Chaucer's Pardoner is the worst of the Canterbury pilgrims, not because of his personal habits or sexual preferences (although these count as serious criticisms by the standards of the middle ages). The Pardoner is very likely to be an attempt at Chaucer's criticism of the basic assumptions as well as of the specific practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

One can easily tell the moral worth of the Pardoner by his rank in the list of pilgrims for he is the last of the described pilgrims in an order that is obviously based not only on social classes, but also on moral values within the social positions themselves. The Pardoner is also portrayed as the close friend of the Summoner, next-to-last on the list of pilgrims, who decides by means of blackmail which sinners to bring to ecclesiastical trial; and, of whom, "of his visage children were aferd."(1)

The Summoner is a wily fellow, but not very bright. No medicine or ointment will clear up his complexion with "whelkes white" (l. 632) and "knobbes" (l. 633) because of his intemperate diet: "Wel loved he garlek, oynons, too, and eek lekes,/And for to drynken strong wyn reed as blood" (ll. 634-635). Nor is he smart enough to realize that quoting rote phrases from Latin that he does not understand will not convince anyone of his knowledge except people as foolish as he is: "And eek ye knowen wel how that a jay/Kan clepen 'Watte' as wel as kan the pope" (ll. 642-643) is Chaucer's remark on his Latin abilities. And the Pardoner and the Summoner are not only friends, but birds of a feather as well: "With hym ther rood a gentil Pardoner/Of Rouncivale, his freend and his compeer" (ll. 669-670). The Pardoner is no better than he should be, given his low social position, and quite a good deal worse.

Pardoners were not necessarily Church officials and were needed in outlying areas where priests were not available, but Chaucer's Pardoner is something different. He has no spiritual belief in the duties of his own office and works for the money he can get out of the opportunities given by hearing people's confessions. Out of hypocrisy, or out of the playfulness caused by the pilgrimage and its story-telling

contest, or just out of plain drunkenness, the Pardoner reveals his own methods very clearly to his fellow-pilgrims (in the "Prologue" to his tale):

And in Latin I speke a wordes fewe,
To saffron with my predicacioun.
And for to stire hem to devocioun.
Thanne shewe I forth my longe cristal stones,
Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones, --
Relikes been they, as wenen they echoon.(2)

In the "General Prologue" these tricks are described in more detail:

Ne was ther swich another pardoner.
For in his male he hadde a pilwe-beer,
Which that he seyde was Oure Lady veyl:
He seyde he hadde a gobet of the seyl
That Seint Peter hadde, whan that he wente
Upon the see, til Jhesu Crist hym hente.
He hadde a croys of latoun ful of stones,
And in a glas, he hadde pigges bones (ll. 693-700).

The holy goods and relics are all phoney, but no one seems to question the Pardoner's word as to their validity. The disintegrating pig's bones in glass are held up as the bones (the relics) of saints complete with rags that serve as remnants of their burial-clothes. The Virgin Mary's veil is a common pillow-case ("pilwe-beer") as is the "gobet" of Saint Peter's sail (or the latter is of some other equally worthless piece of cloth). Whether the "croys of latoun ful of stones" encloses a piece of the "True Cross" (there were said to be enough pieces of the True Cross floating about Europe to reconstruct any number of actual crosses) or whether it was supposed to be a valuable religious object in itself, Chaucer leaves to the reader's imagination; however, it is clear that neither the metal nor the stones of this cross are precious. Nor is it very clear that the Pardoner himself really has permission from the Pope or his representatives to hear confessions. His papers are "comen from Rome al hoot" (l. 687) — hot off the press would be the expression if the printing press had been invented and in use, and the Pardoner's official papers, his licences:

And thanne my bulles shewe I, alle and some.
Oure leige lorde seel on my patente,
That shewe I first, my body to warente,
That no man be so boold, ne preest ne clerk,
Me to destourbe of Christes hooly werk.
And after that thanne telle I forth my tales;
Bulles of popes and of cardynales,
Of patriarkes and bishopes I shewe, (ll. 334-342)

seem equally falsified.

The Pardoner admits his falsity and lack of morality quite explicitly. Yet he insists that: "For though myself be a ful vicious man,/ A moral tale yet I yow telle kan" (ll. 459-460). And "The Pardoner's Tale" is not only a moral tale, loaded with exempla, it is one of Chaucer's most original stories (only very distant analogues have been found) and most dramatic. When the Parson sums up the moral content of The Canterbury Tales with a formal sermon on the seven deadly sins (a summary that may only be an editor's decision since The Canterbury Tales is unfinished, in fact far from finished, as an ordered work), his sermon is far less interesting than the Pardoner's story of three drunkards who seek out Death in order to avenge a friend's death from the plague and find it in the form of a pile of gold which their own natures reduce to treachery and murder. The Pardoner is in fact a master story-teller and the Parson, a country parson similar to those the Pardoner is accustomed to cheat with his false relics:

whan that he fond

A povre peson dwellynge upon lond,
Upon a day he gat hym moore moneye
Than that the person gat in monthes tweye (ll. 701-704),

except for his greater humility and perspectivity, gives a dull sermon which has little or no interest for the modern reader. It is the Pardoner himself, however, who exemplifies the seven deadly sins(3) in his own life and practices. Pride is shown in all the Pardoner's actions, especially in his offering his services to the very pilgrims whom he has just finished admitting to that he is a fake. Envy in his using his humble position for

the sake of the money it brings him; therefore aping those of higher social status. Anger in the lines:

Thanne wol I stynge hym with my tonge smerte
In prechyng, so that he shal nat asterte
To been defamed falsly, if that he
Hath trepased to my brethern or to me (ll. 413-416)

in which the Pardoner shows his skill at and willingness to slander anyone who hints at his falsity or stands in his way. Sloth is represented by the Pardoner's whole attitude of working hard to betray his purposes as a holy man, that is, to give out what are in fact false pardons for confessions, pardons that, in one way or another, are merely bought by material goods, not received through repentance. Avarice, certainly the Pardoner values things of the world beyond all else:

I wol noon of the apostles countrefete;
I wol have monie, wolle, chese, and whete,
Al were it yeven of the povereste page,
Or of the povereste wydwe in a village,
Al sholde his children sterve for famyne.
Nay, I wol drynke licour of the vyne,
And have a joly wenche in every toun. (ll. 447-453).

Gluttony and Lechery are covered by the same lines, and the latter is also seen in the "General Prologue" where the Pardoner is described with "glarynge eyen hadde he as an hare" (l. 684) and "a voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot" (l. 688) animals which are not fabled for their temperate habits. The parson with his motto, "That if gold ruste, what shal iren do?" (l. 500) and his unbroken practice of "But Cristes loore and his apostles twelve/He taughte, but first he folwed it himselve" (ll. 527-528) is a pillar of the Church which nevertheless seems unaware of his existence. The Pardoner is the complete opposite and hides in the bloated bureaucracy of that body, a parasite in its intestines.

The Pardoner is more than this, however. An unprincipled sinner, a false pardoner, a man who admits that: "Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice/Which that I use, and that is avarice" (ll. 427-428), he further goes against his religious role in life (if, in fact, he has such a role) and betrays the people whose confessions he hears to damnation. He is not merely a thief who takes money for false purposes and does not let this trouble his conscience, nor even a man who takes money in place of repentance. The Pardoner condemns honest, if naive, people to hell by
falsely giving them repentance for their sins. He leaves his penitents not in a state of grace, but in a state of peril for their souls. Nor does this have any meaning for the Pardoner at all:

For myn entente is nat but for to wynne,
And nothyng for correccioun of synne.
I rekke nevere, whan that they been beryed,
Though that hir soules goon a-blakeberyyed! (ll. 403-406).

These lines, seeming to contain so much good humor, to be such a good joke, are really a ghastly comment on the Pardoner's moral state and the state of religion in England. To go blackberrying is not merely an expression. Berry picking (especially since most berries grew wild) requires that a person wander without direction, blindly, as it were, from place to place with his destination left to chance and his goal uncertain -- if a goal, or final resting-place exists at all. All this is an apt description of a lost soul which is the position of those who think they have confessed and have been pardoned for their sins but have done so falsely since the pardoner may not even have the permission of the Church to pardon them in the first place along with his not caring about whether the repentance was done sincerely or not, accepting or even demanding gifts for a light penance, accepting money in place of sincerity, and so forth. Even if the Pardoner is a legitimate Church-licenced official, his neglect for the spirit of his duties can do little good.

The Pardoner has an easy conscience. As he says (in this case of avarice):

But though myself be gilty in that synne,
Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne
From avarice, and soore to repente.
But that is nat my principal entente (ll. 429-432).

He is saying, in effect, that the ends justify the means — an old, as well as modern doctrine for doing the wrong thing in the right situation. Moreover, the Church's doctrinal emphasis on rite and ceremony over honesty and pure-heartedness give this a special emphasis: the immortal soul can be put in the hands of an immoral person without danger. The soul is saved by the ceremony of confession. But, as many since Kittridge, have pointed out, the Pardoner's soul is not saved.

Chaucer looked at his world essentially from a courtier's secular point of view (which does not mean that religion played a minor role in his life). This left him basically critical of familiar things such as the
practices of the Church. As Chaucer was not a churchman, nor a church-
reformer (although he had Lollard friends) many minor sins pass for
him as trivial actions giving rise to comic and farcical situations. He
seems deadly serious, though, about the Pardoner, not only as a person
with a soul of his own, but as a reflection on the Church. The Church is
implicitly criticised for allowing the office of pardoner to exist and lie at
the mercy of such as the Pardoner. It is furthermore criticised for
allowing holiness to fall into corrupt hands, as if sacrament being
practised without control must always arrive at a point were its is
corrupted by the imperfect soul of man and earthly life. This is the
bottom of the religious life. The medieval Church was large, the problem
was not that it was not large enough, but that its numbers were in the
wrong places; churchmen went were the money was, but even poverty
did not protect one from immorality because men like the Pardoner
could make what to them at least was a rich living from the poor of the
country, the leavings, as it were, of the churchmen who had gone to
town. It is this Chaucer is criticizing in his portrait of the Pardoner.

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