else is around or when nobody is paying attention to them.

A second, additional interpretation is that the young girl is the personification of Death or is otherwise closely connected to Death. The former raises some issues. Kitty does not express a desire for death – unlike the Old Man – which makes the interpretation plausible, but not

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22 Perhaps the most famous example of a murdered person returning in the form of a ghost is old Hamlet in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The same idea seems to have been used in the BBC adaptation.
necessarily probable. The fact that Kitty was murdered implies that she was once alive. If Kitty is the personification of Death, the question can be asked how Death was able to take lives before she herself was dead. One could argue that Death already existed and only took the shape of Kitty in order to murder Arty and his companions. This again raises a problem. Kitty does not realize she is dead. When she is sitting in the same room as her parents, she seems ignorant of her situation:

Kitty: “Why is everyone all miserable?”
Father: “I can’t believe another child has gone missing here in Rochester.”
Kitty: “No, I, I didn’t. Don’t cry mum, please don’t cry.”
Mother: “I’m sorry, it has brought it all back.”
Kitty: “Can’t we… We must go and help. I must go and help.”
Mother: “Nothing we can do to make it better again.”
Kitty: “Got to try mum.”

(BBC’s Pardoner’s Tale)

She asks why they are sad and replies to her parents comments even if they clearly cannot see or hear her. If Death did in fact deliberately take the shape of the young girl in order to take revenge, we would expect him to be aware of his state.

A more plausible explanation is that Kitty is Death’s messenger and that Death is another character in the adaptation. I propose that the nameless man at the very beginning and end of the episode is the personification of Death. There are some clues regarding his appearance that support such an interpretation. His golden ring for example, which is brought clearly into view by a close-up, has the shape of a skull. The skull is a common symbol used to refer to death. The fact that it is made of gold is also significant. It is gold that will eventually lead to the death of the three outcasts. The deliberate close-up of the ring seems to foreshadow this ending. At the end of the episode, the viewer is left with the feeling that the man had planned this outcome all along. The camera also zooms in on the man’s blackened and tobacco-stained teeth. This could be a possible reference to decay and mortality. When the camera zooms back out, we see the man is wearing dark sunglasses. These are often associated with blindness. If the man is indeed blind, it may refer to the common idea that death does not discriminate. In the case of the adaptation, both the innocent girls and the dangerous criminals die. The man is

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23 Examples of literary works on this theme include William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* and Anthonis de Roovere’s *Vander Mollenfeeste*. 
also dressed in black, a colour that is usually associated with death and mourning. A final element that connects the man to Death is the song he is singing. The song ‘Wonderful Life’ by Louis Armstrong gets an ironic tone when it is sung by the man because the tale depicts ruffians raping and murdering innocent girls. By mocking the beauty of life, he may represent its antithesis, Death.

If the man is Death, Kitty might be interpreted as his messenger. The first person the viewer is confronted with is the man standing in front of the cathedral; the second person is Kitty riding past him on her bike. It is as if Death is sending Kitty on a quest. Later in the episode, we find out that the quest is to direct Arty and his companions to a trap the man has prepared. Kitty does, however, try to warn Arty and perhaps offer him a chance at redemption, just like Chaucer’s Old Man. This is illustrated in the following scene:

Kitty: “Are you following me?”
Arty: “I thought I recognized you from somewhere.”
Kitty: “In a ‘what’s a nice girl like me doing in a place like this’ kinda way?”
Arty: “I’m sorry, what must you think. Like Icarus to the sun I just couldn’t resist. Forgive me. I consider my wings well and truly burned.”
Kitty: “I’ve been to Crete.”
Arty: “Have you?”
Kitty: “That’s where it’s set or whatever, Icarus.”
Arty: “The myth?”
Kitty: “Exactly. Icarus and his father were supposed to fly from Crete to the mainland of Greece.”
Arty: “You are clearly more up on your myths than I.”
(BBC’s Pardoner’s Tale)

When Arty prepares to leave after ‘his wings have been burned’, Kitty draws him back by saying she has gone to Crete. It is interesting that she keeps insisting on the myth. In my opinion, Kitty knows the true meaning of the myth – Icarus’ ambition and arrogance killed him – and she realizes Arty does not. By insisting on the myth, she is in fact warning him that his ambitions will eventually lead to his death. Arty ignores her subtle advice and even goes on to forcefully seduce her.
When her warning has failed, Kitty does not resist Arty’s attempts any longer. She is mysteriously passive and seems to wait for the right moment. That moment arrives when Arty tells her of his desire to become famous. Kitty reacts by insinuating that through killing Amy’s killer, he might achieve fame. Arty immediately believes her and exclaims “I will be doing the world a service. These things, these moments in time, are meant to happen. I was meant to find you and I was meant to do something heroic. I was meant to do the world a service. This is my moment” (BBC’s *Pardoner’s Tale*). He rounds up his companions to go to the house where the killer is supposed to be hiding. They do not find him, but instead they discover gold bars underneath the floor boards. Arty’s desire to be famous makes him want the treasure for himself, but his plan backfires when he is beaten to death by his own companions. In the end, his ambitions and arrogance did kill him. Kitty, seeing that her task is completed, returns with Amy to the place where it all started: the man in front of the cathedral.

These interpretations explain what the young girl is, but they do not answer the question as to why Tony Grounds chose a young girl instead of an old man. Again, there are two possible interpretations to be discerned. In Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale*, the three rioters indulge in gambling, swearing and gluttony. As already argued in chapter 3.1.1., these sins are no longer as relevant in the twenty-first century. In fact, they have become more or less acceptable. Las Vegas, for example, with its multitude of casinos has never been more popular, swear words are no longer omitted in television shows and a quick glance at Facebook or Instagram reveals an obsessions with food. The BBC adaptation, therefore, had to present crimes that were relevant to a twenty-first-century audience and that would leave its viewers shocked. As Tony Grounds himself says, “[y]ou can’t just kill off people on TV these days for being greedy – our threshold is a lot higher” (Grounds, BBC interview). Thus, in the adaptation the tavern sins are replaced with abduction, rape and even murder. It is my opinion that Tony Grounds intended to counterbalance these crimes with innocence in the form of a young girl. The viewer is presented with an opposition between good and evil. In the end, Kitty is able to act out her revenge and she eventually ascends the stairs to heaven. The opposition is used as a means to exact poetic justice and to intensify the moral of the story. As Kitty says, “[w]e’re doing the world a service” (BBC’s *Pardoner’s Tale*).
There is also another possible, feminist interpretation. In the twenty-first century, women are often still perceived as inferior. They get, for example, payed less than their male colleagues for doing the same work and they are objectified in tabloids. Tony Grounds already showed his interest in the role of women in his series *Our Girl* and by opting for a woman as the one to lead the criminals to their doom, he also gives women a voice. In this way, the victims of the criminal acts are given their revenge. It needs to be added that women in the fourteenth century were also treated unequally. However, feminism did not exist then. It was only in the nineteenth century that feminism started to gain ground, leading the way for a feminist interpretation of the young girl in the BBC’s *Pardoner’s Tale*.

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24 The series *Our Girl* follows the adventures and tribulations of female medics in the British Army.
25 There are two important waves of feminism; a first one between the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, and a second one between the 1960s and the 1980s.
4. Conclusion

With six centuries in between, our modern society is bound to be different from the one in Chaucer’s age. A modern retelling of his *Canterbury Tales* can provide some insight into these differences. The 2003 BBC adaptation successfully reimagined Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale* in a twenty-first-century context. This change of setting had an impact on certain themes of the original. The theme of sin is one of these. Although screenwriter Tony Grounds chose to focus on the exemplum, Arty still has a lot in common with the Pardoner. Both are represented as sinful and are able to use quotations to their own advantage. The change in society is revealed in the different reasons behind their sinfulness. The adaptation allowed more psychological depth in the characters. As a result, Arty’s motives are explained in a more detailed way. By means of flashbacks, we get to see his distorted mind and see that he is caught in an intricate web of psychological issues. Whereas the Pardoner acts purely out of greed, Arty’s inability to distinguish between love and fame leads him on the path away from virtue and good works. Arty may not be a biological eunuch, but he is still represented as spiritually impotent. A final theme is the figure of the Old Man. Tony Grounds opted to have him replaced by a young girl. In this way, innocence is placed in opposition to the criminal acts of the three outcasts in a context of poetic justice and a voice is given to the victims of these acts.

One could argue that there are other important themes worth discussing and comparing to the original as well. However, this would have proved too much for the scope of this dissertation. Nevertheless, a comparison of such themes could very well form the subject of other essays. They might also be looked at from another perspective. I focussed primarily on the change in society from the fourteenth century to the twenty-first century, but other angles are also worth examining. For example, the development of sin and crime since the Middle Ages. I only briefly touched upon this aspect but I believe a more thorough study would reveal interesting new observations. The more technical aspects of adapting a literary work into a film or television series form another possible perspective. The focus of this dissertation was mainly on the content and themes rather than on the technical aspects, but these are also worth discussing. Finally, the BBC adapted five other tales for the screen. Detailed comparative studies are needed here as well.
With this dissertation I have tried to not only focus on the BBC adaptation, but also to present my own interpretation of Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale*. In chapter 2.3.2., for example, I proposed a new reading of the Old Man in the context of the three warnings the rioters receive. In this way, each warning is issued by one member of the Holy Trinity, with the Old Man as a representation of the Holy Ghost. Although many scholars have already discussed the identity of the Old Man and there seems to be a consensus that he can be many things at once, I do believe that my interpretation provides a new perspective. A more detailed analysis of the Old Man in relation to the three warnings would therefore be fruitful, as well as an analysis of the entire text with this interpretation of the Old Man in mind.

Television and film have taken an important place in the modern society. More and more books are being adapted for the screen. Scholars should therefore adapt along with it and use comparative studies to shed light on the different approaches. Television adaptations are an interesting way of making medieval source material available for a general public. If scholars manage to adapt to this new trend and start focusing on it even more, they might in fact reach a wider audience than they have been able to do so far. For as the BBC adaptation has proven, popularizing Chaucer through television does in fact work.
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Appendix A

The religious map of the world Independent/Statistica