I THE FAMOUS pronouncement of Chaucer’s narrator on Chaucer’s Pardoner—"I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare" (I.691)—poses several questions for modern readers. What are the options that it offers for the interpretation of the Pardoner? Why is the narrator unable to decide between them? To what extent does Chaucer maintain this indeterminacy about the Pardoner and require the reader, like the narrator, to remain forever undecided? Does Chaucer in any way lead the reader to a greater certitude? If so, what is the sexual status of the Pardoner? Finally, what is the moral significance of that status? These questions arise partly from the complexity of Chaucer’s poetry and partly from present-day ignorance of medieval sexual concepts and terminology.

The term “mare,” in particular, has proved notoriously difficult for modern readers to interpret, and even when the term is glossed, the possibility that the Pardoner may be a “mare” is often ignored in favor of the belief that he is certainly a “geldyng,” or eunuch. Psychological, moral, and spiritual interpretations of the Pardoner’s eunuchry and of the sterility and, less accurately, the impotence with which it is associated permeate current critical treatments of this pilgrim. A faithful reading of Chaucer’s line requires that the balance be restored. We need a gloss for “mare,” and we need interpretations of the Pardoner’s portrait and of his prologue and tale that explore the implications of his possible status as “mare” just as fully as criticism has already explored the implications of his possible status as “geldyng.” It is neither likely nor desirable that such a reading will replace the view of the Pardoner as a eunuch; rather, it is to be hoped it will shed new light on familiar aspects of Chaucer’s rich characterization.

As a contribution to this work, I wish to offer, in the first and longer part of this essay, a more detailed argument than has so far been attempted in favor of viewing the Pardoner as a possible homosexual. In the second part, I consider the spiritual implications of the Pardoner’s sexuality by redirecting attention to his bagful of pardons and relics. The initial references to these objects occupy a significant place in the middle section of the Pardoner’s tripartite portrait in the General Prologue: he is not only a “geldyng or a mare” (II. 669-91) but also both a “pardonner” peddling false relics (II. 692-706) and a “noble ecclesiaste” (II. 707-14). Through an interpretation of the Pardoner as homosexual, I hope to confirm what this structure suggests: that his pardons and relics constitute the essential link, the lifeline, between this sexually anomalous Christian and his church.

For many of Chaucer’s readers, the narrator’s pronouncement is intimately linked with certain deservedly influential commentaries on the Pardoner’s sexual status, and any reconsideration of the subject must acknowledge its debt to those studies and carefully discriminate its conclusions from theirs. In his ground-breaking review of medieval texts on medicine and physiognomy, Walter Clyde Curry opened discussion of the Pardoner’s physical nature. Although the point is seldom noticed, Curry interprets the narrator’s pronouncement as offering a choice between impotence and effeminacy (p. 58). He treats the mention of these two sexual phenomena as serving to define a third possibility, underlying and unnamed, and then shows that the Pardoner’s physical characteristics—long, fine hair; high voice; glaring eyes; and beardlessness—fit the descriptions of eunuchs offered by medieval doctors and physiognomists. All but one of Curry’s sources, moreover, associate eunuchry with immorality, and some also insist that the congenital eunuch is more evil than the castrated eunuch. The sins attributed to eunuchs include dissolve-
ness, shamelessness, cunning, and viciousness. In what has proved the least convincing part of his argument, Curry contends that the other pilgrims, and Chaucer's audience, would have been able to go beyond the narrator's speculations to deduce that the Pardoner suffers from the (presumably rare) condition of congenital eunuchry.

Since in the view of the medieval experts the physical characteristics of all eunuchs are much the same, Curry's labeling of the Pardoner as a congenital eunuch is grounded not in unarguable physiognomical fact, as is sometimes believed, but in fallible literary interpretation. One argument appeals to the influence of source. Chaucer may have based his Pardoner, in part, on the characterization of an eunuch by a physiognomist Polemon (pp. 62-64), and Curry assumes that because Polemon's eunuch was a congenital eunuch, Chaucer's must be, too. A second argument rests on Curry's own estimate of the Pardoner's character: the depth of the Pardoner's depravity is seen as justifying his classification with the more malicious congenital eunuchs rather than with the comparatively benign castrated eunuchs (pp. 59-64). Moreover, by concentrating on the moral distinction between congenital eunuchs and castrated eunuchs, a prominent distinction in his sources, Curry distracts his readers from what he himself understands to be the different distinction in the General Prologue: that between "geldyng" and "mare." While he reveals the accuracy with which Chaucer uses the stereotype of the eunuch for some of the details of the Pardoner's portrait, Curry neither proves that the Pardoner is a congenital eunuch nor definitively exhausts the implications of the narrator's pronouncement.

The relationship of the Pardoner's eunuchry to his spiritual condition and to the larger themes of Chaucer's work was first addressed in a sophisticated way by Robert Miller. Miller examines medieval biblical glosses that attempt to resolve a conflict in attitudes toward eunuchs in the Old Testament, Deuteronomy xxiii. 1, reflecting a literal-minded racial and sexual perception of holiness, excludes eunuchs from the temple, while Isaiah lvi.3-5, taking a more spiritual approach, gives assurances that righteous eunuchs are among God's people. The medieval commentators found a solution to this conflict in a statement of Christ's discriminating among congenital eunuchs, involuntary castrates, and "eunuchs who have made themselves such for the Kingdom of heaven" (Matt. xix.12). Identifying the last group, the voluntary celibates in the service of God, as the eunuchs of Isaiah who will be accepted by God, the commentators go on to invent a second group of metaphorical eunuchs who will be rejected, as in Deuteronomy: those who, while capable of good works, deliberately remain spiritually sterile. Miller argues that the Pardoner's physical eunuchry is the sign of his deliberate spiritual sterility. His chosen role as eunuchus non Dei is seen as bitterly satiric, since he has a special responsibility as a churchman to be a eunuchus Dei, fruitful in good works.

If, however, Chaucer did use the Pardoner's physical condition as a sign in this way, he ran a considerable risk of undermining the very spiritual values he was attempting to communicate. Both Christ and the medieval commentators were reacting against the physical determinism of one strain of Jewish tradition. For them, involuntary eunuchry had no necessary moral significance at all; they were attempting to free the career of the soul from questions of genital competency. Miller's Pardoner, in contrast, is a static figure. While Miller rightly emphasizes the free action by which the Pardoner would have become a eunuchus non Dei, he does not recognize in Chaucer's characterization a continuing human potential for change. Because the immutable physical fact of eunuchry is taken as the sign of the Pardoner's spiritual status, his soul cannot be allowed its own career independent of his sexual destiny. Despite this difficulty, Miller's study has done more than any other to establish the level of seriousness on which the problem of the Pardoner's sexuality should be addressed. Moreover, the biblical materials he has brought to our attention can now be seen as documenting one kind of consideration that medieval people gave to a question central to Chaucer's characterization of the Pardoner: What is the place of sexually different, or "deviant," persons in the scheme of salvation?

Wide acceptance of the conclusions of Curry and Miller has had the unintended side effect of dulling readers' responses to the Pardoner; this pilgrim, it seems, has been fully "explained." As Donald Howard puts it in The Idea of the Can-
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In his dazzling treatment of the Pardoner as a grotesque, as a “feminoid” or “hermaphroditic” male, Howard succeeds in re-creating the strangeness of this pilgrim—his power to mystify, frighten, and fascinate. Partly from motives of anger and revenge, the Pardoner alienates himself from the community of human and divine values; in Howard’s view, he becomes—like evil itself as defined in medieval philosophy, like the grotesques in manuscript illuminations, and like the very fragment of the Canterbury Tales in whose tale appears—something “on the periphery of the ordered world of created goodness,” “marginal,” “floating,” “outside,” “demonic” (pp. 338–41). Curiously, Howard accepts as fact the congenital and “scriptural” eunuchry that theorists have attributed to the Pardoner and claims that we know the character’s sexual status while the narrator and the others do not (pp. 343–45). His discussion of the Pardoner nevertheless proceeds, rightly I think, as if we share the same general perspective as the pilgrims—that is, as if we too remain uncertain about the Pardoner’s sexual status and thus experience the whole man as mysterious.

Howard fears that any interpretation of the Pardoner as homosexual would “explain” the Pardoner in the same deadening and unprofitable way as the belief in the character’s eunuchry has and that the modern stereotype of the effeminate male homosexual would be anachronistically used to deny the Pardoner’s mystery. While I agree that the danger of another reductive reading is real, a view of the Pardoner as homosexual would not necessarily have this effect; for the danger lies not in any particular sexual definition but in the manner of relating the Pardoner’s sexuality to his spirituality. Nor is the stereotype of effeminate male homosexuality an anachronism; it is as authentically medieval as it is modern. Indeed, the medieval confusion of homosexuality with effeminacy and, as we shall see, with other sexual phenomena indicates both that Chaucer’s contemporaries tried to explain homosexuality to themselves and that they failed to dispel the mystery it presented to them. It is true, however, that I cannot produce a Pardoner quite so enigmatic as Howard’s, but this difference arises not from our disagreement about the Pardoner’s possible homosexuality but from my unwillingness to accept, with Howard (p. 351), the Pardoner’s definition of himself as a “ful vicious man.” By turning our attention from the standard glosses on the Pardoner’s sexuality to the literary characterization itself, Howard has brought the Pardoner alive again; but in his valuable explication of the Pardoner as a grotesque, he accepts too fully the Pardoner’s own tortured and theatrical self-image. While giving detailed consideration to the possibility that the Pardoner is isolated from his heterosexual and homophobic peers by a condition of homosexuality, I emphasize the Pardoner’s identity as a pilgrim in the fellowship of other pilgrims, motivated, even in his cupidity, by the love they all seek and experiencing an anguished self-division not unlike what others suffer.

The first step in a reconsideration of the Pardoner’s sexuality must be the establishment of a gloss for “mare.” “Geldyng” and "mare" are homely metaphors that must have had meanings both familiar and fairly precise for Chaucer’s medieval audience; modern readers, however, face difficulties in recovering those meanings. Curry’s influence is registered, but often inaccurately or incompletely, in modern editions of the Canterbury Tales. Among recent editors, only Donald Howard glosses both “geldyng” and “mare,” and he interprets the first as “castrated eunuch” and the second as “congenital eunuch.” John Hurt Fisher preserves Curry’s too narrow interpretation of “geldyng” as suggesting impotence, while Albert Baugh reflects what I think is the most common understanding of Curry’s argument (and of the Pardoner’s status): that “geldyng” means “eunuch” (without implying any differentiation of types) and that the Pardoner is a eunuch. Neither Fisher nor Baugh, however, repeats Curry’s interpretation of “mare” as a reference to effeminacy or offers any alternative gloss for that word. Finally, while both the Middle English Dictionary and the Oxford English Dictionary fully document the use of “geldyng” as a term for “eunuch,” neither includes any evidence for a meaning of “mare” relevant to Chaucer’s context.

For many modern readers, the obvious possible translations for “mare” are “effeminate male” and “homosexual male.” Until recently,
though, there appeared to be no evidence that the word had been used in either of these senses. Then, in 1973, Jill Mann pointed to a Latin poem by the twelfth-century satirist Walter of Chatillon in which homosexual men, also described as effeminate, are labeled “mares”: “equa fit equus” “the horse becomes a mare” (*Medieval Estates Satire*, p. 146). While it is not certain that Chaucer knew Walter’s works, they were relatively well known in England, and the poem does add weight to the suggestion that “mare” may mean “effeminate male” or “homosexual male” or both. But even if there were no question about Chaucer’s having read the poem, one supporting text would not constitute proof of his meaning.

We need not wait for the discovery of more supporting texts, however. The details of the Pardoner’s portrait and the term “geldyng” create a context that suggests criteria for glossing “mare.” “Mare” must be a term commonly used in Chaucer’s day to designate 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 and that were thought to have broad effects on the psyche and on character. The gloss that most satisfactorily fulfills these criteria is “a homosexual.” Chaucer did not know the word “homosexual,” of course, since it did not enter the language until 1869, but he might have referred to what we call homosexuality by making a biblical reference (to sodomites), a mythological reference (to Ganymede or Orpheus), a historical reference (to Julius Caesar, for example), or a philosophical reference (to sinners against nature). As we shall see, the choice of “mare” has several important and related advantages: it avoids provoking an immediate response of condemnation, which other references might have invited; it focuses attention not on sexual acts but on a type of person in whose soma and psyche Chaucer apparently believed homosexuality to be deeply rooted; and it suggests an attitude on the narrator’s part in keeping with his character—a mixture of sympathy, amusement, and condescension.

Since several historical accounts are available, I shall not pause to document in detail the familiarity of Chaucer’s audience with male homosexuality; I should like to explore instead the situation reflected in my criteria for glossing “mare,” the confusion of homosexuality with other sexual phenomena.

In using a word denoting femaleness, Chaucer reflects one ancient and widespread misunderstanding about male homosexuality, that it involves a man’s becoming in some sense a woman. The concept of effeminacy provides one way of thinking about this supposed transformation, but care must be taken in interpreting references to effeminacy in the medieval setting. The *Middle English Dictionary* records only two uses of the word “effeminate,” both in the sense “self-indulgent” or “unreasonable.” Satires on the fop, often described as long-haired and beardless, reflect a perception of feminization of behavior and appearance without any necessary suggestion of homosexuality (Mann, *Medieval Estates Satire*, pp. 141-48). In medieval Latin, however, *effeminatus* sometimes means “homosexual,” as in the Vulgate Bible, and this sense had passed into English by the time of the King James Bible (Bailey, pp. 38-39, 48-53). There is some evidence, moreover, that the young aristocrat who aspired to fashion had to be careful to observe the boundaries that marked off effeminacy and homosexuality. At the end of a lengthy set of instructions on conduct, dress, and grooming in Guillaume de Lorris’ *Roman de la Rose*, for example, the God of Love tells the young lover:

>Cous tes manches, tes cheveux pigne,  
Mai ne te farde ne ne guigne:  
Ce n’apartient s’as damés non,  
Ou a ceus de mauvais renon,  
Qui amors par male aventurer  
Out trovees contre Nature.

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. (II. 2169-74)

Just as not all effeminate males were suspected of homosexuality, so not all homosexual males were perceived as effeminate. In his translation of Dante’s *Inferno*, Mark Musa notes the contrast between the effeminate speech patterns of the sodomitical clerks in Canto xv and the more robust manner of the sodomitical soldiers in Canto xvi. Since the substance of what consti-
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Tutes effeminacy in males is culturally defined and subject to change, it is not necessary to find in the Middle Ages exact replicas of our current stereotype of effeminacy in homosexual males (including, for example, distinctive walk or hand movements): it is only necessary to show that certain types of feminized behavior and appearance in males were sometimes interpreted as evidence of homosexuality. Thus, even if the primary meaning of “mare” was “an effeminate male,” a second meaning may have been “a possibly homosexual male.”

Another ancient way of conceiving the male homosexual’s supposed participation in the feminine was to think of him as a hermaphrodite. In Hellenic rites and legends, the hermaphrodite is a double god, a being with the overt equipment of both sexes (i.e., male genitals and female breasts), a symbol of unity, fruitfulness, and eternal life. In Hellenistic art, however, the hermaphrodite is an extremely feminized figure; though recognizably male, representative of one ideal of homosexual beauty. Interest in this type of hermaphrodite revived during the twelfth-century resurgence of classical scholarship (Curtius, pp. 113-16). A late and perhaps unconscious reflection of this tradition, evidence of its thorough absorption into European thinking, appears in the treatment of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Middle English Purity, a work commonly ascribed to the Gawain poet. The poet describes Lot’s first glimpse of the angels as they pass through the crowded streets of Sodom toward his house; they are extraordinarily beautiful young men with beardless chins, rosy complexions, and luxurious hair like raw silk:

As he stared into be strete ber stout men played,
He syze per swey in asent swete men twayne;
Bolde burnez were bay bohe, wyth berdles chynnez,
Royl rollande fax, to raw sylk lyke,
Of ble as be breere-flor where so be bare schew[e]d;
Ful clene watz be countenaunce of her cler yzen;
Wonk whit watz her wede and wel hit hem scm[e]ld.
(II. 787-93)

On one level the beauty of the angels is meant to suggest a spiritual excellence superior to all considerations and distinctions of human sexuality: but as A. C. Spearing remarks, it also explains something left unexplained in the biblical text: how the men of Sodom came to desire homosexual intercourse with the angels. It seems likely that a hermaphrodite or feminoid male would have been suspected of sexual deviance.

An alternative to thinking of the male homosexual as a woman-man was to think of him as a nonman, for homosexuality was long confused with eunuchry. In Gautier de Leu’s thirteenth-century fabliau “La Veuve,” for example, a widow who remarries finds the vigorous sexual performance of her new husband on the wedding night nonetheless disappointing:

Nos avons caiens un bruhier,
un durfeut, un hebohet.
Ahi! con Damerdex me het
qui fui des bons valles aquius,
et des cortois et des gentius,
si pris cest caitif par nature.

Et cis ribaus me tient plus vil que le femier de son cortil,
mais je sai bien, par Saint Eloi,
qu’il n’est mie de bone loi,
ainsi est de caius de Mont Wimer:
il n’a soing de dames amer.

What have we here? An impotent, beardless ne’er-do-well! Ah me!
The Lord must hate me bitterly, who turned away from fine young men, well born, courteous, and then wound up with this congenital bum!

This scoundrel shows me less regard than he does the dungheap in the yard. However, by Saint Loy I know his moral code is just as low as that of those on Mount Wimer:

for woman’s love he doesn’t care:21

The widow equates less than heroic sexual performance with impotence, impotence with beardless eunuchry, both of these with homosexuality, and all of these with heresy, for the reference to Mount Wimer concerns a large group of bougres who were burned to death for homosexuality and heresy in Champagne in 1239. The fabliau makes fun of the widow and her insatiable appetite, but the intended comedy of her speech must have depended partly on the pervasiveness of just such misunderstandings;22 at the same time, the poet who made comedy out of the widow’s confusion must himself have been in some degree
superior to it. Like the French poet, Chaucer may be seen as making artistic use of what he perceived to be common misunderstandings of sexual phenomena. The Pardoner’s possible eunuchry may contribute to the portrait of a homosexual since medieval people apparently strove to understand homosexuality by identifying it with now one, now another, sexual anomaly.

Seen against this background, Chaucer’s portrait of the Pardoner in the General Prologue emerges as a pastiche of allusions to the three distinct sexual phenomena with which homosexuality was often confused-effeminacy, hermaphroditism, and eunuchry-and thus very probably to homosexuality itself. In the order of their appearance in the portrait the allusions are the description of the Pardoner’s hair-its length and fineness suggesting effeminacy, eunuchry, and hermaphroditism and his grooming of it suggesting effeminacy; the Pardoner’s concern with fashion, implying effeminacy: the references to goats and hares, suggesting hermaphroditism; the high voice, connoting effeminacy and eunuchry; and the beardlessness, a symptom of effeminacy, eunuchry, hermaphroditism, and homosexuality. Furthermore, the glaring eyes and the references to goats, hares, and mares connote extreme lechery, which is at least as suggestive of sexual deviance as of sexual inadequacy.

What this catalog shows is that most of the allusions tend to be multivalent, and the reason is that the lines between these various sexual phenomena were fluid in medieval theory. It is impossible to say whether beardlessness, for example, was more likely to suggest eunuchry or homosexuality to a medieval person. Because of this fluidity, too, references to effeminacy, hermaphroditism, and eunuchry could serve as a code for homosexuality. Finally, while the categories “effeminate,” “hermaphrodite,” and “eunuch” can each account for some of the Pardoner’s characteristics, only the category “homosexual” can account for all of them. For example, while the Pardoner’s interest in fashion can be referred directly only to effeminacy (and not to eunuchry or hermaphroditism) and the narrator’s allusion to goats only to hermaphroditism, both can be referred to homosexuality through what the medieval audience regarded as the mediating concepts of effeminacy and hermaphroditism.

Thus at a minimum it seems impossible to exclude the suggestion of homosexuality from the portrait. It is also impossible for the reader not to be influenced by the opening frame for this physical description: the presentation of the Pardoner’s association with the Summoner. The nature of this association has long been debated, but there is no doubt that the Pardoner is introduced to us traveling with a male “friend” and “compeer” and that the two are singing, in their contrasting voices, a love song, “Com hider, love, to me” (ll. 670-71). This tableau may be read in two ways. The Pardoner may be seen as a frustrated heterosexual who associates himself with the lecherous Summoner in order to deny his own impotence and to acquire symbolically the Summoner’s virility; or he may be seen as a homosexual, ambivalent about disclosing his status, who nonetheless becomes suspect through the public display of this ambiguous friendship. These are the two possibilities that the narrator makes explicit, I believe, when he provides the closing frame for the physical description of the Pardoner: “I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare.” Thus these three parts of the Pardoner’s portrait-the opening-tableau, the physical description, and the closing pronouncement-fit together in a way that has not been fully appreciated. For the medieval audience, with its confused and limited lexicon of sexual terms and concepts, it was the physical description. I suspect, that was most ambiguous; the opening frame first provided implicit guidance, and the closing frame then explicit guidance, to its interpretation. Modern readers may have a different experience, since the meaning of the Pardoner’s friendship with the Summoner has been clouded by controversy and the meaning of the term “mare” has long been lost. In this situation, the physical description, once it is set in the context of medieval sexual theory, seems to me to provide the strongest evidence of the Pardoner’s possible homosexuality, which in turn helps us both to recognize a possible implication of his association with the Summoner and to gloss “mare.”

Given, then, that Chaucer’s text explicitly and implicitly raises the issue of homosexuality, the narrator’s treatment of the Pardoner seems to
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unfold in this way. Faced with a somewhat bewildering set of indications to interpret, the narrator rather shrewdly cuts through the complexity to suggest that the Pardoner is either a nonman, that is, a eunuch, or a woman-man, a homosexual. Indeed the phrase "I trowe," which may denote either speculation or certainty, 25 serves to dramatize the narrator in his role as interpreter, dealing confidently yet respectfully with resistant reality. There may even be an element of self-congratulation in his announced inability to decide exactly what the Pardoner's status is; the narrator may think that the double reference to eunuchry and homosexuality displays his sophistication. Actually, though, he is rather like the modern person who has not mastered the distinctions among homosexuals, bisexuals, transvestites, and transsexuals. One consequence of the narrator's characteristically limited perception is that we initially encounter the Pardoner as a kind of puzzle to be solved rather than as a pilgrim to be judged.

The animal imagery of the narrator's pronouncement also helps temporarily to isolate the Pardoner from moral judgment. The narrator perceives the Pardoner as someone conspicuously deficient in the animal sphere of perfection, lacking integrity of sexual identity, physical intactness, or procreative competency—the amoral perfections, elaborated in various cultural forms, that the narrator admires in the Monk and Harry Bailey. Though found wanting in one sphere, the Pardoner is perceived as supremely competent in another; thus the significance of the "but" as the narrator turns to the Pardoner's work in the world: "But of his craft, fro Berwyk into Ware, / Ne was ther swich another pardoner" (II. 692-93). Sheer expertise, unrelated to its use or purpose, is one of the narrator's chief measures of value throughout the General Prologue (Mann, *Medieval Estates Satire* p.194), and this ideal, despite its moral limitations, has a special virtue in regard to the Pardoner since it embraces more than sexuality. For the narrator, the "pardoner" and the "noble ecclesiaste" are as important as the "geldyng" or the "mare." The narrator sets an example of not reducing the Pardoner to his sexuality, an example that at other levels of response Chaucer means us to emulate.

Nevertheless we cannot be so content with the narrator's tentative diagnosis of the Pardoner as the narrator himself is. As viewed by the medieval church, eunuchry and homosexuality had very different moral statuses; pace the doctors and physiognomists, eunuchry was not in itself regarded as sinful, while homosexual acts (the concept of a homosexual condition was not recognized by the moral theologians) were considered grave sins.26 From this standpoint the narrator's self-satisfied conclusion that the Pardoner is one thing or the other is quite astonishing, for it reflects an essentially secular perspective. Since, however, we must view the Pardoner as a pilgrim— that is, not only as an animal being and an expert worker but also as a moral being with a spiritual destiny—we need to know more than the narrator is able to tell us. The narrator's comment on the Pardoner's sexual status preserves immutably for all time the narrator's own uncertainty about his fellow pilgrim. It does not fix to the same degree the mystery about the Pardoner himself, although the absence of any other explicit statement about his sexuality means that a choice between "geldyng" and "mare" or any extrapolation using both terms will always be an interpretation. Many critics, having chosen "geldyng," have traced the implications of their choice in readings of the Pardoner's prologue and tale; while admitting that the Pardoner may be a eunuch as well, I choose to emphasize his possible status as a "mare," or homosexual, and I should like to explore some of the consequences of my choice.

II

It is rather widely agreed that the avarice the Pardoner boasts about is a screen sin, concealing some graver defect of body or soul or both.27 Like his interpreters, the Pardoner betrays an interest in degrees of sinfulness, identifying one of the rioters in his tale as the "proudeste" (I. 716), another rioter (or perhaps the same one) as the "worste of hem" (I. 776), Harry Bailey as "moost enveloped in synne" (I. 942), and himself as "a ful vicious man" (I. 459). Also, as his constant preaching text, "Radix malorum" (I. 334), reveals, he is obsessively interested in underlying states of sinfulness. and other evidence suggests that he finds the root of all evil in the body. Although his semihysterical discussion of the so-called tavern sins seems not to
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rest on any positive values, it does have a unifying theme. All the sins are developed to some degree in a way that relates them to the human body.

Gluttony, of course, has a natural relation to the body, but the Pardoner’s tracing of ingested food from “the tendre mouth” to the “shorte throte” (compared to a privy) to the “stynkyng cod” Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun” and at last to the bowels with their “foul . . . sou” (II. 12-35) tends to turn all eating into an obscene act. He even treats the sin of Adam and Eve as an act of gluttony, ignoring its intellectual content. Similarly, cursing is treated not as a rejection of Christ’s divinity and teachings but as an attack on Christ’s body; all the examples the Pardoner provides refer to Christ’s body and passion, and he later says of the rioters “Cristes blessed body [they] torente” (I. 709). Finally, gambling is most dramatically presented to us in an imagined scene in which the dice are referred to as “bones” (I. 656). The treatment of these vices suggests an obsessive concern with the body as the source of sin, the instrument of sin, and the victim of sin. Significantly, avarice, the screen sin, is not presented as having an intimate connection with the body; instead it is decidedly intellectual, requiring of the Pardoner great cleverness in plying the tricks of his trade.

A key passage in the Pardoner’s prologue hints more directly at what the concealed and deadly sinfulness in the body might be. The Pardoner describes one of his most ingenious tricks for persuading people to venerate his relics and offer alms:

Goode men and wommen, o thyng warne I yow:
If any wight be in this chirche now
That hath doon synne horrible, that he
Dar nat for shame, of it yshryven be,
Or any womman. be she yong or old,
That hath ymaad hir housbonde cokewold.
Swhich folk shal have no power ne no grace
To offren to m y relikes in this place. (II. 377-84)

The specificity about the woman’s sin and the lack of specificity about the man’s provoke interpretation. It seems likely that the unnamed sin shares a number of characteristics with infidelity: it is a sexual sin; it is peculiarly associated with one sex—with men, as culpable infidelity had long been associated with women; and it inspires a special opprobrium that arises from a cultural bias rather than from the principles of Christian ethics. Male homosexuality meets all these criteria.29 Most important, the shame that attends the naming of the sin even in the confessional seems a clear allusion to homosexuality. Long before homosexuality was christened by Lord Alfred Douglas “the Love that dare not speak its name,” it had been commonly referred to in some variation of the formula found in Chaucer’s Parson’s Tale: “thilke abhomynable synne, of which that no man unnethe oghte speke ne write” (x.909) 30

It would be wrong to seem to deny, by qualification, the intense homophobia embodied in this notorious phrase, and yet it is important to recognize that there were shadings of opinion and feeling about homosexuality.31 In the Canterbury reactions of the other pilgrims reflect a setting in which a homosexual person, while possibly aware of the sometimes inflicted on his kind, did not feel a proximate fear for his safety. The Pardoner’s flaunting of his friendship with the Summoner, though undoubtedly compulsive behavior, is probably not undertaken without some realistic assessment of the risks. As the pilgrims’ apprehension about his ribaldry and Harry’s false camaraderie suggest, what the Pardoner must confront in others is not their outright condemnation of him but their discomfiture, with its varying degrees of amusement, fear, sympathy, disgust, and ambiguous tolerance. In ministers of the church’s sacraments, like Chaucer’s Parson, the Pardoner would almost certainly encounter at least unthinking, if not vehement, reflections of that homophobia which the church had helped both to create and to perpetuate. In himself, the Pardoner has to contend with that self-hatred which internalizes the judgments of others. Ultimately the man who cannot confess the unnamed and unnameable sin is the Pardoner himself.

It may well be, moreover, that the Pardoner’s inability to approach the confessional arises partly from his perception of the gulf between what the church was prepared to forgive and what he had to confess. As his portrait suggests, the Pardoner’s homosexuality is a profound part of his being, an aspect that Chaucer could portray (and probably conceive of) only by project-
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ing a biological cause. The Pardoner himself seems to feel that he is in a state of alienation from Christ and the church, a state that is more than the sum of his sinful acts. *Mala,* or specific evil deeds, are not his concern; the radix, or root condition, is. But in the matter of homosexuality, as in matters of human sexuality generally, the church’s moral theology tended to focus on acts, not on persons; and while it took account of a variety of actors, it defined them in terms of certain fixed statuses only: young or old, male or female, married or unmarried, clerical or lay. It understood homosexual acts only as the perverse behavior of basically heterosexual persons. In other words, the church was prepared to deal with sinners like the scabby Summoner but not with the tortured Pardoner. The “inverted” Pardoner did not fit the church’s definitions and could scarcely form a sincere purpose to amend a condition in himself he probably felt he had no power to change. Chaucer’s study of homosexuality in the Pardoner seems to represent a deliberate intention to explore the inner reality of an outcast especially despised by his society and especially misunderstood by his church.

It is no accident that the man who cannot confess becomes a pardonner. Seizing on a theologically marginal church practice, the granting of indulgences, the Pardoner subverts the sacrament of penance he cannot use while simultaneously setting himself up as a substitute confessor. Officially, he had the power to offer almsgivers only remission of the punishment due sins already absolved by a priest. In practice, like many actual pardoners, he sold supposed absolution from sin. While some of his customers may have been naïve Christians who could not appreciate the difference, others must have hoped to buy spiritual safety dishonestly, without reforming their lives. By exploiting the potential for self-deceit in those he imagines condemn him, the Pardoner attempts to convict his customers of being themselves “envoloped in synne.” As he leads them away from the legitimate sacrament, it is as if he were saying, “If I cannot be truly forgiven, neither shall they be.” At the same time, the Pardoner constantly enacts in reverse the scene of absolution he longs for. As he dispenses his own brand of absolution, often arousing in his audience true contrition (vi.430-31), it is as if he were saying, “If there is anyone the church will not forgive, I will forgive him.” all the while hoping that the forgiveness he dispenses will magically flow back to cleanse himself.

This manipulation of the sacrament is one of the things the Pardoner does that tend to be obscured by what he says as he constructs a smoke screen of single-minded avarice. But his intimate association with confession betrays, beneath his practiced cynicism, the seriousness with which he regards the sacrament. Apparently he does not allow himself the easy out he offers others—the chance to buy forgiveness and satisfaction with money or specific good works. For himself the Pardoner requires true contrition, true purpose of amendment; he does believe that Christ’s pardon is best. Interestingly, it was the subversion of the sacrament, more than the misappropriation of funds, that other churchmen principally complained of in actual pardoners. But Chaucer’s association of his Pardoner with false relics may be a more imaginative touch, since it is not especially characteristic of the pardoners described in contemporary documents. Perhaps nothing else about the Pardoner expresses so poignantly his anguish about his body as do the jars anh bottles of old bones and bits of clothing he always carries with him. When Harry Bailey charges that the Pardoner would try to pass off his “olde breech” with (his] fundement depeint” as a relic and proposes to enshrine the Pardoner’s testicles in a hog’s turd “in stide of relikes or of seintuarie” (vi.948-55), the symbolic equivalence between the relics and the Pardoner himself becomes almost explicit. For many readers, Harry’s crudity must suddenly and explosively bring to consciousness a truth they have already apprehended subliminally.

Binding himself again to a marginal expression of the church’s life, the veneration of relics, the Pardoner expresses both his fear, nearing conviction, that his own body, like the tavern in his tale, is the devil’s temple (1.470) and his faint but continuing hope that this same body may yet prove to be the holy temple of God. Because he uses false relics to make money and to entice others away from true contrition, the relics become, like his body, sources of sin to himself and to others. Moreover, by offering the
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relics for veneration, he dopes his customers into kissing what is symbolically the instrument of that sodomitical sin he and they have learned to despise. At the same time, the Pardoner seems always to be hoping that others will repose a genuine faith in his relics, a faith that will miraculously transform his relics and the body they represent into holy things. In all his trafficking with relics, the plea for money is partly a camouflage for the plea for the redemptive kiss. The relics he uses for this purpose must be false. His relics must be as unholy as he thinks his body is so that the hoped-for transformation can be “real.” The Pardoner will never experience such a transformation, of course, since he will never be able to respect the faith of those he deceives and corrupts.

The notorious difficulty of accounting for the Pardoner’s offering to the pilgrims relics he has already admitted to be false arises in part from overemphasizing the mercenary motive. But by taking the pilgrims into his confidence to a degree, the Pardoner has developed a more intimate relationship with this audience than he usually develops with his more gullible victims. In offering relics now, he is acting under an unusually strong compulsion to acquire that personal validation he is always seeking through them. Even on this occasion, though, the Pardoner’s attempt to reach out to Harry Bailey and the community he represents is doomed by the inveterate ambivalence of the Pardoner’s own attitudes.

The latent aggression in the Pardoner’s statement that Harry “shalt kisse the reliques everychon” (1. 944) and the latent sexual implication in his command to Harry to “Unbokele anon thy purs” (1. 945) turn the scene into one of implied seduction or even rape; the Pardoner uses his homosexuality as a weapon. In addition, by characterizing Harry as “enveluped in synne” (1. 942) and offering to pardon Harry’s sins, the Pardoner contemptuously portrays the heterosexual Christian as needing the absolution of the despised sodomite. But with the same gesture with which he assaults Harry’s heterosexual sensitivities, the Pardoner asks for love; and with the same gesture with which he charges another with sin, he seeks forgiveness for himself. Understandably Harry reacts to the threats to himself in the Pardoner’s behavior and does not hear the cry for acceptance. Example of natural manhood that he is, Harry retaliates by casting aspersions on the Pardoner’s virility and by threatening castration (II. 94655). But as the reference to the true relic of Saint Helen’s cross suggests, the ultimate issue is not perfection in the physical order but holiness in the spiritual order.19 The Pardoner’s defeat lies in the clear implication of Harry’s obscenity that both the Pardoner’s relics and his body are not holy.

The goal of the final scene, as of all the Pardoner’s maneuvers, is a kiss. The scene does in fact end with a kiss, of course, though not one of the sort the Pardoner was seeking. The Knight engineers a reconciliation between Harry and the Pardoner that restores a degree of mutual tolerance while avoiding all the issues. We may be thankful, though, that the Pardoner does not receive the kiss that in rage and self-contempt he wished to extort from an abased Harry. It would truly have been an obscene kiss, not because of any homosexual element, but because of its sadomasochistic nature. Left unanswered, however, is the question whether the Pardoner will ever receive the kiss that in another sense he was seeking: not a kiss mirroring his own self-contempt or a kiss of ambivalent social tolerance but a kiss expressing genuine acceptance of his humanity—in Christian terms, a kiss confirming his part in the Father’s creation and in the Son’s redemption.

Through his manipulation of the sacrament of penance, the Pardoner covertly seeks forgiveness for what he takes to be his sinful condition; through his manipulation of relics, he covertly seeks affirmation that he is in some sense holy. The Pardoner lives his life through the church’s rituals, sacraments, and sacramentals in a way that dramatizes both the pain of exclusion and the hope for ultimate inclusion. No other pilgrim is so saturated in the life of the institutional church as this accomplished singer of the liturgy, this eloquent preacher steeped in the lore of the pulpit, and this successful entrepreneur in absolutions and relics. Though believing himself the church’s rejected son, the Pardoner has done everything he can to make himself a “noble ecclesiaste.”

Given the position of the medieval church on homosexuality, this interpretation of the Pardoner might seem to offer new grounds for the
still current belief that the Pardoner is, among Chaucer’s pilgrims, uniquely evil. In my view it does no such thing. Ideally this interpretation should help us to penetrate the Pardoner’s own obfuscatory characterization of himself as “a ful vicious man,” a characterization that has already begun to receive the skeptical criticism it deserves. Making a useful distinction between behavior and state of mind, John Halverson shows that the Pardoner probably does less actual harm than the Friar and that his description of his own spiritual condition is preposterous, serving to mock those who accept it while disguising and protecting the Pardoner’s true self. Halverson finds the Pardoner not evil, but deadly, “necrophiliac.” While the relationship of the Pardoner to death is important and deserves the further study Halverson calls for (esp. pp. 191-92, 196-97, 199-201), I think it is already possible to say that the Pardoner’s manipulation of relics and pardons betrays signs of spiritual life.

Interestingly, the subject of homosexuality offers Chaucer the opportunity to distinguish between behavior and state of mind in much the same way as Halverson does. Any physical acts in which the Pardoner expressed his homosexuality would be viewed by the medieval church as sinful, and Chaucer does not challenge this teaching. But he does challenge the belief that such sins are uniquely abhorrent, poisoning the whole character and extirpating all good and all potential for good. The Pardoner’s elaborate way of relating to church and community through his relics and pardons reveals such hopeful signs as a latent belief in his own essential worthiness, a desire to be restored to God’s grace, a desire to be socially useful, and a desire to give and receive love. The Pardoner’s defenses, even against the best in himself, are so well entrenched, however, that the possibility of a transformation seems remote, though it cannot be denied. The Pardoner’s preaching text, “Radix malorum est Cupiditas,” is only one of the mottoes relevant to the judgment of this pilgrim; the other is the snatch of popular song on his lips when we first meet him, “Corn hider, love, to me.” it is sometimes said that this song refers only to carnal love, and to a love made distasteful by the characters of the Summoner and the Pardoner. But just as Chaucer alludes here to that charity which is the cardinal value of his pilgrimage, so the Pardoner, however unconsciously, names this charity as the ultimate goal of his own yearnings. Cupidity and love—each reader must decide what relative weight to give to these two in judging the Pardoner, and the weighting of the balances is not obvious.

The task of judging the Pardoner, like that of judging each of the other pilgrims, makes the judges vulnerable, too, not least of all Chaucer himself. A final question cannot be evaded. Why does Chaucer treat the possibility of the Pardoner’s homosexuality so allusively? Does his indirection betray some allegiance, or at least some submission, to the phobic view that homosexuality is so abhorrent it must not be spoken or written about? We must admit, on the one hand, that here Chaucer may be showing a characteristic degree of caution. On the other hand, Chaucer’s very silences can be seen as an allusion to the sin that should not be named. 40 Such an argument runs the risk of being merely self-serving for the critic, of course; but if the glossing of “mare” as “homosexual” is accepted, then the interpretation of Chaucer’s other allusions has a firm anchor in the literal meaning of the text. Moreover, what I take to be this explicit suggestion of possible homosexuality is never withdrawn or disproved. Thus readers must engage in a work of interpretation that inescapably becomes a moral exercise. Because the facts about the Pardoner’s sexuality are not given but must be established, readers cannot easily retreat into one-dimensional judgments of this pilgrim; they are forced to consider the whole character of the Pardoner in a way that should in turn contribute to a nonreductive appreciation of his sexuality and its spiritual implications.

Chaucer may have been inspired by a conviction like the one with which the Parson closes his discussion of “thilke abhomynable synne”: “though that hooly writ speke of horrible synne. certes hooly writ may not been defouled. namoore than the sonne that shyneth on the mixne” (x.910). Chaucer may be seen as using his art, and especially its indirection and allusiveness, to challenge the sexual phobias of his readers, requiring them mentally to juxtapose the Pardoner’s countenance with Christ’s, even
as the Pardoner himself has done by wearing a vernicle on his cap (1.685). The vernicle, a representation of Christ’s face as it appeared on Veronica’s veil, was commonly worn by Christians who had made pilgrimage to Rome. There is nothing unusual about the Pardoner’s wearing such an emblem (although another pilgrim to Rome, the Wife of Bath, is apparently not wearing one), but Chaucer’s use of it is nonetheless thematically significant. The vernicle asserts the dignity of the Pardoner, whatever his sexual status, as part of Christ and reminds us that through his sexual sufferings the Pardoner participates in the crucifixion. But most important, the vernicle asserts the necessity of each reader’s responding to the Pardoner in the context of Christian love, a necessity that cannot be evaded by appeals to the values of secular society or to the prescriptions of ecclesiastical leaders. The use of the vernicle is daring, the challenge to the reader risky; Chaucer is not always cautious.

It would be wrong to overstate the special relation of the vernicle to the Pardoner. however, and thus to isolate him once again in his supposed uniqueness. The vernicle might be mentally placed on the headaddresses of all the pilgrims: there is not one of them who does not challenge the observer’s capacity for insight and love. The Pardoner will not be rightly judged until we also subject to judgment our own fascination with him and until we perceive what he shares with the other pilgrims as clearly as we perceive what sets him apart. Chaucer, after all, suggests the balance at the very beginning: he gives us a “compaignye, / Of sondry folk” but “pilgrimes were they alle.”

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Notes


“The medical and physiognomical texts Curry studied present a secular version of the physical determinism rejected by the biblical commentators. Thus if Chaucer knew both the scientific and the scriptural traditions of interpretation, he confronted not monolithic agreement but obvious conflict on the subject of eunuchry.


7 Howard. ed. Geoffrey Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales, a Selection (New York: NAL, 1969). p. 88. These glosses seem to reflect both a closer adherence to Curry’s views and an interpretation of the terms that differs from the one Howard adopts in The Idea of the Canterbury Tales (1976). In the latter work I cannot identify a gloss for “mare” that would elucidate what a medieval audience understood by the term. Howard says only that Chaucer’s line suggests that the Pardoner “is sexually peculiar—that he lacks something: like a gelding the physical equipment, or like a mare the male gender-identity” (p. 343).


9 Applied to human beings, “mare” is usually a contemptuous term for a woman: “a slut.” While both the MED and the OED cite Canterbury Tales 1.691 s.v. “gedyng” neither treats Chaucer’s use of “mare” in the entry for that word. Similarly. Thomas Ross, in Chaucer’s Bawdy (New York: Dutton. 1972), has a
page-long entry for “geldyng” (p. 94) but for “mare” offers only a cross-reference to an unhelpful entry for “horse” (pp. 115-11).


1 The word was coined by a Hungarian doctor named Benkert; see Arno Karlen. Sexuality and Homosexuality: A New View (New York: Norton). 1971), p. 187. The gloss “a homosexual.” however-like “a eunuch.” the common gloss for “geldyng”-does not accurately reflect the colloquial flavor of Chaucer’s line. The best gloss for “mare” would probably be a slang term for the effeminate male homosexual.


The sins against nature included not only sodomy between males but also homosexual contacts of all types by either sex: anal and oral intercourse, coitus interruptus, and departures from the “normal” position among heterosexuals: bestiality; and masturbation. See John Noonan. Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965). p. 226.

Chaucer’s conception seems identical with what is now sometimes called “true inversion.” a conjunction of cross-sex identification (i.e., feminization in males and masculinization in females) with homosexual choice of sex object. For criticism of the concept as a definition of homosexuality per se, see D. J. West. Homosexuality (Chicago: Aldine, 1967). pp. 59-62.


15 Gower’s Confessio Amantis vii.4304 and Lydgate’s of Princes 111.1613. This usage reflects, of course, a tradition of antifeminism.


20 Eunuchs had a recognized place in homosexual prostitution, and youths chosen as catamitic favorites were sometimes castrated. See Karlen, pp. 31. 229-33. Like effeminacy and hermaphroditism, eunuchs was sometimes thought of as creating a woman-man; see Curry, pp. 57-62, and Jean de Meun’s Roman de la rose. II. 20037-82. For modern scientific studies of eunuchy and homosexuality, see West, pp. 155-60.


22 For example, the French words bougres ‘Bulgars’ (corrupted as modem English “buggers”) and herites ‘heretics’ referred interchangeably to homosexuals and heretics after the church’s suppression of the Albigensian heresy, which was thought to have originated in Bulgaria and to have encouraged homosexuality. See Bailey, pp. 135-44. It should be noted, too, that eunuchs. though sterile, are not necessarily impotent in the sense of being unable to perform the sex act. The church defined impotence broadly, however, to include all conditions that make it impossible to deposit “true semen” in the vagina. See T. Lincoln Bouscaren. Adam C. Ellis, and Francis N. Konh. eds.. Canon Law: A Text and Commentary 4th rev. ed. (Milwaukee: Bruce. 1966). pp. 534-37.

23 On the imagery of goats, hares, and mares, see Rowland. “Animal Imagery.”

Handbooks of Penance (New according to Noonan. Martin le Maistre, writing in the confident. feel sure. be assured." For the second graver evil than heterosexual fornication. seduction, sexual acts—were assigned penances of prayer and fasting comparable to those for adultery and murder.

In the thirteenth century some authorities on the sodomites in Hell. though not in the deepest circles (Cantos xv and xvi), and others in Purgatory (Canto xxvii) and as Karl Vossler observes. Dante confronts such sins "without profound ethical abhorrence" (Mediaeval Culture: An Introduction to Dante and His Times, trans. William Cranston Lawton (New York: Ungar. 1929). II. 263). The sudden revelation of a husband's homosexuality in Tale 6 of Day 5 of Boccaccio's Decameron, perhaps the most prominent of many references to homosexuality in the work, simply provides a climactic comic fillip for the tale. Of special interest are indications that defenses of homosexuality may have been current. Jean de Meun's Genius refers to those who read Nature's rules backward and refuse to understand their true sense (Il. 19636-64). Thomas Aquinas considers and rejects several arguments to the effect that homosexuality is not a grave evil. including the argument that it causes no injury: Aquinas replies that God is injured (Summa Theologica. 22.154.1-12).

In the three analogues to the Pardoner's tale cited by W. F. Bryan and Cermaine Dempster, ed., Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (1941: rpt. New York: Humanities Press, 1958). pp. 41-14. the sinners are women and the disqualifying sin is adultery. Apart from an introductory reference in one of the analogues to murders committed by both sexes, there is no mention of sins. named or unnamed, committed by men. Historically, female homosexuality has not provoked the same phobic reaction as male homosexuality. See Bailey, pp. 159-67, for sociopsychological attitudes underlying Christian teachings.

40 "The Parson probably has in mind a variety of "sins against nature." since he says, 'This cursedness doon men and wommen in diverse entente and in diverse manere" (x.910). The Pardoner himself seems to echo the Parson's formula in these lines: "allas! a fool thyng is it, by my feith. To seye this word. and fouler is the dede." (vi.524-25). Ostensibly the subject is excessive drinking, but the remark. coming in the middle of an attack on the "utome" "bell!" or 'uterus' (Il. 521-36). may suggest that for the Pardoner it is heterosexual intercourse that is unmentionable and undoable. The Pardoner cites Paul as the source of his remarks on the "wombe." and in Paul's epistle (Cor. vi.12-20) the subject is sexual sin, not gluttony.

41 Alain de Lille's twelfth-century philosophical work De Planctu Naturae attacks homosexuality in the monasteries as the type of all man's perversions of nature. and in the next century. Jean de Meun has Genius, the prises: of Nature, condemn homosexuality and recommend castration as punishment (Il. 19636-86). The heroes of a handful of French fabliaux and romances are charged with homosexuality, but always unjustly: the reader never has to confront an actual homosexual hero. (See Gerald Herman. "The "sin against Nature' and Its Echoes in Medieval French Literature." Annuaire Mediaeval. 17 [1976]. 70-87.) In fourteenth-century Italy. however. Dante places some sodomites in Hell. though not in the deepest circles (Cantos xv and xvi). and others in Purgatory (Canto xxvii) and as Karl Vossler observes. Dante confronts such sins "without profound ethical abhorrence" (Mediaeval Culture: An Introduction to Dante and His Times, trans. William Cranston Lawton (New York: Ungar. 1929). II. 263). The sudden revelation of a husband's homosexuality in Tale 6 of Day 5 of Boccaccio's Decameron, perhaps the most prominent of many references to homosexuality in the work, simply provides a climactic comic fillip for the tale. Of special interest are indications that defenses of homosexuality may have been current. Jean de Meun's Genius refers to those who read Nature's rules backward and refuse to understand their true sense (Il. 19636-64). Thomas Aquinas considers and rejects several arguments to the effect that homosexuality is not a grave evil. including the argument that it causes no injury: Aquinas replies that God is injured (Summa Theologica. 22.154.1-12).


26 In seventh- and eighth-century penitentials. which remained in use for several centuries thereafter. homosexual acts—were assigned penances of prayer and fasting comparable to those for adultery and murder. See John McNell and Helena Gamer. eds., Medieval Handbooks of Penance (New York: Columbia Univ. Press. 1938). Thomas Aquinas ranked sodomy as a graver evil than heterosexual fornication. seduction. rape. or incest (Summa Theologica. 2.2.154.12). According to Noonan. Martin le Maistre. writing in the fifteenth century. was apparently the first Catholic moral theologian to suggest that homosexual inclinations might be due to sickness or biological causes (p. 357. n. 34).


28 This synecdoche. referring to the materials from which dice were sometimes made. may well have been established usage. although neither the Middle English Dictionary nor the Oxford English Dictionary cites an occurrence antedating the Pardoner's tale.

In the three analogues to the Pardoner's trick cited by W. F. Bryan and Cermaine Dempster. eds.. Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (1941: rpt. New York: Humanities Press. 1958). pp. 41-14. the sinners are women and the disqualifying sin is adultery. Apart from an introductory reference in one of the analogues to murders committed by both sexes. there is no mention of sins. named or unnamed. committed by men. Historically. female homosexuality has not provoked the same phobic reaction as male homosexuality. See Bailey. pp. 159-67. for sociopsychological attitudes underlying Christian teachings.

34 This approach still reflects the official view of the Catholic church, although the church now also recognizes an “anomalous” condition of homosexuality for which the individual may not be wholly responsible. For the text of the 1975 papal statement, “Declaration on Certain Questions concerning Sexual Ethics,” see Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought, a Study Commissioned by the Catholic Theological Society of America, ed. Anthony Kosnik et al. (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), pp. 299-313. For criticism of the statement, see John J. McNeill, S.J., The Church and the Homosexual (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews and McMeel, 1976), esp. pp. 10-14. The church is moving toward the idea of a special homosexual condition at a time when the sciences are moving away from it.


36 I refer to the so-called crux of the Pardoner’s Tale: “And Jhesu Crist. that is our e soules leche. /So graunte yow his pardoun to recyeve, / For that is best: I wol yow nat deceyve” (II. 916-18). Like other parts of the Pardoner’s performance, including the sermon on the tavern sins and the trick of imputing sins to the unresponsive members of his audience, this benediction has several significances. It is a traditional formula that closes the Pardoner’s storytelling in a conventional way; a setup that flatters the pilgrims and softens them up for the pitch for money that follows: a deliberately confusing statement meant to complete the Pardoner’s revenge against the gentlefolk: a truthful assertion that the Pardoner, while a charlatan, is no heretic; and a poignant revelation that the Pardoner still hopes for a pardon more genuine than his own or that of the institutional church: Christ’s pardon, See Sedgewick, pp. 448-56, and Halverson, p. 198.

37 Owst, pp. 100-01, 349-51; and Kellogg and Haselmayer, pp. 215, 228.

38 In the famous Tale IO of Day 6 of Boccaccio’s Decameron, Friar Cipolla describes a fantastic pilgrimage he purportedly made to acquire relics. In his translation of The Decameron (Baltimore: Penguin, 1972), G. H. McWilliam states that the passage uses code language to describe homosexual experiences (p. 511).

39 For the possibility that these lines also contain an allusion to the famous relic of Thomas a Becket’s hair breeches, see Daniel Knapp, “The ‘Relyk of a Seint’: A Gloss on Chaucer’s Pilgrimage,” ELH. 39 (1972), 1-26. Perhaps Chaucer is suggesting that holiness may be found in unexpected places: in an old pair of breeches or in a homosexual pardoner.

40 Homosexuality was commonly discussed only allusively. In De Planctu Narurae Alain de Lille treats homosexuality through an elaborate allegory of grammatical terms, Dante does not name the sexual sin against nature that he treats in Cantos xv and xvi of the Inferno, and, as already noted, Boccaccio uses a code to refer to homosexuality in Tale 10 of Day 6 of his Decameron. In Contraception, Noonan traces the uses of silence and “cautious generality” in discussions of “sins against nature” in works of instruction for both priests and laity in the twelfth through the sixteenth centuries (pp. 266-74). Confessors and preachers were often warned not to be specific lest they suggest new sins to persons innocent of them.