

CLERGY

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Silenced But Not Stifled: The Disruptive Queer Power of Chaucer's Pardoner

CHAUCERIANS HAVE TRADITIONALLY interpreted the Pardoner in *The Canterbury Tales* as a eunuch and thus refer to his lack of sexuality. Recent work by Glenn Burger, Carolyn Dinshaw, and Steven Kruger question this view by concentrating on the Pardoner's queer—or non-normative—sexuality and the threat it poses to heteronormativity. I, too, elaborate on the Pardoner's queerness; however, rather than looking at the Pardoner as a victim of a hostile and threatened heterosexual society, I focus on how the text, unwittingly or not, actually empowers the Pardoner by presenting him in a dominant position vis-à-vis his imagined and 'actual' listeners. I suggest that the Pardoner's altercation with the Host, Harry Bailey, reveals how queer power disarms heteronormativity, and that the eventual silencing of the Pardoner does not necessarily contain the queer.

Chaucer's Pardoner is a brilliant example of indeterminate queerness. Biologically speaking, the Pardoner is not an enigma; we know he is male, with or without the male sexual organ. Although I am primarily concerned with the indeterminacy of his sexuality, or sexual behaviour, it is not possible to ignore the question of his gender. In a sense the Pardoner, as a character construction, validates Judith Butler's claim that gender stability is a cultural myth, whereby "acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core."¹ The Pardoner's case calls for us to add sexuality to Butler's observation.

¹ *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 136.

Thus, the Pardoner's gender and sexuality are a problem precisely because we can find neither his 'gender core' nor his 'sexuality core.'² What is particularly enlightening for twenty-first-century readers is that rather than burying his virility under the oppressive weight of abnormality, as many scholars choose to believe, Chaucer provides the Pardoner with sexual potency that challenges the idea that masculine normalcy has an exclusive claim to power.

The Pardoner of the "General Prologue": A Portrait of Indeterminate Sexuality

The unresolved question of the Pardoner's sexuality can be traced to the narrator's own confusion in his description of the Pardoner: "I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare."³ Many critics give more weight to the first possibility, thereby assuming that the Pardoner is a eunuch. Walter Clyde Curry, who is often cited as a source for this view, claims that the Pardoner is a *eunuchus ex nativitate*.⁴ Curry draws his conclusion from classical and medieval physiognomists, but he does not really settle the question because some of the evidence he presents supports the other possibility that the narrator suggests, namely, a mare, or, in other words, an effeminate man. Equally confusing is the ancient physiognomist, Rudolphus Goclenius, cited by Curry, who maintains that "a man beardless by nature is endowed with a fondness for women and for crafty dealings, inasmuch as he is impotent in performing the works of Venus."⁵ Although critics over the years have used Curry's findings to support their own positions in the "geldyng ... mare" controversy, the term 'mare' is not without its own ambiguity.

² Drawing on Judith Butler, Robert S. Sturges, *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory: Bodies of Discourse* (New York: St. Martin's P, 2000), describes the Pardoner's performative identity: "The Pardoner's fractured, contested, subjectivity, oscillating among various sexes, genders, and erotic practices, suggests that these identities are all being tried out, or tried on—performed—one after another" (78).

³ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales, The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson et al., 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) l.691. All quotations from *The Canterbury Tales* are taken from this edition. Subsequent quotations will be documented in the text by fragment and line number.

⁴ *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences* (1926; New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960) 59.

⁵ Quoted in Curry, *Medieval Sciences* 58.

In an attempt to isolate late medieval use of 'mare,' Monica McAlpine argues for a contextual meaning based on the portrait of the Pardoner and concludes that 'mare' in Chaucer's day "designate[s] a male person who, though not necessarily sterile or impotent, exhibits physical traits suggestive of femaleness, visible characteristics that were also associated with eunuchry in medieval times."⁶ The views of the physiognomist cited by Curry would appear to support McAlpine's conclusion. But 'mare' can also have a more apparent sexual connotation. Melissa Furrow points out that "the term may suggest one who takes a female role in the sex act (penetrated rather than penetrating), whether male or female," and cites Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne* from the early fourteenth century: "And shame hyt ys euer aywhare / To be kalled a 'prestes mare'."⁷

It is important to bear in mind that effeminacy in the Middle Ages did not necessarily indicate homosexual behaviour.⁸ In fact, the Pardoner's concern with his appearance, "By ounces henge his lokkes that he hadde, / And therwith he his shuldres overspradde" (l.677-78), according to Jill Mann, calls to mind the satirical presentation of fops, who were not necessarily engaging in homosexual behaviour. She finds similarities with not only the Pardoner's "carefully-arranged hair, but also ... [his] smooth face."⁹ In addition, the Pardoner's fashion consciousness, "Hym thoughte he rood al of the newe jet; / Dischevelee, save his cappe, he rood al bare" (l.682-83), relates well to the fashionable young courtiers at the court of Richard II, criticized in *Richard the Redeless*:

⁶ "The Pardoner's Homosexuality and How It Matters," *PMLA* 95 (1980); rpt. in *Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Pardoner's Tale,"* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1988) 109.

⁷ "A Minor Comic Poem in a Major Romance Manuscript: 'Lyarde,'" *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 32 (1996): 300n50.

⁸ Referring to the ancient world, John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980), notes that "gay men were not viewed as 'effeminate' ... unless they happened to exhibit feminine characteristics in addition to being gay. Many heterosexual males were called 'effeminate' by ancient writers, and there is no essential connection between inappropriate gender behavior and sexual preference in any ancient literature" (339). Boswell's observations are also valid for the Middle Ages.

⁹ *Chaucer and the Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973) 148.

... if the slevis / slide on the erthe,
 Thei woll be wroth as the wynde and warie [curse] hem that
 it made;

 The leesinge [diamond-patterning] so likyde ladies and other
 That they joied of the jette [fashion] and gyside [disguised]
 hem ther-vnder.¹⁰

The portrait above confirms McAlpine's point that "satires on the fop ... reflect a feminization of behavior and appearance without any necessary suggestion of homosexuality."¹¹ That is not to say, however, that effeminate men did not engage in homosexual acts. David F. Greenberg reports that the clergy complained about the courtiers at the Norman court who "had begun to wear long hair and women's clothing, and adopted effeminate mannerisms," and homosexual practices were common, for instance, at the court of William Rufus. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Greenberg does not find evidence "that sexual preferences in this circle had to be exclusive."¹²

In addition to effeminate heterosexuals who might also engage in homosexual acts, effeminacy could, in fact, indicate homosexual behavior. Steven F. Kruger observes that "in medieval literary texts from a wide variety of cultures, the accusation of male homosexual behavior is closely associated with a loss of masculinity and an imputation of femininity."¹³ The term 'mare' often surfaces in such situations. The twelfth-century satirist, Walter of Châtillon, in *Stulti cum prudentibus*, describes how "Males grow effeminate, and the horse becomes a mare—you can look for this from men right down to animals ... a new kind of marriage basely joins man to man; the reviled woman is not allowed near the threshold."¹⁴ Doreen M.E. Gillam finds similar examples in medieval

¹⁰ *The Piers Plowman Tradition: A Critical Edition of Pierce the Ploughman's Creed, Richard the Redeless, Mum and the Sothsegger and The Crowned King*, ed. Helen Barr (London: Dent, 1993) 3: 152–53; 158–59.

¹¹ "The Pardoner's Homosexuality" 109.

¹² *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988) 292.

¹³ "Claiming the Pardoner: Toward a Gay Reading of Chaucer's 'Pardoner's Tale,'" *Exemplaria* 6 (1994): 128n40.

¹⁴ Quoted in Mann, *Medieval Estates Satire* 146.

Scandinavian literature, where effeminate men who engage in homosexual acts are referred to as mares. She cites *Helga-kvittha*, where “Sinfiotli insults Godmund by declaring that he had been the bride of a stallion, Grani, and also that he himself had ridden (i.e., mounted) him.”¹⁵ Although ‘mares’ are not mentioned in the God of Love’s advice to the lover in the *Roman de la Rose*, the connection between effeminacy and homosexual behaviour is clearly made: “Sew your sleeves and comb your hair, but do not rouge or paint your face, for such a custom belongs only to ladies or to men of bad repute, who have had the misfortune to find a love contrary to nature.”¹⁶

In addition to the “geldyng ... mare” conundrum, the portrait of the Pardoner in the “General Prologue” includes references to other animals, namely, a goat and a hare. We are told that “A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot” (l.688). While critics often take this to mean that the Pardoner’s voice is high and thin and therefore similar to that of a eunuch, I suggest that the analogy with the goat calls attention to the Pardoner’s otherness, which is not necessarily to say that he is a sexless eunuch. In fact, goats imply quite the opposite. In his *De proprietatibus rerum*, Bartholomaeus Anglicus writes that the goat “was, and still popularly is, considered a lecherous beast.”¹⁷ This relates well to the other animal the Pardoner is compared to: “Swich glarynge eyen hadde he as an hare” (l.684). The sexual behaviour of the hare, like that of the Pardoner, seems to resist precise categorization. John Boswell cites the apocryphal Epistle of Barnabas as an example of how the hare could symbolize homosexual behavior: “[Moses said,] You shall not eat the hare Why? So that, he said, you may not become a boy-molester or be made like these.”¹⁸ Boswell demonstrates the persistence of such an association by pointing out that “half a millennium after Barnabas, the bishop of Pavia could make fun of a gay male by comparing him to a hare.”¹⁹ However, Edward C. Schweitzer, Jr., drawing on the *Eunuchus* of Terence and its

¹⁵ “Chaucer’s Canterbury Mare,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 83 (1987): 198.

¹⁶ Quoted in McAlpine, “The Pardoner’s Homosexuality” 110.

¹⁷ *The Riverside Chaucer* 825n688–89.

¹⁸ Quoted in Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* 137–38.

¹⁹ *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* 142.

commentaries, argues for a more ambiguous definition. He reports that while some believed “that the hare changes its sex,” others maintained “that the hare has both sexes at once.”²⁰ Regarding the Pardoner, I agree with McAlpine that “the glaring eyes and the reference to goats, hares, and mares connote extreme lechery, which is at least as suggestive of sexual deviance as of sexual inadequacy.”²¹

That the Pardoner engages in sexual activity is further suggested by his association with the Summoner, as described in the “General Prologue,” but it is unclear what form that activity takes. A homosexual relation between the two is implied by the narrator’s comment that “This Somonour bar to hym a stif burdoun” (l.673). According to the *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*), “burdoun” could mean “a pilgrim’s staff; also a walking stick, a club, a spiked staff.” It could also be used figuratively. Another definition relates to the literal context of singing: “the low-pitched undersong accompanying the melody.” Thus, I believe a pun is intended and D. Biggins is right in arguing that the sexual connotation of “burdoun” is underscored by the adjective “stif” as well as the context of the song being sung, “Com hider, love, to me” (l.672).²² I would also suggest that the Old French “bourdon,” defined in the *MED* as a “nail with a big head,” provides additional support for this interpretation.

Needless to say, there is not unanimous support for this view. Richard Firth Green, following C. David Benson’s lead, attempts to establish the Pardoner’s heterosexuality through the Summoner. Citing the narrator’s description of the Summoner as a “good felawe,” Green demonstrates that the term “felawe” connotes lechery, a vice Green apparently reserves exclusively for heterosexuals. He strengthens his claim for the Summoner’s normative inclination by drawing on the work of Chaucer’s contemporary, Sir John Clanvowe, who uses the term “good felawe” to describe those who engage in “lustes of here flessch, and goon to the tauerne and to the bordel, and pleyen at the dees.”²³ According to Green, Chaucer’s portrait

²⁰ “Chaucer’s Pardoner and the Hare,” *English Language Notes* 4 (1967): 248.

²¹ “The Pardoner’s Homosexuality” 113.

²² “Chaucer’s ‘General Prologue’ A 163,” *Notes and Queries* 204 (1959): 435.

²³ Quoted in Richard Firth Green, “The Sexual Normality of Chaucer’s Pardoner,” *Mediaevalia* 8 (1982): 352. I have substituted *th* for the Old English *thorn* in the original text.

of the Summoner “suggest[s] that he is an habitu  of taverns and brothels, the companion of pimps and prostitutes, and a quite open debauchee,” and since “the Pardoner is his ‘compeer’ (A670), that is, literally, his ‘equal,’” the Pardoner and the Summoner “are cast in much the same mold.”²⁴ While I have no difficulty imagining the Pardoner and the Summoner engaging in heterosexual debauchery, I again point out that sexual behaviour in the Middle Ages, particularly that of society’s marginal types, need not be exclusively heterosexual. I do, however, welcome Green’s valiant effort to restore the Pardoner’s virility by citing the pseudo-Chaucerian *Tale of Beryn*, where the pardoner “is neither homosexual nor sexually incompetent.”²⁵ Green’s evidence for the Pardoner’s rather ordinary sex life serves to further problematize his sexuality because textual clues resist any precise categorization of the Pardoner’s sexual behaviour.

Despite uncertainty of what, if anything, is between his legs, the Pardoner wields enormous power of speech. The narrator boasts on the Pardoner’s behalf: “Upon a day he gat hym moore moneye / Than that the person gat in monthes tweye” (l.703–04). What is particularly revealing about the Pardoner’s power is that “with feyned flaterye and japes, / He made the person [parson] and the peple his apes” (l.705–06). While one can argue that most of the people he was taking advantage of were “lewed [unlearned; ignorant],” his success implies that his presence embodies a certain amount of power and authority. One of his resources is apparently his voice, which may indeed be high, but certainly not feeble, for we are told “ful loude he soong” with the Summoner (l.672). In fact, rather than merely providing background music, the Pardoner and the Summoner force their presence on the other pilgrims. The narrator declares: “Was nevere trompe of half so greet a soun” (l.674). There is no reason to assume that this refers only to the Summoner’s bass accompaniment, because the Pardoner would have to be equally loud so as to be heard above the Summoner. In addition, the Pardoner uses his voice effectively in church where in order “To wynne silver” (l.713), “he song an offertorie ... murierly and loude” (l.710,

²⁴ “Sexual Nomality” 352. See also C. David Benson, “Chaucer’s Pardoner: His Sexuality and Modern Critics,” *Mediaevalia* 8 (1982): 337–49.

²⁵ “Sexual Nomality” 353.

714). In fact, the portrait of the Pardoner in the “General Prologue” ends on this triumphant note.

Although scholars have often pointed to Faus Semblant in the *Roman de la Rose* as a literary source for Chaucer’s Pardoner, Carolyn Dinshaw draws attention to one characteristic of Faus Semblant few other Chaucerians have expounded on, namely, his unstable gender.²⁶ Faus Semblant compares himself to “Protheus, that cowde hym change / In every shap”; he is equally at home in masculine or feminine attire:

Full wel I can my clothis chaunge,
Take oon, and make another straunge.
Now am I knyght, now chasteleyn [keeper of a castle]

.

Somtyme a wommans cloth take I;
Now am I a mayde, now lady.²⁷

But since he claims that “Wel can I wre [conceal] me undir wede [in my clothing]” (6359), and is evidently successful in deceiving those he dwells with (6355), he does not merely crossdress but also *crossgenders*. A similar confusion of gender in respect to the Pardoner is evoked by the narrator’s observation of his apparent beardlessness: “No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have; / As smothe it was as it were late shave” (1.689–90). While the first line describes a femininely-gendered person, masculinity is suggested by its apparent lack. In other words, he does not have, nor will he ever have, a beard, and this is significant because he normally should have one. The second line adds to the ‘problem’ of his gender in that his feminine status is likened to a masculinely-gendered person who has just shaved. Thus, couldn’t the Pardoner’s perceived beardlessness be attributed to a very close shave? Echoing the “geldyng ... mare” conundrum, these lines are a deliberate obfuscation of the Pardoner’s gender.

²⁶ *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989) 175.

²⁷ *Romaunt of the Rose, The Riverside Chaucer* (6319–20; 6325–27; 6345–46). Subsequent quotations will be documented in the text by line number.

The Pardoner's Activities in the Text: Expressions of Sexual Potency

As a hint of what is to come after he finishes his tale, the Pardoner responds to the Host's command, "Telle us som myrthe or japes right anon" (vi.319) with the rather impertinent, "It shal be doon ... by Seint Ronyon!" (vi.320). The Pardoner is evidently playing on the Host's earlier remark to the Physician: "Thou art a proper man, / And lyk a prelat, by Seint Ronyan!" (vi.309–10). In echoing "Ronyan" with "Ronyon" the Pardoner suggests that he, too, is a "proper man"—with the necessary equipment. H. Marshall Leicester, Jr. notes that 'runnion,' according to the *OED*, means "the male sexual organ."²⁸ I agree with Leicester that the Pardoner's use of this pun is conscious, and is an impertinent response to the Host. The Pardoner further asserts himself by refusing to tell his tale "right anon." For instead of beginning immediately, he tells the Host, "But first ... heere at this alestake / I wol bothe drynke and eten of a cake" (vi.322). His wish to *both* eat *and* drink is a double disregard for the Host's orders. The Pardoner stands up to the other pilgrims as well. Although he agrees to their request that he "telle ... som moral thyng" (vi.325), he will not perform at once. Thus, this strange effeminate man has no fear of asserting himself and, except for the Miller, is the only pilgrim to challenge openly the Host's orders.

The Pardoner also expresses himself in a socially aggressive manner during the prologue to his tale. The "I wol" speech provides a brilliant example of this:

I wol preche and begge in sondry landes;
 I wol nat do no labour with myne handes

 I wol noon of the apostles countrefete [imitate];
 I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete

 I wol drynke licour of the vyne
 And have a joly wenche in every toun.

(vi.443–44; 447–48; 452–53)

²⁸ *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990) 174n15. Although the entry Leicester is referring to is from *Musarum deliciae*, dated 1655, it is listed as an imitation of Chaucer: "He faire could gloze among the country Wives, / A lusty Ronnyon ware he in his hose."

I agree with Donald Howard that “the Pardoner *wills* the role he plays ... [and] in rejecting the prescribed role-model and playing himself, he decides against the world.”²⁹ I interpret “the world” to mean the *normal* world. However, the Pardoner, being other than ‘normal,’ does not merely serve as a mirror for the pilgrims, reflecting their ‘evil’ sides; he is, rather, an *active* other who thrusts his otherness in their faces. And so, while Dinshaw places the Pardoner in a passive feminine position, interpreting his repeated “I wol” as signifying “an enormous lack—an unquenchable *cupiditas*,”³⁰ I would suggest that the Pardoner exhibits an enormous assertion of his will and desire, which is indicative of masculine-active behaviour. Many critics devitalize him, dismissing his desire for a “joly wenche,” like his intention to marry, as heterosexual masquerade. But since the validity of all the other “I wol” statements is supported by the text, why would he throw in such an absurd fabrication? And even if it is not true, does he not present himself as an active threat to normative social behaviour rather than as a passive victim of his supposed impotence and lack?

Sexual references abound in the Pardoner’s Prologue; they underscore not only the Pardoner’s queer sexuality but also suggest his sexual potency. For instance, the Pardoner describes how he employs his hands and tongue when addressing his audience in church. While Kruger rightly observes that no other pilgrim describes how he carries out his job in physical terms,³¹ I think it is important to add that the Pardoner uses his physical features for active goals. His purpose is “for to make hem free / To yeven hir pens [money], and namely unto me” (vi.401–02). And, perhaps even more indicative of the sexual aggression underlying his work, he claims “whan I dar noon oother weyes debate, / Thanne wol I styngye hym with my tonge smerte” (vi.412–13). It is tempting to argue that the Pardoner uses his tongue as a substitute for his

The late date of this citation does not necessarily mean that such a colloquialism was not in use in Chaucer’s day.

²⁹ *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1976) 374.

³⁰ *Chaucer’s Sexual Politics* 162. Dinshaw offers brilliant ‘queer’ readings of the Pardoner in her more recent publications. See “Chaucer’s Queer Touches / A Queer Touches Chaucer,” *Exemplaria* 7.1 (1995): 75–92; *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999).

³¹ “Claiming the Pardoner” 132.

possibly missing genitals. However, other sexual practices are evoked which complicate the Pardoner's expression of his sexuality.

The Pardoner repeats to the pilgrims the speech he usually delivers to his audience: "If any wight be in this chirche now / That hath doon synne horrible, that he / Dar nat, for shame, of it yshryven be ..." (vi.378–80). Michael A. Calabrese draws a parallel between the Pardoner's use of "synne horrible" and its use in the *Roman de la Rose*, where Genius, describing Orpheus and men like him, tells the lover that he hopes "their dirty, *horrible sin* may be sorrowful and painful to them."³² While I agree with Calabrese that "in his own use of the term ["synne horrible"], the Pardoner may be subtly alerting us to his sexual identity,"³³ I would not necessarily take the Pardoner's condemnation of it at face value. The usual interpretation of these lines is that the Pardoner is tricking his audience into offering to his "relikes" because if they do not they will be assumed to be sodomites. On the other hand, by stating that such offenders "shal have no power ne no grace / To offren to my relikes in this place" (vi.383–84), he might be suggesting that wilful sodomites like himself are outsiders, and the church will not accept their penance anyway. In addition, the association between "relikes" and "coillons [testicles]," which I discuss in the next section, further problematizes interpretations of the Pardoner's speech. For if we accentuate "in this place," could the Pardoner be suggesting some type of sexual offering in another place, outside the church? In any case, given the fact that "synne horrible" generally denotes sodomy, coupled with critical consensus regarding the confessional nature of the Pardoner's Prologue, I suggest that more than trickery is being alluded to here.

Sexual practice is also evoked in the Pardoner's claim that "He that his hand wol putte in this mitayn, / He shal have multipliing of his grayn" (vi.373–74). The biblical sense of multiplying mean-

³² "'Making a Mark That Shows': Orphean Song, Orphean Sexuality, and the Exile of Chaucer's Pardoner," *Viator* 24 (1993): 278. For an excellent discussion of the Pardoner in relation to the Orpheus myth, see Sturges, *Chaucer's Pardoner* 107–39.

³³ "Making a Mark" 279.

ing reproducing progeny sexualizes the Pardoner's provocative boast.³⁴ The Pardoner's designation of his "mitayn" as receptacle for the seed underscores his sexual potency, but rather than playing an active role he places himself in a passive position. He thus demonstrates sexual ambidexterity, using various parts of his body or extensions of his body to summon men and women to make offerings. How might we better define this power the Pardoner wields? We might view the Pardoner as an embodiment of both the maternal ur-phallus and the dominating power associated with the male-gendered phallus. These two phallic attributes can be combined into a 'queer phallus,' a symbol of power and authority that cannot be expressed in the heteronormative language of binaries; in transcending male/female, masculine/feminine, active/passive, protruding/flat, the queer phallus eludes heteronormative categorization. And since the queer phallus need not be symbolically tied to the penis, it poses a threat to 'normal' males who claim exclusive possession of the phallus. This threat is dramatized in the showdown between the Pardoner and the Host.

The Pardoner's Showdown with the Host: Who Possesses the Phallus?

The Host (Harry Bailey) is described in the "General Prologue" as "A seemly man ... / For to been a marchal in an halle. / A large man he was with eyen stepe" (l.751–53). The Host is evidently broad as well, for he compares himself with Chaucer, the character, who he observes "in the waast is shape as wel as ... [he]" (vii.700). Although there are various interpretations of "eyen stepe," Maurice Keen points out that this description of eyes "is frequently used of bold, attractive heroes in ME [Middle English] romances."³⁵ We are given further details: "Boold of his speche, and wys, and wel ytaught, / And of manhod hym lakkede right naught" (l.755–56). Although the Host at times reveals that he is neither "wys" nor "wel ytaught," Chaucer is quite clearly constructing a portrait of a

³⁴ Jackson I. Cope remarks that "'multiply' is the most ubiquitous of Old Testament blessings" and cites Issac's blessing to Jacob in Genesis in 28.3: "God Almighty bless thee, and make thee fruitful, and multiply thee"; see "*Bartholomew Fair* as Blasphemy," *Renaissance Drama* 8 (1965): 134n10.

³⁵ Quoted in *The Riverside Chaucer* 825n753.

masculine leader who bears physical traits similar to those of literary heroes and medieval monarchs.

The Host assumes the role of authority figure among the pilgrims and the narrator periodically affirms the Host's authoritative role. For instance, after the Miller finishes his tale, the Host "gan to speke as lordly as a kyng" (I.3900). The Clerk not only submits to the Host's demand but also restates his position among the pilgrims: "I am under youre yerde; / Ye han of us now the governance, / And therefore wol I do yow obeisance" (IV.22–24). Thus, I agree with Donald Fritz that the Host "stands for law and order in the game world ... [and] is the figure of authority in the social intercourse of the pilgrimage."³⁶ The Host, like the Pardoner, wields his power through speech acts. If Chaucer is indeed presenting the Pardoner's indeterminate sexuality as a threat to society, then it is not surprising that the Host, as symbolic authority figure of normative sexuality, should be singled out for an attack by the Pardoner. It is also not surprising that Chaucerians are nearly unanimous in claiming victory for the Host, thus conferring victory for masculine heteronormativity. However, I would like to suggest that something else takes place, something which questions culturally received assumptions of masculine authoritative power.

Although the Host's masculine authority is well established in the "General Prologue" and reinforced throughout the text, we are given hints that the Host does not necessarily wield power at home. After the Clerk finishes his tale about submissive Griselda, the Host, having missed the fine points of the story, exclaims: "Me were levere than a barel ale / My wif at hoom had herd this legende ones!" (IV.1212c–d). Considering how dear a barrel of ale is to him, he must have a great deal of trouble with a wife who is apparently the antithesis of Griselda. This is further supported by his confession: "I have a wyf ... a labbyng shrewe is she" (IV.2427–28). While this comment can be dismissed as a stock complaint, his confidential tone suggests his seriousness: "In conseil be it seyde, / Me reweth soore I am unto hire teyde" (IV.2431–32). His wife is evidently a powerful woman who regards her husband as "a milksop" and "a coward ape" (VII.1910), and he is clearly intimidated by her: "I dar

³⁶ "Reflections in a Golden Florin: Chaucer's Narcissistic Pardoner," *Chaucer Review* 21 (1987): 352.

nat hire withstonde; / For she is byg in armes" (vii.1920–21). What is most telling about these confessions is that they draw attention to what Glenn Burger refers to as the constructed nature of the Host's "extreme assertions of 'authority' and 'normality'."³⁷ That his masculinity may be constructed as well is suggested by his envious gaze at other manly men.

As the Host begins to describe the Monk physically, he moves from the polite form of address to the familiar. This is significant because the Host's gaze suggests envy and his use of "thou" creates greater intimacy. He notes that the Monk is "of brawnes and of bones / A wel farynge persone for the nones" (vii.1941–42). Unlike his own questionable power at home, he claims that the Monk is "a maister ... at hoom" (vii.1938). But most revealing is the Host's apparent envy of the Monk's sexual potency: "Haddestow as greet a leeve as thou hast might / To parfourne al thy lust in engendrure, / Thou haddest bigeten ful many a creatue" (vii.1946–48). The Host directs a similar gaze at the Nun's Priest. After his curious blessing of the Priest's "breche [buttocks] ... and every stoon [testicle]" (vii.3448), the Host exclaims: "if thou were seculer, / Thou woldest ben a trede-foul [a copulator of fowls; a rooster] aright" (vii.3450–51). He marvels at his "braunes," his "gret ... nekke" and his "large breest" (vii.3455–56). These lines suggest that there are some loose bolts in the Host's constructed masculine gender. In fact, if his masculinity were actually challenged, how would he react?

Upon finishing his moral exemplum, the Pardoner summons the pilgrims: "Com forth anon, and kneleth heere adoun, / and mekely receyveth my pardoun" (vi.925–26). Eugene Vance rightly observes that this "kneeling position ... would place their noses right before his deficient crotch,"³⁸ although I am not as certain as he is that the Pardoner's crotch is deficient. Nevertheless, what is important is the sexual connotation of the Pardoner's request. After boldly referring to the Host as one who "is moost enveloped in synne" (vi.942), the Pardoner addresses him in mock politeness: "Com forth, sire Hoost, and offre first anon, / And thou shalt kisse the relikes everychon" (vi.943–44). The sexual implication of "reliques" can be traced to the *Roman de la Rose*, as Dolores Warwick Frese

³⁷ "Kissing the Pardoner," *PMLA* 107 (1992): 1146.

³⁸ Quoted in Burger, "Kissing the Pardoner" 1143.

points out, where the lover is offended by Lady Reason's use of "coilles": "I don't hold you courtly / when you've pronounced the word 'testicles' to me." Lady Reason, however, argues that "had I named 'testicles' 'relics' / and called 'relics' 'testicles,' / would you, who so pick me to death for it, / have then said that 'relics' / was a low and villainous word?"³⁹ While one may argue that Lady Reason makes an arbitrary association between relics and testicles, I would suggest that the two words are not arbitrarily brought together. 'Relike' lends itself well to sexual connotations as suggested in the *MED*, which lists one meaning as "a valuable object"; it can also be used figuratively to denote a beloved person. This is well illustrated in the *Romaunt of the Rose* (the Middle English translation of the *Roman de la Rose*), where "relike" is substituted for "lady": "Whanne thyne eyen have metyng / With that relike precious, / Wherof they be so desirous" (2906–08). And, furthermore, are "coilles" not valuable?

The sexual undertone of the Pardoner's invitation to the Host that he "kisse the relikes" is underscored by his command: "Unbokele anon thy purs" (vi.945). In keeping with his provocative challenge to heteronormativity, the Pardoner, as in his earlier play on "Ronyon," impertinently echoes the Host's authoritative tone that he tell "som myrthe or japes *right anon*" (vi.319, my emphasis). "Purs" as an anatomical part (the scrotum; nether—, ballok—) is cited in the *MED* and the Wife of Bath uses this meaning of "purs" in the disputed passage 44a–f: "I have wedded five! / Of whiche I have pyked out the beste, / Bothe of here nether purs and of here cheste" (iii.44–44b). What is especially telling in this passage is the association between "purs" and "cheste," thus bringing together sexual and financial power. In commanding the Host to unbuckle his "purs" the Pardoner is actually demanding that the Host show his power! He is challenging him to *prove* that he possesses the phallus. And does the man who reportedly lacks nothing of manhood rise to the occasion so to speak?

³⁹ *Roman de la Rose* 6928–29; 7111–15; quoted in Dolores Warwick Frese, *An Ars Legendi for Chaucer's Canterbury Tales: Re-constructive Readings* (Gainesville: U of Florida P, 1991) 29–30.

The Host's response is a further sexualization of the scene. His hysterical reaction, "Nay, nay! ... thanne have I Cristes curs!" (vi.946) suggests "synne horrible," and while I agree with Fritz that the Host "is repulsed by the sexual innuendo of the invitation," I think more is at play here.⁴⁰ The Host's anger escalates and reveals a great deal about the power relations between the two antagonists. But what prompts the Host's hysterical response to the Pardoner?

Although the phallus is commonly used to refer to the penis, it can also symbolize authority and power. Both meanings underscore the confrontation between the Pardoner and the Host. If one accepts the Lacanian idea that "the relation to the phallus is set up regardless of the anatomical difference between the sexes,"⁴¹ then 'normal' men like the Host do not necessarily have exclusive possession of the phallus. Leicester, interpreting Lacan, argues that "the act of ... making the phallus out of the penis ... is what initiates the social construction of gender."⁴² Thus, the Host, whose masculine gender as I have indicated earlier is constructed in the text, ought to possess the penis/phallus like any other 'manly' man in a patriarchal society. However, the Host suggests that the Pardoner possesses this symbol of power: "I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hand / In stide of relikes" (vi.952–53). Whether the Pardoner's "coillons" are present or not is beside the point; the Pardoner evidently has symbolic sexual power which is all the more threatening because it is elusive and non-normative. This threat initiates the Host's violent reaction: "lat kutte hem of [let them be cut off], I wol thee helpe hem carie" (vi.954). The Host's offer to help carry the Pardoner's "coillons" implies, as Kruger remarks, that the Host considers himself "the proper bearer of their power."⁴³ The Host's powerless position is suggested in his accusation to the Pardoner: "Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech [underpants] / And swere it were a relyk of a seint" (vi.948–49). In other words, although he does not submit to the Pardoner, the Host admits that

⁴⁰ "Reflections in a Golden Florin" 350.

⁴¹ Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne* (New York: Norton, 1982) 76.

⁴² *The Disenchanted Self* 182.

⁴³ "Claiming the Pardoner" 136.

the Pardoner has the potential to make him, or any other man, kiss whatever he claims to be empowered relics. The Host, I believe, is suffering from *queer* phallus envy.

According to Freud, the little girl catches sight of the boy's penis and "makes her judgement and her decision in a flash. She has seen it and knows that she is without it and wants to have it." The boy, at a somewhat later stage, experiences "horror of the mutilated creature or triumphant contempt for her."⁴⁴ The scenario acted out between the Host and the Pardoner, however, defies the simple have/have not situation outlined by Freud and continued by Lacan. The Host, in effect, combines both positions; he is the little girl who 'sees' the penis/phallus and the little boy who is horrified or threatened by the sight of the castrated little girl, because the Pardoner's queer phallus is both seen and not seen, tangible and intangible. The Host is envious and at the same time threatened by the Pardoner's indeterminate queerness. Freud goes on to suggest that the hope of eventually obtaining the penis (I would add queer phallus) "may become a motive for the strangest and otherwise unaccountable actions."⁴⁵ The Host's castration threat directed at the Pardoner can therefore be viewed as an "unaccountable" reaction prompted by envy of a power that does not make sense in the Host's heteronormative sphere. However, he cannot really cut off the Pardoner's elusive "coillons." He cannot put his finger on the Pardoner's queer power.

What is particularly striking about this confrontation is that it not only questions the assumption that power and authority are the exclusive possessions of masculine heterosexual men, but it also illustrates that the association between masculinity and sexual power may be an unstable cultural construction. As a 'normal' male, the Host ought to possess the symbolic power represented by the phallus. It is significant that when posited in direct confrontation with the other-than-masculine Pardoner, this representative of masculine authority succumbs to defensive anger which reveals uncertainty about his own claims of power in his society. Although the Pardoner remains silent, he does not crumble under the Host's

⁴⁴ *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Macmillan, 1963) 177.

⁴⁵ *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* 178.

verbal abuse. I would, therefore, propose that the Pardoner is not defeated as most critics choose to believe. His anger continues to unnerve the Host, prompting him to withdraw from the battle of words. He tells the Pardoner “I wol no lenger pleye / With thee, ne with noon oother angry man” (vi.958–59). The sexual connotation of “pleye” should not be disregarded.

The Host’s silencing of the Pardoner is not the end of the story. The Knight, occupying the highest social position among the secular pilgrims, intercedes and rather than expelling the Pardoner to the ostracized fringe of the group, summons him to the centre: “drawe thee neer” (vi.966). And, moreover, he orders the Host to kiss the Pardoner as a symbol of reconciliation. Burger points out that this action forces us to “touch” the Pardoner,⁴⁶ which, I suggest, also forces us to recognize him as a ‘real’ character, and not a sexless caricature. Although the text endeavours to contain the Pardoner’s queerness by incorporating him into the normative heterosexual community—which includes a homosocial sphere such as the kiss of peace between knights—Burger rightly observes that “the Pardoner’s body ... linger[s] perversely in the foreground in active, ‘masculine’ play with the other pilgrims.”⁴⁷ As there is no evidence in the text that the Pardoner will reform his ways or undergo a physical transformation, I would argue that we are left less with silence than with an echo of the Pardoner’s provocative queerness which precipitates such a violent reaction from the Host.

Dinshaw maintains that “queerness articulates not a determinate thing but a relation to existent structures of power.”⁴⁸ The Pardoner’s sexual identity cannot be expressed in our modern categories, ‘gay’ or ‘bisexual.’ Yet his queerness confuses the narrator and unnerves the Host. His interactions with normative society demonstrate a potent sexuality which challenges masculine heterosexuality. He summons men to kneel at his crotch and kiss his ‘relics.’ He employs his sharp tongue on simple ‘normal’ people and extracts money from them. There are undoubtedly other queer characters in medieval texts whose sexual dissidence threatens the ostensible stability of normative heterosexuality. Rather than at-

⁴⁶ “Kissing the Pardoner” 1146.

⁴⁷ “Kissing the Pardoner” 1147. Burger goes on to suggest that the Pardoner stills and defers attempts by the ‘normal’ pilgrims to control what he means.

⁴⁸ “Chaucer’s Queer Touches” 77.

tempt to find medieval equivalents of modern homosexuals, we might do well to draw a line of queerness across time and study the multifarious expressions of subversive sexuality.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ I would like to thank Melissa Furrow for very helpful suggestions and references. An abbreviated version of this essay was presented at the 32nd International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, Michigan.