

K. Waddington
E. C. Ronquist
Engl. 313/2
July 21, 2005

Sexuality and the Pardoner

The "General Prologue" offers a number of comments that suggest the Pardoner deviates to some degree from typical "manliness." By examination of these statements, and others elsewhere, in the context of his general character, occupation, chosen companion, tale and the whole work itself, we shall define--at least to some extent--the nature of his deviation; and also, perhaps more importantly, reveal his sexuality to be no idle item of characterisation, but a referential means of achieving a broad satirical commentary.¹

The "General Prologue" then describes the Pardoner with the ambiguous "gentil."(669) His hair, as yellow as wax, he wears long, hanging to his shoulders. He is beardless not from a

¹I realise--from the comments scribbled upon submitted shorter papers--that, despite your professed openness to varied readings, you have a certain bias against satirically based analyses. Be that as it may, this paper will demonstrate a continued effort to supply an individual--and not half-witted--reading, which refuses to cow-tow to the "professor's" view and with the full knowledge that the dear cost will be a "respectable" grade.

recent visit to the barber's shop, but because he has always been and always will be so: it is part of his unnatural natural state. The narrator also makes use of animal imagery in his description of the Pardoner: with ironic juxtaposition his beardlessness is subsequent to "A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot,"(688) the proverbial bearded beast; his eyes were bulging like those of a hare; and, in the clearest statement of his sexuality: "I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare."(691) He is then a beardless and effeminate creature, closely aligned with the animal realm--the specified beasts are all common symbols of carnality--and so, by implication, in opposition to the spiritual.

We might reasonably conclude that there is a falseness to the Pardoner's sexuality, he is a man and yet lacks manliness, and it in this falseness that we find the first connection between sexuality and the inherent satire which the Pardoner provides. Although there is no straightforward statement, in the "General Prologue" that the Pardoner's pardons and relics are not bona fide pardons and relics, the narrator suggests trickery: "And thus, with feyned flaterye and japes,/He made the person and the peuple his apes."(705-6) The feigned flattery is, of course, another example of falseness, and "The Pardoner's Prologue" will finally reveal all his saleable goods to be equally spurious. For now though, there is another indication that his ecclesiastic affections are rather affectations, for the hood he should wear as the outward sign of his propriety and position is most appropriately kept in his wallet--a clear sign that the

value of religion, for the Pardoner, is a monetary value. As we see, even in the "General Prologue," a clear connection is made between the falseness of the Pardoner's sexuality and the falseness of his ecclesiastical position. Since the Pardoner is the opposite face of a coin which features alternately the Summoner, and since these two characters are the last to be catalogued in the "General Prologue," there can be little doubt that we have, in the making, a satirical exposition of the profane and materialistic state of the fourteenth century Church.

The "General Prologue," besides describing the physical and thus suggesting the sexual characteristics of the Pardoner, also places him, as already mentioned, as the "freend and compeer" and riding companion of the Summoner. Even without extensive analysis of the Summoner, which is outside the scope of this paper, we can nevertheless discover a number of salient points in his respect which demonstrate the appropriateness of their friendship. The metaphor of the Summoner and Pardoner being two sides of the same coin is particularly appropriate when we note that for all the effeminate beauty of the Pardoner, the Summoner is hideously ugly with black scabby brows, with a face covered in welks and pimples and carbuncles, with eyes lecherously narrow. The moral corruption of the Summoner is revealed in his corrupted flesh, whilst the pardoner, all falsehood and deception, demonstrates these qualities by his "lovely" appearance. Indeed, even their occupations, when properly conducted, are quite opposite: where the Pardoner offers

indulgences, forgiveness from sin, the Summoner must seek out the heretic sinner and bring him to justice. But for all their dissimilarities, they share a strong liking for strong drink, place pounds (£) in preference to probity in employment:

He wolde suffre for a quart of wyn

A good felawe to have his concubyn

A twelf month, and excuse hym atte fulle;(649-51)

and, by singing in unison a song of "love" are shown both as "sensual" creatures. Even without the confession of "The Pardoner's prologue," we might judge him "guilty" by association. Further, the logical inference from all this is that they are not only alternate faces of the same coin, but alternate faces of the same *counterfeit* two headed coin.²

In simple terms, and as will shortly become more apparent, we might deign that the Summoner represents Hell, the Pardoner, Death. This is not to suggest that we should read both with an allegorical breath, but that understanding each as such representations allows for a clearer understanding of the poem's mechanics.

So what, precisely, is the sexual nature of the Pardoner? There is, as we shall see, no precise answer. We have already seen, from the "General Prologue," that the narrator thinks him either a gelding or a mare, which is to say, we must suppose, a eunuch or a homosexual. But this is only the inference of the narrator based, to a large degree, upon his appearance and

²In the moral sense.

comportment. The Pardoner himself, on the other hand, tells us he will "have a joly wenche in every toun." (Pardoner's Prologue 453) A limited number of explanations are possible: the narrator's assumption was entirely wrong; partly wrong: he is a natural eunuch rather than one actually castrated; bisexual rather than homosexual; the assumption was correct and this is merely bravado. Harry Bailly, in his heated riposte at the conclusion of the tale, seems to suggest that the Pardoner and his testicles have not actually parted company. He too shares the narrator's opinion that the Pardoner is indeed inclined to the same sex. When asked to be the first to pay for and suggestively kiss the relics, he replies:

"Nay, nay!" quod he, "thanne have I Cristes
Curse!
Lat be," quod he, "it shal nat be, so theeche!
Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breeche!
And swere it were a relyk of a seint,
Though it were with thy fundement depeint.
But, by the croys which that Seint Eleyne fond,
I wolde hadde thy coillons in myn hond
In stide of relikes or of seintuarie.
Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;
They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!" (Pardoner's
Tale 946-55)

Besides supporting the homosexual supposition, this passage is vital for it makes a clear connection between the Pardoner's sexuality, his relics, and the Roman Catholic Church.

"Seintuarie," and "shryned" demonstrate that the host's comments are not merely a personal attack but essentially a comment upon an institutionalised religion which either supports immorality within its ecclesiastics or at the very least turns a blind eye to such behaviour. Another important connection we see here is between sexuality and financial gain, and it is this respect that the Pardoner's deviation is essential.

A clearer example of this occurs during the "Wife of Bath's Prologue." It is the repeated mention of debt as an integral part of marriage: "Whan that hym list come forth and paye his dette"; (Wife of Bath's Prologue 153) and "Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral," (Wife of Bath's Prologue 155) that causes the Pardoner to interrupt. His own diction reveals his sudden abhorrence is wrought of that coupling between sex and money, for he asks if the taking of a wife means buying it upon his flesh--and at such expense. Moral sex then--within the institution of marriage--is essentially an act of obedience to God, for we have been told to "go forth and multiply." The Pardoner, by performing his duties with moral intent would demonstrate an act of obedience, serving to multiply the saved souls which are a testament to God's plan and perfection. The Pardoner fails in both these: his sexuality is essentially a barren sexuality: directed at the same sex, it can only multiply evil symbolised by his own carnal pleasure. Similarly, the selling of indulgences and relics centres around worldly profit in direct opposition to the true purpose of such activities. We see then a mirror image of spiritual sterility--where his

occupation is a morally fruitless act--and sexual sterility. The multiplication which is absent in both is replaced with the multiplication of wealth.

His soulless materialism is evident even in his pre-scripted selling pitches: the bone he offers for sale will cure sick cattle and, if the farmer makes use of it himself, will cause his cattle to multiply and sell; wearing the glove he offers will cause the multiplication of grain. Aside from these fruitless claims, the selling of relics serves, of course, to multiply the Pardoner's own wealth; and, more importantly, by catering to man's physical comfort rather than his spiritual well being, serves to multiply avarice and so sin. It is in this respect, for the Pardoner understands perfectly well his business and shows no sign of repentance, that we realise he is in every respect a lost soul. Not only has he failed in his holy office but has made it unholy and actively participates in the corruption of others, offering relics that will multiply worldly wealth at the expense of true spiritual wealth.

Turning now to the Pardoner's tale, he presents this--despite the previous confession in which he paints himself clearly as one corrupt--as a moral tale. Indeed, the morality of the tale is demonstrative of the importance of context and so the importance of his prologue. Taken in isolation it is indeed an *exemplum* which attacks avarice. But language, like literature, has in built ambiguity and intrinsic limitations. Such is the case here, for a tale of morality is used by the Pardoner as an adjunct to his immorality; and this at his own admission:

I preche of no thing but for coveityse
 Therefore my theme is yet, and ever was,
Radix malorum est Cupiditas
 thus kan I preche agayn that same vice,
 Which that I use, and that is avarice."(424-8)

What *seems* to be a sermon against greed is in effect a message to, "Loosen up those purse strings and buy my goods." Once again, we have an example of the Pardoner's falseness: not only is his sex false, his goods bad, but his tale of morality an exercise in immorality. The use of "*Cupiditas*" also serves to again establish the connection between sex and materialism, where the sterility of the former comments upon the worthlessness of the latter. The lack of value intrinsic to worldly wealth is central to the theme of "The Pardoner's Tale," for the three rascals do not discover the true treasure of Grace, but a material treasure which they have set in its place and which leads to spiritual death and damnation. This then is the true meaning of their end: the death of the body is significant only in that it represents death of the spiritual. We might also notice that the treasure lies at the foot of a tree which certainly refers to the tree in the Garden of Eden, and so brings with it the connotation of sexual sin. The behaviour of the three men then is exactly the behaviour of the Pardoner himself. This is suggested from the very beginning of the tale, for the three men are introduced as serious drunkards in a manner much like our introduction to the Pardoner; and death indeed comes for two of them in the form of a wine bottle.

The Pardoner represents the nefarious ecclesiastic whose partnership with the Summoner suggests not an isolated case but a creeping corruption in the Church. Chaucer's satire is particularly evident when viewed in the broad context of "The Canterbury Tales" which, we should always recall, begins with the "General Prologue" presenting the tellers of tales in a particular and notable order, and ends with "The Parson's Tale" and author's retraction. Chaucer, we must therefore realise, makes use of sexual deviation and sexual sterility to perfectly describe the physical decay and corruption which accompanies the abandonment of spirituality. The quest for death, in "The Pardoner's Tale," which results in the discovery of a false treasure is a mirror image of the Pardoner's own quest for false treasure which results in his spiritual death.

Works Cited

Chaucer The Riverside Chaucer
New York. Oxford University Press. 1988.