Chaucer, J.K. Rowling, and All of Us

A Journey from Harry Potter to The Canterbury Tales \ and Back Again

By Fidelia

"There were once three brothers!" How many of us came to that opening phrase in "The Tale of the Three Brothers" in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows\(^1\) and smiled with pleasure at this evocative introduction? This beginning creates a sense of journey, a feeling that the listener should settle in to listen to a tale told to amuse as it quietly instructs. As I read, I fell in love with "The Tale of the Three Brothers" and something deep inside me recognized true wisdom in its haunting cadences. I was compelled to discover more!

In discussions I found on The Leaky Cauldron, I quickly learned that I was not alone in my admiration for this stunning allegory. The forum postings on the tale were riveting to read as other fans and I shared what we gleaned from the three brothers and their gifts of the Deathly Hallows. When I learned that J.K. Rowling had been influenced by Chaucer's "The Pardoner's Tale,"\(^2\) I was eager to read her original inspiration. I couldn't wait to compare the stories of two bands of brothers who seek to defeat Death. I never suspected that in so doing, I myself would begin a journey which would lead me to see a multitude of connections between Chaucer, J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter, and all of us fans.

The Canterbury Tales

Sadly, for someone who spent years studying the liberal arts, I had only the most cursory knowledge of Chaucer. Before delving into "The Pardoner's Tale," I realized I needed to learn a bit more about Chaucer and his famous The Canterbury Tales if I were to put the story in its proper context. What I found proved later to be significant.

In his tales, Chaucer uses the framework of a pilgrimage to bring together people from disparate social and economic classes as they unite under a common destination. Chaucer gives us a heady mixture of English society in his tales: bawdy millers, noble knights, righteous parsons, devoted students, shrewish wives, and others depart on a pilgrimage from Southwark in London to Canterbury Cathedral to visit the shrine of St. Thomas a Beckett. Interestingly, under normal circumstances, most of these people would have had little to do with each other, but the pilgrimage allows social and economic dividing lines to blur. The pilgrims' host, another Harry, this one Harry Bailly of Tabard Tavern, offers to accompany them at his own expense and to be their guide. He also offers them an opportunity: he invites them to take part in a game of wit and storytelling. As they would all be telling tales on the way to Canterbury to pass the time, Harry proposes that they make a contest of it. Each pilgrim should tell two tales, and he will act as judge.
Whoever tells the best tale (or as Harry puts it, "tales of best wisdom, instruction and delight" 3) would, at the completion of the pilgrimage, win a free dinner at his tavern at the expense of the entire company. However, whoever disagrees with his judgment will have to pay "all we spend along the way." 4 The pilgrims readily agree.

Each pilgrim, then, steps, one by one, into the spotlight. Each presents himself or herself to the other pilgrims, and then launches into a tale. We hear "The Miller's Tale," "The Knight's Tale," "The Wife of Bath's Tale," and so on, through the assembled cast. In the telling of each tale, we see the concerns of 14th century English society revealed. We see what preoccupies them, intrigues them, angers them, and moves them. Love, courtship, and marriage figure as prominently as do sex, politics, religion, salvation, and death. The pilgrims tell tales from their own class perspectives, sometimes angering one another as often as they delight the crowd. Some tell tales to "quit" each other; that is, to use elements of a previously told story to poke fun at that story or its teller. The tales become a battleground of wit and of social and emotional exploration, drawing the reader into the maelstrom of medieval British life.

**The Pardoner's Tale**

With this background in mind, I felt able to take on "The Pardoner's Tale." The Pardoner is a physically repulsive fellow, with physical deformities suggestive (in that era) of sexual deviancy.5 The Pardoner has the profession of traveling around the country, giving sermons from the pulpit, and selling indulgences to pardon people of their sins. His sideline job, though, is much more profitable. He frightens churchgoers into giving offerings to him through the sermons he preaches. The Pardoner is fully indifferent to the fate of those he "saves" as long as his pockets are fully lined. The pilgrims, it is hinted, dislike the Pardoner for his appearance, the suggestions of vice and deviancy about him, and for his sharp tongue ("For when I dare no other way to attack, then will I sting my enemy with my tongue sharp" 6). He is tolerated by the group no more.

When Harry Bailly invites the Pardoner to tell the pilgrims some jokes, the crowd fears what he might say, and they quickly clamor that he not be allowed to display his wit. Instead, they urge him to tell a moral tale.7 Surprisingly, the Pardoner complies. He tells them that his theme, as it is in all his sermons, is "Radix malorem est cupiditas" ("the root of all evil is greed") and he begins his chilling tale.8 He tells of three revelers of exceptional lawlessness and vice who saw the body of a friend pass by on its way to burial. They swear, as brothers on a quest, that they will slay Death, "he who so many slays." 9 They find an old man, whom Death has not taken, and they demand his help in finding Death. The old man says that he left Death in a grove underneath a tree. When the revelers find the tree, they find underneath it eight bushels of gold. The worst man knows that if they are to carry the gold away, they will be caught and treated as thieves. So, he proposes that they wait until nightfall to move their treasure. He suggests that one of them go into town for bread and wine, while the other two guard the treasure,
and the youngest goes. The two remaining decide that it is a far better idea to split the treasure two ways instead of three, and plot the murder of the youngest when he returns. Meanwhile, the youngest decides that he would have the entire treasure for himself, and buys poison to put in two of the three flasks of wine he is buying for the trio. When the youngest returns, the other two murder him straight away. Then they decide to make merry, drink the poisoned wine, and "thus ended these murderers two, and also the false poisoner as well." 10

The Pardoner's Tale and the Tale of the Three Brothers

"The Pardoner's Tale" is admired for its "great pacing for effective shock and uneasiness." 11 It is an elegant tale, both much shorter and more lingering in its horror than the other Canterbury Tales. The moral is a bleak one, with a haunting inference that Death will come for everyone, despite well-laid plans and intentions. The craftsmanship of the story holds the reader enthralled as the fate of the three brothers turns out far differently than they envision. "It is a brilliantly told tale. It is that type of tale, favored in folklore, which depends on a trick, in this case a double meaning for death, which we understand but the rioters do not. They go in search of death in order to kill him, and they find death and die." 12

In the tale, the three brothers have no individual identities to differentiate themselves from each other, as if to insinuate that their moral core is so corrupt as to make distinctions negligible. "The three rioters are anonymous hoodlums, to whom the narrative gives no distinctive characteristics." 13 All that binds the three are their intention to slay death and each brother's goal of gaining the wealth of this world for himself. Death itself is disembodied, symbolized only by the gold buried under the tree. The characters themselves in the tale are not necessarily memorable; it is the moral outcome which is the tour de force.

In his chilling tale, the Pardoner does successfully demonstrate that the root of all evil is greed. Death comes for each of the three brothers, not as an outside actor, but as an outgrowth of the character flaw of avarice within each. Avarice leads to the dissolution of whatever bonds held these brothers together and to the easy contemplation, and later the commission, of murder. Greed then leads to greater sin, and greater sin to death. It is a neat, compact, and terrible equation which the Pardoner illustrates.

Rowling's tale shares with Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale" the device that it is the moral flaw within each brother which brings about the manner of his death. The eldest brother, who attempts to pugnaciously control Death through demanding great power, meets his own end through violence. The arrogant brother, who seeks to conquer Death through control of the forces of life and death, creates his own frustrations at his inability to truly master these forces. In self-induced despair, he creates his own end as well.

It is in the fate of the third brother where we see Rowling break ranks openly with Chaucer's template. The youngest brother displays humility instead of a moral flaw. This brother seeks not to overpower
Death but instead to lead a life without the constant shadow of Death behind him. Rowling portrays this brother as living a full life, untainted by fear. In his wisdom, this brother chooses to live completely in the moment, secure in the knowledge that he is capable of meeting Death on his own terms, in his own time. Only when he is fully ready does he remove the cloak, the obstacle to Death, and begin the next phase of his journey. In a striking detail, Rowling is careful to note that the youngest brother gives the Cloak of Invisibility to his son before he greets Death as "an old friend" and departs this life.

Rowling's tale ends not in neatly packaged bleakness, as did Chaucer's tale, but with hope. She turns Death from an adversary who must be defeated into a friend and an equal, whom one can meet gladly. Also, whereas the three brothers in Chaucer's tale die abruptly and thus end their stories, Rowling's tale leaves open the possibility that the experiences of this life may be passed on. Significantly, the youngest brother takes care to pass the cloak to his son before he turns to greet Death. Rowling leaves the reader with the hopeful image that our knowledge, our experiences, and our philosophical outlooks can be transferred. What we learn dies not with us, but can be given to those who survive us. Some gifts transcend the grave.

Both Chaucer and Rowling leave the reader, then, with forceful and imaginative tales which invite the reader to contemplate his or her own life. What is at our moral center? Which brother will we emulate? How will we greet Death as an adversary to be slain, or as a friend? These questions stretch easily from Chaucer's time to our own, awaiting our responses.

The Teller or the Tale: Which Is It?

Once one reads "The Pardoner's Tale" it is impossible to remember the tale without envisioning the man who tells it. The two are inextricably intertwined. As George Lyman Kittredge, a famous Chaucerian scholar noted over a century ago, "It is impossible to forget the context in which it is told, and the person who tells it." 14 The Pardoner's persona is so strong and so riveting that he imbues his story with additional meaning and import. The Pardoner knows very well that he is disliked among the pilgrims. He acknowledges that fact along with his own moral depravity in openly admitting his cheating of those yearning for salvation before he even tells his tale. He is a man fully aware of his vices and virtues and cares not a whit what the assembly thinks. That contempt for popularity enables him to challenge the pilgrims proudly with his statement:

"For, though myself be a ful vicious man / a moral tale yet I yow telle can." 15

Is he right? Can a vicious man still render a moral service to society? Can someone acting out of purely selfish, personal reasons still perform a deed which can be called truly good?

I trust I am not alone in seeing the shadow of Severus Snape.
I sought out "The Pardoner's Tale" to compare its story to that of "The Tale of the Three Brothers." Yet, it seems that Chaucer influenced more than the allegory at the heart of Deathly Hallows. Did Rowling in fact model Severus on the Pardoner? There's a fair argument to make that perhaps she did.

A strongly notable commonality is that the physiology of both the Pardoner and Severus is fairly off-putting. The Pardoner is described in the following manner:

This pardoner had hair as yellow as wax /  
But in truth it hung, as does a spray of flax:/  
In thin strands hung the locks that he had /  
And therewith his shoulders overspread /  
But thin, it lay in small locks one by one [\[1\]  
No beard had he, nor ever should have, /  
His face was as smooth as if it were just shaved /

I believe he were a gelding or a mare.16

The Pardoner is physically unattractive and, moreover, is a sexually ambiguous person. Scholars continue to debate if the Pardoner is a eunuch, a homosexual, a celibate, or, in the Pardoner's own words, a clergyman with a "joly wench in every toun." 17 It is important to note that the Pardoner's sexuality itself is not so much at issue with his fellow travelers as is the fact that the Pardoner cannot be placed in any definitive category. The Pardoner plays all roles simultaneously, and that ability to confuse his audience and obscure his true nature earns him the profound mistrust of the pilgrims. That mistrust places him on the outer fringes of the group. "The Pardoner is also a grotesquity, marginalized to the periphery [\[1\]] he's dreadful, vital, and fascinating." 18

Severus, like the Pardoner, is physically unprepossessing. Severus is portrayed throughout the series as having lank, oily hair; he is hook nosed and coldly spoken.19 Also, Severus shares the distinction with the Pardoner of having an especially nasty tongue ' and the phrase "I am a full vicious man" might have been coined expressly for him. He too cares not what popular society thinks of him, heeding only his own interior moral compass. Lastly, Severus, the outcast of the Order of the Phoenix, is also a highly ambiguous figure who operates at the periphery of his group. Severus's ambiguity is not his sexuality, but his inner nature and moral composition. His "fellow travelers" in the Order can no more ascertain his true nature or allegiances than the Pardoner's pilgrims could categorize him. Severus is allowed in the Order under the aegis of Albus Dumbledore, yet the members of the Order are unable to fathom where Severus' true loyalties lie. This inability to "place" Severus by his peer group makes him a figure of suspicion and a near pariah.
The most striking parallel between Severus and the Pardoner, however, is that readers cannot hear their tales and separate them from the teller. Like the Pardoner, Severus is a strongly realized character whose personality dominates his story. Severus does render a moral service of incredible magnitude to his society. Acting out of deeply personal and some would say selfish motivations, he performs the deeds which help save the entire wizarding world. Yet the reader cannot forget his flaws in spite of his stunning achievement. Severus, like the Pardoner, creates his own tale, which is elegant, haunting and riveting in its horrific end. In "The Prince's Tale" we finally learn of Severus's true loyalties, but his ambiguity survives his death. We are no nearer categorizing Severus at the end of the series as "good" or "evil" than we were at the beginning. Severus has us asking the same questions readers ask of Chaucer's Pardoner. What role is there for the corrupt Pardoner or Severus in saving society? Can one learn about redemption from a character who is so obviously flawed? Can a "greater good" come out of imperfect motivations? I imagine the debate concerning Severus which continues to rage between fans is much akin to its medieval counterpart on the Pardoner.

I believe that both Chaucer and Rowling give us these compelling characters, with glaring flaws and brilliant gifts, as examples of the extreme moral ranges of which each person is capable. Severus and the Pardoner compellingly demonstrate that even those who operate at the periphery can make enormous contributions despite their marginalization by mainstream society. Chaucer and Rowling so entwine the moral cores of their tales with that of their characters that the two are inseparable. Their stories and the personalites echo long after the last page has been turned, and these "outcasts" provoke more debate and reflection than many of their more likeable counterparts.

**Harry Potter as a Modern Canterbury Tales**

As I mulled over the connections surrounding Severus, the Pardoner, and these similar tales, it struck me that Rowling has perhaps paid homage to Chaucer in more ways than in the inspiration for her allegory or in the model for one character. A further connection to *The Canterbury Tales* is found in the naming of her chapters. In *Deathly Hallows* alone she gives us "Kreacher's Tale" "The Tale of the Three Brothers" and "The Prince's Tale." Rowling employs the same device in her writing of this book that Chaucer uses to such effect: she has her characters step one by one into the spotlight, telling in turn their stories, and in doing so, uniting the characters into a cohesive assembly whose stories impact and play upon each other, sometimes "quitting" them. (Dumbledore's story, for example, has Elphias Doge, Auntie Muriel, Rita Skeeter, and Aberforth Dumbledore "quitting" each other in their versions of Albus' life). I would add that her characters, too, are pilgrims, in search not only of destination but also of transformation. She gives us Harry's tale, Albus's tale, Severus's tale, Tom Riddle's tale, Dobby's tale, Regulus's tale, and so on through much of the cast of the *Harry Potter* series. As each character's back-story is revealed, the reader discovers that character's interior self, his or her struggles and mistakes, and often, his or her
search for forgiveness and redemption. Through the *Harry Potter* character stories, Rowling shines a light on the societal concerns and preoccupations of our time, exactly as Chaucer did for his own era.

Albus’s tale, for example, has us debating in forums and in essays what qualities we expect from our leaders. Tom Riddle’s tale goes to the heart of what limits we set upon those in power. What role do our societies allow for the use coercion and torture "for the greater good?" Kreacher’s and Dobby's tales each highlight the awareness we in the 21st century have of social justice. What is it we owe those who serve? Hagrid’s tale, along with Remus’s, goes to the heart of how we treat those who are noticeably different from the norm. Whom we as a society choose to shun, to exclude, or to legislate out of existence, is a vital question. The conversations readers and scholars have had on each character are far too numerous to recount here. In many forums and Reading Groups, we have discussed each *Harry Potter* character as he or she steps into the spotlight and tells a tale, which mirrors our own era's concerns, preoccupations, and awareness.

Are we, though, so very different from Chaucer's audience? I find it fascinating that Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* ends with "The Parson's Tale." That tale is a far cry from the more bawdy, entertaining, and lively tales included in the repertoire. "The Parson's Tale" is a more learned, gentle treatise on the path to redemption. The Parson reminds the pilgrims (and the reader) that nothing which has gone before is irredeemable. Through true repentance, a confession of faults, and atonement (remorse), there is a way forward. It is an astounding parallel that Rowling chooses to end the *Harry Potter* series in the same way as Chaucer ends The *Canterbury Tales*. The later chapters of *Deathly Hallows* also stress this need to ask forgiveness, to confess faults, and to make amends. Not only does Albus go through that important process in the "King’s Cross" chapter, but Harry’s final advice to Voldemort stresses the absolute necessity of that same cycle of acknowledgement and remorse if redemption is to be possible. Both of these great literary works leave the reader more than entertained; they leave us with timeless spiritual wisdom. Some themes of human experience resound in every age.

**Conclusion: And What of Us?**

I started my journey into Chaucer's writings to find the connections between "The Pardoner's Tale" and that of the three brothers in *Deathly Hallows*. Not only did I find that link, but I found an ever-widening circle of connections between *Harry Potter* and Chaucer's tales. Perhaps, though, we need to take one final step back to widen the circle of our perceptions. After spending countless hours engrossed in discussions as part of online communities, I truly believe that we, too, are pilgrims. We have self-selected to go on a journey together through seven books with Harry and the people he encounters. Despite the widely disparate locations, careers, identities, and backgrounds of this fanbase, we have all volunteered to come together as one community to share in our love of Rowling's tales. Collectively, we mirror Chaucer's wide array of pilgrims. We have poured out our hearts, our opinions, and, in some cases, the
depths of our beliefs into our attempts at finding meaning in Rowling's work. We have discussed, argued, told tales to "quit" each other, and won each other over to new viewpoints as we have shared our very personal journeys with Harry and with each other.

Someone once said that there is a difference between a trip and a pilgrimage. One goes on a trip to reach a destination. One embarks on a pilgrimage with not merely destination in mind but with the hope of interior transformation along the way.22 We have, many of us, made a type of pilgrimage as we kept Harry and each other company through these seven books. Rather than sharing tales on horseback or by firelight as we travel from Southwark to Canterbury, we chat sitting in a circle on sofas or write by the light of our computer screens. We have shared our life journeys with one another, and in the process, been transformed and enlightened along the way. We are community to each other as much as Chaucer's pilgrims were. Although our communities are often virtual, the experiences within them are no less real. Rowling has become our muse, our Chaucer, and our Harry Bailly, who invites us to travel together and discuss the chief concerns of our time and of our hearts. We have accepted her invitation and we are forever changed and enriched by our journey together.

Interestingly, Chaucer's Canterbury Tales was never finished. His pilgrims never reach Canterbury Cathedral, nor do they ever dine together at Harry Bailly's tavern. In my mind's eye, I see them still telling tales, still arguing, laughing, growing quiet as they listen intently, but always continuing to transform and grow. May our own pilgrimage together have an equally fruitful and distant end.

Notes
2. Cnn.com, "Rowling."
3. Chaucer, Canterbury Tales, page 45.
4. Ibid., 45.
5. Benson, "Chaucer's Pardoner."
6. Chaucer, Canterbury Tales, 433.
7. Ibid., 429.
8. Ibid., 435.
9. Ibid., 449.
10. Ibid., 459.


16. Ibid., page 39.

17. Ibid., pg 436.


22. Unknown deacon, sermon at Holy Name of Jesus Catholic Church, summer 2007.

**Bibliography**


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