Greed, treachery, unfaithfulness, and lechery are all used to describe The Pardoner and his contradictory tale of death and betrayal. The Pardoner is the epitome of corruption in the fact that he is the “elegant” purveyor of so-called “holy” religious artifacts. Many scholars, such as Dante Alighieri, would claim that The Pardoner is a manifestation of the fourth circle of Hell: “One mob is made up of Hoarders…In life, they lack all moderation in regulating their expenses; they destroyed the light of God within themselves by thinking of nothing but money” (Alighieri 51). This quote describes how those who were overcome with greed will be condemned forever, but how does a demon escape from a circle of Hell unnoticed by so many religious priests/prophets? The Pardoner is represented by Chaucer as a portion of hell; Dante on his journey through Hell meets those that he knew within his life who coincide with the Pardoner’s characteristics, which parallel the Pardoner’s tale explaining the consequences of greed and betrayal against one’s brethren.

The origin of Dante’s journey through Hell is vague, but the author himself is a well known scholar from Florence, Italy. Dante discusses his journey with the spirit named “Virgil,” who shielded from the woeful misfortune that has befallen the sinner of Hell. When Dante meets Virgil, he asks for a single favor, “Poet, by that God to you unknown, lead me this way. Beyond this present ill and worse to dread, lead me to Peter’s gate and be my guide through the sad halls of Hell” (Alighieri 8). Dante talks about many of his mortal compatriots who have been stricken
with sin; Dante is also compared to the Pardoner who talks about the transgressions of the three revelers, who are purposefully searching for death or a way to avoid life as mortals. Both characters are in similar predicaments: Dante seeks an exit from Hell where he is forced to witness the horrors that are brought upon the sinners, and the revelers seek a way to deceive death’s cold grasp by eliminating him altogether which will ultimately lead to the death of themselves.

The three revelers are striving to defeat death, but are led astray by an old hermit, who is often referred to as death or some demon that lures corrupt souls to Hell, but are interrupted by the eight bushels of gold florins, which causes the revelers to kill one another for the gold. “To finde Deeth, turne up the crooked way./For in that grove I lafte him, by my fay,/Under a tree, and ther he wol abide:…/Right ther ye shall him finde./God save yo” (Chaucer 473-478). The hermit tells the revelers that ‘deeth’ is sure to be found under a grand tree, which was Chaucer’s way of showing how the demons of Hell have infiltrated the world of the living through way of disguises and deception. “And everich of thise riotoures ran/ Til he came to that tree, and ther they founde/Of florins fine of gold ycoined rounde/Wel neigh an eighte bushels as hem thought--/Ne lenger thane after Deeth they sought” (Chaucer 480-484). Here Chaucer portrays how the hermit is able to persuade the revelers to stray from their initial path to search for ‘deeth’ by subconsciously having the revelers lead themselves to death via the power of greed, betrayal, and murder.

Not only is Chaucer’s Pardoner compared to Dante’s gruesome circle of Hell, but he is also compared to the many distraught sinners who are condemned to the torments of Hell. Let’s start by discussing Dante’s encounters with Hell’s damned souls that he comes across while traveling through the fourth circle of Hell, otherwise known as greed (Hoarders). Dante
questions whether he can find and pity a soul that he once knew, but, according to a translation by John Ciardi, “Dante will again be moved to pity as he descends the slopes of Hell. In fact, Virgil will find it necessary to scold him for pitying those whom God in His infinite wisdom has damned” (Alighieri 57-58). In this translation, Virgil will explain to Dante that the damned souls, whether he may know them or not, have been damned for the sins of ‘Hoarding,’ which means Dante must grow cold to the sinners’ fate and he should not deny God’s judgment; although Dante’s concern is human nature, it is appropriate for the ‘Hoarders’ to be looked down upon in disgust and repulsion because of the Pardoner’s actions for selling faux holy items to weary pilgrims in order to make a profit – which were the same choices that the sinners made in the first place. According to Robin Malo at *Chaucer Review*:

It is equally difficult to understand the Pardoner’s character without taking into account his relics and how he handles them. By making Canterbury the destination of the pilgrimage, Chaucer identifies relics and relic shrines as the ostensible reason for his characters getting together in the first place. And of these pilgrims, the Pardoner is the most explicitly associated with relics; in fact, he manipulates his relics (physically and rhetorically) in order to make a living. (Malo 83-84).

This quote explains a common theory when analyzing The Pardoner in that the relics he sells describe his deceitful nature. The idea of going to a holy shrine dedicated to Sir Thomas Becket was more than enough to peak the Pardoner’s interest in making a profit with his own “relics.” The Pardoner sees this journey as a great way to display and vend his relics to unsuspecting travelers who are using this journey for purification purposes. The fact that the Pardoner would take advantage of these pilgrims (although it’s certain that most deserve it) shows his true nature
of being greedy or a “hoarder” as Dante would put it. Dante’s experience with the tormented souls of hell and the Pardoner’s cruel and greedy nature are one in the same in that greed is among the seven deadly sins which will cause corruption within the self as well as corruption within the business of legitimate holy relics and honest merchants.

Hoarders and the Pardoner are both seen as one in the same, but surely there are severe consequences for actively participating in these crimes. As Dante journeys though the fourth circle, he comes across a gruesome sight:

I saw a nation of lost souls,/far more than were above: they strained their chests/against enormous weights, and with mad howls/rolled them at one another.
Then in haste/they rolled them back, one party shouting out:/"Why do you hoard?” and the other “Why do you waste? (Alighieri lines 25-30).

In this passage of “The Inferno,” Dante talks about the fates of those in the depths of Hell who have hoarded and wasted; these hoarders and wasters are forever being crushed by large weights that are representations of the weight of their amount of greed or squander that was experienced during their life. These weights are known as “dead weights” that each group, the hoarders and wasters, use to try to overcome the other in a pointless and endless war. Constant war is the price that the sinners of greed and squander must endure for all eternity because of their life choices.

Chaucer had other plans for the revelers in the Pardoner’s Tale that involve the power of greed causing betrayal to be the true path to death. The revelers abandoned their quest for death once they discovered the eight bushels of gold florins that rested under the tree where death was said to be. Chaucer ends the revelers search with, ““Now lat us sitte and drinke and make us merye./And afterward we wol his body berye.”/And with that word it happed hi par cas/To take the botel ther the poison was./And drank, and yaf his falawe drinke also./For which anoon they
storven bothe two” (Chaucer 595-599). Little do the two revelers by the tree know that the wine was laced with poison by the lone reveler in an attempt to murder because of greed. The two brothers chose to kill the lone reveler because they wanted the gold florins all for themselves, but they drank the wine, which killed the last of the greed stricken traitors. In the end of the tale, the revelers did indeed find Death through their own greed of wealth.

Geoffrey Chaucer’s Pardoner has a mysterious connection to Dante Alighieri’s Hell. The damned souls of Hell are very similar to the Pardoner’s own characteristics, and these events tend to circle back to the Pardoner’s Tale of greed and death; these connections cannot be coincidental because of the spectral and physical evidence that can be bridged between the two works of literature. Chaucer wants to show to the masses how greed is a deep sin that should be avoided and eradicated because of the lingering and haunting fate that follows a Hoarders’ death. Near the end of Canto VII, Dante’s spiritual guide states that, “Hoarding and squandering wasted all their light/and brought them screaming to this brawl of wraiths./You need no words of mine to grasp their plight” (Alighieri 58-60).
Works Cited

