

# The Pardoner's Tale

From *The Canterbury Tales*

By Geoffrey Chaucer

Adapted by Wim Coleman

## CHARACTERS:

(main characters in **boldface**)

<b>Narrators 1, 2, 3</b>	Knight	Wife of Bath
Nun	Miller	<b>Pardoner</b>
Tailor	Friar	<b>Revelers 1, 2, 3</b>
Carpenter	Physician	Servant
Weaver	<b>Harry Bailly,</b>	Innkeeper
Plowman	keeper of the	<b>Old Man</b>
Cook	Tabard Inn	Druggist

## SCENE ONE

**Narrator 1:** Imagine yourselves in Merry England.

**Narrator 2:** It's a misty April day, hundreds and hundreds of years ago.

**Narrator 3:** In the late 1300s, let's say.

**Narr 1:** You meet a group of people riding on horseback from Southwark,\* just south of London, toward the town of Canterbury.

**Narr 2:** They are making a religious pilgrimage to a shrine at the cathedral there.

**Narr 3:** And oh, a varied lot they are, from every walk of life.

**Nun:** A nun.

**Tailor:** A tailor.

**Carpenter:** A carpenter.

**Weaver:** A weaver.

**Plowman:** A plowman.

**Cook:** A cook.

**Knight:** A knight.

**Miller:** A miller.

**Friar:** A friar.

**Physician:** A medical doctor.

**Wife of Bath:** A woman from the town of Bath.

**Narr 1:** Some 29 pilgrims, all of them led by ...

**Harry Bailly:** None other than my good self—Harry Bailly, the keeper of the Tabard Inn, where all these folks first gathered for their ride. It's a long and dreary trip to Canterbury. How shall we pass the time? Ah, I have it, pilgrims! Each of you will tell a tale to all the rest of us. I'll judge whose tale is best—and the winner shall have a free dinner at my inn upon our return to Southwark.

**Narr 2:** And so, as they ride along, the pilgrims take turns telling tales.

**Nun:** Some tales decent and **pious**.

**Knight:** Some tales brave and noble.

**Miller:** Some tales coarse and vulgar.

**Physician:** Some tales tragic and sad.

**Narr 3:** But scarcely one that's not fascinating.

**Narr 1:** Indeed, poor Harry Bailly will have a hard time choosing a winner.

**Harry Bailly:** Ah, good physician, you've fairly broken my heart with your story of that poor girl's death. But let's hear a different sort of story now.

**Nun:** Something moral and uplifting.

**Harry Bailly:** Yes, the very thing. You, young fellow, with your beardless face and long

\* pronounced SUFF-uk

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yellow hair—what tale have you to tell?

**Pardoner:** Oh, a good one—and highly proper and instructive. But aren't we all hungry and thirsty? Let's stop at this tavern here for some meat and drink. I'll tell my tale over a hearty meal.

## SCENE TWO

**Narr 2:** A few moments later, the pilgrims are gathered around a table, listening **intently** to the young man.

**Pardoner:** First let me tell you a little about myself. I'm a preacher by trade, and I've just returned from Rome. This bag of mine is full of pardons I got there from the highest religious authorities.

**Miller:** Pardons?

**Pardoner:** Certificates of holy forgiveness. Buy one of these scrolls from me, and all your sins are gone.

**Nun:** Oh, such wicked nonsense!

**Friar:** You're a liar and a **swindler**, you are!

**Pardoner:** Call me what you like. I've grown fond of you all, so I take no offense. Innkeeper! Another tankard of ale!

**Harry Bailly:** Careful, my friend. Soon you'll be drunk.

**Pardoner:** Excellent! All the better to loosen my tongue for a sermon against drunkenness! And oh, by God's very wounds,\* I have many wise things to say against cursing as well! And gluttony, too—if that lazy innkeeper will only bring me another roasted chicken! And I'll speak most ably against gambling while we're playing at dice after our meal. But my favorite theme is greed. I speak against it best of all, because I practice it most heartily. Look at these holy relics I have to sell.

**Narr 3:** The pardoner spreads an odd variety of objects across the table.

**Wife of Bath:** Why, this is nothing more than an old piece of muslin.

**Pardoner:** Quite right, madam. And yet, I'll convince some poor fellow that it's a piece of the sail



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of Saint Peter's fishing boat.

**Tailor:** And this is just a pillowcase.

**Pardoner:** You are correct, sir. But just watch me pass it off as the veil worn by the blessed Virgin Mary herself.

**Cook:** And these are pigs' bones, surely.

**Pardoner:** Bones of the saints, I call them—and I'll get fine prices for them too. Why, since I got into this pardoning business, I've raked in a hundred marks a year. And all the while, I've preached endlessly against the sin of greed!

**Harry Bailly:** You really are a scoundrel.

**Pardoner:** I'll take that as a compliment, good host.

**Harry Bailly:** You shouldn't.

**Weaver:** Why, you're a perfect hypocrite!

**Pardoner:** How so? What sort of hypocrite brags about his misdeeds?

**Wife of Bath:** (*laughing*) Smartly said!

**Carpenter:** Surely you're the most honest thief I've ever met!

\*a medieval curse

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**Harry Bailly:** Well, you'll get no business from any of us—not with your bones and cloths and scrolls.

**Pardoner:** Won't I, now? Wait till you hear my tale—one that I tell in churches everywhere. For though I may be a villain, my story does have a good, true moral: "The love of money is the root of all evil." I'll leave you yearning for the sort of divine forgiveness you can only get from one of my pardons. Listen closely, now.

**Narr 1:** And so the Pardoner begins his story.

## SCENE THREE

**Pardoner:** In Flanders once, there lived three wicked young **revelers**. They partook of every kind of **vice**, from cursing and **lechery**...

**Reveler 1:** By God's precious heart, there's a pretty girl!

**Pardoner:** to drunkenness and gluttony...

**Reveler 2:** A toast—to all the ale and meat we can cram into our bellies!

**Pardoner:** to gambling.

**Reveler 3:** Seven is my throw. Yours is five, and yours is three.

**Pardoner:** By nine o'clock every morning, they were in the local tavern, well on their way toward getting drunk. One such morning, they heard a bell outside the tavern door.

**Reveler 1:** What's that ringing?

**Reveler 2:** It means that someone has died.

**Reveler 3:** A corpse is being carried through the street. A priest is walking ahead of it, ringing a bell as he goes.

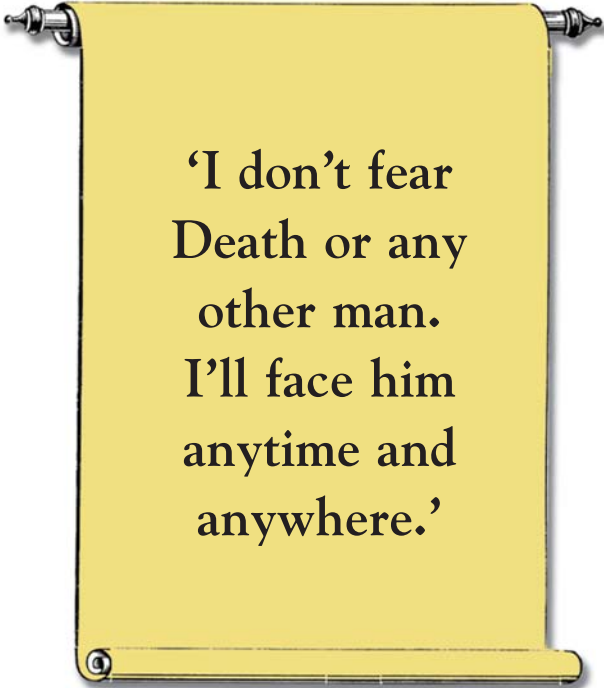
**Reveler 1:** Servant boy! Go and find out who died.

**Servant:** I know already, master. It's a reveler—a good friend of yours. Last night, when he was drunk out of his head, a thief named Death came and cut his heart in two with his spear.

**Reveler 1:** Death? Who is Death?

**Servant:** Oh, a cruel and vicious fellow, master. He has taken thousands of lives in these parts lately.

**Innkeeper:** The boy tells the truth. Why, about a mile away from here, this **fiend** Death slew an entire



'I don't fear  
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other man.  
I'll face him  
anytime and  
anywhere.'

village—every man, woman, and child in it. People say that Death lives in that town all by himself now. He comes around here from time to time, looking for folks like your wicked friend to kill. So beware of Death. Make sure your soul is clean and sinless, for you never know when he may come to take you.

**Reveler 1:** I don't fear Death or any other man. I'll face him anytime and anywhere—and I'll kill him, too, in revenge for slaying our friend. What do you say, brave fellows? We've always been of one mind about everything. Will you join me in hunting down Death and ending his life?

**Reveler 2:** Indeed, I will!

**Reveler 3:** And I will also!

**Reveler 1:** Then let's swear to live and die together, as if we were brothers born!

## SCENE FOUR

**Pardoner:** They swore their oath and drunkenly staggered out of the tavern. They headed toward the town, calling out as they went.

**Reveler 1:** Death! Where are you, you wretched, murderous thief?



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**Reveler 2:** Show yourself, coward!

**Reveler 3:** When we find you, you shall die!

**Pardoner:** About a half a mile along the road, they met a poor old man.

**Old Man:** Good morning to you, young gentlemen.

**Reveler 1:** Who are you, wretched old beggar?

**Reveler 2:** What gives you the right to talk to us?

**Reveler 3:** Why are you still alive, with so many years on your back?

**Old Man:** Alas, what choice do I have? I've searched high and low for a young man willing to exchange his youth for my old age. No one will make such a bargain. I cannot even persuade Death to come and take me, ready as I am to die. I pound on the earth, our good mother, with my staff, crying out to her, "Open, good lady! Make me a soft grave, so I may climb inside and sleep forever!"

But she stays shut and won't let me in, and here I must remain alive in the open air. And now I have to suffer the rudeness of young ruffians like you. What wrong have I done you, to deserve such treatment? Perhaps someday you will be as old as me. Think about how you'll want to be treated then, and show some respect to the next old man you meet. Now, let me pass, for I must be on my way.

**Reveler 1:** Not so fast, old man.

**Reveler 2:** We're not finished with you yet.

**Reveler 3:** You spoke of Death just now.

**Reveler 1:** We're looking for that villain.

**Reveler 2:** We mean to kill him, to avenge our good friend.

**Pardoner:** The worst of the revelers seized the old man and held a knife at his throat.

**Reveler 1:** You know Death, don't you? You're his spy, his accomplice. You help him hunt down his victims. You're a sworn enemy of young folk like us.

**Old Man:** Let me pass, I said.

**Reveler 3:** Not till you tell us where Death is.

**Reveler 2:** Tell us now, treacherous old fool!

**Reveler 1:** And quickly too—or by God, you'll regret it!

**Old Man:** Don't hurt me! It's true—I know Death well. You give me no choice but to betray him into your hands. Follow this crooked path toward the grove up the hill. Do you see that oak tree up there? I left Death resting beneath it.

**Reveler 3:** What makes you think he's still there?

**Old Man:** Oh, he's there, all right. And he'll stay there till you find him. He's no coward. He'll not flee the likes of you—not for all your threats and boasting. Now let me go. May the Good Lord be with you—and may he improve your characters!



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## SCENE FIVE

**Pardoner:** The three revelers released the old man and ran breathlessly up the crooked path. When they reached the oak tree, what did they find beneath it?

**Reveler 1:** Why, here's a huge pile of gold!

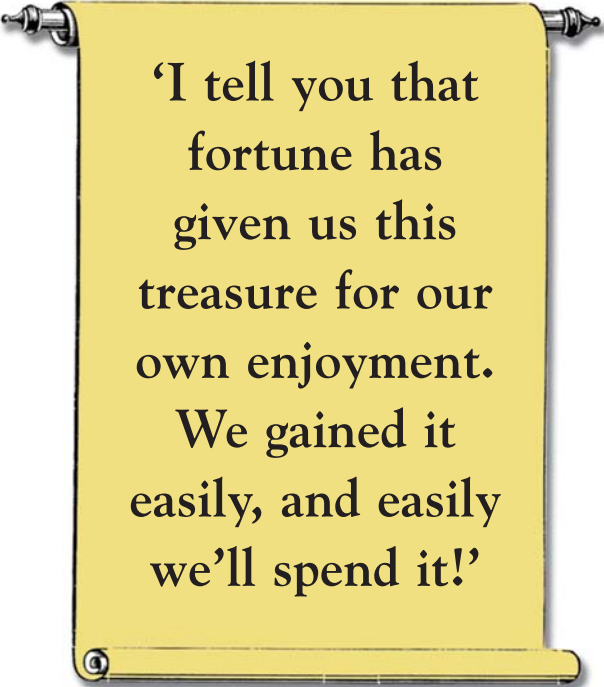
**Reveler 2:** Such a treasure I never imagined!

**Reveler 3:** How many coins are here, do you think?

**Reveler 1:** Too many to count.

**Reveler 2:** At least eight bushels of them, surely.

**Pardoner:** How quickly our revelers forgot their oath to find and slay Death! Instead, they rolled



'I tell you that  
fortune has  
given us this  
treasure for our  
own enjoyment.  
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easily, and easily  
we'll spend it!'

around in the gold coins, laughing and shouting for joy. But soon their leader quieted them.

**Reveler 1:** My friends, listen to me carefully. I'm no fool, although I may act like one, with all my drinking and jesting. And I tell you that fortune has given us this treasure for our own enjoyment. We gained it easily, and easily we'll spend it!

**Reveler 2:** Hear, hear!

**Reveler 3:** Well said!

**Reveler 2:** All we have to do is carry it away to one of our houses.

**Reveler 3:** But whose house shall we take it to?

**Reveler 1:** It's too soon to think about that. We can't take it to town now—not by broad daylight. If people see us carrying it, they'll believe we stole it. They'll hang us for taking what's rightfully ours.

No, we must carry it away by night, in secret.

Now here's my plan. We'll draw straws. The one with the shortest straw will go into town, fetch us all food and drink to pass the day with, and plenty of sacks to carry the gold in after nightfall. The other two will stay here and guard the treasure.

**Pardoner:** The leader held three straws in his fist. The youngest reveler drew the shortest straw and hurried on his way to town. Scarcely was he out of earshot when the leader spoke to his remaining companion.

**Reveler 1:** You know that I'm fonder of you than I am of the fellow who just left us. And now I have something to say that I'm sure you'll want to hear. Surely there's enough gold here to make the three of us rich beyond our wildest dreams. But what if I came up with a way for only the two of us to share it, making us even richer? You'd consider that friendly of me, surely.

**Reveler 2:** I can't imagine how it can be done. Our friend knows about the gold and knows that we're here with it.

**Reveler 1:** If I tell you my idea, do you promise never to breathe it to another living soul?

**Reveler 2:** I promise.

**Reveler 1:** Well then—we'll kill him. Are you willing?

**Reveler 2:** I am. Just tell me how we're going to do it.

## SCENE SIX

**Pardoner:** Meanwhile, the young reveler on his way to town couldn't stop thinking about all those beautiful gold coins.

**Reveler 3:** If only I might have that treasure all to myself, I'd be the merriest man under heaven!

**Pardoner:** And the devil, who is always looking for

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ways to help the wicked destroy themselves, gave him an idea.

**Reveler 3:** I've got it! Poison is all I need! I'll get the other two out of my way, and the whole eight bushels will be mine!

**Pardoner:** And so the young reveler went directly to the local apothecary.

**Druggist:** What can I do for you, my drunken young friend? Phew! You reek of ale, and it's scarcely noon!

**Reveler 3:** I have pests I need to get rid of at home. More rats than I can count and a weasel that's been eating my chickens. Give me some poison strong enough to kill them all.

**Druggist:** You need something plenty powerful. I have just what you need in this little box. There has never been a creature who has tasted this poison who didn't die in the time it would take you to walk a mile. That's how strong this stuff is.

**Reveler 3:** I'll buy it, then.

**Pardoner:** The young reveler hurried away with the box—first to a bottle maker.

**Reveler 3:** Three bottles, please.

**Pardoner:** And then to a winemaker.

**Reveler 3:** Fill these bottles with your cheapest Spanish wine.

**Pardoner:** Then he poured poison into two of the bottles.

**Reveler 3:** I must carefully mark the bottle without the poison. That will be mine to drink.

**Pardoner:** Finally, after buying food and sacks to carry the gold, he hurried back to his friends.

**Reveler 3:** Here I am—with everything we need.

**Reveler 1:** At last!

**Reveler 2:** We wondered what had happened to you.

**Reveler 3:** And now—let's celebrate with some food and drink, shall we?

**Reveler 2:** But first, how about a little physical exercise to work up an appetite? Let's have a



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friendly wrestling match—just you and me.

**Reveler 3:** Why not?

**Reveler 1:** I'll sit back and watch. And I'll bet 10 gold coins that our youngest friend wins.

**Pardoner:** And so the two revelers who had stayed with the gold carried out their plan. One grabbed hold of the youngest reveler, as if in play. Then the leader drew his dagger and stabbed the youngest in his side.

**Reveler 3:** Oh! Betrayed!

**Pardoner:** Then the other drew a dagger and stabbed him again.

**Reveler 3:** Betrayed and slain!

**Pardoner:** Slain, indeed—for in an instant, a dead and bleeding body lay at the surviving revelers' feet.

**Reveler 1:** There—the deed is done. And we're both much richer for it.

**Reveler 2:** Let's bury him quickly.

**Reveler 1:** What's our hurry? Listen to me, good



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friend. All your wealth will bring you no joy if you go rushing through life all the time. Learn to relax a little. Our friend brought us excellent food and drink. Let's enjoy it heartily, and then bury his carcass after a pleasant nap.

**Pardoner:** They opened a bottle of wine—which happened to have poison in it. In a matter of moments, they fell into fits of agony.

**Reveler 1:** Oh! Betrayed!

**Reveler 2:** Betrayed and slain!

**Pardoner:** I'll spare you the ghastly details of their death throes. It's enough to say that all three revelers' corpses soon lay amid that uncountable stash of golden coins. They had found Death, indeed—but they had not slain him.

## SCENE SEVEN

**Narr 2:** And so the Pardoner has finished his tale.

**Narr 3:** But he has not finished his sermon.

**Narr 1:** Now is his moment to make a profit off the other pilgrims.

**Pardoner:** Oh, such a story I have told! Sin upon sin, vice upon vice! Gluttony, drunkenness, lechery, **blasphemy**—and worst of all, greed! For remember my moral: "The love of money is the root of all evil." And tell me, which among you is truly guiltless? Beware, lest you share the fate of those three young men. Do not die with your sins on your heart, for you'll go straight to the devil. Why, think of the perils that face you this very day. It's not unlikely that someone here will fall from his horse and break his neck. Can't you see what good luck it is that I am with you today, and that I have these precious pardons for sale to **absolve** you of all sin? Nay, I'll wager it's not luck at all, but part of some divine plan. I'll take any sort of payment—gold and silver coins, or brooches, spoons, and rings. Ladies, you may even offer up fine balls of wool, for I'll accept those too.

**Nun:** I'll listen to no more of this.

**Friar:** Nor I. You're the blasphemer here, young man.

**Nun:** The church offers no such forgiveness in return

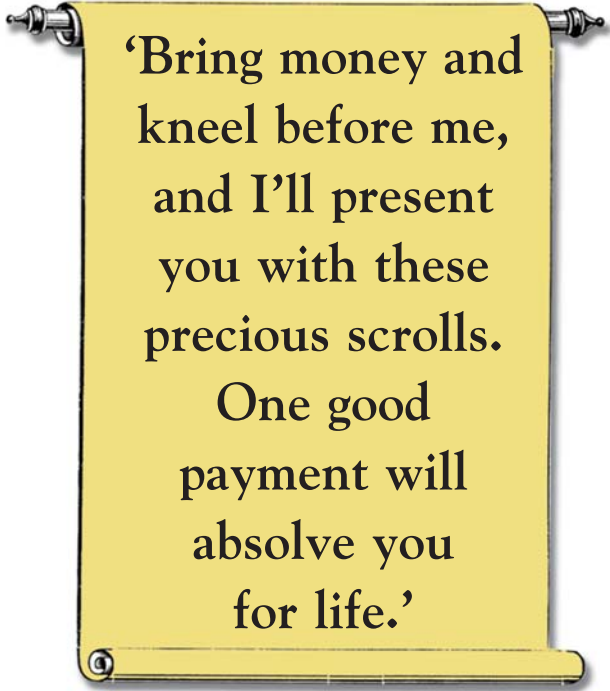
for money, and you know it.

**Friar:** Friends, don't listen to this profane rascal.

**Narr 2:** But the Pardoner pays no attention to the nun or the friar.

**Pardoner:** Come, every one of you! Bring money and kneel before me, and I'll present you with these precious scrolls. One good payment will absolve you for life. Or better yet, refresh yourselves again and again as we travel. Buy a new pardon at every stop. Imagine how clean and good you'll feel, worthy to kiss these holy relics I have spread before you.

**Harry Bailly:** I think we've heard enough.



'Bring money and kneel before me, and I'll present you with these precious scrolls. One good payment will absolve you for life.'

**Pardoner:** I'm not surprised to hear you say so, Mr. Bailly. For I sense that you are more corrupt and sinful than all the other pilgrims put together. Come, buy some of my forgiveness. Set an example to the others. Be the first one here to open up your purse and pay for your eternal soul's salvation.

**Narr 3:** The innkeeper flies into a rage.

**Harry Bailly:** Let heaven curse me if I pay you a penny! You dare to call me corrupt and sinful? After confessing yourself a thoroughgoing scoundrel, with these trinkets and scrolls? Why, just let me get my

hands on you! I'll take some holy relics out of your hide!

**Narr 1:** The Pardoner rises to his feet and stares at the innkeeper, speechless with fury.

**Narr 2:** Many of the pilgrims cannot help but laugh at the quarreling pair.

**Miller:** Oh, what grand entertainment!

**Carpenter:** This could lead to bloodier deeds than the Pardoner told of in his story!

**Narr 3:** But the worthy Knight steps between Harry Bailly and the Pardoner.

**Knight:** Enough of this, gentlemen. Young man, don't **provoke** our host, not after the fine hospitality he has shown us. And Mr. Bailly, consider that the Pardoner's tale was a wise and moral one, no matter what sort of man he may be. Most of all, don't forget that we are on a holy pilgrimage. Harsh words and deeds have no place among us. Come, be friends again.

**Narr 1:** Harry Bailly and the Pardoner shake hands.

**Narr 2:** They quickly forget their anger as they finish their meals.

**Narr 3:** Soon the bill is paid.

**Narr 1:** All the pilgrims leave the tavern and mount their horses.

**Narr 2:** Harry Bailly leads them again on the misty road to Canterbury.

**Harry Bailly:** And now—who'd care to tell the next tale while we ride? ■

## VOCABULARY WORDS

**Pious**—devout, religious

**Intently**—closely, carefully

**Swindler**—cheater, crook

**Revelers**—partiers

**Lechery**—perversion

**Vice**—wickedness, sin

**Fiend**—monster

**Blasphemy**—profanity, irreverence

**Absolve**—forgive

**Provoke**—incite, hassle

## WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

The Roman Catholic Church never sold certificates absolving people of sin. But during Chaucer's time, the church did sell indulgences to people who had confessed and been forgiven for particular sins. Those documents only promised lessened punishment in Purgatory—the place that Catholics believe many people must go after death to suffer for their sins before passing on to Paradise.

Such indulgences were frequently sold by minor clergymen called pardoners. Like the one in Chaucer's story, those pardoners often falsely promised absolution for sins in return for cash. The church's reputation suffered from these abuses until 1567, when Pope Pius V abolished the sale of indulgences.

You might find it odd to hear death discussed as if it were an actual person. The figure of Death, usually presented as a skeleton with a scythe (or, as Chaucer suggests, with a spear), frequently appeared in medieval pageants, plays, and paintings. Death was, after all, a powerful presence in Europe in those days, when staggering numbers of people died from the bubonic plague, also known as the Black Death. It's interesting that Death himself never appears in "The Pardoner's Tale." Or does he? Who is the old man who directs the young revelers to their doom?

Chaucer's vivid and varied characters raise many such questions. For example, why does the Pardoner boast to the pilgrims about his corrupt practices and then try to sell Harry Bailly a pardon once his tale is finished? Chaucer's characters are frequently mysterious, puzzling, and contradictory—which makes them seem as real and alive as any of us.

—Wim Coleman