Chaucer's Pardoner: Food, drink, and the discourse of desecration

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Abstract

The centrality of food and drink in the 'Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale', the 'Pardoner's Prologue', and the 'Pardoner's Tale' itself has been shown by a number of scholars, in particular Martin Stevens & Kathleen Falvey (1982), Clarence Miller & Roberta Bux Bosse (1972), Joseph Millichap (1974), Robert Nichols (1967), and Frederick Tupper (1914). This essay builds on their insights by showing that Chaucer deliberately constructs a semantic field of words relating to food, some of which are neologisms. The scholars mentioned above show how the bread and wine of the texts have deeper metaphorical resonances with the Mass. But their insights can be taken further, by demonstrating that Chaucer subverts this layer of meaning with yet another discourse set: words and deep metaphors relating to brokenness, violence, and death, as opposed to the whole, the healthy – the holiness of Christ's body and blood, and its representation in the Christian Mass. In carrying this out, the Pardoner is one of Chaucer's most evil characters, but also becomes one of his most ethical constructions, as he demonstrates what a Christless world would be like.

Keywords: Geoffrey Chaucer; 'Pardoner's Tale'; food and drink; discourse of desecration; blasphemy

There is a terrible, grim determinism about Chaucer's 'Pardoner's Tale':[1] at its heart is a story as old and dark as time – the origins have been traced back to a 'Buddhist original' dating from anywhere between the fifth and third centuries BCE (Hamel & Merrill 1991: 183), and there are analogues in many cultures at several periods – all with the same conclusion, inevitable as death itself. The motif of this folktale is known as 'The Treasure Finders Who Murder Each Other' (Correale & Hamel 2003: 279).

The 'Pardoner's Tale' is one of greed: set during a breakout of the Black Death, three 'rioters'[2] – drunken louts – set out from their tavern in a town to kill Death, and in seeking him, find and threaten an enigmatic Old Man figure (see Richardson 2003: 323ff.) to tell them where Death is. The Old Man points to a treasure trove of gold florins, under an oak tree (see Roache 1965: 1–6). Two of the three remain to guard their treasure, while the youngest goes back to town, to procure bread and wine. He is tempted by the Devil to poison two of the three bottles he takes back to his fellows; these, in turn, plot to murder him when he comes back. He returns; they kill him, and then die drinking the deadly wine he brought to the grisly communion.

A number of scholars have shown that the 'Tale' is suffused with food imagery, in particular bread and wine, and Martin Stevens & Kathleen Falvey conclude in 'Substance, accident, and transformations: a reading of the "Pardoner's Tale"' that 'his tale must be read as a heretic's parody of the Eucharist' (1982: 155). I shall add to the account of how the Pardoner carries out this parody – and show that besides the terrible determinism of the 'Prologue' and 'Tale' identified by scholars, there is also a gross, and deliberate, materialism that undermines and debases everything the Pardoner touches: his devilish strategy is to degrade Christ and the

Eucharist, using a language of food, bread and wine – along with images of broken bodies and body parts – animal, human, and divine.

In what follows, modern readers of the Pardoner need to bear in mind that, as Melitta Weiss Adamson puts it in her study *Food in medieval times*, 'food was on the minds of medieval Christians practically all of the time' (2004: 192). This was due not only to the seasonality and precarity of supply – which was heightened in plague periods such as the period in which the 'Tale' is set – but also because food was a 'focal point of faith' (2004: 183) and very much part of the cycle of the seasons, both temporal and liturgical. Weiss Adamson shows (2004: 185) how gluttony, and the lust arising from it, was initially considered the original sin, from the writings of Tertullian in the third century CE, St Jerome in the fourth, and Cassian in the fifth. Only later at the time of Gregory the Great in the seventh century did the 'sins of the flesh' become less important than the spiritual sins 'pride, envy, anger, sloth, and avarice' (2004: 193). Christians had been admonished since the third century to fast in order to 'atone for Adam's sin' (2004: 187), a fasting culture which reached its most famous expression in the Rule of St Benedict, around 530 CE, especially in chapters 39 and 40 which regulate the 'quantity and quality of food to be consumed' (2004: 186). Fasting, it appears too, generally implied charity – something still apparent in Christian, Muslim and Jewish practices during principal fasts.

Thus, the early and medieval Christian world was much more attuned to food and the rituals surrounding food than contemporaries would generally be. Redemption was possible in fasting, whether voluntarily on an individual basis as seen in the ascetics that were so common in the landscape of the time, or communally (Weiss Adamson 2004: 185), as happened when all fasted, such as in the Lenten Fast in the forty days leading to Easter – the very period evoked in the April setting of the pilgrimage to Canterbury, at the start of April and Spring, at the height of the Fast, just before Good Friday and the Crucifixion of Christ. But fasting culture also gave rise to the possibility of sin, in the breaking of the many dietary restrictions imposed by the Church in varying degrees over the centuries. It is in this delicate balance that the Pardoner plays with metaphors of carnality, and the deeper metaphors stemming from these in the semantic field of terms relating to food and the body – and the soul that was inextricably bound up in sin and the material world.

At the start of the 'Pardoner's Tale' '[t]hese rioters thre' are first roused to their quest by the sound of a tinkling bell:

> Thise riotoures thre of whiche I telle,
>
> Longe erst er prime rong of any belle,
>
> Were set hem in a taverne to drynke,
>
> And as they sat, they herde a belle clynke[3]
>
> Biforn a cors, was caried to his grave. (ll. 661–665)

The tavern is set in a night-time of revelry and excess, darkness, and plague. It is any time between the Matins bell and Prime – between approximately four and six in the morning. The bell and the corpse seem intended by the Pardoner – and by this I mean Chaucer[4] – as an ironic parallel of the sacring bell in the Mass, betokening the transubstantiation of the bread and wine

into the body and blood of Christ. These bells were, and are, commonly rung at the moment when the priest says the Words of Institution over the wafer and chalice. Such 'opaque references to the Incarnation' (Stevens & Falvey 1982: 155) are amplified as the 'Tale' progresses: the Pardoner 'delivers his sermon while he drinks and eats "of a cake"' (155). Robert Nichols (1967: 502) shows that the word 'cake' was first used of the Eucharist in about 1390, at about the time Chaucer was writing the 'Pardoner's Tale', quoting to this end the *Oxford English Dictionary* citing 'Wyclif's [a variation of Wycliffe] Bible: "a round kaak of breed"' (1967: 502). He goes on to say that the '[*Middle English Dictionary*] particularly acknowledges use of cake as "bread of the Eucharist"'.[5] The ironic references to the Eucharist by the Pardoner are even more obvious by the end of the 'Tale' when the two rioters, having killed their fellow, have 'a corpse-side picnic of "breed and wyn"' (Stevens & Falvey 1982: 155) – and promptly die of the wine poisoned by their murdered companion.[6]

Such desecrating, desacralising images are seen throughout the 'Prologue' and 'Tale', in the mock sermons which the Pardoner delivers. These are borrowed, as scholars have long been showing, from the language of the period and such religious compilations as the circa 1440 manuscript (Brandeis 1900) of *Jacob's well: an Englisht [sic] treatise on the cleansing of man's conscience*, or the sermons – and the Bible – of John Wycliffe who was a contemporary of Chaucer. (Some such texts like John Bromyard's *Summa praedicantium* (1587) are post-Chaucer, but they still echo Chaucer's language and are potentially useful in that they, too, reflect the religious language of the time.) I shall show that Chaucer seems to borrow from Wycliffe formulations and words relating to food and the body. Besides 'caak' (see above) 'gullet' is used in 1380 by Wycliffe and in 1386, or soon thereafter, by Chaucer, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*, 'gullet, n.') as evident in this passage which mimics sermons of the time, and is full of images of food and of the body:[7]

> The apostel [St Paul] wepyng seith ful pitously,
>
> 'Ther walken manye of whiche yow toold have I –
>
> I seye it now wepyng, with pitous voys –
>
> They been enemys of Cristes croys,
>
> Of whiche the ende is deeth; wombe is hir god!'
>
> O wombe! O bely! O stynkyng cod,
>
> Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun!
>
> At either ende of thee foul is the soun.
>
> How greet labour and cost is thee to fynde!
>
> Thise cookes, how they stampe, and streyne, and grynde,
>
> And turnen substaunce into accident
>
> To fulfille al thy likerous[8] talent!
>
> Out of the harde bones knokke they

> The mary, for they caste noght awey
>
> That may go thurgh the golet softe and swoote.
>
> Of spicerie of leef, and bark, and roote
>
> Shal been his sauce ymaked by delit,
>
> To make hym yet a newer appetit. (ll. 529–546)

As a number of scholars have pointed out, in lines 533–535 the Pardoner mimics St Paul in 1 Corinthians 6, verse 13 (I quote from the Wycliffite Bible, the language of which Chaucer most certainly knew): 'Mete to the wombe, and the wombe to metis; forsoth God schal distroye and this and that. Sothli the body not to fornycacioun, but to the Lord, and the Lord to the body' (Forshall et al., vol. 4, 1850: 347–348).

Amid the imagery of dung and corruption Nichols (1967: 502) locates a reference to the controversy reflected in Wycliffe and brewing from the 1370s, about the nature of the Eucharistic bread and wine, in the metaphor of the 'cookes' who 'turnen substaunce into accident' (ll. 538–539). For Wycliffe, as is evident for example in the first chapter of *De eucharistia tractatus maior*, wafer and wine were not literally the body of Christ '*sed efficax eius signum*' (Loserth 1892: 16) – 'but an effective sign thereof'.[9] In addition to this degradation of the Mass in mischievously suggesting it is excrement, the Pardoner-preacher seems to play on the rhyme 'god' (l. 533) and 'stynkyng cod' (l. 534), the foul bag of the belly. This echoes Wycliffe's sermons and his repeated diatribe against priests who: 'sette […] more prise bi *ȝoure stynkynge* bely þan bi ȝoure lord' (Matthew 1880: 171; emphasis added to the phrase repeated at 50, 171, 237, 247). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* it is only in the late 1460s that 'Cod' began to be used as a euphemism for 'God', as seen in the *Towneley plays* (*OED*, 'Cod, n.4 and int.'), but is it not possible that this euphemism for the deity had gained currency sometime before that? Certainly, Chaucer's rhyme pushes the words together in the most blasphemous way. Finally, the Pardoner seems in his diatribe against gluttony to toy sacrilegiously with the word 'mary'. The form of the word *mergh* is, according to *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*, changing to '"marwe" (before 1387) and *marowe* (before 1398)' (Barnhart & Steinmetz 1988: 635). The word is thus undergoing particular transformations at the time the Pardoner – Chaucer – is using it. It is also attested in the Wycliffite Bible in around 1382.[10] This terrible play on the 'Mary' if even only at a subconscious level, reduces the Mother of God to the marrow of a smashed bone. And there is a suggestion of Christ's own Passion, as Elizabeth Biebel points out, in 'the cooks' actions of smashing bones, in that these images recall Psalm 21; 15, 18: "I am poured out like water; and all my bones are scattered […] They have numbered all my bones"' (in Carlin & Rosenthal 1998: 24).

Such extreme sacrilege appears also in the 'Summoner's Tale'. John Finlayson explains Thomas's fart:

> Thomas's instruction to Friar John to grope near his rear parts and be given a 'gift' is a parody of God's revelation of his back parts to Moses: 'And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and I will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen' (Exodus, 33: 18–23). (Finlayson 2007: 462)

The wind which accompanies this scene is mocked, in the most shocking of all Chaucer's characters' blasphemies.

It is becoming clear that the Pardoner delights in playing with words and images that desecrate the holy, and that he does so using words relating to the semantic field of food and body parts. Indeed, a few such words are first attested by *OED* in the 'Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale', the 'Pardoner's Prologue', and the 'Pardoner's Tale': 'confiture', 'empoisoner', 'fruitester', and 'cullion'. These terms, central to the text as they are, are emerging into English at the time Chaucer was writing the Pardoner into being, and he brings them to light in the character's words. There is 'confiture', from Old French '*confit, confite'* – and '[b]efore 1399 *confyt*' (Barnhart & Steinmetz 1988: 193).[11] 'Empoisoner' (*OED*, 'empoisoner, n.') is first used by Chaucer in this text, though he may have got the idea for this form of the word from Wycliffe, who first uses 'poisoner' in English in his Bible, circa 1384 (*OED*, 'poisoner, n.'). 'Cullion' (*OED*, 'cullion, n.', sense †1 '[a] testicle'), too, appears for the first time in English as associated with the Pardoner in the form 'coillons' (l. 952): the word may well have been inspired by one of Chaucer's trips to Italy (*coglioni* still means 'testacles' in Italian). Chaucer may thus be the progenitor of our English 'balls'. And finally, 'fruitester' makes its first and last appearance in English in the Pardoner's mouth, to be briefly supplanted by 'fruiteress' in the eighteenth century (*OED*, 'fruiteress, n.').

It seems, then, that the Pardoner – Chaucer – is playing a game with images and language, which we first discern in his exchange with Harry Bailly in the 'Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale'. The Host is responding to the pathos of the 'Physician's Tale', and playfully makes up words to sound medically plausible. '[S]eyde I nat wel? I kan nat speke in terme' (l. 311) says he, denying his ability in the language of medicine – having just invented the term 'galianes' (l. 306) to match the Physician's 'jurdones' (l. 305), his chamber pot.[12] This is some medicinal Galenic drink. The Host puns, too, on the word for the Physician's 'ypocras' (l. 306) – Hippocratic cures – but also a type of spiced wine. The Pardoner immediately enters into this game. When the Host swears the Physician is 'a propre man' (l. 309), '[a]nd lyk a prelat [bishop], by Seint Ronyan' (l. 310) he is invoking a Scottish Saint, Ninian, who was known for fasting and spare living, especially at Easter – which is, as we have seen, the season in which the pilgrimage to Canterbury is set.[13] The Pardoner picks up on the Host's word play, swearing that he will deliver the 'myrthe or japes' (l. 319) Harry Bailly has called for:

> 'It shal be doon,' quod he, 'by Seint Ronyon!' (l. 320)

He twists the Host's 'Ronyan', changing it to sound more like the French 'kidney', '*rognon'* – and thus swears by 'St Kidney'. This witty word game is dominated, as I have been showing, by food, and drink-related terms, as well as by terms related to body parts – human or animal, relics or living human bodies.

The Pardoner is open with his companions about how he is playing a game, also, with 'lewed peple' (l. 392; l. 437) whom he mocks as 'his apes' as we see in the portrait of the Pardoner in the 'General Prologue' (l. 706). He is modelled on Jean de Meun's Faux Semblant from *Le roman de la rose* (Correale & Hamel 2003: 269). The Pardoner says, in his 'Prologue', 'I peyne me to han an hauteyn speche' which he 'saffrons' with Latin terms – the first time this word is attested in English:

> … in Latyn I speke a wordes fewe,

To *saffron* with my predicacioun,

And for to stire hem [the lewed peple] to devocioun. (ll. 344–346; emphasis added)

The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that the verb is used transitively here, but in fact the Pardoner makes its object deliberately unclear. Is it the Pardoner's speech that is being 'saffroned', or his audience? He does, after all, describe the listening people as being 'stire[d]' by his words, like a pot of stew, perhaps. Saffron was the most expensive spice then, as now (Weiss Adamsson 2004: 15), and was associated with aristocratic tables – and especially with the 'sotelties' that were designed by cooks as entertainments (Weiss Adamson 2004: 74) and also as 'illusion foods' (Weiss Adamson 2004: 185) which dressed up to appear red white (bloodless) meats, thus making them seem more palatable during fasts when the meat of quadrupeds was forbidden and only fish, fowl, and vegetables were allowed. Weiss Adamson observes that saffron gives a 'golden hue' (2004: 74) to food. It was commonly used in the universal dish of the aristocratic Middle Ages originating in Arabia, the *blanc manger*, usually made with fowl.[14] It seems that the Pardoner is knowingly (and for an educated, well fed medieval audience *not* obscurely) invoking such 'sotelties' – the word literally means 'subtleties', as of words (Weiss Adamson 2004: 74) – in his own discourse and its underlying metaphors.

'My theme', he tells his companions, 'is alwey oon, and evere was – /*Radix malorum est Cupiditas* [greed is the root of evils]' (ll. 333–334; repeated ll. 425–426). He then proceeds to declare, and delight in, his own cupidity, and state that he does not want to 'beggen ydelly' (l. 446) and 'countrefete' (l. 447) the self-deprivations of 'apostles' (l. 447) and renunciants like Ninian. Instead:

I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete,

Al were it yeven of the povereste page,

Or of the povereste wydwe in a village,

Al sholde hir children sterve for famyne.

Nay, I wol drynke licour of the vyne

And have a joly wenche in every toun. (ll. 448–453)

Saintly, Ninian-like asceticism gives way to a discourse altogether more profane and material, and full of the undermining jokes we have seen, that the common folk would never see.

In addition to the preaching against the very sin he delights in – says he rather ambiguously 'Thus kan I preche agayn[15] the same vice/ Which that I use' (ll. 427–428) – he also sells access to fake relics. Bones of animals are paraded as holy items, and what has not yet been seen is that they might well come from his own table:

Thanne have I in latoun[16] a sholder-boon

Which that was of an hooly Jewes sheep. (ll. 350–351)

This detail – that it is the shoulder-bone of a *sheep* rather than the more obvious lie that it belonged to 'an hooly Jewe' – suggests he has enjoyed it at a meal and now uses it as a relic. The first time we meet him in the 'General Prologue' the narrator tells us that 'in a glas he hadde pigges bones' which are also presented as 'relikes' ('General Prologue' ll. 700–701). Again, the detail of *what* animals' bones he uses is superfluous, unless we understand that it is a joke – a kind of *sotto-voce* sacrilege, an aside shared by the Pardoner with the Host, who then makes the joke available to those in the audience who are cunning enough to see it too. He is getting all the meat off his metaphorical bones.

> And he clearly has many bones for sale, for he prescribes their use against disease:
>
> If that this boon be wasshe in any welle,
>
> If cow, or calf, or sheep, or oxe swelle
>
> That any worm hath ete, or worm ystonge,
>
> Taak water of that welle and wassh his tonge,
>
> And it is hool anon; and forthermoore,
>
> Of pokkes and of scabbe, and every soore
>
> Shal every sheep be hool that of this welle
>
> Drynketh a draughte. (ll. 353–360)

Such a spurious hallowing figuratively and literally defiles the common well, subverts the general 'weal', holiness, wholeness, health – the Pardoner is, as Henkin points out, parodying the practice of dipping precious things in water, which was considered efficacious against disease, on the 'homeopathic principle *similia similibus curantur*' (1941: 509), that is, 'like is cured by like'. It is a delicious *Selbstironie* that the Pardoner imagines the diseases mentioned here as being of the 'tonge' (l. 356), for his own discourse is, as we are seeing, mocking, infecting and deadly. And the Pardoner's proffered cure is an ironic sacramental – the holy water which was, and is, a reminder of the sacrament of baptism. In pretending (in its literal sense of 'holding out') cure and health – the word 'welle' is repeated three times in almost as many lines (l. 353; l. 356; l. 359), the word 'hool' hard by, twice in two lines (l. 357; l. 359) – he presents instead an imagery of disease and death. As always, from *his* tongue issues a polluted stream of words and images, '[o]f pokkes and of scabbe, and every soore' (l. 358). The sibilance in these words is suggestive of the metaphor of the serpent, which we shall shortly see again, and which is suggested when the Pardoner is introduced to us in the 'General Prologue' and we see him 'wel affile his tongue' (l. 711). (The metaphor of sharpening is deliberate and is subliminally related to the *literal* dagger we will later see in the 'Tale').

As if trying to get even more out of this joke about the bones he tells his congregation to '[f]astynge, drynken of this welle a draughte' (l. 363) in order to increase livestock, 'stoor' (l. 365), and that using this water to make 'potage' (l. 368), soup, will heal – once again the deep metaphor underlying the word is literally 'make whole' – jealousy:

> And, sires, also it heeleth jalousie;

For though a man be falle in jalous rage,

Lat maken with this water his potage,

And nevere shal he moore his wyf mystriste,

Though he the soothe of hir defaute wiste,

Al had she taken prestes two or thre. (ll. 366–371)

There is a devilish mischievousness behind the psychology of getting a man to confront his errant wife – the implication is the Pardoner's (and thus the husband's) default assumption that a wife is always guilty of this 'defaute' (l. 370) – by getting her to make his soup using the Pardoner's 'holy' water. This scenario plays yet again with sacred things (here the sacrament of marriage) and debases them. It evokes the sort of discord, the dissonance, the Pardoner delights in – and delights to share with his companions. The Pardoner's final jab is that the jealous man's wife has slept with 'prestes two or thre' (l. 371) – which may be seen, again, as the subliminal undermining of the Trinity which we have seen before. Like so many small details in the texts associated with the Pardoner, what appears to be merely a throwaway phrase, a metrical filler, can be seen as taking on a significance in the larger pattern of wellness-wholeness-holiness undermined by his poisoning, defiling, and disruptive discourse. The effect of the Pardoner's words is not easy to account for, but the drip-drip of suggestive moments begins eventually to pool into significance. The sheep and pigs' bones that the Pardoner enjoyed as food, are stretching very far here, in providing the 'holy water' for a jealous man's soup – a great joke indeed, for those who can see it.

We saw, above, the Pardoner's assault on the body of Christ, in his reference (ll. 533–535) to St Paul in 1 Corinthians 6, verse 13. Paul goes on in verse 15 to say that abuse of one's own body is akin to abusing Christ, for '[w]iten ȝe nat, for ȝoure bodyes ben membris of Crist?' (Forshall et al., vol. 4, 1850: 348). In verse 19 Paul introduces the image of the body as God's temple:

> Wher [whether] ȝe witen [or] not, for ȝoure membris ben the temple of the Hooli Gost, that is in ȝow, whom ȝe han of God, and ȝe ben not ȝoure owne. Forsoth ȝe be bouȝt with greet prys. Glorifie ȝe, and bere God in ȝoure body. (Forshall et al., vol. 4, 1850: 348).

These verses from Corinthians are central to understanding the Pardoner's strategy. The gluttony he evokes does something similar to the rioters, who:

[…] eten also and drynken over hir myght,

Thurgh which they doon the devel sacrifise

Withinne that develes temple in cursed wise

By superfluytee abhomynable.[17] (ll. 468–471)

His words echo the sermon *De gula*, 'on gluttony', from *Jacob's well*, a compendium of sermons more or less contemporaneous with Chaucer and typical of their time: 'At þe tauerne often þe glotonye begynneth. for [sic] þe tauerne is welle of glotonye, for it may be clepyd þe develys scolehous & þe deuelys chapel […]' (Brandeis 1900: 147).

Another way this strategy of breaking is carried out is his attack on Christ's very body. He achieves this by citing at length examples of blasphemy[18] – what the Pardoner characterises as 'grisly' 'othes'.[19] Swearing by God, or invoking His name in a blasphemous oath, was analogous in the medieval mind to the kind of dismembering we saw above, and was tantamount to *literally* tearing Christ's body to pieces, as *Jacob's well* makes clear in Chapter 23 which is entitled 'Of greed and the vicious tongue' – '*De gula et vicijs lingue*' (Brandeis 1900: 152):

> […] when men sweryn vyolently, as be god, or be ony of his sayntes, or be his soule, his body, his herte, his flesch, his bonys, his peyne, his deth, his feet, his nayles, or be ony of his oþer lymes. Þanne þei rende god iche lyme fro oþer, and arn werse þan iewys, for þei rentyn hym but onys, and swiche swererys rendyn him iche day newe. & þe iewys braken noȝt his bonys, but þei brekyn his bonys, & iche lyme fro oþer, & levyn non hole. (Brandeis 1900: 153)

Nichols shows how the swearing in the 'Prologue' and 'Tale' goes from the mild oaths of the Taverner – '"by Seinte Marie!"' (l. 685) – to the blasphemies of the three rioters, who take their fragile and vainglorious oath of brotherhood by '"Goddes digne bones"' (l. 695), who swear '"by God"' (l. 750), by '"Goddes armes"' (l. 692), and 'by Goddes dignitee' (l. 701) (Nichols 502–503), culminating in:

> 'By Goddes precious herte,' and 'By his nayles,'
>
> And 'By the blood of Crist that is in Hayles,
>
> Sevene is my chaunce, and thyn is cynk and treye!'
>
> 'By Goddes armes, if thou falsly pleye,
>
> This daggere shal thurghout thyn herte go!' –
>
> This fruyt cometh of the bicched bones two,
>
> Forsweryng, ire, falsnesse, homycide. (ll. 651–657)

There is a subliminal link between the bone imagery we have seen before and Christ's broken corpse – bits of body, bone, defiling the sacred with the utterly abject and profane. Yet another of the rioters' oaths 'by corpus bones' – meaning by Christ's bones (*OED*, 'corpus', sense †6. by corpus bones)[20] – relates to the image of the 'bicched bones', the cursed[21] dice. Both of these phrases are first attested in English in Chaucer – the former appearing a few times in the poet's *oeuvre* according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and the latter only in the 'Pardoner's Tale'.

The image of the dagger piercing the heart is repeated three times in the 'Prologue' and 'Tale'. It is important to link this to the desecration of Christ discussed above. We have seen how the rioters '[o]ur blissed Lordes body they totere' (l. 474) – a reference, as Nichols points out (1967: 503), to 'the Gospel account how "oon of the knyȝtis openyde [Christ's] syde with a sper"', taking his text from John xix, verse 34 of the Wycliffite Bible (Forshall et al., vol. 4, 1850: 292). The image is repeated when the lad-servant says Death has taken the rioter's fellow – 'Deeth […] with his spere […] smote his herte atwo' (ll. 675–677), and, finally, when the two rioters kill their younger companion, a moment we considered at the start of the essay.

The image of the dagger which is so powerfully present here is yet another word which appears for the first time in English in Chaucer's work. He derives it from the French *dague*, or Italian *daga* (*OED*, 'dagger, n.'). The *Oxford English Dictionary* opines that since the word is not found in Old French, 'the form *dagger* appears to be really of English formation' (*OED*, 'dagger, n.'). In other words, this could well be Chaucer's own word, based on his knowledge of Italian, French and Latin. (It appears also in the 'General Prologue', l. 113, on the thigh of the Yeoman.) The neologism has a powerful, onomatopoeic quality, derived, as it is, from the verb '*dag'*, 'to pierce or stab', which may, appropriately, have a 'Celtic origin in the British Isles' (Barnhart & Steinmetz 1988: 249). This verbal form is seen for the first time shortly after Chaucer, in the Middle English alliterative *Morte Arthure, or the death of Arthur*, of about 1400, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It occurs in the phrases 'daggande sperys' and in 'daggesthurghe [sic] scheldez' (*OED*, 'dag, v.2').[22]

There is yet another possible link to the way Chaucer's imagination works through words and images, as mediated through the character of the Pardoner. In 'The Chaucer Chest and the "Pardoner's Tale"', Muriel Whitaker discusses the possibility that an elm chest in the British Museum, made at around the time of Chaucer's death, may have been commissioned by the poet himself. The chest contains a triptych outlining three metonymic and definitive moments from the 'Pardoner's Tale' (see Whitaker 1999: 176ff.) underscored by the image of two knives – which Whitaker explains were of the type '"kidney dagger" or […] "ballock-knife" because of the twin lobes where the handle pins the blade' (1999: 178). In the last panel, on the table with these knives, are representations of the bread and wine that are so central to this story, as we have seen. (The second panel shows the two knives being used to murder the third 'rioter'.) The idea that the Chest was Chaucer's is, though speculative, appealing. What is more certain and more relevant to the present examination of the Pardoner is the association of violence and body parts – both bollocks (or 'ballocks') and kidneys feature in the linguistic-imagistic stream of the text, and pertain to the language of Chaucer's milieu. The intersection between historical linguistics, and etymology – with the freshness of the poetic vision working it – gives us some possible insights into the creative processes behind Chaucer's poetry.

In the end one might say that the Pardoner's imagination and language, of smashed and broken bodies – animal, human, divine – such blasphemy 'levyn non hole', in the words of the author of *Jacob's well* (Brandeis 1900: 153). This compendium of sermons to which we have seen allusions before, refers to the Devil's scholar: 'þe feendys scolere […] lykenyd to an eddere' (Brandeis 1900: 150). The role of Serpent is one the Pardoner openly relishes:

> Thanne wol I stynge hym with my tonge smerte
>
> In prechynge
>
> […]
>
> Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe
>
> Of holynesse, to semen hooly and trewe. (ll. 413–422)

And he cares nothing – yet again using a food metaphor, which by now we have seen is part of a semantic field deliberately created by Chaucer through his Pardoner – for what happens to the souls of his victims as they are being buried:

I rekke nevere, whan that they been beryed,

Though that hir soules goon a-blakeberyed! (ll. 405–406)

Perhaps this metaphor explains why the Host ends the 'Pardoner's Tale' by wishing to cut off the Pardoner's own berries, his 'coillons' (from the Italian '*coglione*', 'balls') – yet another word related to food or body parts – and enshrining them in pig shit:

I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond

In stide of relikes or of seintuarie.

Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;

They shul be shryned in an hogges toord! (ll. 952–955)

This[23] is a fitting culmination to the game the Pardoner has been playing, and the kinds of language and imagery used to desecrate all that is good in life: food, the Mass, and Christ himself. As Stevens & Falvey so memorably put it, there is a 'sense of decay and corruption' (1982: 149) in the 'Tale': 'Men are turned into animals or devils; food becomes dung or poison. Everywhere life is turned to death and spirit and flesh into hollow bones' (1982: 149). The Pardoner's 'reliquaries', they conclude, are 'dead, meaningless things, old rags and pieces of bone' (1982: 153).[24] They are as spurious as his pardons 'comen from the court of Rome […] His wallet/ Bretful of pardoun, comen from Rome al hoot' (ll. 671–687) – the Narrator's seemingly needless repetition belying, in the very first sighting we have of him, the Pardoner's deceitfulness.

This essay has shown how the Pardoner's devilish character deploys a subliminal attack on images of holiness, the Mass, baptism, Christ, the Church – at the very deepest levels of the text,[25] using words and word pictures from the semantic field of terms relating to food and the body, and evoking in the reader or listener a Christless world, violate, broken by sin. Underlying this is a semantic field of words and their inner images that return, ultimately, to dividing, to the duplicity of the Devil himself.[26] This power of words to capture and preserve the foundational metaphors behind them – their implicit, inner constructing imagery – is laid bare in the discourse of the Pardoner, giving readers of Chaucer insight into the shaping, poetic processes at work in the textual substratum of the 'Pardoner's Tale'.

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Notes

[1] Henceforward the 'Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale', the 'Pardoner's Prologue', and the 'Pardoner's Tale' are referred to as the 'Introduction', the 'Prologue', and the 'Tale' respectively. References to these are to line numbers in *The Riverside Chaucer* (Benson 1988). There are also some quotations from the 'General Prologue' of the same edition.

[2] This must be one of the *first* instances of this word as a noun in English, even though the *Oxford English Dictionary* claims that it is first attested only between the mid-fourteenth and mid-fifteenth centuries (*OED*, 'rioter, n.'). *OED* does, however, attribute the intransitive form of the verb 'riot' to Chaucer (*OED*, 'riot, v.').

[3] This is the first use of the word 'clink' in English, so Chaucer must have given some thought to this onomatopoeic word, what the *Oxford English Dictionary* calls a word 'of echoic origin' (*OED*, 'clink, v.1'). *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology* says the word dates from around 1325, is 'probably of imitative origin', and derives from Old High German *klingan* (Barnhart & Steinmetz 1988: 180). What makes the word even more effective here is the alliteration of 'clynk' and 'cors' and the enjambement of 'they herde a belle clynk' into '[b]iforn a cors' – and the grammatical ellipsis of the relative 'which': these devices work together to create the effect of the sentence itself falling apart, in that it loses its subject and structure, and thus mimics the incident itself – a moment of clarity in confusion.

[4] John Finlayson (2007: 455–456; 467–470) usefully elucidates making distinctions between Chaucer and his characters, and discusses the tendency at times to divorce Chaucer from the characters he produced, in order to explain away the blasphemy discernible in some of these.

[5] See also the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*, 'cake, n. and adj.'). The word 'cake' in its original sense of 'flat cake or loaf' (Barnhart & Steinmetz 1988: 134) is probably from around 1200 and Scandinavian in origin.

[6] Interestingly the Indo-European root of 'poison' is 'pō(i)-. [t]o drink' whence arises 'Latin *pōtāre*, to drink' (Watkins 1985: 52).

[7] The word is derived from the Latin '*gula'*, 'throat'. *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology* says the word comes into English around 1305, from French *goulet* (Barnhart & Steinmetz 1988: 456)

[8] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* Chaucer and Langland are the first poets to use this word in a pejorative sense, of '[l[echerous, lustful, wanton' though they both also use it in its more normal senses for the time – of pleasing, delicious or desirable (see especially *OED*, 'lickerous, adj. 3').

[9] See Nichols (1967: 501–502) for a discussion of Wycliffe's notion of the host. The relevant passage is quoted from the first chapter of *De eucharistia tractatus maior*, not Nichols which contains errors (see Appendix for translation): '*Nichil enim horribilius quam quod quilibet sacerdos celebrans facit vel consecrat cotidie corpus Christi; nam Deus noster non est Deus recens nec corpus suum cum sit summe sacrum atque perpetuum est sic sacramentale vel novites faciendum, sed nos sacredotes facimus et benedicimus hostiam consecretam que non est corpus dominicum sed efficax eius signum'* (Loserth 1892: 15–16).

[10] See the *Oxford English Dictionary* which quotes the Wycliffe Bible (early version) and Job xxi, verse 24, 'Þe bones of hym ben moistid with marwȝ'. *OED* cites also Wycliffe's rendition of Psalm 45, 'Brent sacrifises ful of mergh […] I shal offren to þee' (*OED*, 'marrow, n.1').

[11] The root of the word is Latin *facere*, 'to make, to do' (Barnhart & Steinmetz 1988: 193).

[12] The *Oxford English Dictionary* glosses this as '"[d]rinks named after Galen" (Skeat)' (*OED*, 'Galianes, n.').

[13] Such concerns would, in the scheme of the poem, be on pilgrims' minds as James Sledd points out in his article 'By Seint Ronyan': '[d]uring the whole of Lent, if we may believe a late tradition, St. Ninian was accustomed to take but the poorest food, and from Holy Thursday till after the Easter Mass he abstained totally from both food and drink. His devotees took his example.' (1951: 233)

[14] *OED* defines 'blancmange' as a 'dish composed usually of fowl, but also of other meat, minced with cream, rice, [crushed] almonds, sugar, eggs, etc. Obsolete'. It was thus a good source of protein for fast days (*OED*, 'blancmange | blancmanger', 'n.†a'). Langland and Chaucer both use the word in this sense, implying it is like 'mortrewes [broth]' and is 'food for a penaunt' (*OED*, 'blancmange | blancmanger', 'n.b' & 'mortress', 'n.1'). The development of 'blancmange' from penitent broth, to a coloured (generally *not* white) moulded sweetmeat is small but significant.

[15] This word is both a preposition as well as an adverb of time and/ or of manner. This play on grammar nicely captures the duplicity of the Pardoner's words: he is for the very things he proclaims he is against.

[16] Orichalcum is tin, copper, and other metals, made into an alloy that looks like gold.

[17] Wycliffe and Chaucer are amongst the first English writers to use the English form of the word from Middle French and the Vulgate Latin *abominabilis* (or *abhominabilis*), referring to both people and things, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* shows (*OED*, 'abominable, adj.').

[18] The word was at the time uncommon in English, though it appears in Wycliffe, and before that in the anonymous *Ayenbite of Inwyt* (*OED*, 'blaspheme, v.'). It is to be found, thereafter, in Chaucer (*OED*, blaspheme, v.3a'), meaning '[t]o speak evil of, revile, calumniate, abuse'.

[19] 'Grisly' is a word which appears twice in relation to oaths and blasphemy in the text, and means something like 'causing horror'. The word is of uncertain origin according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*, 'grisly, adj.') though, it is surmised, the word is related to Dutch 'grijzelijk'. *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology* traces the word to 'Indo-European *ghrīs-/ghri-s-' (Barnhart & Steinmetz 1988: 450). The root of the word is 'ghrēi- [t]o rub' whence 'Germanic *gris, to frighten (< "to grate on the mind")' (Watkins 1985: 32) and Middle English 'grist' (as in 'grist to the mill'). 'Grisly' is thus related to 'gristle' (*OED*, 'gristle, n.') as on bone. It seems, thus, that these words' etymologies bespeak, even if only at a precognitive level, fur (Middle English 'grys') and bone – the body parts we have seen as forming part of the Pardoner's discourse. Consider also the Indo-European 'ghrendh-. [t]o grind' and 'ghrēu-. [t]o rub, grind' (Watkins 1985: 23).

[20] The *Oxford English Dictionary* states that 'corpus bones' is 'perhaps a confusion of *corpus Domini* and Goddes bones' (*OED*, 'corpus', sense †6. by corpus bones).

[21] See *Oxford English Dictionary* 'bicched, adj.' where it is made clear that the word has no discernible etymology, and that its meaning is thus derived solely from its context (to which one might add its onomatopoeic – poetic/ echoic – quality of the plosive initial).

[22] There is a typographical mistake in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: l. 2102 of *Morte Arthure* should read 'dagges thurghe sheldes' (Brock [[1865] 1961] [1865] 1961: 62).

[23] For a full treatment of the Pardoner's 'coillons' episode, see Marijane Osborn's 'Transgressive word and image in Chaucer's enshrined "coillons" passage' (2003: 365–384).

[24] There is a suggestion, also, in the lines preceding this (and in our first glimpse of the Pardoner in the 'General Prologue' (ll. 694–698) where he touts cloth relics) of the kind of fraud that must have been commonplace in medieval Europe, by which 'shrouds' were produced:

'Lat be,' quod he, 'it shal nat be, so theech!

Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech,

And swere it were a relyk of a seint,

Though it were with thy fundement depeint! […]' (ll. 947–950)

[25] Nichols discerns a structural use of food and drink (1967: 504) to integrate the 'Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale', the 'Pardoner's Prologue', and the 'Pardoner's Tale'.

[26] The *Oxford English Dictionary* asserts that the earliest form of 'devil' is the Attic Greek *διάβολος* which comes from '*διαβάλλειν* to slander, lit. "to throw across"' (*OED*, 'devil, n.'). It may be possible, however, to trace the root of this word back to Indo-European '*dwo-* (*duwō)', which is the root of the words for doubleness, duplicity, and indeed 'two' (Watkins 1985: 15ff.) in many languages, starting with Greek and Latin.

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Appendix

This is my own translation of the passage from *De eucharistia tractatus maior*: ‘For there is nothing more horrible than a priest who celebrates or consecrates the body of Christ every day; for as our God is not a new God, and as His body is not new since it is most sacred and eternal, this should not be done sacramentally by novices, but let priests bless the sacred host, which is not the Lord’s body, but an effective sign thereof’.