The Pardoner's Tale

There once lived in Flanders a company of three rioters who did nothing but engage in irresponsible and sinful behavior. At this point, the narrator interrupts the tale itself to launch a lengthy diatribe against drunkenness - mentioning Herod, Seneca, Adam, Sampson, Attila the Hun and St. Paul as either sources or famed drunkards. This in turn oddly becomes a diatribe against people whose stomachs are their gods (their end, we are told, is death), and then a diatribe against the stomach, called, at one point a "stynkyng cod, fulfilled of dong and of corruptioun" (a stinking bag, full of dung and decayed matter). This distraction from the story itself ends with an attack on dice-playing (dice here called "bicched bones"; or cursed dice).

The three drunkards were in a tavern one night, and, hearing a bell ring, looked outside to see men carrying a corpse to its grave. One of them called to his slave to go and ask who the corpse was: he was told by a boy that the corpse was an old fellow whose heart was smashed in two by a secret thief called Death. This drunkard agreed, and discussed with his companions how this "Death" had indeed slain many people, of all ranks, of both sexes, that very year. The three then made a vow (by "Goddes digne bones") to find Death and slay him.

When they had gone not even half a mile, they met an old, poor man at a style, who greeted them courteously. The proudest of the drunkards responded rudely, asking the man why he was still alive at such a ripe age. The old man answered that he was alive, because he could not find anyone who would exchange their youth for his age - and, although he knocked on the ground, begging it to let him in, he still did not die. Moreover, the old man added, it was not courteous of the drunkards to speak so rudely to an old man.

One of the other drunkards responded still more rudely that the old man was to tell them where Death was, or regret not telling them dearly. The old man, still polite, told the drunkards they could find Death up the crooked way and underneath an oak tree.

The drunkards ran until they came to the tree, and, underneath it, they found eight bushels of gold coins. The worst one of them spoke first, arguing that Fortune had given them the treasure to live their life in happiness - but realizing that they could not carry the gold home without people seeing them and thinking them thieves. Therefore, he suggested, they should draw lots, and one of them should run back to the town to fetch bread and wine, while the other two protected the treasure. Then, at night, they could agree where to take the treasure and carry it safely. This was agreed, and lots were drawn: the youngest of them was picked to go to the town.

However, as soon as he had gone to the town, the two remaining drunkards plotted amongst themselves to stab him upon his return, and then split the gold between them. While he was in the town, the youngest thought of the beauty of the gold coins, and decided to buy some poison in order to kill the other two, keeping the gold for himself. Thus, he went to an apothecary, bought some "strong and violent" poison, poured it into two of three wine bottles (the third was for him to drink from), topped them up with wine, and returned to his fellows.

Exactly as the other two had planned it, it befell. They killed him on his return, and sat down to enjoy the wine before burying his body – and, as it happened, drank the poison and died. The tale ends with a short sermon against sin, asking God to forgive the trespass of good men, and warning them against the sin of avarice, before (this, we can presume narrated in the Pardoner's voice) inviting the congregation to "come up" and offer their wool in return for pardons.

The tale finished, the Pardoner suddenly remembers that he has forgotten one thing - that he is carrying relics and pardons in his "male" (pouch, bag) and begins to invite the pilgrims forward to receive pardon, inciting the Host to be the first to receive his pardon. "Unbokele anony thy purs"; he says to the Host, who responds that the Pardoner is trying to make him kiss "thyn old brech" (your old pants), swearing it is a relic, when actually it is just painted with his shit. I wish, the Host says, I had your "coillons" (testicles) in my hand, to shrine them in a hog's turd.

The Pardoner is so angry with this response, he cannot speak a word, and, just in time, the Knight steps in, bringing the Pardoner and the Host together and making them again friends. This done, the company continues on its way.