

The PARDONER'S TALE

It's of three rioters I have to tell
Who, long before the morning service bell,
60 Were sitting in a tavern for a drink.
And as they sat, they heard the hand-bell clink
Before a coffin going to the grave;
One of them called the little tavern-knave
And said "Go and find out at once—look spry!—
65 Whose corpse is in that coffin passing by;
And see you get the name correctly too."
"Sir," said the boy, "no need, I promise you;
Two hours before you came here I was told.
He was a friend of yours in days of old,
70 And suddenly, last night, the man was slain,
Upon his bench, face up, dead drunk again.
There came a privy thief, they call him Death,
Who kills us all round here, and in a breath
He speared him through the heart, he never stirred.
75 And then Death went his way without a word.
He's killed a thousand in the present plague,
And, sir, it doesn't do to be too vague
If you should meet him; you had best be wary.
Be on your guard with such an adversary,
80 Be primed to meet him everywhere you go,
That's what my mother said. It's all I know."

The publican joined in with, "By St. Mary,
What the child says is right; you'd best be wary,
This very year he killed, in a large village
85 A mile away, man, woman, serf at tillage,
Page in the household, children—all there were.
Yes, I imagine that he lives round there.
It's well to be prepared in these alarms,
He might do you dishonor." "Huh, God's arms!" **C**
90 The rioter said, "Is he so fierce to meet?
I'll search for him, by Jesus, street by street.
God's blessed bones! I'll register a vow!

58 rioters: rowdy people; revelers.

61–62 hand-bell . . . grave: In Chaucer's time, a bell was carried beside the coffin in a funeral procession.

63 tavern-knave (nāv): a serving boy in an inn.

72 privy (prīv'ē): hidden; secretive.

76 Bubonic plague killed at least a quarter of the population of Europe in the mid-14th century.

82 publican: innkeeper; tavern owner.

86 page: boy servant.

C EXEMPLUM

Many characters in moral stories are **allegorical**—that is, they stand for abstract ideas, such as virtue and beauty. Identify the allegorical character presented in lines 72–89. Who fears him? Why?

Here, chaps! The three of us together now,
Hold up your hands, like me, and we'll be brothers
95 In this affair, and each defend the others,
And we will kill this traitor Death, I say!
Away with him as he has made away
With all our friends. God's dignity! Tonight!"

They made their bargain, swore with appetite,
100 These three, to live and die for one another
As brother-born might swear to his born brother.
And up they started in their drunken rage
And made towards this village which the page
And publican had spoken of before.
105 Many and grisly were the oaths they swore,
Tearing Christ's blessed body to a shred;
"If we can only catch him, Death is dead!" **D**

When they had gone not fully half a mile,
Just as they were about to cross a stile,
110 They came upon a very poor old man
Who humbly greeted them and thus began,
"God look to you, my lords, and give you quiet!"
To which the proudest of these men of riot
Gave back the answer, "What, old fool? Give place!
115 Why are you all wrapped up except your face?
Why live so long? Isn't it time to die?"

The old, old fellow looked him in the eye
And said, "Because I never yet have found,
Though I have walked to India, searching round
120 Village and city on my pilgrimage,
One who would change his youth to have my age.
And so my age is mine and must be still
Upon me, for such time as God may will.

"Not even Death, alas, will take my life;
125 So, like a wretched prisoner at strife
Within himself, I walk alone and wait
About the earth, which is my mother's gate,
Knock-knocking with my staff from night to noon
And crying, 'Mother, open to me soon!
130 Look at me, mother, won't you let me in?
See how I wither, flesh and blood and skin!
Alas! When will these bones be laid to rest?
Mother, I would exchange—for that were best—
The wardrobe in my chamber, standing there

D PREDICT

What qualities of the three men does Chaucer emphasize in lines 93–107? Predict what will happen to them based on these text clues.

109 stile: a stairway used to climb over a fence or wall.

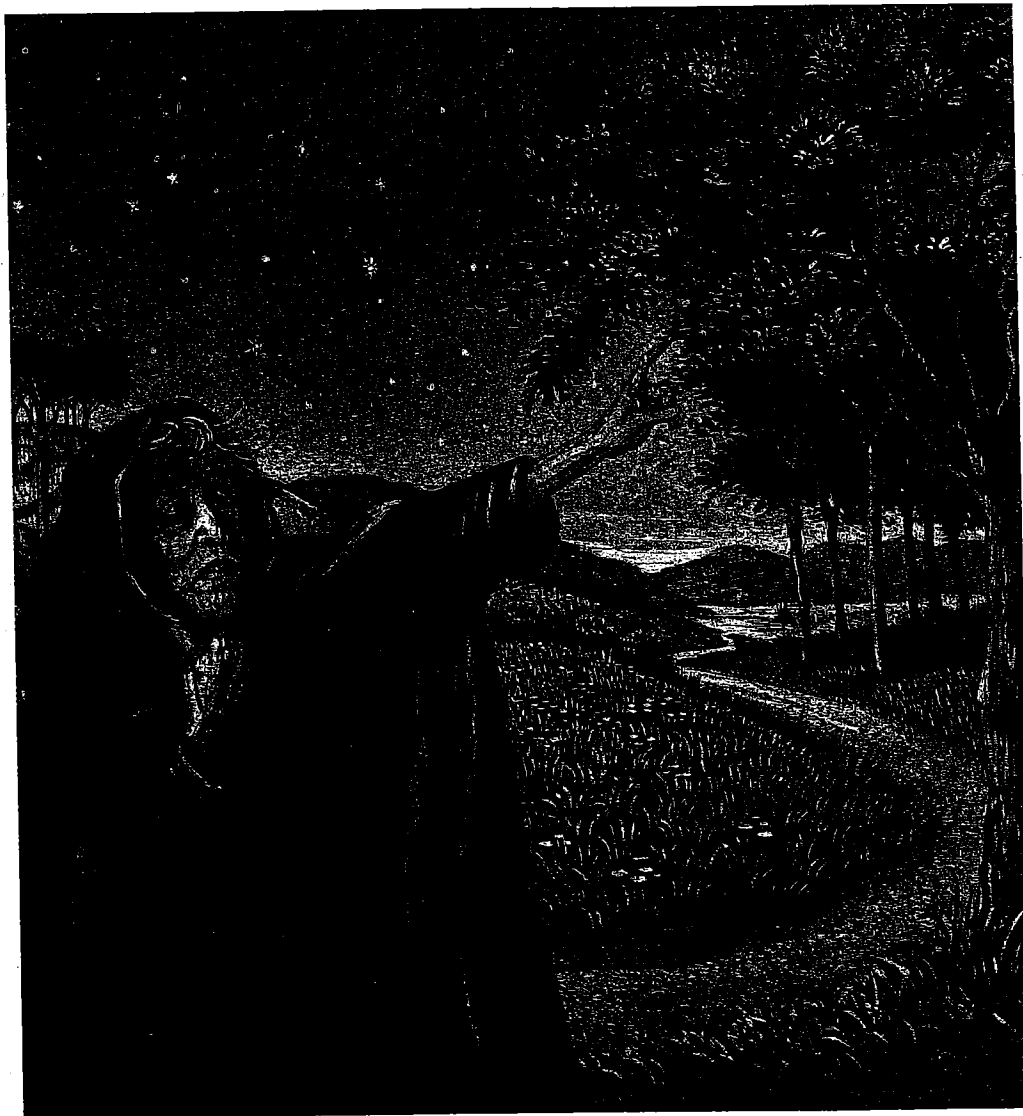
129 The old man addresses the earth as his mother (recall the familiar expressions "Mother Earth" and "Mother Nature").

135 So long, for yours! Aye, for a shirt of hair
To wrap me in! She has refused her grace,
Whence comes the pallor of my withered face.

“But it dishonored you when you began
To speak so roughly, sir, to an old man,
140 Unless he had injured you in word or deed.
It says in holy writ, as you may read,
‘Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head
And honor it.’ And therefore be it said
‘Do no more harm to an old man than you,
145 Being now young, would have another do
When you are old’—if you should live till then.
And so may God be with you, gentlemen,
For I must go whither I have to go.”

135 **shirt of hair:** a rough shirt made of animal hair, worn to punish oneself for one's sins.

142 **hoary:** gray or white with age.



“By God,” the gambler said, “you shan’t do so,
150 You don’t get off so easy, by St. John!
I heard you mention, just a moment gone,
A certain traitor Death who singles out
And kills the fine young fellows hereabout.
And you’re his spy, by God! You wait a bit.
155 Say where he is or you shall pay for it,
By God and by the Holy Sacrament!
I say you’ve joined together by consent
To kill us younger folk, you thieving swine!” **E**

“Well, sirs,” he said, “if it be your design
160 To find out Death, turn up this crooked way
Towards that grove, I left him there today
Under a tree, and there you’ll find him waiting.
He isn’t one to hide for all your prating.
You see that oak? He won’t be far to find.
165 And God protect you that redeemed mankind,
Aye, and amend you!” Thus that ancient man.

At once the three young rioters began
To run, and reached the tree, and there they found
A pile of golden florins on the ground,
170 New-coined, eight bushels of them as they thought.
No longer was it Death those fellows sought,
For they were all so thrilled to see the sight,
The florins were so beautiful and bright,
That down they sat beside the precious pile.
175 The wickedest spoke first after a while.
“Brothers,” he said, “you listen to what I say.
I’m pretty sharp although I joke away.
It’s clear that Fortune has bestowed this treasure
To let us live in jollity and pleasure.
180 Light come, light go! We’ll spend it as we ought.
God’s precious dignity! Who would have thought
This morning was to be our lucky day?” **F**

“If one could only get the gold away,
Back to my house, or else to yours, perhaps—
185 For as you know, the gold is ours, chaps—
We’d all be at the top of fortune, hey?
But certainly it can’t be done by day.
People would call us robbers—a strong gang,
So our own property would make us hang.
190 No, we must bring this treasure back by night
Some prudent way, and keep it out of sight.

E EXEMPLUM

To best illustrate a moral personality, characters in an exemplum are usually good or evil. To which category does the gambler belong? Cite evidence from lines 149–158 to support your response.

169 florins: coins.

178 “Fortune” here means “fate.”

F IRONY

Reread lines 167–182. In what way is the discovery of the treasure ironic, or different from what you had anticipated?

And so as a solution I propose
We draw for lots and see the way it goes;
The one who draws the longest, lucky man,
195 Shall run to town as quickly as he can
To fetch us bread and wine—but keep things dark—
While two remain in hiding here to mark
Our heap of treasure. If there's no delay,
When night comes down we'll carry it away,
200 All three of us, wherever we have planned.” **G**

He gathered lots and hid them in his hand
Bidding them draw for where the luck should fall.
It fell upon the youngest of them all,
And off he ran at once towards the town.

205 As soon as he had gone the first sat down
And thus began a **parley** with the other:
“You know that you can trust me as a brother;
Now let me tell you where your profit lies;
You know our friend has gone to get supplies
210 And here's a lot of gold that is to be
Divided equally amongst us three.
Nevertheless, if I could shape things thus
So that we shared it out—the two of us—
Wouldn't you take it as a friendly act?”

215 “But how?” the other said. “He knows the fact
That all the gold was left with me and you;
What can we tell him? What are we to do?”

“Is it a bargain,” said the first, “or no?
For I can tell you in a word or so
220 What's to be done to bring the thing about.”
“Trust me,” the other said, “you needn't doubt
My word. I won't betray you, I'll be true.”

“Well,” said his friend, “you see that we are two,
And two are twice as powerful as one.
225 Now look; when he comes back, get up in fun
To have a wrestle; then, as you attack,
I'll up and put my dagger through his back
While you and he are struggling, as in game;
Then draw your dagger too and do the same.
230 Then all this money will be ours to spend,
Divided equally of course, dear friend.
Then we can gratify our lusts and fill

196 **keep things dark**: act in secret, without giving away what has happened.

G PREDICT

Reread lines 183–200. How do you think the three men will react to the challenge of sharing their treasure?

parley (pär'lē) *n.* a discussion or a conference

The day with dicing at our own sweet will.”
Thus these two miscreants agreed to slay
235 The third and youngest, as you heard me say.

233 **dicing**: gambling with dice.

234 **miscreants** (mɪsˈkrɛ-ənts):
evildoers; villains.

The youngest, as he ran towards the town,
Kept turning over, rolling up and down
Within his heart the beauty of those bright
New florins, saying, “Lord, to think I might
240 Have all that treasure to myself alone!
Could there be anyone beneath the throne
Of God so happy as I then should be?” ❦

❦ **EXEMPLUM**

Which details in lines 236–24
tell you that greed is the subj
of this moral story?

And so the Fiend, our common enemy,
Was given power to put it in his thought
245 That there was always poison to be bought,
And that with poison he could kill his friends.
To men in such a state the Devil sends
Thoughts of this kind, and has a full permission
To lure them on to sorrow and perdition;
250 For this young man was utterly content
To kill them both and never to repent.

243 **Fiend**: the Devil; Satan.

And on he ran, he had no thought to tarry,
Came to the town, found an apothecary
And said, “Sell me some poison if you will,
255 I have a lot of rats I want to kill
And there’s a polecat too about my yard
That takes my chickens and it hits me hard;
But I’ll get even, as is only right,
With vermin that destroy a man by night.”

249 **perdition**: damnation; hell.

260 The chemist answered, “I’ve a preparation
Which you shall have, and by my soul’s salvation
If any living creature eat or drink
A mouthful, ere he has the time to think,
Though he took less than makes a grain of wheat,
265 You’ll see him fall down dying at your feet;
Yes, die he must, and in so short a while
You’d hardly have the time to walk a mile,
The poison is so strong, you understand.”

This cursed fellow grabbed into his hand
270 The box of poison and away he ran
Into a neighboring street, and found a man
Who lent him three large bottles. He withdrew
And deftly poured the poison into two.

He kept the third one clean, as well he might,
275 For his own drink, meaning to work all night
Stacking the gold and carrying it away.
And when this rioter, this devil's clay,
Had filled his bottles up with wine, all three,
Back to rejoin his comrades sauntered he. ❶

280 Why make a sermon of it? Why waste breath?
Exactly in the way they'd planned his death
They fell on him and slew him, two to one.
Then said the first of them when this was done,
"Now for a drink. Sit down and let's be merry,
285 For later on there'll be the corpse to bury."
And, as it happened, reaching for a sup,
He took a bottle full of poison up
And drank; and his companion, nothing loth,
Drank from it also, and they perished both.

290 There is, in Avicenna's long relation
Concerning poison and its operation,
Trust me, no ghastlier section to transcend
What these two wretches suffered at their end.
Thus these two murderers received their due,
295 So did the treacherous young poisoner too. ❷

O cursed sin! O blackguardly excess!
O treacherous homicide! O wickedness!
O gluttony that lusted on and diced! . . .

Dearly beloved, God forgive your sin
300 And keep you from the vice of avarice!
My holy pardon frees you all of this,
Provided that you make the right approaches,
That is with sterling, rings, or silver brooches.
Bow down your heads under this holy bull!
305 Come on, you women, offer up your wool!
I'll write your name into my ledger; so!
Into the bliss of Heaven you shall go.
For I'll absolve you by my holy power,
You that make offering, clean as at the hour
310 When you were born. . . . That, sirs, is how I preach.
And Jesu Christ, soul's healer, aye, the leech
Of every soul, grant pardon and relieve you
Of sin, for that is best, I won't deceive you.

One thing I should have mentioned in my tale,
315 Dear people. I've some relics in my bale

❶ PREDICT

What do you think will happen to the three men? Support your response with clues from the text.

288 **nothing loth**: not at all unwilling.

290 **Avicenna's** (äv'ĭ-sĕn'əz) **long relation**: a medical text written by an 11th-century Islamic physician; it includes descriptions of various poisons and their effects.

❷ EXEMPLUM

Moral stories usually have straightforward plots, where events happen in quick succession. In what way does the story's conclusion fit this pattern?

299 The Pardoner is now addressing his fellow pilgrims.

304 **bull**: an official document from the pope.

311 **leech**: physician.

315 **relics in my bale**: Relics are the remains of a saint—bones, hair, or clothing. In medieval times, many relics were counterfeit.

And pardons too, as full and fine, I hope,
As any in England, given me by the Pope.
If there be one among you that is willing
To have my absolution for a shilling
320 Devoutly given, come! and do not harden
Your hearts but kneel in humbleness for pardon;
Or else, receive my pardon as we go.
You can renew it every town or so
Always provided that you still renew
325 Each time, and in good money, what is due.
It is an honor to you to have found
A pardoner with his credentials sound
Who can absolve you as you ply the spur
In any accident that may occur.
330 For instance—we are all at Fortune's beck—
Your horse may throw you down and break your neck.
What a security it is to all
To have me here among you and at call
With pardon for the lowly and the great
335 When soul leaves body for the future state!
And I advise our Host here to begin,
The most enveloped of you all in sin.
Come forward, Host, you shall be the first to pay,
And kiss my holy relics right away.
340 Only a groat. Come on, unbuckle your purse!

319 shilling: a coin worth twelve pence.

330–331 The Pardoner reminds other pilgrims that death may come to them at any time.

340 groat: a silver coin worth four pence.