

Schrödinger's Box: Reliquary Embodiment and the Paradox of Chaucer's Pardoners

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Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

August, 2014

Nashville, Tennessee

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## Schrödinger's Box: Reliquary Embodiment and the Paradox of Chaucer's Pardoner

Among the sundry pilgrims traveling to Becket's shrine in *The Canterbury Tales*, the Pardoner is one of Chaucer's more memorable and fraught creations. A corrupt clergyman who sells indulgences and false relics fashioned from cloth remnants and "pigges bones," the Pardoner serves as a foil to the morally upright Parson, but, unlike the lax Friar and Summoner, he occupies a more complex role in the narrative than a mere object of religious satire (Chaucer 1.700). After all, as Alastair Minnis has contended, the Pardoner's "self-exhibition" of his morally bankrupt professional practices to his fellow travelers threatens the premise of their entire pilgrimage (165). Beyond the Pardoner's manifest greed and dishonesty, however, critics of *The Canterbury Tales* historically have fixated on the detailed, but incoherent descriptions of his body which, in the words of Elspeth Whitney, "suggest some form of more hidden deviancy, one unacknowledged by the Pardoner himself and not clearly identified by his fellow pilgrims" (357). While the disjunctive body of the Pardoner has often been assumed to mirror his spiritual or sexual irregularities, indicating his unsuitability for his sacred office, I argue that his physical instability within the text also signifies his simultaneous embodiment of sacred and secular meaning.

Critics' ethics for reading the Pardoner have historically focused on his body, yet their approaches have shifted over the years in tandem with the changing discourse around medieval secularism. While the details from "Geoffrey's" description of the Pardoner in the General Prologue have been deployed differently within these various frameworks, scholars have chiefly fixated on the clergyman's physical effeminacy — distinguished by his long, flaxen hair, high voice, and beardless chin — and the narrator's infamous statement, "I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare" (Chaucer 1.675-78, 688, 690-91). From the late 1950s through the 1980s, the

prevailing influence of the exegetical or “Robertsonian” school<sup>1</sup> within Chaucer studies encouraged critics to read Chaucer’s works, even those which appear nominally secular, as sacred allegory. Consequently, much of the scholarship on Chaucer’s Pardoner from this period elects to interpret Geoffrey’s suggestive comment as a metaphor for the Pardoner’s spiritual sterility, regardless of what physical abnormalities it might also signify.<sup>2</sup>

The decline of Robertsonianism, however, facilitated a surge of interest in the Pardoner’s actual, corporeal condition. Monica McAlpine’s “The Pardoner’s Homosexuality and How It Matters” (1980) inspired many later critics to read the Pardoner as a homosexual man, based on her gloss of the word “mare” and by a hinted association between the Pardoner and his companion, the Summoner (11, 18).<sup>3</sup> Inflected by new insights emerging from gender theory and queer theory, later interpretations have characterized the Pardoner variously as “a ‘normal’ man, a congenital eunuch, a man who has been castrated, a man impotent but physically intact, a hermaphrodite, ‘a testicular pseudo-hermaphrodite of the feminine type,’ an oversexed womanizer, an alcoholic, a ‘drag queen,’ a cross-dressed woman” or, as Elspeth Whitney recently argued, a phlegmatic man with imbalanced humors (Whitney 357-58, 360).<sup>4</sup> This contemporary trend of configuring the Pardoner as a collection of sexual or humoral symptoms implicitly responds to Robertson by inverting his value system: whereas Robertson and the exegetical critics transformed all flesh into sacred allegory, this later generation of critics treats the Pardoner’s body as the final reservoir of meaning, using a secularized, pseudo-medical discourse. Both of these systems of reading, however, focus on applying a totalizing label to the Pardoner to account for his apparent deviance, smoothing over the score of contradictions that make his character so arresting.

A handful of current scholars have begun to refuse to play this diagnostic game by changing the terms of the critical conversation: instead of speculating as to the specific nature of the Pardoner's condition, they focus on the disruptive effect of the fragmented, incoherent presentation of his body. In *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, Carolyn Dinshaw argues that, by representing the clergyman in terms of absence and disjunction, Chaucer ensures that "no one really knows what the Pardoner is" (157). Similarly, Glenn Burger asserts in *Chaucer's Queer Nation* that the Pardoner's incoherent body represents "a nexus of intermingling discourses about the subject and its meaning that cannot settle into a reassuring ordered hierarchy, but must work in conjunction, even in competition, in one another" (141). While Burger and Dinshaw provide a refreshingly nuanced perspective on the Pardoner's complexities, their analyses foreground his physical ambiguity to a degree that threatens to dissolve his body altogether. In terms of modern secularist discourse, their approach might be likened to that of Gil Anidjar in his essay "Secularism," in which he asserts that secularism, Christianity, Orientalism, and imperialism are each different names for a single system of power and authority (66). In all three cases, the critics' recognition of the fluid boundaries between discourses opens up considerable possibilities for their readers to reimagine structures of meaning. Nevertheless, their refusal to impose boundaries between crucial conceptual categories in their fields also makes their ultimate conclusions diffuse and resistant to practical application. By shifting scholarly focus to the Pardoner's physical incoherence, rather than the mystery between his legs, Burger and Dinshaw gesture toward a productive way of approaching the problem of the Pardoner's body, but thrust him back into the realm of the incorporeal — translating his flesh not into sacred allegory, but into secular discourse.

Here, I refine Burger and Dinshaw's approach by framing the Pardoner's incoherence as aggressive self-contradiction rather than soft-focus ambiguity. Whether he is claiming to be "a wench in every town" in spite of his effeminate mien or insisting that he can still tell a moral tale after reeling off a catalogue of his own hypocrisies, the Pardoner performs his many incongruities without shrinking, demanding an equally bold ethic to fully represent his physical and spiritual dissonance (Chaucer 6.453, 459-60). One particularly fruitful strategy for attempting such a reading would be to use what medievalist Barbara Newman terms "a hermeneutics of both/and" (7). In *Medieval Crossover: Reading the Secular Against the Sacred*, Newman, drawing upon the work of Catherine Brown and Tomaryn Bruckner, argues that

when sacred and secular meanings both present themselves in a text, yet cannot harmoniously be reconciled, it is not always necessary to choose between them. . . . Sometimes incompatible meanings simply collide — though the apparent necessity to choose between them may have been meant as a conscious device to provoke discussion (7-8).<sup>5</sup>

By embracing these principles of both/and, we can address the spiritual and physical complexities of Chaucer's Pardoner without using one as a screen — or, in Robertson's parlance, a "veil"— for the other, and without treating him as a medical specimen. In lieu of the medico-scientific discourse which locates meaning firmly in the body, the Pardoner's body is most productively discussed in the language of his wares, holy relics — objects assumed to fuse human flesh with divinity. While, at face value, relics may appear to embody the essence of the sacred that the corrupt Pardoner crassly imitates, both the clergyman and the tools of his trade are objects of fundamental contradiction whose meaning derives from their fragmentation.

I am certainly not the first reader of *The Canterbury Tales* to connect the body of the Pardoner with the scraps of animal bones he vends to unsuspecting pilgrims.<sup>6</sup> Robert S. Sturges, in *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory: Bodies of Discourse*, provides one of the most protracted and incisive readings on the subject in his chapter, "The Dismemberment of the Pardoner." In addition to the Pardoner's possible physical fragmentation below the belt, Sturges emphasizes "just how obsessive the imagery of dismemberment — or the dismembered imagery — becomes whenever the Pardoner is speaking or being spoken of" (126). His prologue and tale are rife with images of bones and isolated body parts (Sturges 125). Furthermore, in both his expostulations on sin and his tale, the Pardoner represents the vices he warns against in terms of fractured bodies: the gamblers' dice are made of literal bones, the drunk makes a "latrine" of his throat, compulsive swearers rend Christ's body by invoking it in parts, and the glutton becomes a veritable catalogue of putrefying organs (Sturges 125-26; Chaucer 6.656, 527, 473-75, 534).<sup>7</sup> While Sturges identifies the Pardoner's faux relics made of body fragments with the character's "defining attribute" of fragmentation, he clarifies that "the Pardoner is no saint," and is therefore at the greatest possible distance from promises implied by actual relics (134). Whereas relics implicitly offer assurance that, regardless of the body's condition, the self "will be reassembled and perfected in Heaven," the Pardoner's "moral status condemns him to an eternity of fragmentation" (133, 135). Contrary to Sturges's final assertion, I argue that the Pardoner and genuine religious relics share four fundamentally vexed properties that make their *teloi* more obscure.

First, and most obviously, the Pardoner and the relics of his trade are emblems of bodily fragmentation, which occupied a fraught space within the medieval imaginary. The word "relic" comes from the Classical Latin *reliquae*, or "remains," usually referring to cremated ashes

(Freeman 8). By the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the definition of what constituted an acceptable relic had expanded to include objects belonging to sacred individuals or even objects that they had touched, called “brandea,” but the most revered — or “notable” — relics had to be body parts (8; Malo 85). Reverence of notable relics by medieval European Christians, however, grated against other religiously motivated fears of bodily decay and fragmentation, which early Christian texts portrayed as a chief evil of Hell (Freeman 21). Medieval associations between the dissolution of the body and sin contributed to considerable social stigmas surrounding diseases like leprosy, which was popularly associated with marginalized groups like unclean women and Jews (Zimmerman 3). To diffuse clerical concerns about handling dead or rent flesh, many medieval theologians adopted John of Damacus’s philosophy that saints’ relics were simultaneously dead in the bodily sense and alive with the indwelling presence of Christ (Freeman 22). In this sense, the state of the medieval relic in its reliquary resembles that of the potentially poisoned cat in a box from Erwin Schrödinger’s famous thought experiment. As long as the box stays closed, the cat’s fate remains indeterminable, making it simultaneously alive and dead from the perspective of the onlooker. Similarly, the essence of the Pardoner’s relics — or of their slippery vendor — cannot be made clear from the empirical evidence available, so that their being is defined by the collision of seemingly irreconcilable conditions.

The practicalities of relic veneration, for example, elicited contradictory, yet compatible clerical attitudes about the fragmented body. In spite of immense anxiety about bodily disintegration, the partition of relics was entirely necessary in order to give medieval believers access to healing. Sacred bodies were often cut apart so that they could be distributed among more sanctuaries; Oliver of Tréguier went so far as to argue that the partition of relics allowed the sacred body to be more widely disseminated and, therefore, to generate more prayers (143).

Pilgrims to the shrine of Thomas à Becket, the destination of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, were prone to scramble to accumulate "as many parts of Thomas as there were to be had" to use as healing or prayer talismans; an account by the twelfth-century monk Benedict of Peterborough reports that from the very moment that Becket breathed his last, crowds gathered to dip pieces of cloth in his blood or to pour what they could into tiny vessels (Freeman 4). This morbid scene captures the astonishing collision between worship and profanation, between dissolution and healing that characterized medieval relic veneration. Similarly, the fragmented rhetoric of Chaucer's Pardoner yields kernels of sacred truth at the parts of the text it appears to be most disjointed.

As Sturges suggests in *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory*, the Pardoner may tell an elegantly conceived and haunting tale, but it is hardly a continuous one. His archly confessional prologue is exceeded in length only by the prolix Wife of Bath's history of her five marriages (Chaucer 6.330-462, 3.1-828). Even after he begins to tell the tale of the three rioters who vow to murder Death, the Pardoner halts the story to deliver a nearly two-hundred-line pseudo-sermon, in which he denounces a catalogue of sins by citing a plethora of Biblical and historical examples (6.481-660). This didactic digression, however, also contains the tale's most graphic images of the grotesque body: the Pardoner claims that the excessive drinker turns his throat into a "pryee," and he reduces the glutton's body to its "womb," "bely," and "stynkyng cod," all distended by filth (6.527, 534). Delivering moral lessons — or perhaps a parody thereof — using the crassest of imagery, the Pardoner's rhetoric builds tensions concerning the overlap between the sacred and profane body similar to those surrounding relic worship.

Like the genuine relic, however, the Pardoner's seemingly corrupt gestures may also convey seeds of divine truth, fulfilling his adage, "For certes, many a predicacioun / Come ofte



tyme of yvel entencioun” (Chaucer 6.407-8). Numerous critics of the Pardoner’s tale have suggested that the character’s digressions are the result of drunkenness, since he swigs “a draft of malty ale” at the beginning of his performance (6.456).<sup>8</sup> Others, beginning with George Lyman Kittredge, have disputed this reading, but, regardless of the cause of the Pardoner’s errancy, he arguably offers his most valuable and genuine counsel at points of narrative breakage. In the course of his lengthy digression on the evils of drink, the Pardoner halts the dramatics of his recitation to simply state that, as far as he knows, all of the great deeds of the Old Testament “[w]ere doon in abstinence and in preyere” — a statement that certainly does not line his pockets and, perhaps, reflects actual reverence (6.577). Furthermore, when he launches into his bizarre, self-defeating sales pitch — having already disclosed his unscrupulous trade secrets to his audience — at the end of his tale, the Pardoner breaks off in his claims of being able to save his customers with his wares, saying,

And lo, sires, thus I preche.

And Jesu Crist that is oure soules leche:

So graunte yow his pardoun to receyve,

For that is best. I wol yow nat deceyve (Chaucer 6.916-18).

The Pardoner’s claim for the primacy of Christ’s forgiveness, midway through an attempt to market his own, again offers a sacred truth at a rupture in his line of speech. Whether drunken indiscretion or shameless greed, his basest instincts yield what may be fleeting moments of grace, represented by images of bodily and spiritual renewal. Revealing glimpses of the sacred when he is at his most profane, Chaucer’s Pardoner is a “leche” in two senses: a social parasite that preys on the earnings of the vulnerable but also, in spite of himself, an agent of healing. In the latter capacity, the Pardoner acts as both the supervising physician and the worm-like

creature which was said to siphon off excess blood and bad humors (Hajar 159). His biting words allow him to pierce the pilgrims' self-protective flesh, so that his potent, provocative tale stirs the blood of the spiritually sluggish and goads the Host into purging his cholera. While his curative relics supposedly remove sickness and jealousy, the Pardoner challenges his companions to perform spiritual surgery on themselves by getting under their skins and exposing the sinful infections that they have neglected to heal.

Beyond the issue of fragmentation, the Pardoner, like medieval relics, is simultaneously fetishized as a material body and de-corporealized throughout the text. Although the most valued relics were necessarily parts of human bodies, the parts themselves were typically stored in reliquaries that identified but obscured their contents (Malo 91). Non-notable relics, such as those sold by the Pardoner, were exposed to the public view, but often linguistically occluded by the ornate narratives of their origins offered by the relic-keeper — a practice that unscrupulous curators used to create the illusion of a pedigree for their fakes (92).<sup>9</sup> Hence, the display of most medieval relics, whether in a church or in a thoroughfare, simultaneously emphasized and concealed the nature of the relic as a material object. While the Pardoner's rhetoric shows this process of linguistic occlusion at work — his florid description of his "hooly" sheep's shoulderbone that he intends to sell seems to imbue the brazen fake with divine powers — the text performs a similar function upon a pair of less-than-venerable members of the Pardoner's body: his testicles (Chaucer 6.350-71).

Although it is unclear what Geoffrey means in the *Tales*' General Prologue when he supposes that the Pardoner is "a geldyng or a mare," our first encounter with the Pardoner pointedly makes his genitalia into objects of curiosity (Chaucer 1.690-91). Though the clergyman's high voice and beardless chin contribute to the impression that he may be a eunuch,

the Pardoner's prologue and tale are rife with scrotal imagery of varying degrees of subtlety (1.688-690). Beyond the aforementioned reference to the glutton's "stynkyng cod," the most memorable incident occurs at the end of the tale, when the Pardoner invites Harry Bailly, the Host of the Tabard Inn and the judge of the pilgrims' tale-telling competition, to kneel and kiss his relics (6.534, 944). Perceiving a threat within the Pardoner's challenge, Harry Bailly refuses and strikes back with a blistering — and graphic — retort:

‘Lat be,’ quod he. ‘It shal nat be, so thee’ch!  
Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech  
And swere it were a relyk of a seint —  
Though it were with thy fundament depeint!  
But by the croys which that Seint Eleyne fond,  
I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond,  
Instide of relikes or of seintuarie!  
Lat kutte hem of! I wol with thee hem carie.  
They shul be shrined in an hogges toord! (6.947-55).

While the Host may appear to strike the first blow below the belt, Eugene Vance elaborates on a sexual valence to the Pardoner's proposition, noting that "the kneeling posture to which the Pardoner summons the pilgrims would place their noses right before his deficient crotch" — in position for prayer and for fellatio (743).<sup>10</sup> In threatening to castrate the clergyman, Harry Bailly rejects both the Pardoner's possible indecent proposal and his conceit of setting "*himself* up as a moveable shrine endowed with relics unsurpassed by those of anyone else in England" (Vance 741). The exchange performs well as hostile male banter, yet also implicitly poses an audacious and threatening question: how do we differentiate between relics and testicles?

While this may seem to be an absurd problem, this exact concern is also raised in Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*, a medieval French dream vision poem from which Chaucer freely borrowed throughout his poetic career (Diekstra 12). Medievalists have frequently identified the religious hypocrite Faus Semblant as a precedent for Chaucer's Pardoner, yet the famed exchange between the Lover and Reason about the nature of the sign resonates with Harry Bailly's response.<sup>11</sup> In a section often excised from manuscripts because of its content, Reason informs the Lover protagonist, who earlier took offense at Reason's use of obscenity, that language is so arbitrary that once could easily call testicles "relics," and vice versa:

Et quant por reliques m'oïsses  
Coilles nommer, le mot preïsses  
Por si bel, et tant le prisasses,  
Que partout coilles aorasses  
Et les baisasses en eglises  
En or et en argent assises

And when you had heard me name balls  
As relics, you would take that word  
To be so fair, and prize it so,  
That everywhere you'd worship balls  
And venerate them in churches,  
Arrayed in gold and silver shrines (de Meun 21.568-69; trans.  
Newman 6).<sup>12</sup>

Rory B. Egan argues that, inspired by this riotous exchange, Chaucer indulged in some subtle, off-color wordplay with the term “bulles,” which the Pardoner uses to mean the papal licenses he carries for his own protection, but also translates to “testicles” in old French (7). Furthermore, the Latin *bullae* was used to signify *bullae dependens*, dangling ornaments once used as reliquaries (Egan 7). In addition to crediting Harry Bailly’s retort with a little wit, this reading makes the Pardoner’s promise to show “my bulles,” as well as those of “popes,” “cardynales,” “patriarkes,” and “bisshopes,” to everyone into a wildly irreverent pun that makes sport of the process of enshrining and evaluating relics (Chaucer 6.336, 342-43).

As relics were classified in part by size, this projected display by the Pardoner transforms the canonical procedures for classifying relics into a laughable scene of clergymen comparing the heft of their “bulles.” Nevertheless, the fact that the Pardoner never does display his “bulles” of either variety to his audience foregrounds another commonality between his family jewels and church relics in their bejeweled receptacles: the text may return time and again to the idea of the Pardoner’s balls, yet, like a reliquary, never reveals what he actually has in his trousers. In spite of the narrator’s suppositions that the clergyman is a eunuch, the Host’s castration threat reifies the presence of the Pardoner’s testicles, so that, like Schrödinger’s cat, he appears to embody two incompatible states at once. While the Host’s coarse retort may render him speechless, the Pardoner emerges from the dispute with his mystery intact, so Harry Bailly never gets the satisfaction of opening the box and ensuring that the proverbial cat is dead. In addition to satirizing the hierarchies of value attached to relic curation, the profane discourse around the Pardoner’s body also demonstrates how his genitals’ instability as a text grants him a threatening power over his companions as an illegible sign, in addition to making him a target for ridicule.

Simultaneously hyper-visible and obscure, medieval relics and Chaucer's Pardoner share a certain material instability, but are also unstable with regards to their function over time. No sacred relic, after all, begins its life as a relic, meaning that, in each case, a point occurs when a human becomes an array of material objects and those objects in turn become vessels for a divine presence. Furthermore, one can rarely foretell which people or objects will have afterlives as sacred relics before this transformation takes place. Regardless of their past or objective worth, materials become holy relics by performing a sacred function for their worshippers.<sup>13</sup> The properties of relics, moreover, were supposed to vary, depending on the character of the individual touching them: the sixth-century saint, bishop, and historian, Gregory of Tours, tells of a man who stole objects from a shrine of St. Julian who then experienced "smoke pour[ing] from his body as if from a furnace" (Freeman 58). In other words, the "essence" of a relic is highly performative: its holy status results from the effects it allegedly produces in the world, and its potential for help or harm depends on the intentions of its handler. This protean potentiality of the relic provides a hermeneutic to address crux of the Pardoner's performance: the relationship between the spiritual efficacy of his tale and the shadiness of his intent.

In his prologue, Chaucer's Pardoner plays with the disjunction between his internal motivations and his performance as a clergyman when he delivers his mercenary mission statement:

Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice  
Which that I use. And that is avarice.  
But though myself be gilty in that synne,  
Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne  
From avarice and soore to repente.

But that is nat my principal entente.

I preche nothyng but for coveitise.

Of this mateere it oghte ynough suffise (Chaucer 6.427-34).

At first blush, this speech may seem to reflect the Pardoner's vanity about his rhetorical skills, which are developed enough that he can convert people to creeds that he does not believe himself.<sup>14</sup> His earlier statements that "For certes, many a predicacioun / Comth ofte tyme of yvel entencioun" and that "For though myself be a ful vicious man / A moral tale yet I yow telle kan," however, hint that he hopes that he can perform a spiritual service in spite of his cynicism (6.407-8, 459-60). While a number of earlier critics have detected a flickering desire on the part of the Pardoner to move others toward God, the Pardoner's hidden potential to perform good works has yet to be explicitly formulated as an analogue to the relics he sells.<sup>15</sup> Although his wares might be fakes, the clergyman's elaborate descriptions of his hypothetical buyers healing themselves or bringing forth bounty from their fields using his "relics" seems to betray a benevolent desire that his fraudulent objects might become genuinely sacred in more righteous hands than his (Chaucer 6.350-71). Furthermore, by disseminating healing or moving others to convert, the Pardoner himself may also ultimately perform the role of a relic — a redemptive prospect that hinges on the radical instability of sacred objects.

Although the idea that a man as corrupt as the Pardoner could one day become a figurative relic may seem far-fetched, accounts of the life of Thomas à Becket, the Christian martyr whose shrine is the destination of the Canterbury pilgrims, indicate that he was hardly free of his own self-serving impulses. An "arrogant" man who "proved obsessive about preserving his privileges," Becket brought his dispute with King Henry II that resulted in his murder to a head in 1170, when he excommunicated three high-ranking bishops so he could

perform the anointment in the coronation of Henry's son (Freeman 2). After Becket was slain in Canterbury by three of Henry's knights, however, the monks who witnessed the slaughter perceived him to be a holy martyr and perpetuated that assessment in their accounts of his death (3-4).<sup>16</sup> Within the first fifteen years after his death, the shrine's official accounts report over seven hundred miracles being effected by Thomas's remains, and his resting place remained an international attraction for pilgrims well into the fifteenth century (Ward 89, 95). Chaucer's pilgrims may spurn the Pardoner, but their object of veneration in Canterbury, while perhaps not as "wholly vicious" as the unscrupulous relics vended in their company, exhibited some very similar character flaws before his rebirth as a martyr and conduit for miracles (Chaucer 6.459-60). While this comparison may immediately appear to debase Thomas à Becket, it actually emphasizes the fact that the most holy of saints' relics come from vulnerable, flawed mortal bodies. In reminding his audience that "many a predicacioun / Comth ofte tyme of yvel entencioun," Chaucer's Pardoner reintegrates relics into the world of the secular flesh, making their transformation through the power of God seem all the more miraculous (6.407-8).

To carry the subject of relics' reintegration into secular contexts even further, the Pardoner and his wares also emblemize the commodification of the sacred and use of religion as a form of commerce. In his prologue, the Pardoner pantomimes being scandalized by the notion that he should be expected to swear a vow of poverty:

What? Trowe ye, the whiles I may preche  
And wyne gold and silver for I teche,  
That I wol lyve in poverte wilfully?  
Nay, nay! I thoghte it nevere, trewely.  
For I wol preche and begge in sondry lands.



I wol nat do no labour with myne hands  
Ne make baskettes and lyve therby,  
Because I wol nat beggen ydelly. (Chaucer 6.439-446).

While the Pardoner has been portrayed as exceptionally greedy, his behavior is, in many ways, an extreme, individual extension of some of the money-making structures engrained within the structure of the institutional Church.<sup>17</sup> Although Max Weber popularized the notion in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that the medieval monopoly Church impeded the growth of Europe's economy, the Church's substantial investment in that economy guaranteed that it would continue to provide crucial human and financial capital. In addition to contributing resources, the Church also played a critical role in developing economic infrastructure, implementing the first systems of deposit, credit, and banking, provided lending services to merchants, and acting in defense of private property and trading activity. As official doctrine did not forbid the possession of wealth, the medieval Church strategically aligned its economic activities with its creeds, manipulating prohibitions on practices like usury to redistribute income to itself. Even within the Church hierarchy, vows of poverty and the rejection of worldly goods were advocated for only a few orders, suggesting that most clergymen of the period would be equally averse to taking up a begging bowl as Chaucer's Pardoner (Lowder et al. 172-177). As numerous critics have argued that Chaucer's satire targets the Church's institutional structures that enable widespread abuses, rather than designating the behavior of the Pardoner, Friar, or Summoner as atypical, the Pardoner's unscrupulous business practices are indicative of both an individual and a corporate problem: he is the corrupt member which testifies to the Church's sickening body.<sup>18</sup>

This commercial aspect of the Church obviously extended to the sale of relics by men like the Pardoner, but also to most relic-worship in cathedral setting. Upon their arrival at Becket's shrine, Chaucer's pilgrims would have been greeted by a monk who would collect coins, jewels, or other offerings to the saint, and would also give them the opportunity to purchase candles; a money box would also have been perched upon Becket's tomb for any additional gifts (Ward 94). With its enormous international draw, Thomas à Becket's shrine was a quite profitable source of income for the monks who tended it. By 1275, the cathedral's accounts show that Becket's shrine drew in the monastery's most financial activity, even allowing the shrine-keeper to make loans to other departments; furthermore, later records of offerings show that this affluence continued well into the fifteenth century (Ward 95). The brash claim of Chaucer's Pardoner that "myn entente is nat but for to wynne / And nothyng for correccioun of synne" may be uncommonly crass, but his treatment of relics as instruments of business and sources of profit was far from unusual (Chaucer 6.403-4).<sup>19</sup>

Even the other pilgrims are implicated in this economy. Glenn Burger observes that although the Pardoner's fellow travelers reject his attempts to sell them salvation, the General Prologue makes clear that the entire company is going "[t]he hooly blisful martir for to seke / That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke," suggesting "that everyone expects some real return from the pilgrimage, that its spiritual reward will be materially signified — whether by a physical cure or by release from time in purgatory" (Chaucer 1.17-18; Burger 152). Harry Bailly may threaten to cut off the Pardoner's testicles to put an end to his sales pitch, but neither he nor his fellow travelers can cut themselves off from the Pardoner. He is not the single offending "member" of Matthew 5:30 which may be hacked cleanly away, but a piece of a larger body that

operates by the same secular principles of commerce and exchange, with sacred fragments of bodies as its currency.<sup>20</sup>

To borrow Barbara Newman's phrase once more, medieval relics and Chaucer's Pardoner both exemplify the concept of "both/and hermeneutics," embodying contradictory properties and functions that encompass both the sacred and secular at once (7-8). In addition to shifting the critical dialogue around the Pardoner toward a more explicit and nuanced discussion of his self-contradiction, my conceit of examining the Pardoner as a figurative relic — or of relics as analogues to the Pardoner — could also be productively applied to another pairing: Geoffrey Chaucer and the text of the *Canterbury Tales*. As a poem constructed of literal, uncompleted fragments, *The Canterbury Tales* is a secular relic of the Western canon, with every editor since Chaucer's original scribe, Adam Pinkhurst, serving as its many custodians. Critics of *The Canterbury Tales* have also long theorized that the Pardoner, like the Wife of Bath, performs as a kind of proxy for Chaucer — in this case, to probe the question of whether a flawed or even culpable man can still disseminate moral truth.<sup>21</sup> While Chaucer's apparent affinities for his troubled clergyman are tantalizing, the Pardoner's character acts as yet another reliquary or Schrödinger's box which appears to hold a significant, but ultimately indeterminable piece of its enigmatic creator.

Like his Pardoner, Geoffrey Chaucer appears accessible to us through his fulsome words and documents of commercial interests, yet Chaucer's own embodiment and intent remain as obscure as the fictional clergyman's "bulles."<sup>22</sup> One of the few surviving images of Chaucer depicts a black-garbed, bearded man in profile, holding a pen in one hand and a rosary in the other (Portrait of Geoffrey Chaucer). Without the benefit of a witty editorial from *The Canterbury Tales*' "Geoffrey" to characterize this pilgrim for us, we may still discern a man with

complex, overlapping allegiances to his faith and his craft, and whose indirect gaze cannot clearly be read. Arguably the most pressing questions that implicate Geoffrey Chaucer's body and character, however, pertain to his apparent violation of another person's body and character. In 1380, according to a Chancery court document which troubles Chaucerians to this day, Geoffrey Chaucer was released from charges of *raptus* — which could mean “rape” or “abduction” — against a baker's daughter named Cecily de Chaumpaigne. While Chaucer was only accused of *raptus*, he made at least one payment of £10 to Cecily, a sum equal to over half of his annual Controller's salary (12). Though we can only speculate as to substance of the charges, Derek Pearsall argues, “that Chaucer was guilty of something is clear from the care he took to secure immunity from prosecution” (137). The nature of Geoffrey Chaucer's wrongdoing remains as unclear as the Pardoner's intent, yet his legacy is similarly marred by an indeterminable aura of scandal for which he purchased a pardon, like those hawked by his most unscrupulous character.

While Chaucer's deeds and intentions in this matter — and, most importantly, the perspective of Cecily de Chaumpaigne — have been lost to history, he appears to have gone to his grave wrestling with the matter of whether a guilty man may tell an aesthetically and morally worthy tale. The end of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and of his career culminated in his infamous retraction, in which he repudiates his secular life's work and begs forgiveness for penning “many a song and many a lecherous lay” (Chaucer 328). Like the Pardoner's final plea for the pilgrims to buy his relics, the retraction's tone is inscrutable as either sincere or mocking: even as Chaucer begs pardon for producing his vulgar texts, he lists their titles one by one, memorializing his oeuvres as he denounces them. While we may never know whether Chaucer's retraction sprung out of his “predicacioun” or, if not “yvel,” mischievous “entencioun,” the

discourse of the relic finally gives us a language to describe what action it performs (Chaucer 6.407-8). By figuratively hacking apart his own corpus, Chaucer both redeemed his works' "wordly vanitees" and secured their immortality — a final contradiction befitting a man who spoke "solaas" and "sentence" from the lips of the Pardoner (328, 1.798).

<sup>1</sup> After D.W. Robertson, Jr., who proposed the influential thesis that all medieval poetry, "even that usually called 'secular,'" actually "clothes truth in a veil" that conceals its spiritual import ("Historical Criticism" 14; A Preface 16).

<sup>2</sup> See Robert P. Miller's "Chaucer's Pardoner, the Scriptural Eunuch, and the Pardoner's Tale" (1955), A. Kernan's "The Archwife and the Eunuch" (1974), or E.R. Amoils's "Fruitfulness and Sterility in the 'Physician's' and 'Pardoner's Tales'" (1974).

<sup>3</sup> In the General Prologue, Geoffrey recounts that the Pardoner loudly sings "Come Hither, Love to Me," while the Summoner "bar to hym a stif burdoun," a potentially bawdy quibble that hints at a sodomitical relationship between the two (Chaucer 1.672-73).

<sup>4</sup> See C.D. Benson's "Chaucer's Pardoner: His Sexuality and Modern Critics" (1982), Beryl Rowland's "Chaucer's Idea of the Pardoner" (1979), Henry Ansgar Kelly's "The Pardoner's Voice, Disjunctive Narrative, and Modes of Effemination" (2001), John M. Bowers's "Dronkenesse is ful of stryvyng: Alcoholism and Ritual Violence in Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*" (1990), or Jeffrey Rayner Meyers's "Chaucer's Pardoner as Female Eunuch" (2000).

<sup>5</sup> In her own writing on Chrétien de Troyes, Bruckner articulates a similar relationship that she calls the "sic et non principle" (19).

<sup>6</sup> See also Robyn Malo's "The Pardoner's Relics (And Why They Matter the Most)" (2008) and Rory B. Egan's "Bulles, Coillons, and Relics in The Pardoner's Tale" (2008).

<sup>7</sup> Medieval moralists maintained that oaths like "By God's heart!" or "Christ's precious blood!" figuratively tore apart the Godhead (Boenig and Taylor, in Chaucer 263, note 2).

<sup>8</sup> For classic arguments to this effect, see Gordon Hall Gerould's discussion of the Pardoner in *Chaucerian Essays* (1952) or Frederick Tupper's "The Pardoner's Tavern" (1914).

<sup>9</sup> According to canon law, "non-notable" relics included body part relics deemed too small to be "notable," relics made of inferior body parts, or a saint's former belongings (Malo 87).

<sup>10</sup> Harry Bailly's title of "hoost" may also be a pun on the Christian Eucharist: the host was traditionally placed beside relics at altars of consecration, and its transubstantiation was referred to as "the miracle of the mass" (Ward 13). The altercation between the Pardoner and the Host comically pits relics against the communion wafer and enshrines them in their customary positions next to one another.

<sup>11</sup> See Dean Spruill Fansler's *Chaucer and the Roman de la Rose* (Vol. 7, 162-66), G. Gelter's "Faux Semblants: Antifraternalism Reconsidered in Jean de Meun and Chaucer," and Timothy L. Stinson's "Illumination and Interpretation: The Depiction and Reception of Faus Semblant in *Romance de la Rose* Manuscripts."

<sup>12</sup> Dahlberg translates Reason's words in prose: "if, when I put names to things that you dare to criticize and blame, I had called testicles relics and had declared relics to be testicles, then you, who here criticize me and goad me on account of them, would reply that 'relics' was an ugly, base word" (135).

<sup>13</sup> The notion of the relic as agent lends itself to a potentially fruitful connection with the current work on "vital materialism" in our field, popularized by *Jane Bennett's Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* and recently addressed in Cohen and Durkett's spring 2013 special issue of *postmedieval* on ecomaterialism.

<sup>14</sup> In his essay "The True Morality of the Pardoner's Tale," Angus Alton suggests that the Pardoner's rhetorical genius likely means that he converts more people than the pious Parson. In his essay on style in "The Pardoner's Tale" in Brown's *A Companion to Chaucer*, John F. Plummer notes that the Pardoner is a singularly skilled manipulator of rhetoric, but that his statements like "I wol yow nat deceive" ensnare his listeners in a Liar's paradox.

<sup>15</sup> See the discussions of the Pardoner in George Lyman Kittredge's *Chaucer and His Poetry* (211-218) and Paul Strohm's *Social Chaucer* (156).

<sup>16</sup> One witness, the monk Benedict of Peterborough reported that the knights' ransacking of Becket's palace was a sign from God that a martyrdom had taken place, because the act reiterated the division of Christ's clothes at his Crucifixion (Freeman 3). He also described the blood under Thomas's head as taking on "the likeness of a crown" (4).

<sup>17</sup> See C.A. Owens's "The Crucial Passages in Five of the 'Canterbury Tales': A Study in Irony and Symbol" (1953), and for a larger review of critical attitudes toward the Pardoner, John Halverson's "Chaucer's Pardoner and the Progress of Criticism" (1970).

<sup>18</sup> See William Komowski's "Chaucer and Wyclif: God's Miracles Against the Clergy's Magic" (2002), John Finlayson's "Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale*: Flatulence, Blasphemy, and the Emperor's Clothes" (2007), Robert W. Shaffern's "The Pardoner's Promises: Preaching and Policing Indulgences in the Fourteenth-Century English Church" (2006), and Brantley L. Bryant's "'By Extorcions I Lyve': Chaucer's *Friar's Tale* and Corrupt Officials" (2007) and John F. Plummer's critical survey in the Variorum edition of "The Summoner's Tale."

<sup>19</sup> The trinity of rioters dividing Death's treasure among themselves — and ultimately murdering one another out of greed — in the Pardoner's tale could be read in part as a satire on the Church's partition of relics (Chaucer 6.777-894).

<sup>20</sup> "And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell," Matthew 5:30. Note the use of the word "profitable." Even if Harry Bailly did hack away at the Pardoner's "offending member" as a way of keeping his physical and spiritual perversity from spreading, this verse from Matthew still constructs his gesture of containment in terms of commerce.

<sup>21</sup> For a recent and protracted exploration of this theory, see Alastair Minnis's *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and the Wife of Bath* (2008).

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