

A Pardoner with a Merchant's Heart: How a Merchant's *Habitus* Affects the Sale of Indulgences

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The idealized view of a pardoner looks something like this: a humble and honest man who travels the land urging humanity to see that they are imperfect, sinful beings in need of God's forgiveness and who wholeheartedly believes that an indulgence will benefit the state of the buyer's soul. His main intent is spreading the word of God's salvation and improving humanity. He is quite similar to Chaucer's Parson and different from the everyday merchant, who people in the Middle Ages associated with greed. Maybe some of these ideal pardoners existed. Chaucer's literary characterization of the Pardoner in *The Canterbury Tales*, however, is far from the ideal pardoner. He is instead a selfish swindler. By using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the *habitus* as the lens for the examination, I will show how the Pardoner has adopted common practices of the literary merchant that affect how he tries to sell his indulgences and relics and that he ultimately fails because he behaves like a merchant.

In order to examine how hierarchies influence one's view of a work as aesthetically pleasing, Bourdieu "appropriate[d]" and reexamined the idea of *habitus*, which is a concept several medieval readers of Aristotle used (Leitch 1662). Bourdieu defines *habitus* as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" that are produced by "structures constitutive of a particular type of environment" (Bourdieu 72). Vincent B. Leitch simplifies Bourdieu's definition by saying that *habitus* is "nondiscursive knowledge about how to act within a certain field" that creates "routinized behaviors" specific to that field (1662). Bourdieu concentrates on environments concerning social hierarchies or fields that a person associates or identifies with, ultimately saying that

people are not born *with habitus* but are born *into* it and unconsciously raised by it (Bourdieu 89). He points out that, because of *habitus*, people are not necessarily consciously following rules of a society or group to reach a goal. Their *habitus* allows them to automatically react to and “cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations” (72). People take on practices and wisdom specific to their field. These practices are nonverbal (87), which means that people express their *habitus* mostly through body language and how they react to situations. However, when someone uses the *habitus* in the incorrect field, the *habitus* comes across as abnormal (78).

Habitus, then, is essentially social instincts conditioned and constructed by where and how someone grows up. The “field” Bourdieu describes could translate to classes (upper, middle, or lower), education level (high school or college), nations, or regions of a country. The *habitus* is most evident in body language; however, saying that it is not discursive does not necessarily mean that it cannot involve dialogue, but simply that the speech is part of the conditioned mechanical reaction to a situation. In this case, the speech becomes an action.

Elizabeth Fowler applies Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus* to literary characters, such as Chaucer’s Knight. Fowler defines *habitus* as the “shaped disposition of the body, brought about by frequent practices and functioning,” that is the “glue that helps fit the body to the social person” (Fowler 11). Fowler uses the Knight to show how *habitus* works to reveal his social persons. She first calls attention to posture and landscape, using words like “riden,” “cristendom,” and “hethenesse” to reveal that he is both a romance knight and a crusader (5-6). She moves on to what she more closely identifies as *habitus* when she speaks about his “comportment, speech, ideological code (*gentillesse*), dress, and practice” (9). For instance, Fowler argues that he also takes on the social person of the pilgrim as well as the crusader because the Holy Land is the Knight’s final destination, (9). These two social persons, however,

identify with significantly different qualities and mannerisms, which causes tension in his character. The reader, she says, identifies these social persons and measures the Knight against them while he reads about him or read his tale (10).

Fowler comments on the Pardoner, focusing on how he has “conflicting social persons” (18), such as the “confessing sinner and simoniac minister” (18), how Chaucer sexualizes his image (67), and how he essentially tries to sell himself (58). She comments on his commercial nature, but she does not fully explain the Pardoner’s adoption of the *habitus* of a merchant. By applying her technique to the Pardoner, I show that his *habitus* is inappropriate for the Pardoner. Fowler’s application of Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus* will be useful to explain how the Pardoner’s desire to sell indulgences shows that his practices are more fitting for a merchant than a pardoner. To demonstrate this point, I will discuss the Pardoner’s practices relative to the practices of Chaucer’s Parson and the late medieval merchant.

I. The *Habitus* of the Parson

The Parson is one of Chaucer’s few positive representations of a churchman. Chaucer’s Parson, for instance, shows no sign of avarice. The narrator describes the Parson as “povre” (I. 478) but “riche...of hooly thoght and werk” (I.479), which suggests that the Parson is not greedy and likely does not consider money the most valuable aspect of life. The Parson was also hesitant to “cursen” people who did not pay their legally required tithes to their priest and would sometimes give his own money, though he likely had little (I. 486-489). Both of these examples show that the Parson does not consider his own money of great importance and that he places more importance on spirituality and on the wellbeing of others. Since Chaucer associates the Parson with selflessness, the Parson’s character suggests that men of the church should have a

habitus based on selfless acts. Their association with selflessness causes them to act out of kindness.

The churchmen's selfless acts, then, make up a part of their *habitus* as well as their motivation for their jobs. The idea that churchmen should participate in selfless acts aligns with the idea that the Church said it preferred a gift economy, which focused on charity, instead of a profit economy, which encouraged sin (Ladd 4). The Parson uses sermons or meditations to teach others about God (Bestul 602), and he asks nothing in return. The Parson, then, does not treat Christian beliefs like a commodity, even though the narrator does describe his work as his "bisynesse", which is "to drawen folk to heven by fairnesse,/[and] By good example" (I. 520-521). Because the Parson participates in a gift economy, his motivation is to benefit others and God is different from that of a salesman.

The narrator of the *General Prologue* does not mention the Parson's clothing, which suggests that he wears nothing of importance or of great expense. It also suggests that clothing is not the Parson's main concern and has little to do with his job. This is very different from a character like the Merchant. The only accessory that the narrator says the Parson holds is his "staf," which he uses when he walks far and wide to visit churchgoers (I. 494-495). The Parson's attire, or the narrator's lack of description of the attire, suggests that no one piece of clothing should define a churchman. The lack of expensive clothing and the lack of desire for expensive clothing should define their *habitus*.

The Parson's dependence on a gift economy encourages his actions that reveal a concern for his people without arrogance. Though he was "hooly" and "vertuous," he was "nat despitous" to "sinful men." Instead, his preaching was "discreet and benygne" (I. 515-516), which suggests that he shows no sign of arrogance when he teaches sinners. He also shows concern for the

people when he walks to visit them (I. 494-495). The Parson, the narrator says, is like a shepherd and the people of the town are like his sheep (I. 514). His description as a shepherd shows that it is his job to watch over churchgoers. The Parson's comparison to a shepherd, who has great responsibility but is lowly and of a low social class, and his way of speaking to sinners in benevolent manner create a *habitus* that causes him to respond with selfless actions.

II. The *Habitus* of the Merchant

Due to the medieval merchants' job description, their *habitus* is different from the Parson's. As Roger Ladd's work suggests when he speaks about a merchant's movable social standing (12), merchants had a great deal depending on their business ventures. In fact, merchants took a large risk when investing in just about any trade venture. Medieval merchants began paying insurance for goods in transit because these trade ventures were not always secure (Spufford 30). Storms could sink the ship that transported the goods or bandits could steal the goods, which means that the merchants would lose all of the money they invested. Overland travel could damage the goods or leave them open for ambush (30, 33, and 37). This means that without insurance, if the goods were too late or damaged, the merchants could lose money.

A medieval merchant's alleged motivations stem from avarice. One of the reasons the Church generally disapproved of the profit-based economy was its association with avarice. Because people associated the profit-based economy with avarice, they also allegedly associated merchants—those who made the profit-based economy possible—with avarice. Trade involved money, which ultimately lured and corrupted the people it came into contact with (Ladd 16). This idea suggests that a merchant supposedly sells goods purely out of greed. As Jill Man discusses, the literary merchant's main intent is personal gain, which is why they are associated

with avarice (99). Their association with avarice contributes to a merchant's *habitus* because it causes him to automatically act out of greed. Their motivation of avarice serves as their "structuring structure (Bourdieu 72). Because of the merchant's *habitus*, people expect merchants to act and dress in certain ways.

A merchant's dress is part of his *habitus* and is a product of what some people saw as their greed. Merchants and other traders aim to gain credit, or a way to pay for the commodities (Bertolet 66). Their desire for credit is why a merchant's *habitus* cannot suggest in any way that he wastes money (65). Their *habitus* can, however, reveal their success by somehow displaying their credit in order to "reap a greater reward" (66). In this case, spending their money would not be a waste but an "investment" because it is important to show that they are successful or to at least appear to be successful (66). If people think a merchant is successful, they will most likely be more willing to bring him their business. A merchant can show his success by displaying expensive items, which hopefully will benefit his social standing and capital (67). Displaying expensive items or clothing to reveal wealth and success becomes part of a merchant's nondiscursive *habitus*.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, we can see this type of *habitus* in the Merchant's description. In order to appear successful in trade and persuade people to bring him their business, Chaucer's Merchant dresses well. Chaucer describes him as wearing a "Flaundryssh bever hat" (I. 273), "bootes clasped faire and fetisly" (I. 274), which are both expensive and fashionable items of clothing that would suggest to people who saw him that he has been successful in trade. The narrator proves that his appearance suggests success when he says that "Ther wiste no wight that he was in dette" (I. 280). Likewise, the Shipman says that people who know the merchant in his

tale think he is “wys” because they think he is “riche” (VII 2). Because of their appearances, people see both of these merchants as prosperous.

A merchant’s *habitus* is also evident in his anxiety, which is another aspect that motivates his actions. It is the second “structuring structure” (Bourdieu 72). Actual merchants were anxious over their social standing because of the constant risk of business failure. Ladd notes that merchants sometimes experienced a calamitous trade venture that lost them a significant amount of money (12). In *The Canterbury Tales*, the Shipman tells a tale about an anxious merchant. Before leaving on his business venture, the merchant pays little attention to his wife sexually (VII 113-123). When he returns, however, he “gan embrace/His wyf al newe, and kiste hire on hir face” (377-8). Because of his anxiety before his trip, he could not think of anything else and neglected his wife. He was also concerned about his wife’s allowance (1370) because if she could not handle her money, then people might think that he could not control her or his own business. He should appear confident and successful through his clothing and control of his wife, but behind that, he is anxious because he understands the risk involved in his work. Because these examples show how merchants react to the knowledge that they could lose their money or their trading partners, they suggest that this merchant is an extremely anxious man, which is perhaps why he does not become arrogant. The Merchant knows that he might fail, which makes him anxious instead of arrogant.

III. The *Habitus* of the Pardoner

Perhaps the most significant example of the Pardoner adopting the *habitus* of a merchant is when he takes the largest risk involved in selling a commodity. The Pardoner takes a large risk when he tries to sell a pardon or relic to Harry Bailey, one of the most powerful men on the

pilgrimage, before selling one to any of the other pilgrims. Harry is, in a sense, the self-elected leader because it was he who proposed the competition of telling the tales (VI. 828-841) and generally serves as the facilitator. The Pardoner claims that the Host should begin because “he is moost envoluped in synne” (VI. 942). The Pardoner targets Harry because of his status. If he can persuade the leader of the group who is also, as the Pardoner claims, the most sinful to buy a pardon, then the other pilgrims will likely follow because they trust in Harry’s wisdom. If Harry does not buy a pardon, however, no one will. In this situation, the Pardoner takes on the *habitus* of a merchant because of his risk-taking. Like a merchant, to win big, he must make a large investment. In this case, the Pardoner invests everything and loses everything. The Pardoner takes this large risk, though, because he wants to survive in a world based on wealth from huge commercial profits.

Though the Church preferred a gift economy that focused on charity because it believed profit encouraged sin, society became increasingly reliant on profit, which brought about the profit-based economy. The Church began to change, too (Ladd 4). Fowler notes that pardoners helped raise money to support and build hospitals as well as other important buildings and institutions. Pardoners, Fowler says, were like “external subcontractors” (52), since they essentially paid themselves a portion of their earnings from selling indulgences (52). In this environment, though the Parson participates in a gift economy, Chaucer’s Pardoner takes on the *habitus* of a merchant in his approach to selling indulgences, how he describes them, and what he wants in exchange for them.

In order to make the sale, the Pardoner examines his audience, searching for the person or group with the most control, which is part of a merchant’s *habitus*. The Pardoner first accomplishes this by accepting the Host’s request to tell a “myrie tale” (VI. 316) and mirroring

the Host by repeating the name of “Seint Ronyan” (VI. 320), a lesser known saint who appears only these two times in *The Canterbury Tales*. In this case, the *habitus* appears in an act of speech and in mirroring, which is part of the merchant’s technique of making the sale. Robin Peterson and Yam Limbu use E.O. Brownell’s definition of mirroring to explain why the convergence of mirroring and empathy is useful for the modern day salesman. Mirroring is essentially a type of communication based on body language as well as similar vocabulary and tone (Peterson and Limbu 195-196). By mirroring his customer, a salesman shows that he has been paying attention to the customer. It also suggests that they have something in common, something they both identify with, which could cause the customer to feel more inclined to make the purchase because people are “drawn” to others “when their body language is similar to [their] own” (196). If a salesman mirrors his customer’s stance or vocabulary, he or she also shows that he or she is in tune with the customer. Someone selling jewelry, for instance, would have to gage the customer’s willingness to buy the product and use his or her mirroring strategies to convince the customer that it is his idea to buy the product.

When the majority of the pilgrims complains and requests a tale about a “moral thyng” (VI. 325) instead, the Pardoner switches gears, realizing that the majority—not Harry, the single leader—holds the control. So, he immediately accepts their request. When he addresses them, he calls them “Lordynges” (VI. 329). This address gives the pilgrims respect, which is something that not all of them might be used to. Though calling them “Lordynges” (VI. 329) is not the same as mirroring, it is still the appropriate response. In this social field, it is important to flatter the customers in order to lure them into the seller’s trap. The customers feel important, which could potentially make them more inclined to purchase the item.

After introducing his merchandise of indulgences and relics, the Pardoner makes a sales pitch. Like most salespeople, he makes the pardons and relics inviting and desirable by showing their applicability to most of the audience and their concerns. He claims that the relic can heal their livestock of diseases (VI. 355-360). He also claims that their livestock will “multiplie” (VI. 365), which means that buying this item would be an investment because they could eventually make more money off of their animals. With this part of his sales pitch, he covers people, perhaps mostly men, who live off of their land or sell their animals.

The Pardoner then switches gears, saying that it not only heals disease in animals but in people as well. Because of their fear of inconstant women, men have the disease of “jalousie” (VI. 366). The Pardoner uses this angle to target the women. He claims that the relic will heal the disease, which is also a sin, by making the men forget. Man and wife, though unfaithful, could live together in harmony because of this relic. His technique is similar to a vender selling a skin product. He claims that his product is an investment because it prolongs beauty. It soothes the skin, it covers unpleasant blotches, and it has a nice fragrance to boot. The Pardoner’s technique is similar in that it targets a large audience and plays off what he feels they would most desire or find the most useful.

The Pardoner treats the indulgences like a merchant would treat the items he sells. He first tells the audience from whom he received the pardon, which suggests that his pardons might be better than another person’s pardons. On his person, he has “Bulles of popes and of cardynales,/Of patriarkes and bishopes” (VI. 342-343). He starts with the person of the highest authority—the pope—and reminds his audience at the end of his tale that these pardons “were me yeven by the popes hond” (VI. 922). These statements suggest that these pardons might be more powerful as well as more expensive than another. Maybe they can absolve more sins and

help the buyer reach heaven faster. The Pardoner continues to describe the pardons and relics as “faire as any man in Engelond” (VI. 921) and as “newe and fressh” (VI. 928), as if an indulgence has an expiration date. As something that is both from the pope and new, the pardon is of fine quality.

It is especially significant that the Pardoner describes wine, a normal saleable commodity, in a similar fashion. In a digression during his tale, the Pardoner, as a wine connoisseur, advises his audience to avoid certain kinds of wines, particularly the wine from a wine-growing district in Spain because he considered its wine inferior to wine from France (VI. 562-571). This digression aligns with his description of the pardons because the Pardoner suggests that, because he knows his audience likes the finer things, such as fine wine, then they should prefer the “fine” indulgences. This is an attempt to sell himself and his ability, as well. By sharing his knowledge of fine wine and saving his audience from the lesser wine, he is showing his “concern” for his audience. If the audience believes he shows concern for them, they will be more likely to trust him and buy his commodities. As Fowler discusses, the Pardoner is selling himself to sell his product (58). Because he is like them and knows about luxury commodities, they should trust him. Unlike the Parson, the Pardoner is not a shepherd (I. 504) but a deceiver. The Pardoner’s treatment of the indulgence as a fine commodity and his attempt to sell himself by associating himself with finer things work together as selling points.

The Pardoner’s avarice, the motivation people assume belongs to merchants (Mann 99), motivates him when he sells pardons. He admits that his “entente is nat but for to wyne./And nothing for correccioun of synne” (VI. 403-404). It is significant that he confesses that he does not really care if his buyers understand why they need forgiveness or if they change their sinful ways after hearing his sermon. For Chaucer’s Parson, that *would* be his main motivation and

intent. Saying that his “entente is nat but for to wynne” (VI. 403) aligns the Parson with the supposedly greedy merchants, who are not concerned about whether or not the item served his buyers well as long as it served his own purpose: to receive money.

What the Pardoner wants to buy with the money also reveals his avarice. He claims that he will not live in poverty (VI. 448) like the Parson does and will not perform any physical labor to rise from poverty (VI. 444). He still, however, declares that he “wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete” (VI. 448), which means that he intends to live quite comfortably due to the money he earns by abusing people’s faith. His greed is even more evident when he continues by saying that he does not care if he cheats the “povereste page” (VI. 449) or the “povereste wydwe” (VI. 450) out of all of their money and causes both her and her children to starve (VI. 451) as long as he can buy his own food. This churchman cares nothing for widows, children, or the poor, people who the Bible emphasizes all Christians must care for and who the Parson visits because of his selflessness. His selfish actions stem from greed. These actions are similar to those of a merchant because merchants, as Mann says, are allegedly greedy and care only for their personal gain and money instead of how their goods could help others.

As a churchman, the Pardoner should be humble like Chaucer’s Parson, who does not seem concerned about his clothing. He is a “povre” (I. 478) and “hooly” (I. 479) “shepherde” (I. 504), who has good intent and truly does tend his sheep. The Pardoner instead adopts the *habitus* of a merchant through the way he dresses. His hair, which is “yelow as wex” (VI. 675), hangs down for all to see as does “a strike of flex” (VI. 676). In order to show it off, he does not wear the hood. Unlike the Parson, the Pardoner looks fashionable and prosperous (VI. 682), which distances him from the church and associates him with the *habitus* of a merchant, whose clothes are fancier and show his success.

The only piece of clothing that the Pardoner wears that relates to the church is the “verynycle” (VI. 685). This accessory reminds his audience of his position in the church, so it becomes more of a business accessory than an accessory that truly shows his devotion to Christ. Ultimately, then, the “verynycle” (VI. 685) is to create profit, causing it to align with all of the Pardoner’s other Merchant-like accessories, which remind his audience of his success. The Pardoner’s clothing, like a merchant’s clothing, is good for business.

While the Pardoner picks up many elements of the merchant’s *habitus*, he does not adopt the merchant’s anxiety because he is accustomed to success. The narrator claims that the Pardoner earned more money a day “Than that the person”—churchman earning a living with the aim to spread God’s word—“gat in monthes tweye” (VI. 704). The Pardoner confirms his wealth when he says, speaking about his typical sales pitch, “By this gaude have I wonne, yeer by yeer,/An hundred mark sith I was pardoner” (389-390). “Yeer by yeer” (389) suggests that his techniques never fail. Because of his continual success, the Pardoner exhibits no anxiety, the opposite of the common merchant *habitus*.

The Pardoner’s success and lack of anxiety cause him to become arrogant, contrasting with both the Parson, who the narrator says never condescends (I. 515-516), and merchants, who are anxious about their goods. He tells his audience that his theme is “*Radix malorum est Cupiditas*” (VI. 426), meaning it is all about avarice, and that he preaches “agayn that same vice/Which that I [he] use[s], and that is avarice” (VI. 427-428). He continues by saying he cares only about his earnings (VI. 440). By admitting his hypocrisy and by revealing his intent, the Pardoner hands over his game plan. Because of his arrogance, he never doubts his success, thinking that these “lewed people” (VI. 437), who are far inferior to himself, will fall for his trap regardless.

The Pardoner's arrogance causes him to misread both his environment and his audience. He mechanically exhibits the *habitus* of a merchant in his appearance and in his sales pitch, but it does not work. He goes from a sermon with an exemplum, which is similar to the field of a churchman like the Parson, to a sales pitch, which is part of the merchant's field, partially because the Parson's and the Pardoner's motivations are different. Though his technique normally succeeds, his arrogance causes him to misread the audience, so he does not realize that Harry Bailey, an inn-keeper, is accustomed to people of questionable behavior and lawbreakers (Bertolet 136, 138). He is essentially the wrong person for the Pardoner to take on. As Bourdieu says, "practices [of the *habitus*] are always liable to incur negative sanctions when the environment with which they are objectively fitted," which is says is why there are generation conflicts (78). While the Pardoner, with his merchant *habitus* and his churchman *habitus*, is likely fitted to most of the other pilgrims, he is not fitted to an environment that includes Harry, which is partly why his sales pitch fails.

Using Fowler's application of Bourdieu's theory of the *habitus* shows how the Pardoner behaves like a merchant in his risk-taking, his treatment of the indulgence as a commodity, his association with avarice, and his appearance. All of these likenesses reveal the infiltration of commercial practices into the Pardoner's strategies. The Pardoner constantly plays the salesman by acting like he respects his audience, by showing that he is similar to his audience, and by essentially selling himself. Even how the Pardoner accessorizes resembles a merchant. Seeing this connection to the merchant's *habitus* allows us to understand why the Pardoner behaves as he does. This examination of the *habitus* also allows us to evaluate a contributing factor to his downfall, which at first seems strange because he is generally successful when he follows the same techniques. Because the Pardoner became used to his success, he became arrogant. It is his

arrogance that causes him to misread the audience, not realizing that his *habitus* would not work in his current environment. He cannot hide that, though he is a churchman, he follows the rules of a merchant.

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