

THE SHIP CHAPLAIN'S TALE

THE SHIP CHAPLAIN'S PROLOGUE

By the time the buyer was finished, just she and I
Were left at the table. And feeling rather dry,
I called to the bartender to bring two gins,
With which, I joked, to wash away our sins.

"We're closed," he said. "You'll have to leave
unshriven."

And in a moment we were being driven
Out of there. "Just a minute!" I cried.
"Weren't you the judge?" But he replied,
"The host in Chaucer never said whose tale
Was best. So why should I? Besides, I fail
To remember many told among the first,
Nor could I tell you which was best or worst.
And anyway, it's time to go to bed."

"But Chaucer added one more tale," I said,
"Ending his great masterwork in prose,
A sermon that would make a preacher doze."

"Well, here's the chaplain coming by the door,"
The bartender replied. "One tale more
Won't matter much. So please, come on back in.
We'll ask him for a colloquy on sin."
"And wash it down with gin!" I quickly said.
"With gin!" he agreed. "And then it's off to bed."

The buyer said she was tired and went below
To join her lover. The chaplain agreed to go
Along with our little Chaucer imitation
And give a theological oration
On the seven deadly sins as we all three
Sat round the table drinking happily,

I and the bartender gin, the chaplain port,
Preaching as requested for our sport.

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In Chaucer's time, the Seven Deadly Sins were deadly because if you were guilty of them and not confessed and forgiven, you would be condemned to eternal death, meaning Hell. Other sins might require you to spend some time in Purgatory, but for these sins there was no expiation.

In our time, the Seven Deadly Sins are what make society function. Take a look at any ad campaign. What does it play upon? Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Envy. We attempt to profit from any possible human weakness. We prey upon addictive behavior. We encourage Sloth. We stoke Wrath. Just listen to any radio talk show. If we want to sell products that happen to be good for people, we tell them that they can be gluttons without worrying about it.

What are the largest and most profitable businesses in our society? Sex. Gambling. Addictive drugs, legal and illegal. The perfect products. They ensure their continued demand.

The deadliest sin of all, the kingpin of deadly sins, is Pride. If you did a poll, I would guess that 99% of all people polled would say that pride is a good thing. Most people would be shocked to think of it as a sin. The notion that anything at all should be more important to you than you is foreign to our thinking.

But as any addict knows, that sin is the source of all the others. You've got to be humble to know that you are sinful by nature, and that the only way you can rescue yourself from sin is to reach out for help. But how many people in our society know they need help?

So if you don't believe in Heaven or Hell or any sort of afterlife, why are these sins? Some of them, we can agree, are obviously self-destructive. Lust, Gluttony, Sloth, and Wrath come to mind. And Envy is no fun, so it, too, is self-punishing. But what about Greed? What's wrong with that? Without Greed, how would our capitalist system work? Who would invest? How would anything get done?

Greed and Pride are the two main sticking points when you talk about sin in modern society. They don't hurt people. They help people. They're necessary. Why should they be considered sins?

The only answer has to be within. They are self-punishing spiritually. What you lose is beauty, a richer sense of self within the whole, connection, relationship, love.

Love, most of all. The loss is no less incalculable for not being apparent. You don't know what you're missing if you never feel it.

Not that people in Chaucer's time were any less sinful than we are. Far from it. But they had a framework into which sin fit. Chaucer's pilgrims were on their way to Canterbury to beg forgiveness for their sins. That was the frame for his collection of tales. And for their lives. People were sinful, but they were also pilgrims. They could be saved and granted eternal life. They were loved. Each one was a precious eternal soul in the eyes of God, Who suffered personally on the cross to save them.

We're on a cruise to nowhere. That's the frame for this collection of tales. We are sinful but there's no salvation. There's no God, no forgiveness, no love. We're on our own.

In a few hours, it will be daylight and we'll be ready to turn around, having gone nowhere, seen nothing, just existed a bit longer in the midst of meaningless emptiness.

If there's going to be love, it's going to have to come from us. If each soul is going to be precious, it's going to have to be precious to us. If there is going to be any salvation, we are going to have to help save one another.

And if that's the sin of Pride, well, we have no choice. But the new sin of Pride has to be the sin of thinking we can be who we are alone. That we are not responsible for one another. That

goodness can be purely individual. That love can be limited.

We have no choice but to believe that we can help one another be better.

I leave you with that hope.

Goodnight.