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**Chaucer's Pardoner
and the Figure of the Charlatan
in Medieval French and Occitan Poetry**

Chaucer enables us to sharpen our senses against the scourge and blight of charlatanism. This I know, for with his help I have watched quacks vending medicine and politics and religion in our own day.¹

In his essay reviewing critical interpretations of Chaucer's Pardoner up to 1940, G. G. Sedgewick went against the psychologizing trend; for Sedgewick, the Pardoner is the epitome of the charlatan, a type whom Chaucer familiarizes us with in fictional form in order that, in real life, we may recognize his techniques. This interpretation seems to have fallen on deaf ears.² Since Sedgewick's essay, Chaucer scholars have attributed ever greater complexity of character and psychological "depth" to the person of the Pardoner in their arguments over the "true motivation" for his illogical, incongruous verbal behavior: after revealing to his fellow Canterbury pilgrims that he is not the pious person he seems to be — for his sole motivation is greed and his relics are fakes — the Pardoner concludes by trying to get the pilgrims to buy his pardons and to offer him money to kiss his relics.³ To modern minds, there is a rational explanation for contradictory behavior, and Chaucer scholars have suggested many motivations to resolve the Pardoner's illogical actions: drunkenness, forgetfulness or habit, an elaborate "put on" to amuse the pilgrims, a sudden change of heart, sheer cynicism, an extravagant gamble, despair.⁴ No critical consensus has yet emerged, except perhaps the modern view that such diversity of interpretations must suggest a very complex character.

¹ G. G. Sedgewick, "The Progress of Chaucer's Pardoner, 1880-1940", *Modern Language Quarterly*, 1 (1940), 431-58, p. 458.

² A major exception is Patricia M. Kean's *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry*, vol. 2, *The Art of Narrative*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972, pp. 96-109.

³ In her explanatory notes to the most widely used contemporary critical edition of Chaucer, Larry D. Benson's edition of *The Riverside Chaucer*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987, pp. 905-6, Christine Ryan Hilary points out that critical controversy over the Pardoner's "Prologue" and "Tale" centers on his motives and character and focuses particularly on "his attempt to sell his admittedly fake relics to the Host". All citations from the Pardoner's "Prologue" will be taken from the Benson edition.

⁴ For brief accounts of critical opinion over the last century, see Marilyn Sutton, *Chaucer's Pardoner's Prologue and Tale: An Annotated Bibliography, 1900-1995*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000.

If we examine the literary types out of which Chaucer invented his Pardoner — the self-describing allegorical vice figure of Faux Semblant from the *Roman de la rose*, but also the lesser known model of the charlatan figure selling preposterous ointments by means of his spiel — the apparent contradictions of the Pardoner's character turn out to be conventional. Even though Chaucer has deliberately fleshed out and humanized these model types through his physical description of the Pardoner in the "General Prologue" (lines 669-714), so that we know a good deal about the Pardoner's hairstyle, his lack of facial hair, the quality of his voice, his sense of fashion, and so on, it is probably anachronistic to read too much psychological complexity or depth into the Pardoner. Must we assume that Chaucer's experiment in further humanizing a personified vice figure was entirely successful? Or that he was bound by or aiming at psychological realism as we understand it?⁵

Illogical behavior — such as revealing one's tricks to the same audience one tries to trick — motivates modern critics to search for a deeply hidden personal motivation that would resolve the incongruity. However, as we shall see, a medieval audience was entertained by —and "resisted" chiefly by laughing at, by not taking seriously — a *jongleur's* performance of a charlatan's spiel, which exaggerated the preposterousness of his sales pitch. Likewise, the allegorical vice character Faux Semblant both surprises and amuses his audience within the *Roman de la rose* (the God of Love and his barons) by the incongruity of his behavior when he reveals his dishonesty and yet expects them to accept his promise of loyalty.

That Faux Semblant lies behind Chaucer's Pardoner is widely accepted, but Jean de Meun's character has too often been misinterpreted to justify points Chaucerians wish to make about the Pardoner. For example, the term modern critics most often — and too loosely — use to designate the Pardoner's self-revelation to the other pilgrims is "confession" or "public confession", and they have long identified the model for this type of speech as Faux Semblant's "confession". This colloquial use of the term "confession" can already be found in D. S. Fansler's 1914 dissertation on Chaucer and the *Roman de la rose*: "These lines in the French poem [...] form part of *Faux-Semblant's* confession before the God of Love. [...] Like the harangue in the French poem, what the

⁵ Patricia Kean understands the Pardoner as Chaucer's not entirely successful attempt to naturalize a type of discourse characteristic of allegorical satire, that of the self-describing vice figure (p. 108). Kean's interpretation has been dismissed, along with Sedgewick's, as a "now old-fashioned appeal to convention" by Lee Patterson in a footnote to his chapter "The Subject of Confession: The Pardoner and the Rhetoric of Penance". Patterson judges that the two alternative ways of understanding the Pardoner have been to attribute his contradictory behavior either to "the presence of unassimilated and irrelevant literary conventions" or to psychological realism (*Chaucer and the Subject of History*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, p. 384). Arguing that the Pardoner exemplifies a penitential concept of despair, Patterson offers an elaborate rationale for what is still essentially a psychological reading based on the critical *doxa* that the Pardoner's performance is a confession.

Pardoner has to say takes the form of a confession [...]”⁶ Eighty years later in *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England*, William Calin makes the same assertions, identifying *Faux Semblant*’s “public confession” as the model for the Pardoner’s:

In order to convince the others to accept his offer [of his services to Cupid], this worthy [Faux Semblant] makes a public confession, revealing the truth about himself. He boasts of his capacities for evil; yet also he denounces what he does and what the friars do in his name. By unmasking himself, confessing his secrets, and denouncing his own practices even when boasting of them, the imago of hypocrisy ceases to be himself [...]. Why does the Pardoner, the embodiment of hypocrisy, confess his hypocrisy to the pilgrims, and then bless them, and then turn around and try to sell them his false relics? Chaucer has adapted his character’s fixed essence and his active behaviour from Faux Semblant in the *Rose*: sincerity from a hypocrite and sudden reversals in attitude and behaviour are not shocking in a comic allegorical personification. The problem is, none of Chaucer’s pilgrims is a comic allegorical personification; all of them, including the Pardoner, are mimetic representations of people, and therefore their comportment is subject to the laws of people and, from more than one critical perspective, has to be justified also in psychological terms.⁷

As usual, this comparison of the Pardoner to Faux Semblant — on the basis that both publicly “confess” their own hypocrisy — serves as a springboard toward a psychological analysis of the Pardoner’s personality. The term “confession” supposes a certain psychological depth and sincerity on the part of the person confessing, as well as a subject matter concerning personal sin, and it suggests a firm foundation for psychologizing interpretations.

The problem is that, although Faux Semblant describes his own character, as personified vice figures often do, he does not engage in a “confession” to the God of Love. “Confessional” is a misnomer both for the situation Jean de Meun invented and for the one Chaucer did.⁸ The God of Love orders Faux Semblant to identify himself so that he and his barons will be able to recognize Faux Semblant in future and know where to find him if they need him. The God of Love specifically asks Faux Semblant to “teach” or inform the group about himself; the medieval generic term *enseignement* is more accurate than the term

⁶ Dean Spruill Fansler, *Chaucer and the “Roman de la Rose”*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1914, p. 162. The view that Faux Semblant’s “public confession” is the model for the Pardoner’s “public confession” was canonized by W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer’s “Canterbury Tales”*, 1941; reprint Atlantic Highlands, N. J.: Humanities Press, 1958, p. 409: “Much of the *Prologue* [...] is paralleled in and may have been inspired by the speeches of Faux-Semblant in the *Roman de la rose*, where the same device of the public confession is used with great success, and where the sins laid bare — hypocrisy and self-interest — are exactly those of the Pardoner.” Since then, this critical *doxa* has been repeated by nearly every scholar who has treated the Pardoner’s “Prologue” and “Tale”.

⁷ William Calin, *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994, pp. 337 & 340.

⁸ It may be that this misunderstanding has been encouraged by Chaucer scholars’ familiarity with the explicitly penitential context of Passus 5 of William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, in which personified vice figures — deadly sins such as Envy, Wrath, Covetousness, Gluttony, and Sloth — do confess their own evil deeds to Repentance, their personified confessor.

“confession” to describe the kind of speech Faux Semblant is asked to give about himself (*Roman* 10913-21; *Romaunt* 6073-81):⁹

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>‘ Mes toutevois en audiance, Por noz genz oster de dotance, Conmant je que tu leur enseignes, Au mains par generaus enseignes, En quel leu mieuz te troveroient, Se du trover mestier avoient, Et comment l’en te connoistra Car granz sens en toi connoistre a. Di nous en quex leus tu converses. ’</p> | <p>‘But natheles, in oure heryng, To putte oure folk out of doutyng, I bidde thee teche hem, wostow how, Bi som general signe now, In what place thou shalt founden be, If that men had myster of thee; And how men shal thee best espye, For thee to knowe is gret maistrie. Telle in what place is thyn hauntyng.’</p> |
|--|--|

Faux Semblant’s self-description may be long at times, but it is not a monologue. The God of Love interrupts him several times for clarification, and twice in scandalized disbelief (hardly the reaction of a confessor) at his cheek or effrontery (*Roman* 11055-57, 1495-98; *Romaunt* 6221-23, 6797-800):

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>[Amors] dit en rompant sa parole ausinc con s’el fust fausse ou fole : ‘ Qu’est ce, deable, es tu effrontez ? ’ ‘ Qu’est ce, deable ? Quex sunt ti dit ? Qu’est ce que tu as ici dit ? —Quoi ? —Granz desleautez apertes ! Don ne crainz tu pas Dieu ? —Non, certes. ’</p> | <p>[Love] brak his tale in his spekyng, As though he had hym told lesyng, And seide, ‘What, devel, is that I here?’ Quod Love, ‘What devel is this that I heere? What wordis tellest thou me heere?’ ‘What, sir?’ ‘Falsnesse, that apert is; Thanne dredist thou not God?’ ‘No, certis.’</p> |
|---|--|

As Patricia Kean has remarked, Faux Semblant behaves typically, for the vice figure “enthusiastically exposes its own nature so as to both shock and titillate the audience.”¹⁰

Eventually, the God of Love and his barons enter into Faux Semblant’s game. Faux Semblant assures them that he would not dare lie to them unless he felt sure that the lie would go undetected (*Roman* 11939-44; *Romaunt* 7287-92):

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>‘ Mes a vos n’ose je mentir ; mes se je peüsse sentir que vos ne l’aperceüssiez, la mençonge ou poign eüssiez : certainement je vos bolasse, ja por pechié ne le lessasse. ’</p> | <p>‘But unto you dar I not lye. But myght I felen or asprie That ye perceyved it no thyng, Ye schulde have a stark lesyng Right in youre honde thus, to bigynne; I nolde it lette for no synne.’</p> |
|--|---|

And then he goes on to say that he has no intention of giving up his attempts to trick them, so they had better watch out! The God of Love and his barons find such honest dishonesty amusing (*Roman* 11947-50; *Romaunt* 7293-96):

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>Li dex sorrir de la merveille, chascun s’en rit et s’en merveille, et dient : ‘ Ci a biau sergent, ou bien se doivent fier gent ! ’</p> | <p>The god lough at the wondir tho, And every wight gan laugh also, And seide, ‘Lo, heere a man aright For to be trusty to every wight!’</p> |
|---|---|

⁹ Quotations from the *Roman de la rose* will be taken from the second volume of the edition of Félix Leçoy, Paris: Champion, 1966. English translations will be taken from the C Fragment of the *Romaunt of the Rose*, generally not attributed to Chaucer, yet published in the Benson edition of *The Riverside Chaucer*. Line, not page, numbers will be given for all verse citations in this essay.

¹⁰ Kean, p. 98.

Immediately after this, Faux Semblant pledges his allegiance to the cause of the God of Love, who exclaims that such a pledge is against Faux Semblant's very nature and, upon consideration, decides to "believe him" and accept his services without pledge (*Roman* 11980; *Romaunt* 7328-29):

— Or soit, je t'en croi sanz plevir.

And Love answerde, 'I truste thee
Withoute borowe, for I wole noon.'

Both Faux Semblant and Chaucer's Pardoner are asked by their respective audiences for information or teaching; they are not asked to confess their sins. Faux Semblant is asked for information about himself so that he may be found when needed, and the Pardoner is asked, more generally, for some moral or clever thing that the pilgrims may learn. Both Faux Semblant and the Pardoner teach their respective audiences about their own dishonesty, and their expositions of their fraudulent practices turn into a kind of *tour de force* when, on the basis of this paradoxical honesty about dishonesty, they expect their audiences to trust them in the end. Just as the initial shock of Faux Semblant's revelations soon turns into laughter, so the Pardoner's pilgrim audience exhibits "something of the same mixture of outrage and amusement."¹¹ Harry Bailly's response to the Pardoner's taunting invitation to kiss his relics for money is much cruder than the God of Love's "What the devil!" However, the scandal is short-lived. In the midst of general laughter, the Knight quickly convinces the Host and the Pardoner to kiss and reconcile:

'Namoore of this, for it is right ynough!
Sire Pardoner, be glad and myrie of cheere;
And ye, sire Hoost, that been to me so deere,
I prey yow that ye kisse the Pardoner.
And Pardoner, I prey thee, drawe thee neer,
And, as we diden, lat us laughe and pleye.'
Anon they kiste, and ryden forth hir weye. (962-68)

The Pardoner, like Faux Semblant, is merely acting in character when he exhibits contradictory behaviors. Contradiction, unreliability, untrustworthiness are his very nature. Even though the Pardoner is more fully personified and humanized than is Faux Semblant, we need not, as if he were a real person, try to resolve his obvious contradictions by discovering a hidden motivation that would account for or "make sense" of them on a deeper psychic level. If the Pardoner's incongruous behavior resembles Faux Semblant's in some ways, this is not due to "the presence of unassimilated and irrelevant literary conventions" in Chaucer's characterization of the Pardoner.¹² Such a reformulation of the arguments of Sedgewick and Kean assumes that modern psychological realism was Chaucer's goal. It is more likely that he intended to keep his reading or listening audience at a certain distance from his fictive charlatan, a distance necessary to amuse and instruct.

¹¹ Kean, p. 98.

¹² Patterson, p. 384.

There are also major differences between Faux Semblant's and the Pardoner's self-descriptions. Chief among these is the theatricalization of a part of the Pardoner's monologue, which is a charlatan's sales pitch addressed to two different audiences at the same time: an imagined folk audience, as well as an audience of fellow pilgrims to Canterbury. In response to a request from the respectable pilgrims for *som moral thyng, that we may leere / Som wit* (323-24), the Pardoner informs them that his own avarice motivates his preaching against avarice, and he goes on to demonstrate how he turns a healthy profit from false relics. Before the audience of Canterbury pilgrims, he first explains how he convinces an audience of naive country folk of the powers vested in him by the highest ecclesiastical authorities: to these illiterates, incapable of reading Latin, he shows fake documents granting him authority and power, *Bulles of popes and of cardynales, / Of patriarkes and bishopes I shewe* (342-43), and he impresses them further by seasoning his preliminary sermon with a few Latin words (344-45). Finally, he produces his false relics (presumably confided to him by these same ecclesiastical authorities). For the instruction of the Canterbury pilgrims, the Pardoner takes the initiative to "play himself": he performs for them the spiel that he usually performs before country folk in order to gull them into offering money for the miraculous benefits of contact with his relics. This performance occupies thirty-six lines of the Pardoner's prologue (352-88) beginning '*Goode men, I seye, / taak of my wordes keep*'; it is marked off in modern editions as self-quotation (within the Pardoner's speech to the Canterbury pilgrims, whom he addresses initially as *Lordynges*).

In this particular demonstration of his promotional techniques, the Pardoner features a bone encased in a metal reliquary that, when immersed in any well, will create medicinal water that works wonders on livestock, farmers and jealous husbands. This water, to which the power of the relic has been transferred, can be used to wash the tongues of and instantly cure cows, calves, sheep and oxen infected by worms or bitten by snakes, but also to cure the skin diseases of sheep that drink it; ritually imbibed by a fasting farmer once a week before cockcrow, the water increases his livestock and goods; incorporated into a jealous husband's soup by his wife, even though she has slept with two or three priests and her husband is furious with her, this same water will cure his jealousy forever. Any man wanting further assurance of prosperity can put his hand into a *mitten* (provenance unmentioned) that will make his grain grow better. After the carrot of personal gain or impunity comes the stick of public censure. The Pardoner concludes his spiel by denying the benefit of his relics or of his absolution to any person in the audience who has committed *synne horrible* or to any woman who has cuckolded her husband. Turning to the Canterbury pilgrim audience for whom he has just "played" himself, he comments that this last trick (*gaude*) has been worth a hundred marks a year (389-90).

As we shall see, the Pardoner's performance of himself as charlatan is considerably less exaggerated than the versions of charlatans' spiels medieval troubadours and jongleurs invented to amuse their audiences. In the jongleurs' versions, the demasking of the charlatan must be done entirely through the exaggeration and incongruity of the words of the spiel itself and the way these are acted out. In the case of the Pardoner, even before he begins performing his spiel, the authenticity of his relics and his religious authority have been undermined by the "General Prologue" description of him and by his own introductory comments about his fake documents and relics. Although there are clear differences in their degree of preposterousness, as compared to the Pardoner's spiel, there are also similarities that make it worthwhile to examine two versified charlatans' spiels, one in French, the other in Occitan, both invented in the last half of the thirteenth century. Neither of these earlier spiels should be understood as having surely influenced Chaucer, although this type of entertainment may well have been known him and probably would have interested him, if only because a jongleur's performance of a charlatan's spiel is a way of embodying and humanizing hypocrisy or trickery differently — and more fully — than can be done by personifying vice in an allegorical narrative.

In medieval French, there are few extant charlatans' spiels for hawking herbs and quack medicines, and all seem to be comic representations of the type, versions invented by minstrels or jongleurs to amuse audiences. The *Dit de l'herberie* begins in monorhymed tercets and turns into prose after 114 lines. This text, tentatively dated around 1265, survives in only two manuscripts: BNF MS fr. 1635, fol. 80, from the late thirteenth century, and BNF MS fr. 24432, fol. 34, a manuscript written in 1345 and which attributes the text to Rutebeuf.¹³

What, then, are the main similarities between the *Dit de l'herberie* and the Pardoner's spiel? The Pardoner tells his pilgrim audience that the authority vested in him is religious, and he "proves" this to simple country folk, prior to launching into his spiel, by exhibiting documentary evidence in the form of a letter patent sealed with the local bishop's seal, as well as various bulls from popes, cardinals, patriarchs and bishops. At the beginning of his spiel, the charlatan Healer testifies to his own authority by naming or alluding to foreign potentates he has served successfully and exotic places he has visited to gather herbal or lapidary remedies:

Je sui uns mires,
Si ai estei en mainz empires.
Dou Caire m'a tenu li sires

I am a healer,
and have been to many empires.
The lord of Cairo was my host

¹³ See Rutebeuf, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Michel Zink, Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1990, vol. 2, pp. 240-51, for the text and a modern French translation of Rutebeuf's poem. English translations will be my own. Although I will not discuss it here, there is one other French prose text rubricated *Ci comence l'erberie* (BNF MS fr. 19152, fol. 89). An edition of this text may be found in Edmond Faral and Julia Bastin, eds., *Œuvres complètes de Rutebeuf*, Paris: Picard, 1969, vol. 2, pp. 268-71.

Plus d'un estei ;
Lonc tanz ai avec li estei,
Grant avoir i ai conquestei. (10-15)

more than one summer;
I spent a long time with him
and won much wealth there.

The Healer's authority is entirely secular, based on the experience he has gleaned through globe-trotting:

Meir ai passee,
Si m'en reving par la Moree,
Ou j'ai fait mout grant demoree,
Et par Salerne,
Par Burienne et par Byterne.
En Puille, en Calabre, [en] Palerne
Ai herbes prises
Qui de granz vertuz sunt emprises. (16-23)

I crossed the sea
and returned by way of the Peloponnesus,
where I stayed a long while,
and by way of Salerno,
and Burienne and Viterbo.
In Apulia and Calabria and Palermo
I gathered herbs
full of great powers.

The Healer has also travelled to the land of Prester John and come back with precious stones capable of bringing the dead back to life (*Mout riches pierres en aport / Qui font resusciteir le mort*, 33-34). He lists the names of ten of these for effect¹⁴ before returning to the subject of his herbs, which come from the most distant places:

Herbes aport des dezers d'Ynde
Et de la Terre Lincorinde,
Qui siet seur l'onde
Elz quatre parties dou monde
Si com il tient à la raonde. (50-54)

I bring back herbs from the deserts of India
and the Land of Lincorinde,
which is situated on the stream
that flows round
the four quarters of the world.

One of the places where the Healer claims to have stayed in in his travels is Salerno, home of the famous medical school.

In the last two lines of the versified section of his spiel, the charlatan refers to a greater medical authority than himself, a person he calls *ma dame*, who has sent him to make these remedies available to the people:

Or oeiz ce que m'encharja
Ma dame qui m'envoia sa. (113-14)

Now listen to the mission
my Lady gave me in sending me here.

This ending is, in fact, the beginning of a new spiel in prose, opening with a second flattering address to his audience, now designated as *Bele gent*. This time around, the Healer insists on the authority vested in him by *ma dame Trote de Salerne* (the famous Trotula of Salerno, authority on medieval gynecology), whom he goes on to describe as an extremely wise woman, but grotesque in appearance (reminding us of marvellous creatures from exotic lands), for she uses her ears to cover her head, and her eyebrows hang in silver chains over her shoulders: *qui fait cuevrechié de ces oreilles, et li sorciz li pendent a chaainnes d'argent par desus les espaules. Et sachiez que c'est la plus sage dame qui soit enz quatre parties dou monde* (246). The self-authentication of the charlatan Healer — as the envoy of a greater healer, and as a man with wide experience in herbal medicines and protective stones — is an essential introduction to his description of his medicinal wares. The Pardoner, using documentary evidence,

¹⁴ According to Zink, p. 486, fn. 3, the stones called *ferrites*, *crasperites*, *tellagons*, *galofaces* and *garcelars* are mentioned nowhere else and seem to have been invented for the occasion.

also authorizes himself as the envoy of greater powers before beginning to hawk the benefits of his relics.

Whereas the Pardoner's fake relics are supposed to assure material profit (by curing livestock or making grain grow) or marital tranquility (by curing jealousy in husbands), the Healer's plasters, herbal concoctions and exotic stones are all supposed to protect or cure people from physical diseases or illnesses. In the prose section of his spiel, for example, the Healer gives a recipe for an herbal remedy for worms, but these are worms that supposedly cause death by sudden heart attack in people (247-48), and not the kind of worms of which the Pardoner's relics cure livestock.

In the very act of vaunting them, the Healer frequently tells the truth about the lack of efficacy of his remedies. This is one of the sources of humor in the charlatan's spiel as performed and deformed by the jongleur. For example, the Healer suddenly deflates audience expectations concerning the protective powers of his precious stones. He claims that the man with a protective stone about his person need not fear death. The example that follows this generalization really should name a disease, such as leprosy (*lepre*), by which the protected man need not fear being "carried off" into death. The word we hear seems incongruous in context: *lièvre* (hare). What the Healer actually says is close to the truth with respect to the efficacy of his stones; protected by this method, a man need not fear being carried off by a hare:¹⁵

Foux est ce il ce desconforte :
N'a garde que lievres l'en porte
C'il ce tient bien. (41-43)

He's crazy to worry:
he needn't fear a hare will carry him off
if he stands his ground.

This is not the only time when the charlatan punctures his own balloon, deflates his own boast. He offers two more incongruous examples of how the man protected by one of his stones need have no fears — of a barking dog or a braying old donkey:

Si n'a garde d'aba de chien
Ne de reching d'azne ancien
C'il n'est coars ;
Il n'a garde de toutes pars. (44-47)

He needn't fear the barking of a dog
nor the braying of an old donkey
unless he's a coward.
He has nothing to fear from any sector.

At the end of the versified spiel, his claim to be able to cure any deaf man is completely undercut by substituting the adverb "less" for the expected "more":

Et ce vos saveiz home xort,
Faites le venir a ma cort ;
Ja iert touz sainz :
Onques mais nul jor n'oÿ mains,
Ce Diex me gari ces .II. mains,
Qu'il orra ja. (107-112)

And if you know a deaf man,
make him come to my court;
he'll be completely cured:
never will he hear less —
may God protect these two hands —
than he will hear then.

¹⁵ For images of men bound and carried off by hares or frightened, hunted, besieged, or imprisoned by them, see Lilian Randall, *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966, figs. 354-58 & 365.

In the middle of his spiel, the Healer recites the ridiculous mixture of ingredients of his infallible cure for toothache in a list that builds up to an anticlimax; when the patient who sleeps with this plaster on his cheek wakes up, the Healer assures him he will find shit or mud:

Et de la dent
Gariz je trop apertement
Par .I. petitet d'oignement
Que vos dirai :
Oeiz coument jou confirai ;
Dou confire ne mentirai,
C'est cens riote.
Prenez dou saÿn de marmote,
De la merde de la linote
Au mardi main,
Et de la fuele dou plantain,
Et de l'estront de la putain
Qui soit bien ville,
Et de la pource de l'estrille,
Et dou ruÿl de la faucille,
Et de la lainne
Et de l'escorce de l'avainne
Pilei premier jor de semaine,
Si en fereiz
Un amplastre. Dou jus laveiz
La dent ; l'amplastre metereiz
Desus la joe ;
Dormeiz un pou, je le vos loe :
S'au leveir n'i a merde ou boe,
Diex vos destrue ! (73-97)

and toothache
I cure very quickly
with a tiny bit of ointment
that I'll describe for you.
Listen to how I prepare it.
I won't lie about its composition;
it's beyond dispute.
Take some marmot's fat,
some linnet's shit,
on a Tuesday morning,
and some plantain leaves
and some really vile turds
from a prostitute
and some dust from the currycomb
and some rust from the sickle
and some wool
and some oat husks
mashed up the first day of the week
and make a plaster out of them.
With the liquid wash
the tooth; put the plaster
on the cheek
and sleep awhile (I recommend it):
if on waking there's no shit or mud,
God destroy you!

We expect an announcement of the successful cure at this point in the Healer's spiel, not the blatant truth that the sufferer will find himself covered in a shitty mud, which is what the plaster really is.

If I have dwelt at some length on these examples in the charlatan Healer's discourse of sudden and unexpected deflation of a ridiculous claim, or truthfulness in trickery, it is because they pose the same sorts of questions concerning intention that the Pardoner's spiel poses, and this because, in both cases, a spiel has been theatricalized, modified, and performed for a different audience and to a different purpose, no longer to gull, but to amuse and warn. The situation of a jongleur playing charlatan Healer resembles that of the Pardoner playing himself, because each performance supposes two different audiences: a gullible and laughable "original" audience, and a knowing, amused second audience. The jongleur may play the Healer to entertain many audiences, from the court to the tavern, but in doing so he also evokes the audience

originally addressed by the charlatan's spiel.¹⁶ Likewise, in playing his own spiel before an audience of Canterbury pilgrims who want instruction, the Pardoner conjures up an audience of naive country folk whom the spiel is supposed to dupe.

From merely reading a medieval text intended for performance such as the *Dit de l'herberie*, it is difficult to know whether its composer (and the performer of the text) intended for us to laugh at the Healer for his verbal slips, which produce truthfulness where he had not intended it, or whether we are supposed to be amused at the extreme cleverness of this charlatan in slipping these disclaimers past his mesmerized audience. Who is playing with whom? Is the jongleur playing with the Healer's words, distorting them or making him misspeak himself, in order to turn him into the butt of the joke? Or does he expect us to imagine that he presents a Healer's spiel "intact"? Is his intention to create a Healer who deliberately plays with his audience's ability to follow the sense of his words?

The Occitan charlatan's spiel that we will call the *Dit de l'onguent*, in monorhymed quatrains with many irregularities, written sometime after 1254 by the troubadour Peire Cardenal and extant in a single manuscript (BNF fr. 22543, fol. 136), differs considerably from the *Dit de l'herberie* but still shows some similarities to the Pardoner's spiel. Amazingly, the modern editor of this text finds no hint of parody in it, yet thinks it impossible that Peire Cardenal himself could have performed "cette annonce pour la préparation au 'lait de poule' [...] apte à guérir aussi bien la misère morale des 'mauvais garçons' que la maladie." He suggests that Peire Cardenal must have composed the piece "à la prière d'un jongleur médecin ou guérisseur; ainsi s'explique le ton de conviction, sans intention parodique apparente."¹⁷ It does not seem very likely that Peire Cardenal invented this spiel for a jongleur who was also a healer (a double profession that must have been extremely rare, for no traces survive), but rather for a jongleur who wanted to entertain audiences with an imitation of a charlatan healer's spiel, exaggerated in ridiculous ways. Indeed, the claims of this spiel are so far-fetched that it could be quite funny if played with a deadpan conviction, but that would not be the only possible way to play it.

¹⁶ With its two parts — rhymed tercets, then prose — the *Dit de l'herberie* further complicates the notion of internal audience. The versified section seems directed at an audience eager for marvels and accounts of distant parts of the world, whereas the prose section several times mentions the possible poverty of the audience, who can use water for macerating herbs if they have no wine, and who, even though the Healer says he has made them a very low price, can pay with food for himself or his horse or with prayers, if they have no coin (246-50).

¹⁷ René Lavaud, ed., *Poésies complètes du troubadour Peire Cardenal (1180-1278)*, Toulouse: Privat, 1957, p. 469. Citations will be from this edition of the poem, which also provides a French translation. English translations will be my own.

Like the Healer of the *Dit de l'herberie*, the Healer of the *Dit de l'onguent* claims to have been sent by a higher secular authority, not "Dame Trote of Salerno", but a king who wants to improve his subjects. He begins with a flattering address to the "worthy and courteous" citizens and courtiers to whom he has been sent with this message:

Sel que fes tot cant és
Salve-ls pros e-ls cortés
E la cort e-ls borgués,
A cuy yeu soi tramés
Per dire so que say. (1-5)

May He who created everything
save the worthy and the courteous,
the court, and the burghers,
to whom I have been sent
to tell what I know.

A powerful, valiant, joyful king (*Un ric rey, valen, gai*) is tired of seeing people who are vile and bad:

Ja homz croys ni malvas
No-s meta en son pas,
Que no-l vol en sa fas,
Ans es del vezer las
E fay lo-y aparvén. (10-14)

May no vile or bad man
cross his path,
for he doesn't want to face him,
and is tired of seeing him,
as he makes quite clear.

For this reason, the king has procured an ointment that cures badness and suffering; the Healer testifies to this, for he has seen the king pick and cure more than a hundred men with it in public (16-22).¹⁸ The Healer has prepared a new batch of this royal ointment, whose ingredients he reveals as part of his sales pitch. He is, he claims, on a royal mission:

Per que-l reys a volgut
Metre tot son afic
En un onhemen ric
Dont li malvat mendic
Seran onh e-l dolen.
S'estays suau ni jen
Ie-us dirai l'onhemen. (23-29)

Because the king has decided
to put all his efforts
into a powerful ointment
with which rascals
and the suffering will be smeared.
If you'll be calm and quiet,
I'll tell you about the ointment.

The Healer's account of the composition of the royal salve is a long list of elements that cannot be quantified because they have no material existence (and are thus impossible to include in any real recipe). The beginning and ending of this list will give an idea of the fantastic composition of this ointment:

— De neula e ven
Es tot lo pus e-l mays
Vieuladura e lays
Y a mes, e sos gays,
E critz d'escaravays
[...]
E flairor de cozina

It is mainly made up
of clouds and wind.
He put in fiddle playing
and lays and gay songs,
and the buzzing of beetles
[...]
and kitchen smells

¹⁸ The charlatan may be suggesting that he has been sent by Saint Louis, although the tradition of French kings as healers had nothing to do with the use of ointments, for they healed by touch. An allusion to the crusading Saint Louis may also be suggested in the Healer's statement that the precious jar that holds the royal ointment was received as a present from an Oriental ruler to "the French":

E-l sòudas de Turquia
Trames lo l'autre dia
Say als Franx per prezén. (98-100)

And the Sultan of Turkey
sent it the other day
as a present to the French.

E de dolor d'esquina
 E de lag de galina.
 Non parletz de meзина
 Mas que l'onhemens l'a. (30-64)

and backache
 and hen's milk.
 You can't name a medicine
 that's not in the ointment.

The impossibility of such ingredients, and the incongruous combination of them, make this royal ointment quite unbelievable and thereby point to the Healer's charlatanism. The medieval audience seeing and hearing this list reeled off by a jongleur miming a charlatan would most likely be amused by it, as also by the charlatan's attempt to persuade his audience to buy such a preposterous concoction.

Whereas the Healer of the *Dit de l'herberie* sells both protective stones and herbal remedies, the Healer of the *Dit de l'onguent* does not sell stones *per se*, but rather associates them with the ointment in order to sell it. Through his description of the gold jar containing the royal ointment, he brings some of these same stones into his spiel (rubies, garnets, hyacinths), as well as different ones (sapphires, jaspers, carbuncles). Precious stones and images from the stories of famous lovers and military battles ornament this jar made in the Orient and sent as a present to the French by the Sultan of Turkey (65-94). Worth at least two hundred kilos of silver, according to the Healer's estimate, the precious container increases the prestige of the royal ointment — much like a gorgeous reliquary enhances the reputation of a wonder-working relic. However, the ointment the Healer has for sale does not come from this precious jar, but is a fresh batch, as he announces near the end of his sales pitch:

— L'onhemens es complitz
 E pastatz e pestritz ;
 E qui er ben aibitz
 Ni francs ni amorós
 Tragua se sa vas nós
 Vas l'enguen pressióis
 Que es tan bels e bós
 Que totz gueritz sera
 Ades per ma e ma ;
 E qui vergonh' aura
 Estug l'al endema.

The ointment is ready now,
 ground up and mixed;
 whoever is endowed with good qualities,
 or open or amorous,
 come forward in our direction
 toward the precious ointment,
 which is so lovely and so good
 that it will cure him entirely
 in an instant, through and through;
 and whoever feels ashamed,
 let him put it away for tomorrow.

The Healer's final invitation to his audience resembles the Pardoner's *gaude*, the trick which enables him to use the force of public opinion as a lever: by forbidding contact with his relics to adulterous wives and people who have committed horrible sins, the Pardoner discourages anyone from hanging back. The Healer of the *Dit de l'onguent* divides his audience into two groups: those who have nothing to be ashamed of, whom he flatters as “full of good qualities, open, or amorous”, and those who do have something to be ashamed of. He welcomes the former group to be treated publicly with the salve, while the latter may put it away for another day. In short, anyone who wants to be perceived as having nothing to hide had better opt for the public treatment. There is a further irony here, in that the royal ointment was supposedly designed to cure the king's

subjects of rascality, as well as physical suffering. The Healer's audience might well be reticent to come forward for the salve, out of fear of being taken for rascals. The ending of the charlatan's spiel seems to contradict the beginning and puts the audience into something of a double bind. As with the Pardoner's spiel, we may wonder who is playing with whom. Is the contradictory logic put there by Peire Cardenal, like the incongruous ingredients of the ointment, to poke fun at a rather silly charlatan? Or does Peire Cardenal mean to represent the charlatan as a trickster deliberately playing with his audience's capacity to understand the sense of his discourse? In the latter case, the joke would be on the charlatan's audience. The theatricalization of the charlatan's spiel — its invention by Peire Cardenal for performance as entertainment by a jongleur miming the charlatan — considerably complicates interpretation for today's readers, so distant from medieval performance contexts.

Comparisons of the Pardoner's spiel with these thirteenth-century jongleuresque versions of a charlatan Healer's spiel, and also with the self-description of Faux Semblant, suggest that there are indeed "depths" of meaning to be plumbed in Chaucer's presentation of the Pardoner playing himself. However, these depths — the effect of contradictions similar to those we have found in the case of jongleurs playing charlatans or Faux Semblant defining himself — need not be attributed to the psyche of the Pardoner as person. Rather, the depths to be plumbed are authorial; the difficulty lies in understanding Chaucer's intentions in creating the character of the Pardoner, out of such literary traditions as he did.