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Chaucer's Bloody Pardoner

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Abstract:

The complexity of Geoffrey Chaucer's character, the Pardoner, still remains one of the most difficult among scholars of Middle English. Most scholarly conversations isolate one feature of him, whether his clothes, his physical appearance, his relics, his sexuality, his language, his attention, to come to specific conclusions that aid in the understanding of his complexity. In Chaucer's time, identity was understood in terms of the four humors (choleric, melancholic, phlegmatic, and sanguine), a classical conception that continued into the Middle Ages and was consistently used to describe personalities, illnesses, and behaviors. These humors could potentially become imbalanced, and it was imperative to rebalance, although some people went to extreme measures to do so. Applying humoral theory to the Pardoner's identity provides a tool to address all his features and reassemble them together. I suggest that the Pardoner is of the sanguine humor. His characteristics reflect a sanguine man through several physical and symbolical connections, which are important to understanding the totality of his character. I evaluate several details in the Pardoner's portrait and explore how they are representative of his sanguine humor. It is the Pardoner's sanguine humor, blood that becomes the focus, causing his unpredictable behavior with the other pilgrims and exemplifying his ability to manipulate. The Pardoner's sanguine humor is reflected in all of his attributes, whether positive or negative. My argument that the Pardoner's sanguinity, does not reduce the complexity of his character, but sheds light on his characteristic ambiguities. The evidence of his sanguinity provides another reading of his character as another complex feature, aiding in understanding the totality of his identity.

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