There are several similarities between the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner, not the least of which is the intimate relation between the prologue and tale of each author. If it can be said that the basis of this relation between prologue and tale in the Wife’s case is that she denies and destroys reality to make her fictional life valid, perhaps it may then be said that the Pardoner in turn destroys fiction in order to complete the process of rendering everything subjective and meaningless. In this sense they are in league with each other, and we see this in several ways. Whereas the Wife may be seen as a figure who distorts reality through a carnal willfulness and weakness of which she is only partially aware, the Pardoner emerges as a highly astute figure who has developed his depravity into a powerful intellectual theory, which in his prologue and tale he attempts to impose on the pilgrimage in order to destroy it. Unlike other flawed characters in the company who, despite themselves, reveal the intellectual or moral basis of their corruption (which, in many cases, they do not fully understand), the Pardoner intentionally exposes his vice in the prologue in order to raise evil to a theoretical level on which he can confront good. For if, in fact, the various authors of the pilgrimage have shown themselves as imperfect, each would seem to have also shown the origin of this imperfection to be misunderstanding or moral weakness. The great challenge to a figure like the Pardoner is to provide a theoretical basis for his fellow authors’ misconstructions and for the audience’s misinterpretations, and so trap them intellectually, as well as morally, in error. The Pardoner is, then, a formidable challenge not only to the authors of the Canterbury pilgrimage but also to the author of the Canterbury Tales, and to its audiences.

The nature of that challenge is a form of radical nominalism that calls into question the function of language in revealing truth, our ability to know truth, and consequently (in this kind of reductive logic), the objective existence of truth.

On the surface, nominalism would seem to favor the fictive use of language, since its basic claim is that universals and abstract concepts are merely names, or words, which do not correspond to or represent any objective reality. In the medieval context, however, this did not lead to a greater prestige of the imaginative use of language, but rather, just the opposite; under nominalism, the interest in language became increasingly speculative and severely logical, and literary analysis of texts lost importance. The force of imaginative creation, in the medieval...
view, existed precisely in the correspondences that could be perceived to what lay outside the text, and part of the
delight of the beautiful was generated through the multiple analogies that could be perceived between the fiction
of the created artifact and the realities beyond it. Naturally, when beyond the text there is nothing other than more
words, these analogies are not possible, or, at least, not delightful. In other words, the basis of fiction is reality,
and when that is removed all communication becomes expository. Harry Bailly realizes this keenly, although not
at a theoretical level, and continually tries to keep the "fun" in fiction; his good instinct for literature, limited though
it may be, is what accounts for his eventual rage against the Pardoner.

The Pardoner is an enemy not only of orthodox medieval philosophy, but of poetry as well. His challenge to a
certain theory of universals and of language is felt directly as a threat to the activity of the Canterbury authors and
to the act of pilgrimage itself. By constructing the figure of the Pardoner in this way, Chaucer succeeds both in
raising the theory of poetry to the level of the theme of his work, and in forcing the audience to reflect on the
process of understanding and interpretation in which they are engaged.

The Pardoner's attack on the audience is launched at the outset of his introduction. The Host instructs the
Pardoner to "Telle us som myrthe or japes", but having perhaps perceived by his appearance and earlier behavior
the Pardoner's inclination to depravity, some of the other pilgrims countermand the Host: "Nay, lat hym telle us of
no ribaudye [ribaldry]!" The Pardoner realizes that the pilgrims would be safer with a ribald tale than that which he
has in store for them, and his ironic use of the contraries of honesty and drunkenness in agreeing to their demand
expresses the disdain with which he regards their self-righteousness: "'I graunte, ywis,' quod he, 'but I moot
thynke / Upon som honest thyng while that I drynke.'"

He begins by telling the audience how he uses rhetoric and for what purpose, revealing that in his tale-telling his
theme is always the same: "Radix malorum est Cupiditas [Cupidity is the root of all evil]." The irony that he intends
is in the double sense that he preaches against the sin of cupidity while having cupidity itself as his personal
motive for such preaching. For the several members of his audience who are slow in catching irony, he spells it
out. With papal documents, the seals of church powers, and his own ecclesiastical title, he establishes his
authority and attempts to win the respect and confidence of his audience. He then reveals his glass boxes full of
old rags and bones, which the audience believes, based on the authority of the speaker, are relics. And their
belief, the Pardoner tells us, is all that matters: "Relikes [relics] been they, as wenen [imagine, suppose] they
echoon [each one of them]." This is an important statement, for it reveals the basis of the epistemology of the
Pardoner as author, and, of course, it foreshadows his final proposition to his fellow pilgrim-authors at the end of
his tale.

It is unlikely that this revelation is merely more of the Pardoner's considerable cynicism toward his audience and
his fellow man. Rather, it is a statement of principle. For the Pardoner, all signs are systems of discourse,
language and relics alike, and what is significant in them is their manner of communication, not the validity of what
they communicate. The Pardoner himself is an expert in the analysis of communications, as he amply
demonstrates, and this expertise is built on the idea that no objective truth can be communicated by any system
because there is none to communicate. Therefore, whatever the audience believes, or can be made to believe,
through a particular discourse is, indeed, correct. That is to say, since words and other signs do not correspond to
any reality other than their own process of signifying, whatever meaning they are understood to have is as good
as any other; therefore, what the audience is led to believe is the best understanding that can occur. These are
the pragmatics born of extreme nominalism, which make of the lie, misrepresentation, and propaganda intellectual
virtues, and identify nominalism as a descendant of sophistry.

The self-revelations of his prologue present us with the paradox of the dishonest man being honest about his
dishonesty. That is not to say that the Pardoner is above seduction; for, indeed, he seems to gear his words
initially to the individual pilgrims seemingly most vulnerable to his rhetoric. His sheep's shoulder bone, he says,
cures not only animal illnesses, but, he adds with an eye to the Wife of Bath no doubt, it cures the jealousy of
husbands, even those who are quite correct in their suspicions of their wives' adultery. He has a mitten, too, that
multiplies the grain it handles. The Miller is likely to have an interest in it. But his ultimate ploy is one that few in
his audience are likely to be strong enough to refuse. "Anyone," he seems to say, "who is guilty of truly horrible sin, particularly women who have committed adultery, must not come forward to venerate my relics." With this trick, as he boldly tells the pilgrims, he makes a very good living.

The Pardoner is not now playing his tricks, but describing them. Since he is a pardoner, he is more than personally concerned with sin, for penance and contrition are his professions, and he soon reveals his theory on this subject, as well. The rest of his prologue is devoted largely to the broad topic of intention and effect:

Thus kan I preche [preach] agayn [against] that same vice
Which that I use, and that is avarice.
But though myself be gilty in that synne,
Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne [separate from],
From avarice, and soore to repente.
But that is nat my principal entente [intention].

The Pardoner here engages a topical subject of the Middle Ages--whether an evil man can know, and thus teach, the truth. On the one hand was the position generally associated with Augustine and the Neoplatonists that true knowledge presupposed a union between knower and known, which knowledge was love. Therefore, he who did not love the truth could not be described as having real knowledge of it. On the other hand was the equally orthodox position of the Scholastics that knowledge was a function of intellect and love a function of the will. Theoretically, these faculties were separate although related, and the possibility of the coexistence of a correct intellect and a corrupt will existed. Therefore, a thoroughly evil man might know and accurately express the truth.

The Pardoner obviously allies himself with the Scholastic position, for he sees the many advantages to himself that lie therein. The fully articulated theory is sufficiently complex for there to be plenty of room for distortion. By extension, it also applies to tale-telling and thus becomes a pertinent consideration for poetry. Must a poet be a good man in order to practice his art? Or, to restate it, what is the relationship of the practice of fiction and the moral probity of the practitioner? What, in addition, is the role of authorial intention in the construction of meaning in a tale? The Pardoner provides implicit answers to these questions in his prologue and tale, and Chaucer suggests alternative responses within the larger structure of the *Canterbury Tales.*

The Pardoner ends his introductory words with a statement of principle concerning virtue, knowledge, and truth, and from this theory flows his tale. A vicious (in the original sense: full of vice) man can tell a virtuous tale, he claims, and it is clear that this implies the ability of the vicious man to know that the content of the tale is, indeed, virtuous. This is possible on the basis of the theory mentioned above that intellect and will can function independently. Thus a separation of the two faculties is introduced. This disjunction, in the Pardoner's presentation, reminds us of the Wife of Bath, who separates and divides, but never unifies, and like her, he is engaged in his storytelling in a plan to separate word from meaning, language from reality, in such a way that signs will mean anything he wants them to.

That a vicious man can tell a moral tale indicates that there really exists a moral truth that can be known. But the separation between universals and particulars is posited on the idea that if there is universal truth, it cannot be known because only particulars can be known. The further separation between signs (words, things, and concepts) and what they signify (represent, symbolize, make known) makes impossible both real knowledge of the truth and accurate expression of it. Thus, analogies between these separations can be, and in the case of the Pardoner certainly are, misleading. In Scholastic theory the truth spoken by a vicious man remains the truth, totally independent of his love or knowledge of it. Indeed, it is precisely because of its independent existence that the truth can be attained by the correct intellect despite the subject's moral condition. In nominalist theory, on the other hand, the intellect, regardless of its condition, cannot know anything beyond what the particulars of experience yield. The Pardoner, whose intellect is governed by the principle that truth cannot be known because reality is essentially a linguistic construct, can only preach the most relative kind of morality and will only create fiction of the most self-referential kind.
The Pardoner, then, because he believes that truth can never be known, lies through mental reservation in his claim about the easy accommodation of immoral author with moral fiction, just as he lies in his claim concerning the efficacy of false relics for the repenting of sin. Whereas a genuine desire to turn away from error remains genuine regardless of the authenticity of any sign which may have inspired it, the Pardoner is saying, as if in response to the Wife's earlier lament about sin and love, that "there is no sin." In this view, the repentance related to sin is illusory, and the words, objects, and ideas employed to produce this illusion are of little consequence, as long as they are believed. Reality has become an enormous pile of old rags and bones.

As with other figures of the pilgrimage, Chaucer (as author) establishes the significance of the Pardoner by his appearance and by the authoritative texts he gives him to cite. In the *General Prologue,* several details of the Pardoner's description suggest effeminacy and even eunuchry. The Narrator clearly sees and states the physical dimension of the Pardoner's condition through equine analogies: "I trowe [believe] he were a geldyng or a mare." His sexual orientation is alluded to in the description of his relationship with the apparently leprous Summoner: "Ful loude he soong [sang] 'Com hider, love, to me!'" The Summoner, it is said, bore him a "stif" accompaniment. The Pardoner's lack of virility, his sexual impotency and sexual orientation, are not the result of genetic chance, a dominant mother, or the unfortunate consequence of disease, as our modern sciences might try to explain such characteristics. Instead, according to the medieval science of physiognomy, the Pardoner's physical endowments and health are direct reflections of his intellectual and moral condition, and the same holds true for all the pilgrims. Just as his intellect is divorced from reality, self-referential, and incapable of fruitful relation with the world, so his sexuality is narcissistic, divorced from nature, sterile, and nonlife-giving. In this way Chaucer incarnates in the very physical condition of the Pardoner the philosophy and morality that the pilgrim will attempt to promote.

The Pardoner's perverse use of Scripture also harmonizes with his other characteristics. Like the Wife, the Pardoner refers only to that part of the text that serves his immediate purpose, usually distorting it, and Chaucer relies on the audience's familiarity with the true sense of the text to introduce a meaning ironically contrary to that which the Pardoner intends. Such is the case with the Pardoner's motto, "Radix malorum est Cupiditas," which he takes from Saint Paul's letter to Timothy (one of Paul's most prominent disciples), in which Paul gives instructions on the creation and maintenance of the Christian community. Much of the letter is concerned with false teaching and empty speech, and these are connected with cupidity by Paul: "Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned: From which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling." Chaucer encourages and expects his audience to go beyond the lines of the text quoted by his pilgrim and to consider it in its wider context, which ironically reflects on the storytelling author-pilgrim.

There is much in the Pauline text from which the Pardoner extracts his dictum that reflects directly on the Pardoner himself, but perhaps nothing quite so pertinent as the following: "He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness." The irony of the Pardoner's citing of Saint Paul is not only that the Pauline text exposes the vice of the very one who cites it, but also that it provides an alternative position on the function of language to that held by the Pardoner. Paul's view, stated here and elsewhere, is that true language and true doctrine come directly from God so that man may know the truth, which is divine in origin and eternal: "Whereunto I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle, (I speak the truth in Christ, and lie not;) a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity." Thus, before the pilgrim-author has succeeded in establishing his intended meaning, the text is invested by a higher authorship with an alternative meaning capable of changing the nature of the whole text. The audience need only be capable of finding it.

Apparently originating in the East in Buddhist literature, versions of the *Pardoner's Tale* are found throughout the world in all times up to our own (John Huston's film *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* is such a version). Its timeless appeal certainly has something to do with its enigmatic quality and the multiple layers of meaning and irony it contains. Chaucer's original contribution is in the development of the figure of the old man who points the way to the final denouement. Chaucer's rendering of the tale, however, is one that maintains the commentary of...
the Pilgrim-Author throughout in the form of the sermon, which also characterized his prologue. Having established the three protagonists of the tale as figures of capital sins, many of which he has accused himself of earlier, the author interrupts the narrative of the tale to comment on its moral significance.

Gluttony, avarice, and idolatry are the chief sins of the Pardoner's characters, and as he enumerates and describes them he also shows them to be related to each other. Appealing to a series of ancient sources, including both wise pagans and Scripture, the Pardoner creates a powerful condemnation of these sins:

*Allas! a foul thyng is it, by my feith,
To seye this word, and fouler is the dede,
Whan man so drynketh of the white and rede
That of his throte he maketh his pryvee [privy / toilet],
Thurgh thilke cursed superfliuitee.*

In this formulation, the Pardoner alludes to the relationship between the word and that which it signifies, declaring the reality (gluttony or fornication) the signifier, to be more than the "word", or signifier, but, also, the word to be appropriate to what it expresses; both are "foul." However, were the author sincere in this belief, he would personally repudiate the thing he so describes. Rather, in the case of the Pardoner, who has openly established himself as the personification of these vices, we are treated to a display of rhetorical skill, for he is engaged in creating a fiction about three characters guilty of these vices. By interspersing the fictional narrative with a discourse on the nature of those sins, he deliberately blurs the boundaries between the fictional universe of the tale and the real world to which it should correspond. In other words, by reweaving into the fiction the lesson, or meaning, that may be derived from it, the Pardoner attempts to neutralize that meaning by making it fictive.

Like the Pardoner himself, the three rioters of his tale take signs of all kinds for reality. Hearing that Death has slain one of their companions, they set out to find and to slay Death, swearing by "God's bones" to accomplish the deed before nightfall. This additional reference to bones recalls the author's earlier description of his false relics, and associates the rioters' quest to control the reality of death with the Pardoner's theory of reality as illusion. This brotherhood, whose members have sworn to live and die for each other, encounter in their quest an old man whose quest is not to slay Death but to join it, to remedy a life overextended and empty of vigor. His instructions to the youths are correct:

*To fynde Deeth, turne up this croked wey,
For in that grove I lafte hym, by my fey,
Under a tree, and there he wole abyde;
Noght for youre boost he wole him no thyng hyde.
Se ye that ook? Right there ye shal hym fynde.*

The old man not only pursues Death, but knows where, for all but himself, it is to be found, as his advice to the youths demonstrates. Yet he, himself, is unable to possess Death, condemned, as he tells us, forever to wander in search of what he knows but cannot become one with. Like the Pardoner, according to his own boast, the old man can lead others to what they seek, but is forever separate from it. The three rioters conceive of reality in a material and literalist way, thinking that death is a tangible, and thus controllable, phenomenon. Their dedication to food and drink is another dimension of their materialism, and so for them, signs, words, and concepts, such as the death bell they hear, the oaths they swear, and Death whom they pursue, contain no greater reality than their experiential existence. The old man, on the other hand, has lost this naive enthusiasm for the world of particulars, having long lived the bitter experience of a radically nominalist world disconnected from the real. He has become the empty sign: "Lo how I vanysshe, flessh, and blood, and skyn! / Allas! whan shul my bones been at reste?" Still another reference to bones! He is the very sign of Death by his appearance and words, but he cannot connect with the reality that he signifies and remains a particular in search of a universal. He is the living death, the oxymoron, the contradiction that so permeates the Pardoner's prologue and tale.
All the characters of the tale, then, constitute the pilgrim-author and reveal him. The Pardoner's gluttony and swearing is echoed in the rioters who further establish his materialist-relativist philosophy in the narrative, while his eunuchry and spiritual oldness are reflected in the old man's physical lifelessness; that figure further establishes his author's nominalist philosophy in the tale through his isolation from what he knows. The tale is brought to a wonderfully ironic end through the Pardoner's brilliant use of a Eucharistic metaphor when, having found gold instead of Death under the tree, one of the trio is sent for bread and wine to celebrate their fortune. After murdering their brother, who has brought back the food, so as to divide the gold between them, the two survivors drink the wine, which the younger victim has poisoned in the hope of having the treasure all for himself. For the first and only time in the tale, the sign (gold: cupidity) and what it signifies (death) are brought together to the confounding of character and author alike.

At various levels of the tale, the Pardoner's authorial intentions are fulfilled. As a moral sermon the tale conditions the audience to repent of the various sins that they have seen so dramatically depicted and punished, and as an intellectual proposition it sufficiently confuses the nature and efficacy of signs so as to gain possible acceptance for his nominalist literary theory. But most important, from the author's point of view, the tale has set the stage for his ultimate extension of both theory and practice, the use of morality to destroy morality and the use of literature to destroy literature. The Pardoner hurries at the end of his tale toward that goal, immediately offering to his audience his false relics as means of redemption.

The Pardoner has good reason to hurry, realizing, perhaps, that within his tale, for all his careful rhetoric, lurks another possible significance antithetical to the meaning and application he intends. The longer the audience explores the text's allegorical relations to the world and to other texts, the more this meaning emerges from it. The bread and wine that bring death expand in significance as they are inevitably associated with the bread and wine that truly slay death; the oak under which the rioters find gold and death similarly unfolds into symbol when associated with the tree of life and the text "the wages of sin is death"; the numerous partial citations from Scripture and other authoritative texts reach out to their full contexts to create a larger and inevitably contradictory meaning to that intended by the author. But nothing so menaces the Pardoner's success as the figure of the old man who, as the personification of the author, reveals the Pardoner's way as living death. With the memory of the skeletal old man who points the way to death so fresh in their minds, how terrifying to the pilgrims must seem the old bones which the Pardoner now offers to them as relics.

In order to ensure the self-referentiality of the tale (so important to the success of his enterprise), the Pardoner attempts to extend its terms into the world of the Canterbury pilgrimage itself by urging his fellow travelers to accept his false relics and thereby give assent to the ideology of empty signs, meaningless experience, and positivist art:

But, sires, o [one] word forgat I in my tale:
I have relikes and pardoun in my male [pouch],
As faire as any man in Engelond,
Whiche were me yeven [given] by the popes hond.
If any of yow wolfe, of devocion,
Offren, and han myn absolucion,
Com forth anon, and kneleth heere adoun,
And mekely receyveth my pardoun.

While we cannot know which, if any, of the pilgrims reached for coins in order to buy into the Pardoner's proposition, we see the destruction of his scheme when he appropriately singles out Harry Bailly as his main target. As Harry has, in fact, invented the idea of a tale-telling pilgrimage and acts as the official literary critic, his assent to the Pardoner's theory is most crucial. For, just as the pilgrimage itself is a physical journey toward an objective reality in time and space, that is, the shrine of Canterbury and its relics, which is a sign of a spiritual journey toward salvation, so too the tales told during the pilgrimage are an intellectual use of sign implying such a spiritual reality and the purposeful mental journey toward it. Harry's assent to the Pardoner's epistemological
principles would have destroyed the meaning of both the physical and mental journeys and would have provided the Pardoner with the vengeance and the leadership he seems to desire.

The Host's ferocious rejection of the Pardoner's philosophy arises out of both his abilities and his limitations. Although he has shown himself throughout to be unable to interpret the tales beyond their level of entertainment, he nevertheless has a strong and correct instinct for what makes fiction work: Harry knows what constitutes tedium and what constitutes delight, and as far as his judgments go, they are correct. This common man's intuition about art's need for reality, for mimesis, coupled with his natural, virile heartiness, define Bailly as the Pardoner's contrary and his natural antagonist. When these opposites clash, the violence is considerable:

"Nay, nay!" quod he, "thanhe have I Cristes curs [curse]!
Lat be," quod he, "it shal nat be, so theech [as I hope to prosper]!
Thou woldest make me kisse thyne olde breech [breeches],
And swere it were a relyk of a seint,
Though it were with thy fundement depeint [stained by your buttocks]!
But, by the croys [cross] which that Seint Eleyne fond,
I woulde I hadde thy coillons [testicles] in myn hond
In stide of reliks or of seintuarie [holy objects].
Lat kutte [cut] hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;
They shul be shryned [enshrined] in an hoggis toord [turd]!"

This very personal attack on the Pardoner addresses his intellectual position as well as his corporeal condition and is both appropriate and extremely telling, rendering the Pardoner speechless in defeat. The Host has at once cruelly unmasked his adversary's physical deficiency and the sterility of his philosophy. "Your relics and your theories," Harry storms, "are as worthless as your testicles," thus knitting up and exposing all the elements of this author's motives and methods.

That the Pardoner's downfall comes through his misuse of relics is significant. By his forceful rhetoric he has succeeded in purging verbal signs of their significance, but his war on meaning is total. Like words, relics were also conceived of as signs, but as signs with a simpler and more direct relationship to what they signified. As the etymology of the word suggests, a relic was considered the "remains" of a person or object especially sanctified. Often they were parts of a saint's body or something that had touched the body and had thus taken into themselves a degree of the power of the sacred object. Like icons, relics do much more than represent what they signify; they cause the reality to be present: "The icon is not consubstantial with its prototype and yet, while employing symbolism, is not itself a symbol. It causes to emerge, not without a certain artistic rigidity, a personal presence; and it is symbolism which reveals this presence, as well as the entire cosmic context that surrounds it."

Differing from the usual function of words, relics incarnate what they stand for and are a conduit for a power no longer present. Their authenticity, then, is more obviously crucial to their function, although, like the false words of the Pardoner, a false relic may inspire real faith and devotion. Relics and icons are, therefore, more powerful than words and yet far less supple. Language, even false language, does, in fact, participate in the making of meaning, whereas a false relic, like an impotent man, can engender nothing, as Harry Bailly so bluntly puts it. According to medieval theory, a false relic will under no circumstances have the effect it is supposed to have, although the subjective belief that it inspires may have merit as piety. The relic, then, depends completely for its power on the objective, independent existence of that of which it is the remains and the sign.

The Canterbury pilgrimage is one directed toward a relic, the remains of Saint Thomas à Becket. The Pardoner realizes that it is not only the stories told on the journey that must be the object of his attack, but also the goal of the journey itself, if he is to impose his view of reality upon the pilgrims. But at the same time that he voids words of their signifying power and relics of their incarnating power, he also assults a third category of sign, one preeminent and unique in medieval Christian thought, the Eucharist. The Pardoner's central allusion to this "sign
of signs" comes in his insincere denunciation of gluttony: "Thise cooke, how they stempe, and streyne, and grynde, / And turnen substaunce into accident."

The theory of the Eucharist is that through the repetition of Christ's words at the Last Supper, bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ while retaining their natural form and appearance. Through this transubstantiation the accidents, or visible and tangible aspects of the bread and wine, remain while the substance, or essence, is changed to that of the Divinity. Just as the Pardoner uses the image of bread and wine at the end of the tale to denote death, so here he uses the theory of transubstantiation to describe gluttony and luxury, and for good reason. For in the Eucharist is discovered the highest order of the real, in that it is both sign and signified simultaneously. For it is not a true sign of something else, nor only a representation, nor even an icon that calls forth the divine presence in the Eucharist, but it is a complete union of symbol and reality, which, as it is eaten by the faithful, denotes the complete union of knower and known, creator and created, universal and particular.

For the radical nominalist, the possibility that every day, in every church, the particulars of bread and wine not only communicated a universal, but became the universal of universals (Plato's nous, Christianity's superessential Being), posed a serious problem, and in Chaucer's time more than in any other the question of transubstantiation was hotly argued. Robert E. Nichols, Jr., in his study of the Eucharistic symbolism in the "Pardoner's Tale," describes one side of the controversy: "Wyclif, who declared that hypocritical clergy by their actions 'ben made wafreris,' protested the fiction that any priest can 'make' the body of Christ daily by saying mass, arguing that he simply 'makes' in the host a sign of the Lord."

We see how far-reaching is the Pardoner's attack on cognition when we realize that the three cornerstones of knowledge--language, icon, and Eucharist--which he attempts to undermine, constitute the epistemological structure of the Middle Ages. Just as he empties signs of their signification through his manipulation of language, and just as he demotes the function of the relic to that of the empty sign, so, too, he attempts to devalue the mystery of the Eucharist to the status of a human sign. Attempting to project his own spiritual decay onto the world through the use of fiction in his tale, this author threatens the basis of fiction itself. But in Chaucerian poetics there is within language, and thus within fiction, the power to reassert the essential connection with reality, as is revealed in this case through the unlikely agency of the Host, "moost enveloped in synne."

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