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J. K. Rowling, Chaucer's Pardoner, and the Ethics of Reading

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Abstract

This essay discusses teaching Chaucer's Pardoner and his *Tale* through his queerness and fitness to tell a moral tale. It is informed by ethical reading theory and pursues a comparison between the Pardoner and J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series. Rowling's public comments about trans women have disaffected many fans of her book and film series, and I suggest that wrestling with such dilemmas in the classroom provides students with tools to navigate similar ethical problems outside of an academic setting.

> "Facing this stuff in real life is not like school. In school, if you make a mistake, you can just try again tomorrow, but out there, when you're a second away from being murdered or watching a friend die right before your eyes, you don't know what that's like."
>
> — *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*

I have taught Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* multiple times over the years to a variety of students, from general education non-majors to English majors and graduate students and in classes ranging from surveys themed around "Sin and Redemption" or "Monsters in Literature" to specialized seminars. In all of them, we follow what I suspect is a standard approach, focusing first on the character of the Pardoner himself, then his appropriateness to tell his Tale, and finally the *sentence and solaas* of his *Tale* of the three revelers and their meeting with (D)death. Over the years this *Tale* has become my favorite of *The Canterbury Tales*. The questions that it raises about identity and sexuality as well as the relationship of artist to art are both interesting and accessible to students. More specifically, and most relevant to my discussion here, the *Tale* invites exploration of the Pardoner's sexuality and its connection to what A. J. Minnis (2008) calls the "fallible author." Although much of our discussion about the Pardoner as fallible story-teller centers on his immediate context as a pilgrim and representative of the Church, increasingly students are likely to turn their attention to the fallible authors they see in their own lives. In fall 2020, these familiar topics took on a new urgency with an author whose books and film series are near and dear to many of them. Most of the students in my classes are avowed Harry Potter nerds, but J. K. Rowling's recent transphobic comments have driven a wedge into the community of fans and instigated soul-searching among those whose love of the series conflicts with the views articulated by the author. Such reflection in turn leads to a seemingly untenable dilemma, namely, how to separate one's love of all things Harry Potter from an implied endorsement of Rowling's controversial comments. One day we had a particularly lively class discussion about the Pardoner, focusing on the similarity of his *Tale* to Rowling's "Tale of the Three Peverell Brothers," which appears in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (Rowling 2007b; Yates 2010). It occurred to me that approaching this dilemma in a more deliberate way in a low-stakes classroom discussion, in this case by exploring the Pardoner as fallible through ethical reading theory and a queer studies lens, would afford students (particularly those who are traditional-aged and striving to live authentic and morally cohesive lives) the skills to address the kinds of ethical challenges we all encounter throughout our lives in a variety of settings.

My teaching is loosely informed by ethical reading theory, which gives us the tools to understand how author, text, and reader interact. My approach starts with the assumption that thoughtful reading provides valuable training and practice for the kinds of experiences readers are likely to encounter throughout their lives. That is, literature plays a role in helping readers identify, develop, and articulate their ethical and moral values as well as their interconnectedness with others. According to Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack (1998),

> By challenging readers to reaffirm their existing moral sensibilities through their textual experiences, ethical criticism encourages prospective students to consider spheres of experience and cultures beyond themselves, to recognize a plurality of human conditions and realities. By emphasizing the self-reflexive nature of reading, ethical criticism offers a wide array of pedagogic possibilities for educators interested in inspiring their students both to revaluate their own value systems and to look beyond the often insular boundaries of the self. (186)

If such an approach is fruitful, and I believe that it is, how does the Pardoner challenge us to confirm or revaluate our morals and ethics? What do we learn of human experience and cultures other than our own through his example and through his *Tale*?

Our study of Chaucer's text always begins with the Pardoner's Portrait in the *General Prologue*. Often the physical descriptions that are most interesting to students are those that invite a queer reading:

A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot.
No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;
As smothe it was as it were late shave.
I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare. (1. 688[1])

Students, often sophisticated in their understanding of sexuality, frequently note that such readings of the Pardoner identifying him as homosexual (McAlpine 1980) can seem reductive, because they rely on an understanding of sexuality and gender as binary. They are, however, no more sympathetic to those scholars who have instead chosen to focus on the indeterminacy of the Pardoner (Dinshaw 1989; Sturges 2000). I've found that students in general perceive these ambiguities as disrespectful: they want to see the Pardoner as representative of a real person and to interrogate his queerness with regards to the meaning of the teller and his tale. They point out important problems with identifying him as a gay man, more broadly queer, or as vaguely fluid. First, are we then supposed to understand that his hypocrisy, greed, and immorality are somehow inextricably bound to his sexuality? As Steven F. Kruger (1994) contends,

> To embrace the Pardoner, to claim the Pardoner as somehow our own, is not just to embrace a gay ancestor—if that is what he is—but also to take to ourselves a self-proclaimed hypocrite and cheat, and, worse yet, to make ourselves (as we identify with the Pardoner) the target of the strong, and violent, hatred of the tale's conclusion (the Host's verbal, but almost physical, attack on the Pardoner). (121)

Secondly, can we feel the contempt for the Pardoner that the texts asserts without, as Kruger says, "implicating ourselves in that homophobia—without supporting the homophobic movements of the text and without making ourselves their object?" (121). Kim Zarins (2017) similarly notes, "the narrator uses vague, pejorative hints that attack the Pardoner's masculinity—and assumes our complicity in laughing along and making the same link between the Pardoner's spiritual bankruptcy and his failure at being a 'real' man."

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[1] All references to *The Canterbury Tales* are to Chaucer 1987.

Discussions of the Pardoner's queerness can thus open into a consideration of ethics, of how we treat marginalized people today, helping teachers and students "create socially engaged meanings of literary and cultural texts from remote periods… observing how dominant ideologies relegate queers to marginal or ostracized positions" (Zeikowitz 2002, 68). Furthermore, "A queer critical pedagogy leads students who do not consider themselves oppressed, marginalized, or silenced to examine the position of 'queer' in texts as well as in contemporary society, and, most important, it encourages these students to evaluate critically the role they may play in the denigration of both fictional and 'real' queers" (Zeikowitz 2002, 68–69). Indeed, the Pardoner seems to demand that we make the connection between his time and our own, as Zarins (2017) writes:

> Modern people in general see themselves as more civilized and socially evolved than the 'dark' Middle Ages, but the Pardoner forces us to face such false pretenses, considering the bathroom laws in recent U.S. history and the high number of infants with atypical genitalia forced to undergo surgeries to comply with social norms. These politicized bodies show how precarious human rights are for people with bodies that are not deemed gendered in socially sanctioned ways. Key to this discussion is to keep our academic analysis of this medieval text from being insulated from those high stakes, thereby missing how potentially relevant these issues really are and losing awareness of potentially problematic language in our discussions of bodies.

Having established potential points of empathy with the Pardoner and connections to our own lives and experiences, we're ready to approach another question that is directly relevant to the students' lives, and that is the relationship of art and artist. We've established that the Pardoner is greedy and that he can nevertheless tell a moral tale. Should we, to paraphrase D. H. Lawrence (1969), trust the teller or trust the tale (2)? Specifically, the questions in my discussion guide read as follows: "The Pardoner tells his fellow pilgrims that he is dishonest and greedy, yet he tells a story about the sin of greed. Does his persona take away from the story's theme? Is it possible for unrepentant sinners to be effective moralizers?"

Typically, students have approached these questions in terms of the hypocrisy they see around them.[2] Students are quick to equate the fictional Pardoner with unscrupulous televangelists and, increasingly, purveyors of the Prosperity Gospel, which many of them find questionable. The discussion in fall 2020 turned quickly to the news that Jerry Falwell, Jr., president of the conservative Christian Liberty University—known for, among other things, its anti-LGBTQIA+ policies and insistence on so-called sexual purity in its students—had been exposed as participating in a *ménage à trois* with his wife and a one-time pool boy, now entrepreneur and former business partner of the Falwells (Roston 2020). Students, especially those who are devout Christians and/or identify as queer, were indignant at the hypocrisy and could also understand the sense of betrayal and the pain felt by some of their peers at Falwell's university, peers who had been shamed for their own sexuality.

Such discussions of the Pardoner's hypocrisy lead, of course, to the author's potential hypocrisy, that is, Chaucer's fallibility. By this point in the semester, I have introduced students to the Cecily

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[2] I should note that as with many southern universities, Appalachian State University students who identify as religious are overwhelmingly Protestant Christians, although few students in my classes self-identify as conservative or fundamentalist.

Chaumpaigne case with its ambiguous rape charge. My students have had reactions resembling the one described by Tison Pugh (2005) in an essay similarly concerned with the ethics of teaching. Pugh's student exclaimed, "I'm glad we don't know whether Chaucer raped her, [because] if he did, I couldn't like him. And I want to like him if I'm going to read him" (569). Pugh notes that his student

> seized this ambiguity and therein found sufficient wiggle room in her reaction to Chaucer that she could continue to enjoy his literature without having to commit herself to liking the works of a rapist. For her, the potential ethical ramifications of aligning a personal affection for Chaucer and his literature with her contemporary social and political beliefs were alleviated by a welcome gap in historical knowledge. (569)

Like Pugh's students, my own are not particularly disturbed by or engaged with this incident. Rather, in contrast to the conspicuously disreputable Pardoner, who is closely associated for them with today's scandal-ridden preachers, Chaucer's fallibility is sufficiently vague and ancient.

Recently, students' understanding of fallible authorship has started to shift in light of the new (or renewed) and horrifying revelations around particular artists. When Woody Allen and Michael Jackson come up in our discussions of the relationship of art and artist, as invariably they do, tempers can flare. Many students call for them to be cancelled or boycotted. This is, of course, not unique to my classroom: in 2018, students at the University of California, San Diego, called for the theater department to remove a theater class focusing on Allen's films, a good real-life example that students can identify with (Flaherty 2018).

Questions about a fictional fallible author became even more pressing and immediate in the spring of 2020 around statements made by J.K. Rowling, an author popular with many of my students. Since COVID-19 drove many of us to Zoom, I've been using a different virtual background each day that somehow relates to the theme of the day's reading: a dragon for *Beowulf*, Canterbury Cathedral for the *General Prologue*, and even the undersea kingdom of Oceana from *Barbie in A Mermaid Tale* (Wood 2011) on the day we talked about bestiaries. Students have fun trying to identify the background and its relevance to our work, and the day we read the *Pardoner's Tale*, they were quick to recognize the shadow puppets of "The Tale of Three Brothers" from the film *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1* (Yates 2010), with one student saying "That's exactly what I was thinking about when I read the story!" For those unaware, J. K. Rowling (2007a), in an online live chat with her fans about *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, was asked, "Were the deathly hallows [sic] based on any realworld [sic] myth or faerie tale [?]." As I've argued elsewhere, Rowling's seemingly offhand response—"Perhaps 'the Pardoner's Tale', by Chaucer"—is more important than it appears, and students are usually happy to explore what this significance might be (Gulley 2014). That day, however, students weren't interested in parsing out any similarities. As soon as I raised the topic of Rowling's debt to Chaucer, the words "Ugh. I'm so over JK" appeared in the chat section, leading to a spirited discussion about Rowling's controversial tweets concerning trans women.

On June 6, 2020, Rowling retweeted the op-ed piece "Creating a More Equal Post-COVID-19 World for People Who Menstruate" (Sommer, Kamowa, and Mahon 2020), commenting, "'People who menstruate.' I'm sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomund? Woomud?" In response to a swift backlash, Rowling doubled down, tweeting, on the same day, that "If sex isn't real, there's no same-sex attraction. If sex isn't real, the lived reality of women globally is erased. I know and love trans people, but erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives. It isn't hate to speak the truth." Later on June 6, 2020, she continued, "I respect every trans person's right to live any way that feels authentic and comfortable to them. I'd march with you if you were discriminated against on the basis of being trans. At the same time, my life has been shaped by being female. I do not believe it's hateful to say so." These tweets were seen in conjunction with her earlier support for Maya Forstater, a woman whose contract was not renewed due to some of her tweets along with complaints of open transphobia, and also in relation to Rowling's own subsequent op-ed in which she laid out the reactions to her tweets and more fully explained her beliefs about biological sex and transgendering. As a result, Rowling was called a TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) by many in the LGBTQIA+ community (Ivy 2019).

My students' feelings about these events were not far off from those conveyed by fans on social media, with many finding Rowling's position abhorrent as well as disappointing because of the values of tolerance conveyed in her books and her public progressive statements over the years. In some cases, fans even swore off a series that they've loved and identified with for most of their lives. Many found a middle ground of denouncing Rowling but holding on to their love of the series and of fandom. In this vein, many of the stars of the movie franchise were quick to condemn or distance themselves from Rowling's statements, but just as quick to urge fans not to let go of the magic and support they'd found over the years, noting particularly that many young LGBTQIA+ fans had found comfort in the wizarding world. For example, Bonnie Wright, who portrays Ginny Weasley in the film adaptations, tweeted on June 10, 2020, "If Harry Potter was a source of love and belonging for you, that love is infinite and there to take without judgment or question. Transwomen are Women. I see and love you, Bonnie x."

Similarly, one of these fans, Aja Romano (2020), writes of their excitement when Tonks arrived on the scene in the fifth book, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*: "[She was] a shape-shifter with spiky pink hair, a punk-rock aesthetic, and an insistence on being called by her gender-neutral last name. I was certain that Rowling had written a canonically genderfluid character." Despite their ultimate disappointment with the story arc of Tonks, who ends up "a married, fully binary woman, softer and gentler, letting her husband feminize her as 'Dora'—a name she'd previously hated," Romano writes that Tonks "remains the character who innately reflected my own nonbinary nature before I even fully understood it myself. She's the Tonks I created, not the one Rowling gave me." Romano's dilemma is one faced by many fans of Harry Potter. While some readers are ready to cancel Rowling, others hope for a way to distance themselves from the author herself while continuing to own their love of the Harry Potter universe. Although acknowledging that Rowling's comments may have ruined Harry Potter for many fans, Romano also argues that "by repudiating Rowling's anti-trans comments, millions of Harry Potter fans are also turning the series into a symbol of the power of a collective voice to drown out an individual one," a collective voice that shows "love and empathy for trans people and other vulnerable communities."

We are frequently called upon to perform this magic of textual transformation, but many Harry Potter fans—including my students—are unable to drown out Rowling's voice. Ironically, the compassion that queer and ethical readings of the Pardoner elicit and the connections to current sexual politics make negotiating the Rowling problem difficult for students. The very impulses that allow them to find value in Chaucer's writing in general and in the Pardoner and the story he voices are the same ones that drive them to reject Rowling: Chaucer wrote long ago and his status as rapist is ambiguous; Rowling continues to write and retain artistic control over the Wizarding world and her rhetoric about trans women is straightforward and unapologetic. Additionally, while students may not like the Pardoner or condone his behavior, they empathize with him precisely because they understand how his marginalization as a queer figure might inform his actions. Rowling, in contrast, is anything but marginalized: she is successful beyond imagination, artistically and financially, and her success has given her an outsized platform, that, unfortunately, she has used to advance her beliefs about trans women. The ethical conundrum is aptly described by Kruger (1994), who asserts that

> the Pardoner presents a perfect allegory of the dangers of not reading spiritually, but then, by framing this with his vivid self-confession, forces his audience away from a spiritual reading, away from submitting to the moral force of the sermon. The reader or listener is, in essence, backed into an untenable position—either to accept the Pardoner's teaching, ignoring the depravity of the teacher, or reject that teaching, turning away from what is in fact good Christian doctrine. (134–135)

One might arguably claim that, as with the Pardoner, when we associate the tale with the teller, we similarly spiritually misread Harry Potter and are in danger of being backed into an untenable position.

Avoiding that position, however, is not so simple. Ethical reading theory contends that readers have a responsibility to the author, in essence, that there is a forged link between authorial intent and meaning. As Charles Larmore (2014) notes,

> Texts do not write themselves. They are written by authors and are written to some purpose or variety of purposes. If we did not suppose that the text was the expression of the author's intention, we would have no basis for thinking, as we do, that to understand the meaning of some problematic passage we should turn, first of all if not exclusively, to other passages of the same text or to other writings by the same author. We consider them to be directly pertinent because we presume that they have been produced by the same cause as the passage in question, namely, the mind of the given author. (51–52)

Most scholars I know aren't particularly interested in authorial intent, and Larmore is quick to note, "We do not aim only, or even principally, to determine what a book's author meant to say, but rather seek to discover what the book means for us" (52). However, Rowling herself (2007a) invites the reader to identify her with her works, claiming that "the Potter books in general are a prolonged argument for tolerance, a prolonged plea for an end to bigotry" and engaging in charitable work that reflects those values she locates within the works. In 2016, she received the PEN Award for her written work as well as for "using her talents and stature as a writer to fight inequality on both a local and global level," according to the foundation; this award further solidified the apparent link between the books and Rowling's authorial intent (Flood 2016).

These same values—of tolerance and a desire for equality and an end to bigotry—are apparent in my classroom discussions of the Pardoner and Rowling, as is my students' clear desire to be compassionate and to avoid hypocrisy. Most of my students are traditional young adults, away from home for the first time, living in dorms and apartments, and at the critical age when people begin to question the values that they're brought up with. Indeed, for many of these students and their peers Harry Potter was a crucial part of their childhood that accompanied them into adulthood and has played an important role in their moral self-reflection. They continue to identify with Hogwarts' houses; they play on the college Quidditch team; and they dress up as the characters for Halloween. Crucially, as has been noted in the discussion surrounding Rowling's rhetoric, many LGBTQIA+ youth found the support within the pages of the Harry Potter series that may have been lacking in their families, houses of worship, or schools. Some of them may be able to jettison their books and wands, but many more are looking for a way to reconcile their love of Harry Potter with their sense of betrayal by his creator. Ultimately, we can't as educators dictate the correct choices for our students. Teaching them that there are no right answers can be a frustrating exercise for all involved. As is frequently the case with teaching and learning, we don't know if we have been successful in conveying these ambiguities. Furthermore, many of the most important lessons of college don't become apparent or relevant to students until they are long out of our lives. Often, then, the best we can do is to try to choose strategies that help them tease out what it means to be ethical readers and consumers in general through a careful consideration of the literature we include in our classes. In doing so, ideally, we can help them ask the right kinds of questions to navigate the other moral and ethical quandaries they meet as they leave our classrooms to become fully engaged citizens of the world.

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