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Intersex and the Pardoner's Body

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Intersex and the Pardoner's Body

A voys he hadde as small as hath a goot
 No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;
 As smooth it was as it were late shave.
 I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare.¹

In the past, these lines and others have been scrutinized to find out what kind of body the Pardoner has—be he a eunuch, or someone neither fully male nor female, or (more recently proposed) a person so humorally imbalanced that it affects his physical body.² While most scholars today see this body essentialism as reductive and problematic, the opposite approach that embraces the figurative over the literal may do the Pardoner an equal if not greater disservice, because when the Pardoner is all performance, his body all figurative rather than

1. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), I 688-91. Also, lines 675-79 describe the Pardoner's pale, long hair.

2. Back in 1919, Clyde Walter Curry argued that the Pardoner was born a eunuch. In 1964 Beryl Rowland argued instead that the Pardoner was intersex—Rowland uses the term “hermaphrodite,” but in regard to her work and others, I will be using the updated term “intersex” instead of “hermaphrodite,” unless I am directly quoting someone or bringing attention to the terminology per se. Since these two theories, scholars have scaled back to something less physically marked, no longer involving anatomical sex difference, when there are other, less physically embodied ways of answering the Pardoner's secret. Monica McAlpine in 1980 argued that the term “mare” referred to the Pardoner's homosexuality. In 2011, Elspeth Whitney argued the Pardoner's effeminacy could be explained by his humoral complexion as a phlegmatic. There's been discussion too, as to which diagnoses are univocal and which ones can overlap in a kind of cluster of diagnoses and assessments, but the overall approach in these studies is to solve the puzzle of the Pardoner's body, a pursuit which can lend itself to overreading the body. Clyde Walter Curry, “The Secret of Chaucer's Pardoner,” *JPEG* 18 (1919): 593–606. Beryl Rowland, “Animal Imagery and the Pardoner,” *Neophilologus* 48 (1964): 56–60. Monica McAlpine, “The Pardoner's Homosexuality and How It Matters,” *PMLA* 95, no. 1 (1980): 8–22. Elspeth Whitney, “What's Wrong with the Pardoner? Complexion Theory, the Phlegmatic Man, and Effeminacy,” *Chaucer Review* 45, no. 4 (2011): 357–89.

literal, he has no body at all. Scholars have accepted this reading since 1989 when Carolyn Dinshaw argued for a “lack” in the Pardoner that frames him as a eunuch—but only figuratively; her overall point is “that *something* is missing” that “constitutes the Pardoner’s being as essentially defective, lacking, fragmented.”³ This shift to the figurative resists reading too much into the body to obtain the Pardoner’s “secret” (an investigation previously posed by Clyde Walter Curry), and yet, in a sense, this approach is only a less extreme form of C. David Benson’s problematic notion that it is not only “suspect” but “ridiculous” to inquire into the sex and sexuality of a fictional character based on so few lines.⁴ Thus on both sides of the debate—for those who seek an understanding of the Pardoner’s sexuality and those who insist on its irrelevance—there has been a retreat from the body, as well as a shift from the singular body to multiple bodies, as we see in Robert S. Sturges’ Pardoner, who in addition to being a eunuch can be male, heterosexual, lesbian, or anything else his performance may suggest.⁵ The scholarly community has mostly moved away from an *either / or* approach to the Pardoner’s body—either he is this or that—and more toward a *both / and* limitlessness, characteristic of queer readings in which possibilities are opened, categories challenged and reconfigured, and choice is

3. He is “a eunuch figuratively, if not literally too . . .” Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 161–62.

4. To Benson, such “irrelevant,” “modern” or anachronistic readings are motivated by a “suspect . . . curiosity” of needing to know the sexual proclivities of lives in biographies and fiction alike, “however doubtfully ascertained.” C. David Benson, “Chaucer’s Pardoner: His Sexuality and Modern Critics,” *Medievalia* 8 (1982): 337–46 (346). Dinshaw disagrees with the idea that sexuality is irrelevant for a medieval audience but confines herself to a figurative reading perhaps to avoid criticisms of adding what Benson deems a “modern distortion” and an unwarranted sense of certainty. Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 256–57, fn. 1.

5. Robert S. Sturges, *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

emphasized.⁶ Sturges' work celebrates the fruitfulness of the Pardoner's performance, and I admire this gesture toward including so many possibilities, but, again, the problem is that when the Pardoner is all performance, he is precluded from having a body. As Dinshaw remarks, the Pardoner is veiled, yet there might be "*nothing* underneath . . . nothing but veils and letters covering a fundamental absence, a radical lack of meaning or truth."⁷ Yet if he has no body, how is his performance possible? And whose performance is it, his or ours imposed on him? The radical lack of meaning might not originate from him but is something we put on him, something we want performed, and without a body, he must do our bidding. We could be excluding the Pardoner from his own performance.

For years when teaching the Pardoner, I accepted Dinshaw's embodiment of lack, but I finally started thinking about the Pardoner's body when I gave myself the task of retelling the *Canterbury Tales* as a young adult novel peopled with modern American teenagers on a road trip.⁸ As a novelist I had to make decisions about characters whether that information explicitly reached the page or not, and this included the Pardoner's body. Basically, he had to have one. I had to decide if he'd have a "secret," but he couldn't be a walking *nothing*, or a figure whose body shifts at will. I am a cis-female and heterosexual person who wanted to write with inclusion and affirmation about a LGBTQIA+ teen, despite the implicit hierarchical and sensationalized *us* versus *them* that I saw in Chaucer's *General Prologue* and that I saw in scholarly literature. As I re-examined the scholarly history, I felt uncomfortable with some of the language I found there.

6. Vanda Zajko, "Intersexuality, Queer Theory, and the Myth of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis." *Helios* 36, no. 2 (2009): 180.

7. Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 157.

8. Kim Zarins, *Sometimes We Tell the Truth* (New York: Simon & Schuster / Simon Pulse, 2016).

It seems many scholars accepted arguments pertaining to the Pardoner's lacking testes or lacking *something*, but without care, this kind of language would be deeply problematic to include in a novel for teenagers in the same way that it poses problems in the classroom. The language of lack lends itself to in-class jokes about men without balls, men who lack manliness and thus should despise themselves for it, much as some scholars perceive the Pardoner despising his own body.⁹ The language of lack conveys a judgmental tone, a shorthand way to read someone, without taking into consideration that this supposed weakness may be a great strength. As Jed Chandler has argued, a eunuch embodies a spiritually transformative and perfected blending of male and female uniquely enabled for the Grail quest.¹⁰ Such medieval representation and scholarly discussion reflects a fullness of being, the opposite of lack. In contrast, Curry's diagnosis of the Pardoner as a eunuch is to explain a spiritual flaw with a physical one, and Dinshaw renders that investigation in figurative terms; meanwhile the whole approach grounds itself in a reductive and damaging definition of lack. In a modern context, this language of lack assumes that students have never encountered testicular cancer, injury, or variations at birth, and the rhetoric of lack can condone and perpetuate shame. We scholars on the whole seem to prefer his *lack* to *variation*, depravity rather than difference, but I would like to make a case for these latter, more affirming terms.

9. H. Marshall Leicester, for example, writes about the Pardoner's despair centered around "his own nothingness," his lack. See H. Marshall Leicester, *The Disillusioned Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 172.

10. Jed Chandler, "Eunuchs of the Grail," in *Castration and Culture in the Middle Ages*, ed. Larissa Tracy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013), 229–254.

An Infamous Diagnosis: Beryl Rowland's Pardoner

I also wish to challenge this privileging of the figurative over—or at the expense of—the literal, as shown in a particularly vitriolic reaction in Pardoner scholarship to Beryl Rowland's 1964 argument that the Pardoner is a hermaphrodite, or “intersex,” the term I will be using in this paper to better acknowledge the physical, psychological, and social / political realities of intersex people. For some people, “intersex” remains a fraught term tainted with its origins in the medical profession, or with its vagueness in conveying identity as well as a range of medical conditions,¹¹ but in contrast to terms like “hermaphrodite” and “disorder of sex development” (DSD), “intersex” is the term that has been the most accepted and adopted by groups such as the Intersex Society of North America and interACT Advocates for Intersex Youth, as well as used in memoirs, blogs, and scholarship in the social sciences.¹²

11. For scholarship that advocates for the usefulness of “Disorder of Sex Development” over “intersex” as terms, see Alice D. Dreger and April M. Herndon's article, “Progress and Politics in the Intersex Rights Movement: Feminist Theory in Action,” in *Intersex and After*, ed. Iain Morland, *GLQ* 15.2 (2009: 199–224). For Dreger and Herndon, changing the nomenclature from “intersex” to “DSD” might be more effective in getting the medical community to listen to the needs of intersex patients. See also Ellen K. Feder's article in the same special issue, “Imperatives of Normality: From ‘Intersex’ to ‘Disorders of Sex Development’,” in *Intersex and After*, ed. Iain Morland, *GLQ* 15.2 (2009: 225–48). Feder, citing Bo Chase, resists the terms “hermaphrodite” and “intersex” because these terms emphasize identity over the medical condition itself; such terms “denoted a ‘kind’ of person, which led to the understanding of intersex as what could be called a disorder like no other” (236–37). For Feder, “DSD” puts the attention on the medical condition rather than the identity of the person with that condition. Her argument is well reasoned, but very many within the intersex community still resist the stigma of having a “disordered” sex development, and Feder uses the term intersex in the title of her 2014 book, *Making Sense of Intersex: Changing Ethical Perspectives in Biomedicine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014). In the Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome Support Group (AISSG) website, for example, the term “hermaphrodite” is labeled “deeply offensive,” and while “DSD” is not as stigmatized, it is still deemed “controversial in some circles,” last accessed October 2, 2017, http://www.aissg.org/21_OVERVIEW.HTM#Terminology.

12. See, for example, Thea Hillman's memoir, *Intersex (For Lack of a Better Word)* (San Francisco: Manic D Press, 2008). For scholarship, see Katrina Karkazis, *Fixing Sex: Intersex,*

By doing an intersex reading of the Pardoner in 1964 and thereby answering the “secret” posed by Curry, Rowland brought potential visibility to a condition hushed in a different kind of secrecy, because it was many years before the human rights violations of intersex people became public knowledge. Her work was not seen this way by scholars motivated to push against examining the Pardoner’s literal body. The hostility to Rowland’s work on the Pardoner indicates a reluctance to consider not only the specific intersex reading she was trying to argue but also *any* intersex reading, a rejection that more broadly indicates the erasure of intersex in medieval scholarship and the telling preference in medieval studies to use outdated terminology, “hermaphrodite” rather than “intersex.” Rowland’s argument is problematic, but so too is the reception of her claims, and rethinking this argument will help us rethink the Pardoner and his Tale.

In 1964, when Rowland challenged Curry’s positioning of the Pardoner as a eunuch and argued for an intersex reading, she drew upon some traditional and less-than-traditional methods. First, she used her specialty in animal imagery to point out the animals that describe the Pardoner—his goatish voice and his glaring rabbit eyes. Medieval lore associates both animals

Medical Authority, and Lived Experience (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008) and Georgiann Davis, *Contesting Intersex: the Dubious Diagnosis* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Davis identifies as intersex in the book, which suggests her comfort with the term. The term has become mainstream, as seen in *National Geographic*’s January 2017 special issue on gender, though intersex-identifying twitter users such as Pidgeon Pagonis (@pidgejen), who was featured on the cover of *National Geographic*, complained in a December 16, 2016 tweet that *National Geographic* retained the term “disorder of sex development” and cites this United Nations Free and Equal fact sheet: https://unfe.org/system/unfe-65-Intersex_Factsheet_ENGLISH.pdf. *National Geographic* revised the online version of the article: <https://mobile.twitter.com/Pidgejen/status/810952788121415680>. For intersex and mainstream culture, also see “What’s It Like To Be Intersex?” *Buzzfeed*, March 28, 2015, https://www.buzzfeed.com/lizzwarner/what-its-like-to-be-intersex?utm_term=.yk2bB1G4l#.ljq8wKWbO. The term also makes its way on television, with Amanda Saenz being the first intersex actor to play an intersex character: Dan Avery, “‘Faking It’ Breaks New Ground With First Intersex Actor To Play Intersex Character On TV,” *Logo.newnownext*, April 1, 2016, <http://www.newnownext.com/faking-it-intersex/04/2016/>.

with intersex. Second, and this is the problematic part of her argument to some scholars, she turned to a then-contemporary medical book from 1954 and diagnosed the Pardoner with a technical-sounding medical term that she did not define but stated was a “hermaphroditic” (or intersex) condition: “testicular pseudo-hermaphroditism of the feminine type.”¹³ I will discuss her terminology in detail, but for the moment, I want to concentrate on the critical if not hostile reception of her work. For example, when David Lawton summarizes Pardoner scholarship and mentions her diagnosis of testicular pseudo-hermaphroditism, he adds dismissively, “Whatever that means.”¹⁴ Indeed, this technical-sounding, even paradoxical-sounding diagnosis immortalized Rowland in Pardoner studies and secured her a notorious mention in every summary of studies about the Pardoner, repeated with what seems to be gleeful derision or quiet scorn. With tongue in cheek, Dinshaw lists Rowland’s theory with Eric Stockton’s as the most “impressive” interpretations of the Pardoner: “Different critics, seeking to nail down his physical condition, have made some impressive diagnoses on the basis of this *General Prologue* portrait: in what are now widely lampooned critical judgements, he’s been called ‘a testicular hermaphrodite of the feminine type,’ and ‘a manic-depressive with traces of anal eroticism, and a pervert with a tendency toward alcoholism’.”¹⁵ Rowland’s theory has also been called “oft-ridiculed” (Cox, in a review of Sturges), an “infamous diagnosis” (Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*),

13. Rowland, “Animal Imagery and the Pardoner,” 58. In the 1954 medical text Rowland consulted, this “pseudo-hermaphroditic” condition is listed under a larger subset of intersex conditions. Despite the modifier “pseudo,” it is understood as “intersex” because intersex people are born with both male and female sex characteristics. As I discuss below, there were political reasons for the introduction of a “pseudo” intersex condition.

14. David Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985), 27.

15. Carolyn Dinshaw, “Chaucer’s Queer Touches / A Queer Touches Chaucer,” *Exemplaria* 7.1 (1995): 80. For Stockton’s essay, see Eric Stockton, “The Deadliest Sin in the *Pardoner’s Tale*,” *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 6 (1961): 47–59.

an idea “notoriously seized on” (Sturges), “a definition well suited to tickle one’s sense of the absurd” (Lindeboom), and a “breathtakingly precise” argument delivered with “enviable assurance” presumably because it is so bad (Benson).¹⁶ Most of the time Rowland’s theory is not discussed but merely listed in summaries in all its testicular pseudo-hermaphroditic glory, and then the scholar at hand presses on to something more credible, be it Curry’s theory for the body essentialists, or for the other camp an emphasis on performance and figurative lack.

It is something of an achievement for a mere four-page piece, including footnotes, to garner this multi-year pile-on. Short pieces of course can receive strong notoriety, but I think these highly visible, shorter pieces are typically authored by seasoned scholars entering a debate with much more status and hence with that visibility.¹⁷ The reception of Rowland’s piece must have made an impression on the newly minted PhD only two years out of graduate school, publishing in an era where women scholars were in the minority.¹⁸ She was producing a number of short pieces like this one when notoriety struck. Despite this criticism, she went on with her work in animal studies, and in 1979, after having authored three books, she published a longer essay on the Pardoner. In other words, she stayed in a space that must have felt at times unreceptive at the very least.

16. Catherine S. Cox, Review of *Chaucer’s Pardoner and Gender Theory: Bodies of Discourse*. By Robert S. Sturges,” *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 66, no. 4 (2001): 168–70 (169); Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 267; Benjamin Willem Lindeboom, *Venus’ Own Clerk: Chaucer’s Debt to the Confessio Amantis* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi BV, 2007), 406; Benson, “Chaucer’s Pardoner,” 338.

17. An example of a seasoned scholar entering a high-profile debate with a short article would be Richard Firth Green’s piece on the Pardoner as a womanizer, a piece not well received by scholars conducting a queer reading of the Pardoner. See Richard Firth Green, “Further Evidence for Chaucer’s Representation of the Pardoner as a Womanizer,” *Medium Aevum* 71, no. 2 (2002): 307–309.

18. Margaret Jennings, “Beryl Rowland: *In Memoriam*,” *Chaucer Review*, Vol. 38, No. 2, (2003): 203-204.

Rowland's work on the Pardoner remains ignored and dismissed, partly due to offering a diagnosis, according to Dinshaw, "far more specific and certain than is warranted," a criticism also made by Benson.¹⁹ However, why not at least consider intersex in general as a possibility even if Rowland's search for a precise intersex diagnosis is unpersuasive? Benson conveys a disinterested and incredulous tone when he notes that some scholars read the Pardoner as homosexual "or even a hermaphrodite," as if intersex in general, not just Rowland's specific claim, merits less consideration than homosexuality (and Benson's tone does not seem to find an interpretation of homosexuality credible, though it is apparently more credible to him).²⁰ Considering how dramatically Benson and Dinshaw disagree over queer readings, it is interesting that they are so united against Rowland.

Scholars rarely note any merits to Rowland's scholarship on this topic, yet there are two scholars who do so even as they critique it. Vern Bullough in 1999 finds her terminology outdated and hence not clear. For Bullough, her theory is not a possibility, because people with this condition usually present as female, and moreover, midwives would have examined infants for their normality so that "any child to survive would have had only slight variations at birth."²¹ There is no footnote to support this suggestion of infanticide of medieval intersex babies.²²

19. Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 260.

20. Benson, "Chaucer's Pardoner," 338.

21. Vern Bullough, with Gwen Whitehead Brewer, "Medieval Masculinities and Modern Interpretations: The Problem of the Pardoner," in *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West*, ed. Jacqueline Murray (New York: Garland, 1999), 100.

22. I do not know of any evidence for infanticide of intersex babies in the medieval period, but there is evidence for it in antiquity. See Luc Brisson, *Sexual Ambiguity, Sexual Ambivalence: Androgyny and Hermaphroditism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Berkeley: University of California, 2002), 14.

Bullough adds that the Pardoner would unlikely have “testicular pseudohermaphroditism” but instead could possibly have had Klinefelter’s syndrome, which he defines as a male with an extra chromosome (XXY) and small external genitalia; usually the syndrome manifests during puberty, due to the absence of facial hair or a drop in voice.²³ I do not wish to posit if Klinefelter’s syndrome is indeed more likely, but note that Bullough, a non-Chaucerian, does not discredit Rowland’s use of medical texts, for he takes a similar approach—that is, a medically based one, and puts forth his own interpretation as more scientifically up to date and suitable.

If Bullough admires Rowland’s method if not her results, Sturges admires the results if not the method: he seems to appreciate her work’s potential more than any other scholar and welcomes the prospect of an intersex reading, which supports his work on the Pardoner’s gender fluidity. That said, he criticizes Rowland’s work for drawing from that 1954 medical text, which he deems an anachronistic approach—to him, she should have confined her evidence to medieval animal lore rather than try to understand intersex bodies with current medical information. On a related note, and similar to Dinshaw and Benson, Sturges also critiques Rowland for identifying a precise intersex condition, one that would not have been understood in medieval times. Finally, while he appreciates an intersex reading, he criticizes her for pushing her argument as a univocal answer precluding all others. Regarding this last point, I agree that Rowland’s diagnosis is overly specific, yet an argument for intersex is not univocal; for example, it does not preclude homosexual, transgender, or non-binary identities, as current (“anachronistic”) research makes

23. Bullough writes as though Klinefelter’s syndrome is not an intersex condition: “if the Pardoner was not a hermaphrodite, a more likely diagnosis is that he had Klinefelter’s syndrome” (100-101), but Klinefelter’s syndrome tends to be classified as intersex elsewhere, as, for example, on the Intersex Society of North America’s page, <http://www.isna.org/faq/conditions/klinefelter>. Bullough is working with a 1971 text for his 1999 article: Howard W. Jones and William Wallace Scott, *Hermaphroditism, Genital Anomalies and Related Endocrine Disorders* (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1971); see Bullough, 108, fn. 33.

clear.²⁴ With regard to her research, Rowland would not be the first or last scholar whose work was discredited on account of anachronism,²⁵ but it seems problematic to me to ignore our present understanding of intersex as if it were irrelevant for research or the classroom when the reverse is true: our modern understanding of intersex brings higher stakes and relevance to medieval representations of intersex. Furthermore, it is difficult to do interdisciplinary work if we refuse to consider the strides scholars and activists are making in other fields. We become relevant only to ourselves, if even then.

24. For example, of Georgiann Davis's interviews of intersex people, 30 percent identified as lesbian, gay, or homosexual, 11 percent as bisexual, 11 percent as queer, 8 percent as asexual, 8 percent as "complicated," and 32 percent as straight / heterosexual. See Georgiann Davis, *Contesting Intersex: The Dubious Diagnosis* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 93. See also Sharon E. Preves, *Intersex and Identity: The Contested Self* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003). Of the thirty-seven intersex people interviewed by Preves, "24 percent of interviewees were living in a gender different from their sex of assignment and rearing" and "46 percent engaged in sexual activity with partners living in the same gender role," 8-9.

25. Michael Johnston and Alex Mueller, "Kant in King Arthur's Court," *In the Middle*, August 24, 2016, <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2016/08/kant-in-king-arthurs-court-charges-of.html>, accessed October 26, 2016. The authors explain, "We are anxious as hell about anachronism," and scholarly standards instead promote "indifferent moral evaluation" to such an extent that scholars cannot call host desecration "antisemitic" because premodern people had no concept of hate speech (2).

The Pardonner and the Age of Gonads

To be fair, Rowland's nomenclature is difficult. For reasons unknown, Rowland's 1964 essay did not define the intersex term "testicular pseudo-hermaphrodite of the feminine type." Her 1979 follow-up piece finally clarified in a mere footnote that this term did not signify a "true hermaphrodite" but rather a male with incomplete external genitals, in which "[t]he two scrotal folds remain un-united and enclose a vagina-like cavity," and secondary sex characteristics include a high voice and lack of facial hair.²⁶ Most scholars, as Sturges aptly points out, do not cite Rowland's more substantial follow-up essay, but I doubt her 1979 footnote would have saved her reputation. The notion of a "hermaphrodite" who is a "pseudo-hermaphrodite" simply appears confusing, and medievalists have dismissed Rowland's anachronistic and semi-modern yet outdated and perplexing terminology.

Yet the story behind the term "pseudo-hermaphrodite" can be unfolded when we look back to the era of Herculine Barbin, whose memoirs were published by Michel Foucault to wide attention. Barbin's treatment—and those of many intersex people—by the medical community is explored in Alice Dreger's groundbreaking 1998 study, *Hermaphrodites and the Invention of Sex*.²⁷ In late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century medical practice, there was a strong resistance if not refusal to identify anyone as intersex. To keep gender dimorphism firmly in place and discount these challenges to sex and gender, from 1870 to 1915, an era Dreger calls the "Age of Gonads," sex was determined exclusively by a person's gonads regardless of any other

26. Beryl Rowland, "Chaucer's Idea of the Pardonner," *Chaucer Review* 14 (1979): 140–54 (151).

27. Alice Domurat Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

sex characteristics.²⁸ Thus, if a person possessed ambiguous genitalia, a doctor need look no further than the patient's gonads to determine sex: testes for males, ovaries for females. Since it was rare to discover both testicular and ovarian tissue in a living patient's gonads—such testing involved the use of a microscope and a team of experts to evaluate the findings—the medical community could mostly ignore the limitations of their system for sex determination: “Non-emergency exploratory surgeries were quite rare, and biopsies basically unheard of; and so, conveniently, the only true hermaphrodite was a dead hermaphrodite.”²⁹ A pseudo-hermaphrodite only *seemed* to be both male and female, but actually, the case could be easily resolved to their minds by this sole, reductive criterion.

Rowland's Pardoner, then, had testes, which by nineteenth-century standards would have made him male, but the Pardoner is “of the feminine type,” meaning someone who externally appears female. Rowland's 1954 medical source explains that in such patients testosterone production is normal, but the body does not respond to it; the text weaves into its clinical observations a heteronormative assessment of such patients' sexual attractiveness as women:

In the feminine type the degree of femaleness may be so marked that no suspicion as to the true genetic or phenotypic sex of the child is raised until in late adolescence she presents with primary amenorrhea or infertility. This extreme form of male pseudo-hermaphroditism has been termed “testicular feminization syndrome.” These patients have a normal female appearance, a tendency to eunuchoidal skeletal proportions, good

28. *Ibid.*, 29.

29. Alice Domurat Dreger, “A History of Intersexuality: From the Age of Gonads to the Age of Consent,” in *Intersex in the Age of Ethics*, ed. Alice Dreger (Hagerstown, MD.: University Publishing Group, 1999), 9. This chapter is a reprint of a special issue of the *Journal of Clinical Ethics*, 9, no. 4, ed. Alice Dreger, (Winter 1998).

breast development and are often attractive. Axillary hair is absent and pubic hair scanty.³⁰

In Dreger's research, intersex patients typically posed little problem for doctors in terms of sex assignments (the doctors' adherence to gonads made sex assignments simple), but the condition Rowland cites was indeed problematic because the people with this condition present in the opposite gender of their gonads. Nineteenth-century French and English women who had always thought of themselves as women were forced to become men to match their gonads, or in some cases allowed to remain women provided they first were surgically "corrected." Eventually nineteenth-century doctors changed their approach and did not force a woman to become a man simply because she had undescended testes, and the Age of Gonads ended, though its terminology lived on decades past Dreger's 1915 terminus date, as can be seen in the 1954 medical textbook Rowland consulted.

As a side note but pertinent to this discussion of reductive criteria surrounding sex assignments, Rowland's brush with the Age of Gonads provides an interesting analogue to Aristotle's insistence that intersex bodies *seem* sexually ambiguous but their supposedly true sex could be determined by looking past the obscuring, extra sex features.³¹ In contrast to this model, Albertus Magnus deemed that there were cases beyond a doctor's ability to assign a sex with confidence.³² Pre-modern science did allow for more than two sexes. A two-seed theory in *On the Seed* by the school of Hippocrates (d. 370 BCE) postulated that the male and female contribute seed that determines sex: strong seed produces males; weak seed produces females;

30. Frederick William Price, *Price's Textbook of the Practice of Medicine*, ed. Donald Hunter (London: Oxford medical publications series, 1956, ninth edition), 550.

31. Bullough, "Medieval Masculinities," 94.

32. *Ibid.*

and equal amounts of male and female seed produce an intersex baby.³³ A second two-seed theory in *On Regimen* postulates males and females can produce seeds of either sex, and this combination determines the infant's sex: male seed from both parents produces an intelligent and strong male, but "female seed from the male overpowered by male seed from the female will result in an androgynos—an intersex person."³⁴ Cary Nederman and Jacqui True point out that medieval science believed the placement of the baby in the womb had a strong role in determining whether a baby would be born male, female, or intersex—in other words, medieval science to some degree allowed for a third sex, in a manner in which Aristotle and late nineteenth- and twentieth-century medicine did not.³⁵ Nevertheless, binary sex assignments still were seen as necessary, or at least were still the standard by which all bodies were assessed. Augustine, for example, assigns intersex people as male rather than female as a backhanded compliment, ascribing the "better" sex to those who show signs of both sexes.³⁶ Roman law and later Roman Catholic canon law required the person to choose their sex based on which sex was

33. John Hare, "Hermaphrodites, Eunuchs, and Intersex People: The Witness of Medical Science in Biblical Times and Today," in *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible*, ed. Susannah Cornwall (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 79–97 (81).

34. *Ibid.*, 82.

35. Cary Nederman and Jacqui True, "The Third Sex: The Idea of the Hermaphrodite in Twelfth-Century Europe," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6, no. 4 (1996): 497–517.

36. Megan K. DeFranza, "Virtuous Eunuchs: Troubling Conservative and Queer Readings of Intersex and the Bible," in *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible*, ed. Susannah Cornwall (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 55–78, 57. See also Rowland, "Chaucer's Idea of the Pardoner," 145, for a citation of Augustine from *PL XLI*, col. 486: "Androgyni, quos etiam Hermaphroditos nuncupant, quamvis admodum rari sint, difficile est tamen ut temporibus desint, in quibus sic uterque sexus apparet, et ex quo potius debeant accipere nomen, incertum sit: a meliore tamen, hoc est a masculino, ut appellarentur, loquendi consuetudo praevaluit." Rowland's translation: "As for the Androgyni or Hermaphrodites, as they are called, though they are rare, yet from time to time there appear persons of sex so doubtful, that it remains uncertain from which sex they take their name; though it is customary to give them a masculine name, as the more worthy" (fn. 42).

“arousable . . . determined by ability to perform the male (penetrative) or female (receptive) role and not by any other anatomical or behavioural sign.”³⁷

Twelfth-century Parisian Peter the Chanter writes along similar lines of conforming to one gender or the other, in *De Vitio Sodomitico*. I will quote from his text at length because it is often cited but only in brief and in translation, never in the original to my knowledge, but mostly because Peter’s work is an interesting example of an oblique discussion of intersex people. I will later discuss how literary texts invoke the trope of the hermaphrodite while ignoring intersex lives, but even here, when talking about actual intersex people, Peter gives priority in the discussion not to intersex choice but to a repudiation of homosexuality as a willful and immoral decision, and he writes as if intersexuality merely presents a theological puzzle in regard to homosexuality. Peter acknowledges the inherent blur between man and woman (Is Eve completely a woman if she comes from Adam’s rib?) and tries to dispel the consequential ambiguity between intersexuality and homosexuality:

Item, Dominus virum plasmavit de limo terrae in agro Damasceno, formaturus mulierem de costa ejus in paradiso. Unde ne crederet quis eos fore androgynous praeoccupans formationem mulieris, ait: “Masculum et feminam creavit eos (Gen. 1)” Quasi: Non erit consortium viri ad virum, vel mulieris ad mulierem, sed tantum viri ad mulierem, et econtrario. Unde Ecclesia homini androgyno, id est habenti instrumentum utriusque sexus, aptum scilicet ad agendum et patiendum, instrumento, quo magis calescit, quove magis est infirmus, permittit uti.

Si magis calescit, ut vir, permittunt eum ducere; si vero magis mollescat, et mulier

37. Susannah Cornwall, “Laws ‘Needfull in Later to Be Abrogated’: Intersex and the Sources of Christian Theology,” in *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible*, ed. Susannah Cornwall (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 147–167, 151.

permittunt ei nubere. Si autem in illo instrumento defererit, nunquam concederetur ei usus reliqui instrumenti, sed perpetuo continuebit, propter vestigia alternitatis vitii sodomitici, quod a Deo detestatur.

[The Lord formed man from the slime of the earth on the plain of Damascus, later fashioning woman from his rib in Eden. Thus in considering the formation of woman, lest any should believe they would be hermaphrodites, he stated, “Male and female created he them,” as if to say, “There will not be intercourse of men with men or women with women, but only of men with women and vice versa.” For this reason the church allows a hermaphrodite—that is, someone with the organs of both sexes, capable of either active or passive functions—to use the organ by which (s)he is most aroused or the one to which (s)he is more susceptible.

If (s)he is more active, (s)he may wed as a man, but if (s)he is more passive, (s)he may wed as a woman. If, however, (s)he should fail with one organ, the use of the other can never be permitted, but (s)he must be perpetually celibate to avoid any similarity to the role of inversion of sodomy, which is detested by God.]³⁸

Many scholars cite a portion of this passage in translation to indicate some agency for intersex people, though it is evident that it was not intersex people themselves but their sex lives that

38. For *De vitio sodomitico*, see *Verbum abbreviatum* 138, text in *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina*, 205:333-35, last accessed December 29, 2017, https://books.google.com/books?id=fZTYAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA21&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false. For the translation, see John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1980), 375–76. Boswell explains the pronoun usage in his translation in this way: “‘(S)he’ is used here to suggest the ambiguity regarding the gender of the hermaphrodite which Peter achieves by using Latin verbs with no expressed pronomial subject. The English translator has no comparable option” (376).

mattered to Peter, and letting them choose their gender identity and making them stick to it would regulate their sexual behavior for a heterosexual culture.

However, Cornwall notes that there are hints in Christian tradition of more accommodating approaches to the broader experiences and social identities of intersex individuals themselves, which require further research. She cites John Wallis' sermon in the seventeenth century; Wallis declares that the Virgin Birth

is not much more than what (pretty often) happens amongst men, when God gives both sexes to the same person (such there are, and have been . . .) and what hinders them, but that God, if he please, may mingle the Effects of both the Sexes in the same body? A little alteration in the structure of the vessels would do it.³⁹

The non-sensationalized, matter-of-fact view of an intersex person as part of God's creation, linked to God's ability to enact the Virgin Birth, places intersex as a part not only of the world but also of God's order. This is not a monstrous or idealized representation. Intersex people are just people in Wallis' estimation, and they are a part of the world like anybody else.

Not offering such an empowering message as John Wallis, Rowland presents the Pardonier as a "deviate" at odds with God's order. In current nomenclature, the condition Rowland describes corresponds to Complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (CAIS), a condition resulting in external genitals that are completely feminine. In CAIS, the body cannot use, hence masculinize from, the androgens that the testes produce. The syndrome is rarely discovered before detecting the lack of menstruation in adolescence. As the Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome Support Group (AISSG) website explains, "In AIS, the child is conceived with male (XY) sex chromosomes. Embryonic testes develop inside the body and start

39. Cornwall, "Laws 'Needfull in Later to Be Abrogated'," 152.

to produce androgens. In AIS, these androgens cannot complete the male genital development due to a rare inability to *use* the androgens that the testes produce so the development of the external genitals continues along female lines. However, another hormone produced by the foetal testes suppresses the development of female internal organs. Thus a person with AIS has external genitals that in Complete AIS (CAIS) are completely female or in Partial AIS (PAIS) are partially female. Internally, however, there are testes instead of a uterus and ovaries.”⁴⁰ Today, people with CAIS are “invariably” gendered female according to the AISSG website,⁴¹ but by deeming the Pardoner “of the feminine type” and seeming to absorb some of the rationale of the Age of Gonads in her mid-twentieth century text, Rowland positions him as someone brought up a boy but feeling and looking more like a girl—hence his frustration and what Rowland calls his “deviate” identity. To be sure, Rowland is working with a very specific diagnosis and misapplying medical knowledge to the Pardoner’s body in ways that are controversial and inaccurate. As Bullough points out, when considering the femininity of a person with CAIS, it does not seem likely that the Pardoner would be reared as a boy, as she postulates. That said, Rowland’s efforts to understand intersex with the then-current research led her to an exploration new to medieval studies: simply by studying the available medical information, she came upon the first intersex reading but also, broadly speaking, the first transgender reading of the Pardoner. I hasten to add that I am not conflating intersex with transgender, when in fact one term relates to sex and the other to gender identity.⁴² I note only that gender identity is an issue for many

40. “How AIS Occurs,” *Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome Support Group (AISSG)*, accessed October 1, 2017, http://www.aissg.org/21_OVERVIEW.HTM#FormsAIS.

41. *Ibid.*

42. For an insightful transgender reading of the Pardoner, see M. W. Bychowski, “Genres of Embodiment: A Theory of Medieval Transgender Literature,” *Transliteration: Things Transform*, May 17, 2016, <http://www.thingstransform.com/2016/05/genres-of-embodiment->

intersex people, and it is possible for an intersex person to be given a sex assignment that does not agree with them. The aforementioned AISSG website notes that “[s]ome babies with PAIS may be raised as males but many are re-assigned as female.”⁴³

Rowland seems to perceive gender identity as part of the Pardoner’s struggle and notes the inconsistency between the Pardoner’s feminine disposition, as shown by his long, feminine hair (presumably he chooses to grow it out just as he chooses to dress “al of the newe jet,” (I 682) and his masculine hyper-heterosexual presentation as shown in his boast to enjoy a “joly wenche in every toun” (VI 453). Some scholars take the Pardoner at his word and see him as a womanizer, but Rowland resolves this perceived inconsistency by noting the “typical desire of the deviate to conform to the sex in which he was reared, although physically he may be unable to do so.”⁴⁴ There is much to take exception to in this quotation, but to her credit she sees a powerlessness in the Pardoner’s enforced sex assignment (note the passive construction of her phrasing “the sex in which he was reared”). This language of deviance sounds condemnatory, something more like Peter the Chanter might say, but in the context of sociological work as summarized by Sharon E. Preves, Rowland’s phrasing suggests a more medical approach to the Pardoner’s deviance rather than a moral one (a medical approach is itself problematic, as is pathologizing otherwise healthy intersex people, but I’ll leave that aside for the moment): “As

[theory-of-medieval.html](#). Bychowski’s medieval research is always grounded to the present moment and relevant to today’s conversations. This particular essay signals the stakes for medieval scholars to acknowledge harmful language in our community, for the essay responds to transphobic language that had occurred at the academic conference, the 51st International Medieval Congress, in Kalamazoo, MI, at which Bychowski presented an earlier version of this paper.

43. “Forms of AIS, Complete and Partial,” *Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome Support Group (AISSG)*, accessed October 1, 2017, http://www.aissg.org/21_OVERVIEW.HTM#FormsAIS.

44. Rowland, “Animal Imagery and the Pardoner,” 58.

the medical sociologists Peter Conrad and Joseph Schneider illustrate, the institutional authority to regulate deviance has markedly shifted hands over the course of time. Deviance has shifted from being as a sin, to crime, to sickness.”⁴⁵ The Pardoner is not sinning or committing a crime by having long hair, a beardless face, and a male identity. His only “crime” may be that he does not conform well enough to social expectations. For some intersex people, male and female sex assignments seem too limiting to include them, and Rowland’s language of conformity can be recalled when we read the perspective of an intersex person being interviewed by Susannah Cornwall: “You grow up in a world that’s male and female right from the littlest in this dimorphic world and you don’t fit in either box. That’s very, very confusing. You learn quite early that the way you are doesn’t conform with people’s expectations of what a man or a woman should be.”⁴⁶ Though Rowland calls the Pardoner “the deviate,” she seems to read him as having been brought up under tremendous pressure to conform to a standard of heterosexual masculinity. His display of femininity may be both liberating and vulnerable at the same time, along with his desires to both subvert and conform to expectations imposed by society.

There is precedent and context to such conformity. Dreger’s research has shown how, due to the rigidity of nineteenth-century medical practice, intersex people were coerced to take

45. For the work of medical sociologists Peter Conrad and Joseph Schneider, see Preves, *Intersex and Identity*, 33.

46. For the quotation from an interview of an intersex person, see Cornwall, “Laws ‘Needfull in Later to Be Abrogated’,” 155. Cornwall includes several quotations from interviews on sex, gender, and faith relevant for Pardoner scholars tracing the Pardoner’s own position in these areas. Interviewee Anthony says, “My body is mostly male, but I don’t identify as male. I identify as being genderless, or ungendered . . . I think that there’s a lot of things in the Christian text, the Bible, which could be interpreted in a much more open way . . . I don’t think Jesus was hung up on gender. I mean I’m not going to say he regarded himself as gay or transgender or anything like that. I am sure he recognized that he was in a male body. But he certainly didn’t seem to me to be hung up on it the way that we are in society” (158).

on a different gender than the one they had grown up with all their lives, simply to match their gonads. Rowland, in turn, assumes a male assignment at birth for the Pardoner not because it was likely for CAIS according to her twentieth-century medical textbook, which advocated a female assignment, but because she is reading his sex assignment based on gonads, which would make him male no matter his external appearance. She seems to be assuming that the sex assignment would be male at birth in the fourteenth-century context much as the doctors of the Age of Gonads would have preferred. Her 1954 textbook advocates for rearing such a person as female but puts scare-quotes around the pronouns in describing a patient with this syndrome, underscoring that a person with CAIS is male insofar as gonads are concerned: “‘her’ psychosexual orientation,” late discovery of the syndrome, and the fact that “‘she’ may already be married to a man” necessitate her sex and gender assignment as female, but otherwise, the medical text’s implied “truth” is that she is male.⁴⁷ Rowland’s medical source only shows how far we have and haven’t come since the nineteenth century in terms of the medical care for intersex bodies.

Equipped with this information, Rowland brings forth a case in medieval literature in which the wrong gender assignment was made for the ill-served Pardoner. It’s not that there is “nothing” underneath all the veils as Dinshaw as argued. In fact, underneath all those veils is an intersex body that has been suppressed by social pressure to conform, to fit in and thereby become unobtrusive and invisible. Such erasure is enough to make anyone despair, but the critical literature would suggest the Pardoner’s despair comes from a loathing for his own lack. Bullough, a non-Chaucerian, points out what few Chaucerians do, that “The Pardoner’s view of himself is quite different” than the mockery provided in the *General Prologue*; “In fact, he seems

47. Price, *Price’s Textbook of the Practice of Medicine*, 550.

quite proud of what he is” in terms of his skillful voice (as opposed to a goatish voice) and a confident use of his body when he preaches.⁴⁸ Chaucerians usually discount such confidence as performance to cover up lack, but what if he really does like his body, and his problem lies with the loathing others have for his body? That loathing can be seen from Chaucer’s famous “I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare” (A 691) to modern popular culture. For example, Jennifer Lawrence, who starred in the *Hunger Games* movies, regretted in an interview that nude photos of her were leaked but reports that the situation could have been much worse: “At least I’m not a hermaphrodite. I could have been outed—Jennifer Lawrence, hermaphrodite.”⁴⁹ When we teach Chaucer’s Pardoner to our diverse students, it seems appropriate to point out how the Pardoner is socially set up and framed, contextualized by contempt then and now, rather than underscore the lack and nothingness of this non-binary character.

48. Bullough, “Medieval Masculinities,” 95.

49. Josh Kurp, “Now Everyone Hates Jennifer Lawrence Over a Nude Photos Joke She Made,” *Uproxx*, October 17, 2014, <http://uproxx.com/webculture/now-everyone-hates-jennifer-lawrence-over-a-nude-photos-joke-she-made/>

“Lat kutte hem of”

One result of an intersex reading is that it helps us see the Pardoner as cheated rather than as the cheat he is typically portrayed to be. Rowland’s 1954 medical text advocates rearing the child female but also lying about her intersex condition: “No hint of the patient’s genetic sex should be given, and the testes should be removed because of their liability to malignant change.”⁵⁰ Here we return to the language of secrecy, so familiar to Pardoner scholars; this time, however, secrecy is initiated by the twentieth-century medical community. Medical management involves the lies of the doctor to the patient, and of the doctor playing the Host who removes the young patient’s testes: as the Host says in regard to the Pardoner’s testes, “Lat kutte hem of” (VI 954). It is nearly the same procedure. The only difference is that the Host prescribes it as an aggressive insult, whereas the medical community offers something ostensibly for the good of the patient, who can be told her “ovaries” risk cancer and need to be removed.⁵¹ The Pardoner, then, can stand for the modern intersex person who has cut through the lies told him or her and knows what has been threatened or already taken away. Like so many who have undergone medical mistreatment, the Pardoner is speechless with rage: “So wrooth he was, no word ne wolde he seye” (VI 957). He has been greatly wronged. Not longer—or not solely—the peddler of false relics, the Pardoner understands his own body has been profaned and fashioned into false relics by and for the Host. The concern I have with “queering the Host” is that it sounds too

50. Price, *Price’s Textbook*, 550.

51. For one example among many, one woman had to untangle her own medical history; her gonads were removed in adolescence and subsequently she found out in a college biology swab test that she was XY and thereafter located the term “testicular feminization” in a library book. See Davis, *Contesting Intersex*, 40–41. See also Preves, *Intersex and Identity*, Chapter 3, “Stigma, Secrecy, and Shame,” 60–86.

playful and too high a compliment for someone so aggressive toward someone else's queer body, and with the privilege and power to enact his will over that person.

If we must queer the Host, that queerness is read differently and more powerfully when we link it to an intersex experience. Iain Morland discusses the queerness of the doctor's touch, a touch that removes sensation from the intersex patient—in other words, the touch that forecloses future touching even though queer desire remains: “the surgeon's desensitizing touch makes bodies strange.”⁵² While in 1995 Dinshaw defines “queer touching” as the contagious, disruptive touch of the queer to make strange heterosexual culture, Morland challenges her reading as limited in that it cannot account for the post-surgical body's loss of a sense of touch, of sensation, because of a surgeon's hands—in doing so he points out ways that queer theory both applies and fails to apply to intersex. For Dinshaw, queerness is the force that initiates change “knocking signifiers loose, ungrounding bodies, making them strange . . . to provoke perceptual shifts and subsequent corporeal response in those touched.”⁵³ Morland's point, though, is that the intersex person loses “corporeal response” by the queer touch of the surgeon. In that light, her concluding remark that “[t]he touch of the queer carries a disillusioning force that may be discomfiting but can only, finally, work to the social good” is problematic, when we consider the Pardoner as the one touched—cut, altered—for the “social good” of normalization. Morland's argument reminds us how complex queerness and “touching” are. Exploiting his masculine authority, the Host as doctor turns intersex bodies into dimorphic relics to be passed off in society as male or female; this act is a violent sham that society somehow accepts and glosses

52. Iain Morland, “What Can Queer Theory Do For Intersex?” in *Intersex and After*, ed. Iain Morland, *GLQ* 15.2 (2009: 285–312), 298.

53. Dinshaw, “Chaucer's Queer Touches,” 76.

over. The Knight intervenes after the Host's threats, but not to reprimand the Host or remove his power. The Knight requires only that the Host and Pardoner kiss, to affirm that all is well and everyone has good intentions. Reading the Pardoner through this lens may help readers see institutional crimes rather than the crimes of the Pardoner, a marginalized individual removed from touch but not desire.⁵⁴

To me, that connection between intersex surgeries and the Host's threat of castration is meaningful and part of why I admire Rowland's efforts. In trying to understand the "secret" surrounding a fictional medieval character, a concept so criticized by Benson and others, Rowland in 1964 brought at least some visibility to a condition hushed in secrecy, years before public awareness became widespread. Her terminology and resources harken back to the nineteenth century, and she had no access to research on medical malpractice against intersex patients, but in representing the Pardoner's stress concerning living male but feeling either female or non-binary, Rowland is presenting issues that would not surface for decades. Years later, Suzanne Kessler's 1990 study, "The Medical Construction of Gender: Case Management

54. Morland, "What Can Queer Theory Do," 304. Morland cites an analogy David Reimer makes to explain how desire persists long after the removal of his penis: "If you lose your arm, and you're dying of thirst, that stump is still going to move toward that glass of water to try to get it. It's instinct. It's in you," and argues instead of a theory of "queer touching" as articulated by Dinshaw, the notion of "queer reaching" better conveys the desire of the postsurgical body and also breaks down the opposition between historical inflexibility and queer flexibility: "although history persists in the present by leaving the postsurgical individual with a 'stump' (whether literally or metaphorically), the stump may be invested with desire in ways that could not be anticipated by a historical materialist explanation of how the stump came to be [D]esire arises from the difference between the past and present, but cannot be reduced to an effect of the past on the present. Desire in my analysis is therefore separate from the question of how we might imagine and reach a queer future. It is a matter of how we reach and inhabit the present" (304). I think there is more work to be done locating the Pardoner in this discussion.

of Intersexed Infants,”⁵⁵ which was among the top twenty articles to be cited from over twenty years in *Signs*, was striking for discussing the surgical alteration of intersex infants, a topic David Rubin notes was “rarely discussed” before in non-medical circles, and the Intersex Society of North America, an organization devoted to intersex advocacy and education of the public, did not come into being until 1993.⁵⁶ By contrast, the 1960s was the era of John Money, the psychoendocrinologist responsible for shaping the medical field’s protocol to determine an intersex infant’s gender and imprint that gender on patients through lies, shame, and secrecy. Dreger notes that these issues, rather than gender assignments, were the core grievance of many intersex people:

most intersex people kept the gender assignments they were given, whether surgeons made their genitals look typical for their gender or not. And we knew that people who changed their gender labels as teenagers and adults did not find misidentified gender to be the core of their suffering. The problem in intersex care wasn’t a problem in gender identity per se. The problem was that, in the service of strict gender norms, people were being cut up, lied to, and made to feel profoundly ashamed of themselves. Bo said it as plainly as she could: Intersex is not primarily about gender identity; it is about shame, secrecy, and trauma. Doctors were so obsessed with “getting the gender right” that they didn’t see that they were causing so much harm.⁵⁷

55. Suzanne Kessler, “The Medical Construction of Gender: Case Management of Intersexed Infants,” *Signs* 16 (1990): 3–26.

56. David Rubin, “‘An Unnamed Blank That Craved a Name’: A Genealogy of Intersex as Gender,” *Signs* 37, no. 4 (2012): 884.

57. Dreger, *Galileo’s Middle Finger*, 38. See also Dreger, “A History of Intersexuality,” 12. There, she summarizes Money’s approach that “assumes doctors should be the determiners of sexual identity,” with the goal of teaching the child through lies and secrecy that identity without the child knowing they are intersex.

Money's practice gained wide attention when he operated on a non-intersex person. In 1967, a baby named David Reimer's lost his penis due a burn accident during circumcision, rendering Reimer intersex by circumstance if not by birth. Money resolved to have Reimer brought up as female and surgically removed the baby's testes and performed other surgeries to transition Reimer to be a girl; hormones would be administered in adolescence. The highly publicized case was supposed to prove Money's theory that sex was socially constructed and that a very young patient was flexible, pliable, and could be imprinted with a gender identity (a term Money coined) if surgical operations accompanied the social reprogramming of gender—but Reimer rejected this upbringing at age fourteen and chose to be male.⁵⁸ In this context of coercion of intersex bodies to conform to social standardization, Beryl Rowland's work opened the way to acknowledging that being intersex brings with it enormous pressures to conform; the Pardoner's role as a "deviate," as Rowland puts it, does not indicate personal sin as much as a system sinning against him.⁵⁹

To be clear, I don't want to argue over the Pardoner's gonads, or which of the other thirty intersex conditions the Pardoner might have, if not CAIS. What I do question is why the twentieth-century scholarly community had very little trouble accepting Curry's proposal that the Pardoner lacked testes at birth, or why in later years Dinshaw's figurative lack became widespread in popularity, yet there was and is very little tolerance for the notion that the

58. For an account of Reimer's case and how Reimer's circumstances rendered his experiences similar to that of an intersex person, see Iain Morland, "Gender, Genitals, and the Meaning of Being Human," in *Fuckology*, ed. Lisa Downing, Iain Morland, and Nikki Sullivan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 69–98.

59. Rowland, "Animal Imagery and the Pardoner," 58.

Pardoner is intersex. For many, a eunuch's body has been easier to accept than an intersex one, even though a eunuch reading can be very similar to an intersex one in terms of centering bodies neither fully male or female—it does not seem like so great a leap. For more recent readers, in turn, a disembodied Pardoner is preferred to an intersex Pardoner. Why is this concept of lack easier to accept than variation? For a character known for his multiple significations, the Pardoner's potentially intersex body need not be threatening—or “ridiculous”—to modern readers of medieval texts.

Terminology Matters

To provide context to this discussion, let's take a step back and consider the term “intersex,” the word many in the intersex community have taken for themselves and wish to be called, rather than “hermaphrodite,” as according to this statement from the AISSG website:

Most of our members detest these hermaphrodite terms, just as those with AIS find the old name (testicular feminization syndrome) for their specific condition deeply offensive. For many of our members who have not been told the truth by doctors, it is these terms that they come across in medical libraries / bookshops, when searching for information that will allow them to make sense of their situation. This is deeply traumatizing for a teenager who in all respects except for her internal organs appears to be female (and who

often has only come to medical attention through a failure to menstruate) and we feel these archaic terms should be banned from the medical literature.⁶⁰

For Sturges (*Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory*, 2000) and David Rollo (*Kiss My Relics: Hermaphroditic Fictions of the Middle Ages*, 2011), the term “intersex” was widely available. It is indeed used in Rowland’s 1954 medical textbook and of course adapted later by the intersex community. The term was used in gender scholarship and sociology by Suzanne Kessler in her 1990 article and 1998 book,⁶¹ as well as Alice Dreger’s 1998 and 1990 books,⁶² and it held some staying power as can be seen in more recent work including Sharon Preeves’ 2003 *Intersex and Identity*,⁶³ Katrina Karkazis’ *Fixing Sex* in 2008, Morgan Holmes’ 2008 *Intersex: a perilous Difference* and 2009 *Critical Intersex*,⁶⁴ Ellen Feder’s *Making Sense of Intersex* in 2014,⁶⁵ and

60. This quotation appears under the heading, “‘Hermaphrodite’ Terms,” *Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome Support Group*, accessed August 28, 2016, http://www.aissg.org/21_OVERVIEW.HTM.

61. Suzanne J. Kessler, “The Medical Construction of Gender” *Signs* 16 (1990): 3–26, and Suzanne J. Kessler, *Lessons from the Intersexed* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

62. Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*, and Dreger, *Intersex in the Age of Ethics*.

63. Sharon E. Preves, *Intersex and Identity: The Contested Self* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

64. Morgan Holmes, *Intersex: A Perilous Difference* (Selinsgrove Pa.: Susquehanna University Press, 2008), and Morgan Holmes, ed., *Critical Intersex* (Farnham: Ashgate, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009). It is relevant to add that on the day Susannah Cornwall received her contributor copy of *Critical Intersex*, a volume in which contributors actively question whether “intersex” or “DSD” is the more appropriate term, news broke regarding an athlete accused of being a “hermaphrodite”: Cornwall blogged, “it was brought home to me today that, [as reported in The Guardian](#), the South African athlete Caster Semenya may have been shown by tests to be a *hermaphrodite*. I think it's easy for those of us working in this discipline to forget, even as we wrangle over ‘intersex’ v. ‘DSD’, that much of the rest of society is still clinging to that archaic and inaccurate designation which we thought was long gone and

Georgiann Davis' *Contesting Intersex* in 2015. However, besides one quotation from Judith Butler I could find in Sturges' book (he does not elaborate on the term Butler uses), the term was apparently unused by these literary scholars.⁶⁶ In the index to her 2013 book *Nothing Natural is Shameful: Sodomy and Science in Late Medieval Europe*, Joan Cadden references "hermaphrodite" but not "intersex."⁶⁷ Nederman and True occasionally use variations on this latter term, "intersexuality" and "intersexed," but the terms are quietly employed as synonyms for "hermaphroditism" (the section header where these terms first appear is "Hermaphrodite Studies Today") and not brought to bear on the very active discussions on intersex actually happening today.⁶⁸ One exception is Leah DeVun's noting that alchemical "hermaphrodites" were "not concerned with any actual case of intersex birth; the alchemical hermaphrodite was merely a metaphor."⁶⁹ Even if these terms are not explicitly defined and seem to be used synonymously at times in the article, there is some difference being established, or at the very least some acknowledgement of "actual" intersex people. I have rarely seen such acknowledgements of the "actual," or any distinctions between real and figurative usages made in medieval scholarship, however. Practically speaking, in the context of library research this

buried. It seems that reports of 'hermaphroditism's death have been greatly exaggerated." "Critical Intersex," *Susannah Cornwall*, September 11, 2009, <http://susannahcornwall.blogspot.com/2009/09/what-should-be-waiting-for-me-when-i.html>.

65. Ellen K. Feder, *Making Sense of Intersex: Changing Ethical Perspectives in Biomedicine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

66. Sturges, *Chaucer's Pardoner*, 44.

67. Joan Cadden, *Nothing is Shameful: Sodomy and Science in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

68. Nederman and True, "The Third Sex," 500.

69. Leah DeVun, "The Jesus Hermaphrodite: Science and Sex Difference in Premodern Europe," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 2 (2008): 193–218; 194–195.

general divide in terminology results in one world of scholarship and activism under the search term “intersex” and a medieval world under the search term “hermaphrodite,” which is a puzzling divide to perpetuate when “hermaphrodite” is an offensive term to most intersex people.

The dreaded charge of anachronism is surely a motivator for scholars to avoid modern contexts, and it is also true that hermaphrodite and intersex mean different things.

“Hermaphrodite” of course is a term medieval people inherited from the classical era, and it conveys not just a medical reality, but also myth and metaphor. Medieval hermaphroditic bodies include alchemical substances, biblical bodies including Christ and Adam, homosexual bodies, philosopher-courtiers, the Antichrist, and more—even the Pardoner’s figure of Death can be read as male and female, as I’ll discuss later. As this list suggests, hermaphroditic bodies can have nothing to do with actual people who have male and female genitalia, chromosomes, or secondary sex characteristics. The discussion surrounding hermaphrodites is usually not about intersex people, but rather tropes that appropriate intersex bodies for entirely different discussions couched in myths, metaphors, and play. This play is performed for a literary community to discover what hermaphrodites might mean for the non-intersex, the Hosts of this world asking for a tale to enjoy and judge. For such privileged and literate non-intersex people, the “hermaphrodite” is little more than a playful fiction for entertainment or a site for moral castigation.

In this context, a literary “hermaphrodite” can’t just be an intersex person minding their own business; they have to mean something for non-intersex readers, and that something is sometimes a cautionary lesson in the breakdown of proper sexual ethics. In John Gower’s fourteenth-century text *Mirour de l’Omme*, intersex characters are products of incest, not just in one but in two generations. In this Anglo-Norman poem, Satan has intercourse with his daughter

Sin to produce Death (gendered male yet called *La Mort*); then Sin and Death engender the Seven Deadly Sins, who in turn marry one partner, the World, to then have thirty-five daughters explicitly called hermaphrodites. The personifications involved, not to mention that this is Satan's family, suggest the enormity of these sexual sins as registered on the bodies of these intersex children, themselves personifications of specific sub-types of the Seven Deadly Sins. It would be easy to assume that nowadays, being enlightened beyond medieval thinking, we would never portray intersex characters as the product of incest, yet this is exactly what happens in Jeffrey Eugenides' 2002 critically-acclaimed novel *Middlesex*, in which Cal/Callie's parents and grandparents commit incest, by implication making the grandchild's intersexuality a consequence of that sexual behavior. It is remarkable that these fourteenth- and a twenty-first-century texts construct an intersex character in the same way, as a product of such sin, personified in Gower by Sin herself but figuratively present in Eugenides. Eugenides' novel includes doctor visits and other more scientific aspects of the intersex experience, and yet there is something about "hermaphrodites" (the term Eugenides uses) that conveys the mythical, the sensational, and the sinful. "Hermaphrodite" invokes "deviance" in the moral sense: even if Cal/Callie or Gower's daughters did not commit the original sin, it's their misfortune to be children born with those incestuous sins written on their flesh.⁷⁰

Both these authors at least acknowledge that babies are born intersex. Ovid, the first to create a famous intersex character, incorporates the story into his *Metamorphoses*, the theme of which is forms taking on new forms. Thus, babies born intersex won't do; there must be a

70. Nathan Carlin, "A Pastoral Theological Reading of *Middlesex*," in *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible*, ed. Susannah Cornwall (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 103–04. Carlin makes the point that Jeffrey Eugenides' novel should not use the term "hermaphrodite," as yet another way to frame the intersex protagonist in mythic terms rather than as a person, in addition to the implied incestuous origins of intersex bodies.

catalyst that brings on change. Rather than portray a baby born intersex, Ovid attributes the change of form to Hermaphroditus' bad luck and naïveté: the boy enters Salmacis' waters, fails to see the danger of the girl lusting for him, and fails to escape her attack and her fateful prayer to be united with him as one. Hermaphroditus becomes a "just-so" story or etiological myth, in this case explaining why the waters of Salmacis are not a good swimming place for men who wish to stay male. When it comes to intersex, all three of these "hermaphroditic" fictions and myths muddy the waters so that we readers cannot see who is being drowned as the casualties of writerly / readerly play.

"Intersex," in contrast to the term "hermaphrodite," is a modern, originally medical term stripped of the hermaphrodite's classical and medieval metaphors and associations, and while intersex people possess a variety of genders and sexualities, the term pertains to sex. "Intersex," like sex itself, is not a precise term. Susannah Cornwall notes that the term "does a lot of work," in that it covers a wide range of medical conditions, some life threatening, some not, as well as "what we might term an intersex 'habitus': a social and, to some extent, political identity shared by some intersex people."⁷¹ As a medical condition, it depends on a number of vaguely defined factors determining what is male and what is female, such as that nebulous line between a hypospadiac micropenis and clitoral hypertrophy, as but one example.⁷² Uncertain criteria notwithstanding, the figure commonly cited is that 1 of every 2,000 babies are born intersex.⁷³ It's only recently that the intersex community formed as activists decrying the medicalization of bodies treated without consent, including infants undergoing clitorectomies, vaginoplasties, and

71. Cornwall, "Troubling Bodies," 5.

72. Preves, *Intersex and Identity*, 4.

73. Davis, *Contesting Intersex*, 3.

numerous other genital reconstructive operations, all in the name of providing infants with bodies eventually capable of reproduction or at least penile-vaginal sex, if lacking sensation and orgasm due to surgical complications. Treated as a medical emergency, these infants were assigned their “true” sex largely based on reproductive ability for girls and penis length for boys⁷⁴ and with the goal of constructing a heteronormative body capable of heterosexual sex.⁷⁵ Once reconfigured for public approval, these heavily scrutinized bodies in turn can become invisible and silenced.

From birth, and years before sexual maturity, intersex bodies are institutionally sexualized bodies, victims of a system that operates on silence, shame, and secrecy—three themes common both to aspects of the Pardoner's secret and to the modern intersex experience, in which the “secret,” rather than privately borne by its owner the Pardoner, becomes controlled by the medical community. Children learn that they are different “down there” and are told to

74. Dreger summarizes the reductive medical approach to sex assignments: “If a child is born intersexed and has a Y chromosome, his phallus will be carefully examined. If it looked like a believable penis to the doctors, or if they think they can make it look like what they think a penis should look like, the child will be assigned the boy gender. Doctors will examine this child at regular intervals and work—using surgical and endocrinological technologies—to make him look like a ‘true’ boy. If his phallus is less than 2.5 centimeters (1 inch) stretched at birth, however, most specialist clinicians will assign this child the girl gender, and use surgery and hormone treatments to make the patient look like what the doctors think girls should look like.

“If a child is born intersexed and without a Y chromosome, doctors will assign that child the girl gender. If her clitoris is longer than 1 centimeter stretched at birth, surgeons will seek to surgically reduce it because they think it will bother the child's parents and interfere with bonding and gender identity formation. If she does not have a vagina that is, in the doctor's opinion, big enough for penetration with a penis, she will have surgery for that. Hormone treatments will eventually be used, if necessary, to get her breasts to grow, and so on.” Dreger, “A History of Intersexuality,” 12.

75. One interviewee reported of her doctor, “He pushed me to be feminine, he pushed me to be heterosexual, he pushed me to give in to boys,” Davis, *Contesting Intersex*, 93. Also see Davis, *Contesting Intersex*, 73, for the doctors' rationalization of treatment based on gender assignment.

keep quiet their trips to the doctor and hospital; they are taught to lie to protect the secret; they are taught to lie on the exam table and not tell anyone about it. Contemporary memoirists cite the trauma and shame of the examination room in childhood and adolescence, in which they disassociate from their bodies to cope with frequent prodding and even more invasive tactics.⁷⁶ The stakes for intersex could not be any higher, and scholars of sociology and medical ethics underscore these violations of human rights and urge the medical community to change its practice.

In medieval literary studies, the stakes seem rather different. We don't deal with intersex but rather with hermaphrodites, sensationalized bodies available for non-intersex scrutiny and manipulations and play for pleasure in the text. All my academic life I have been drawn to figurative play-spaces, that magical mix of body and language, both full of possibility when brought together. Yet I'm also concerned that this mode of signification also has the potential to ventriloquize marginalized voices rather than allow them to speak their own truths.

76. See, for example, the first essay in Thea Hillman's, *Intersex (For Lack of a Better Word)*, 9-11. In this essay entitled "Haircut," she writes about some difficulty she has with sexual intimacy and notes its origins on the exam table in her childhood: "I think the ticklishness started with the doctors. Well, one doctor, whose job it was to make sure I was developing at a normal rate, whose fingers pushed on my chest to see if breast tissue was developing, whose fingers opened me to make sure my clitoris was doing everything it was supposed to and not one bit more." See also Davis, *Contesting Intersex*, 121, and Preves, *Intersex and Identity*, 67-71, for the triggering effect caused by photography and by exposure to large audiences at teaching hospitals. For the use of vibrators on intersex girls, see Alice Dreger, *Galileo's Middle Finger: Heretics, Activists, and One Scholar's Search for Justice* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 221-2; and Alice Dreger and Ellen K. Feder, "Bad Vibrations," The Hastings Center, June 16, 2010: <https://www.thehastingscenter.org/bad-vibrations/>.

Hermaphroditus' Speech

This ventriloquizing of marginalized voices is most obviously seen when we analyze the trope of the intersex person as an eloquent speaker (which Rowland recounts in her 1979 piece), and in particular, Hermaphroditus as a figure of eloquence.⁷⁷ Remigius of Auxerre notes this connection in his ninth-century *Commentus* on Martianus Capella's *De nuptiis* and reminds us that Venus, not Philology, was Mercury's first love:

Ermafroditus autem significat quondam sermonis lascivitatem, qua plerumque neglecta veritatis ratione superfluous sermonis ornatus requiritur. Dicebat ergo se Iuno metuere ne iterum ad amplexus Veneris Mercurius vellet redire et Ermafrodito alium fratrem procreare (*Commentus* 1:108).

[Hermaphroditus signifies a particular lasciviousness of speech that obtains when the reasoned search for truth is neglected and the superfluous adornment of speech above all pursued. Juno claims she feared Mercury might want to return to the embraces of Venus and father another brother for Hermaphroditus]⁷⁸

77. Rowland, "Chaucer's Idea of the Pardoner," 149: She discusses the "hermaphrodite as both monster and shaman . . . he is unnatural and evil . . . Yet he is also a shaman, and his eloquence still bears traces of miraculous Dionysiac power and inspires him with the confidence which is to cause his final humiliation." Here Rowland compliments his eloquence, but only to add that it contributes to the Pardoner's downfall. It is a demeaning part of the so-called "hermaphroditic fiction" to endow an eloquence that justifies the character's condemnation.

78. Translation by David Rollo. See David Rollo, *Kiss My Relics: Hermaphroditic Fictions of the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 44–45. For Remigius of Auxerre's *Commentum in Martianum Capellam*, see *Remigii Autissiodorensis commentum in Martianum Capellam*, 2 vols., ed. Cora E. Lutz. (Leiden: Brill, 1962–65). Rollo notes the passage in the *Commentus* (1:108) refers to the *De nuptiis* 22.16.

This language of lascivious adornment is alluring to medieval and modern audiences, yet it is a condemnatory passage. First, the overall point is that Hermaphroditus is the lovechild of a couple who never should have gotten together, perhaps with an implication that the sexual sins of the lascivious parents are visited upon the sex of the sexualized child, much like that aforementioned link between incest and intersex. The prospect of a second such intersex child would be even worse for the world. Second, and more to my point, the lascivious speech invoked in the passage is attributed to Hermaphroditus, but we're not given an actual speech. The imagination can supply such discourse and thereby ventriloquize the intersex body through the performance Remigius fashions for him. It is he who—like the Host—judges over bodies and tongues. Remigius is of course attributing to Hermaphroditus a lesser kind of speech: this eloquence—“sermonis lascivitatem” and “superfluous sermonis ornatus”—amounts to verbal excess absent from a skilled and conscientious orator such as Martianus' *Lady Rhetoric*, for Hermaphroditus' rhetoric is devoted only to beauty and pleasure, without truth value or philosophical significance (“neglecta veritatis ratione”). “Eloquence” may seem a compliment, but it is a back-handed one: since Cicero's time, and his established dichotomy of eloquence and philosophical truth, this classic gift of excessive eloquence has been weighed against philosophical truth and ever found wanting.⁷⁹

The task of the modern critic seems to be to “save” Hermaphroditus' pejorative representation here by turning the tables and pointing out unwitting participations in and

79. As Rita Copeland writes of rhetoric and philosophy, “Chaucer and other medieval poets did not simply accept the Platonic binary between truth value and representation, philosophy and rhetoric: rather, they worked with that binary, using rhetoric as the site from which they would negotiate the conflicting claims over the authority of knowledge and the power of representation.” There was play, and eloquence could be used in service to truth, but the binary was widespread. See Rita Copeland, “Chaucer and Rhetoric,” in *The Yale Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Seth Lerer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 125.

celebrations of the very qualities for which Hermaphroditus was being condemned, thereby destabilizing heterosexual culture. As Rollo notes,

Accordingly Remigius identifies Venus as the true creative presence behind the text and [Venus] creates a new form of textual hermaphroditism. Although not the physical product of another mythological union of Hermes and Aphrodite, the fable [i.e., Martianus' *De nuptiis*] is nonetheless "hermaphroditic" because created by Aphrodite from *sermo, facundia, eloquentia*, from the verbal categories with which Hermes, the Mercury of the text, is at one time or another equated. It is the second progeny of sensuality and speech, a textual brother to Hermaphroditus, but one that shows none of the negative characteristics of an elder sibling, since, by creating this alternative hermaphroditism, Venus in fact comes to the aid of those philosophers against whom she seems starkly contrasted (49).

With Venus revealed as Martianus' muse and thus joining with Hermes in rhetoric if not in the flesh, hermaphroditism is celebrated, philosophical wisdom and sensual pleasure unite in fruitful union. The intention of saving Hermaphroditus by locating something of Hermaphroditus within the text is good and certainly interesting, yet there are problems with this approach, for it celebrates something "hermaphroditic" without acknowledgement that these tropes have nothing to do with intersex. In such readings, medieval and modern critics are both still working with the same reductive script casting Hermaphroditus as that embodiment of stereotyped, lascivious eloquence—all the while utterly denying him a voice. Hermaphroditus is commented upon, not commenting. He *signifies* ("Ermafroditus . . . significat") speech rather than speaks. His representation as lustful is at odds with the dramatized scene in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which young Hermaphroditus is *distraught* because of his first experience of sexuality—he rejects

Salmacis' advances and fights her when she assaults him. Hence he's not particularly lascivious or even eloquent, really. He's just a boy, a victim of sexual assault, upset about the attack, upset that his speech is disregarded (he asks Salmacis to stop—hardly the lascivious speech for which he is famous). It is from this narrative of victimization that his once lamenting voice gets co-opted into one of seduction that squarely places him on the wrong side of the age-old binary of truth and eloquence. As the voice of lascivious eloquence, Hermaphroditus isn't real; he's a "hermaphroditic fiction," an elder brother and backdrop to the real story, constructed by and for the pleasure of an elite audience disinterested in a tale of a boy being sexually assaulted. Hermaphroditus as a trope is more easily ventriloquized and more titillating, even as such discourse is dismissive of what intersex really is.

Like Hermaphroditus and his lascivious speech being constructed for him, the Pardoner and his tale, as proposed by the Host, are similarly constructed to emphasize lust and to lack any deeper truth. Like the narrator of the *General Prologue*, the Host brings the Pardoner's appearance to our attention, but the narrator and Host do so differently. The narrator mocks the ambivalence of the Pardoner's sex in degrading comparisons to animals, but the Host's sense of humor embraces a more flirtatious tone. He plays along like a stand-in for the Summoner, in hopes to elicit a lusty tale from the Pardoner:

"Thou beel amy, thou Pardoner

Telle us som myrthe or japes right anon."

"It shal be doon," quod he, "by Seint Ronyon!" (VI 318–320)

Just as the Pardoner plays off the Summoner in their lusty singing, the Pardoner's oath "by Seint Ronyon" plays off the Host's previous invocation of this saint ten lines earlier, but makes explicit the pun on "runnion" or kidneys, which can be interpreted as testicles (VI 310). By his bearing and his request, the Host seems to expect some kind of dirty tale from the Pardoner, and the Pardoner cheerfully obliges—yet the Pardoner's pilgrim audience does not want that expectation met and halts it immediately. Why do they stop the tale before it begins, in favor of "som moral thing," when they gleefully tolerate fabliaux from a variety of pilgrims (VI 325)? If we try an intersex reading, this is a bold scene. The Host, no longer modern doctor but more of a Remigius figure, acknowledges the sexually tainted eloquence of Hermaphroditus and, quite unlike Remigius, asks for a tale. This winking acknowledgement of salacious hermaphroditic rhetoric is problematic because the Remigius-figure is supposed to invoke the "hermaphroditic fiction," with the actual intersex person hidden from view. Acknowledging the Pardoner for what he is and acknowledging the script that he is handing to him, the Host thinks he is merely type-casting the Pardoner, but the pilgrim audience sees something more unsettling. The trope becomes real before their eyes, the hermaphroditic fiction a mere script to be performed by an actual intersex person. Their disgust may not be in the fabliau per se, but rather in the discomfort of the figurative meeting the literal and the literal carrying the greater presence. The Pardoner, though only invited to speak according to the stereotype imposed on him, is ready to blow the audience away and give his Remigius something to remember. He willingly takes on stereotypes to critique them. That is why he turns to the other stereotyped role thrust on him—the hypocritical Pardoner—when the pilgrim audience begs for "som moral thyng" as if that were safer territory distanced from his intersexuality. Doing so, taking on his role as professional Pardoner able to tell a good if hypocritical exemplum, he conforms to his audience's needs. Yet

at the same time he shows that his voice, even when speaking to scripts they hand him, cannot be managed by them. He plays with ventriloquism only to underscore the involvement of those who keep passing him the words. He courts their discomfort in and through these role-playing games, until the Host silences him with the threat of castration: “I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond . . . Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie; / They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!” (VI C 952–55).

Some critics think the Host’s castration threat is a joke, but how does one joke with a person who is not allowed to joke—not allowed to speak his “ribaudye” (324)? The Host who on other occasions plays the role of peacemaker does not treat the Pardoner with the same respect. I’ve already noted a temporal paradox in which the Pardoner as a modern intersex person might experience this castration as having already happened—a violation of human rights by a surgery to which he never consented. This reading makes the Host’s insult all the more egregious by mocking the Pardoner with his most devastating loss. The Pardoner is further managed by the Knight in a kiss of peace—not a salacious act but one of conformity, the price of swallowing his dignity and playing along. He is made to kiss his surgeon, just as Hermaphroditus is made to merge with his attacker and then ventriloquize lascivious speech that was never his. In myths like those of Hermaphroditus and of Philomela, who was raped and mutilated, both the body and tongue are attacked, in that order, so we must seek Hermaphroditus’ tapestry just as Philomela’s sister had to do.

There is a real-life analogue to such tapestries and to making assumptions about intersex voices. In his preface to Herculine Barbin’s memoirs, Foucault commented that Barbin’s memoirs were somewhat mundane, banal, elusive, and frustrating because Barbin does not

divulge much due to “that elegant, affected, elusive style” that is a product of its time.⁸⁰ But what else was Foucault expecting, or was he concerned at what his audience might have expected? Barbin’s voice is not the sensational one Foucault or Foucault’s audience perhaps preferred to hear; the voice did not sound “hermaphroditic” enough, only (disappointingly?) as human as anyone else. Foucault notes Barbin’s consistent point of view as a woman, rather than as a man or as someone non-binary; Barbin does not question what Foucault seems to think should be questioned. To his credit, Foucault honored Barbin’s voice by publishing it as it was written, not co-opting a voice or body to serve his own purpose in a parallel way to how the medical community photographs a naked intersex body and puts a black box over the eyes to dehumanize that person as a mere example of intersex rather than an individual. To reverse this trend of depriving intersex people of their voices and bodies, Dreger’s edited volume, *Intersex in the Age of Ethics*, contains essays of intersex people voicing their experiences and perspectives, as well as including photographs of them as regular people—the way they wish to be seen. The cover image of a naked body with blacked out eyes is of Dreger herself.⁸¹

80. Foucault, *Herculine Barbin (Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-century French Hermaphrodite)*, ed. Michel Foucault, trans. Richard McDougall (New York: Vintage, 1980), xi–xii.

81. Dreger, *Galileo’s Middle Finger*, 35–36. “For that collection, Bo and I wanted a front cover that showed the contrast between the monstrous medical image of intersex and the real lives of intersex people—to make the point that you never know who around you is intersex and the point that the medical approach is what makes someone a monster. We had realized how powerful images were in getting people to change their thinking. So we took photos that all the contributors—intersex and non-intersex—gave us of themselves, and put those, all mixed up, on the front cover. A few were bare-chested men; most were fully clothed. You couldn’t tell who was intersex and who wasn’t. For the center of the montage, we wanted a classic medical image—naked, eyes blacked out, against the grid—but I didn’t dare use a real image and reexploit someone. I can’t remember if Bo or the publisher suggested it, but one of them said to me, “Why don’t we do a picture of you, Alice?” So I paid a university photographer whom I’d come to know fifty bucks to meet me at his apartment and photograph me naked standing in the “medical pose” with a band of paper meant to look like a hospital ID bracelet taped around my

To return to the passage about Hermaphroditus, surely it is ironic that we participate in Martianus and Remigius' privileged male medieval world that appropriates a mythical, silenced "hermaphroditic" body, accuses it of rhetoric that detracts from and lacks truth, and performs this condemnation with its own adorned and false rhetoric. By reading Remigius' commentary with careful attention, David Rollo points out an intriguing inversion implicating Martianus in the "hermaphroditic fiction," when Remigius notes that "Capella" signifies a she-goat, which makes his authorship of a "hermaphroditic text" appropriate, and the comparison also seems to be a compliment to Martianus, since she-goats are said to have excellent eyesight (45). Rowland would no doubt add that goats are associated with intersexuality. This inversion of a male poet using feminine (and intersex and goatish) vision is an intriguing twist and part of why I enjoy this figurative space, but we still need to problematize "hermaphroditic" language as something removed from and doing violence to actual intersexed bodies. Rollo makes fruitful connections between oppressive language and revealed sexualities, but the term "hermaphroditic fictions" are fictions about metaphorical and performative bodies that have little to do with intersex. We return essentially to the body of Martianus Capella, to the tropes and the eloquence of the poet himself (eloquence that is of course deepened by philosophic truth), rather than to the intersex body. You could read such scholarship and not even be aware that intersex bodies existed then and now because metaphor doesn't leave enough room for a body. We are back to Sturges' work

right wrist. He then used Photoshop to put a grid behind me and a black band over my eyes. He also blurred out my naughty bits. (I didn't have tenure.) When my friends and students saw the book, they immediately recognized me. So much for the idea that the black band makes any difference! I just told them I do nudity only if the plot requires it." As a side note, I find Dreger's tenure remark interesting in that it is riskier career-wise to make that pose than to exploit an intersex person, and it's also interesting that Dreger's lack of tenure is an issue just as it was for Beryl Rowland.

on the fluidly shifting body, which can be useful for thought experiments, but nonetheless works with disembodiment on principle.

Thus while such scholarship truly strives for inclusion, the lack of acknowledgment of intersex and the avoidance of the physical intersex body and its appropriations over time are in danger of perpetuating erasure and excluding intersex people from the scholarly community. What if we wrote about monstrous representations of metaphorical Jews or homosexuals or women without acknowledging that there might be real Jews or homosexuals or women in the room? That is my concern when we laugh at the mere thought that the Pardoner is intersex or a hermaphrodite—and scholars do laugh at the word “hermaphrodite,” which is reason enough to get rid of it. “But *you* are not a hermaphrodite,” a senior scholar commented with a laugh when he read in the program my conference paper title, which had used both terms. It’s an interesting assumption, coupled with that complicit laugh, and it goes with my overall point that a non-intersex community writes for itself and excludes the very people ostensibly being discussed. Later, at a different panel at the same conference, an audience laughed at Rollo’s book title—admittedly, “*Kiss My Relics*” is funny and catchy, but the subtitle, “*Hermaphroditic Fictions in the Middle Ages*” then is rendered similarly comic in tone, funny in a way intersex memoirs and interviews aren’t. We should not court this laughter, which seems to repeat the scene in which the Pardoner is cut down with jokes at his expense.

Is there another way of doing this kind of work as a medievalist and a literary scholar? I think we can and should make our work speak more to the world around us to inform ourselves, locate our position in the larger discourse, and contribute in our small and still lagging way to empowering intersex voices and bodies. To do anything less is to perpetuate the fallacy that “hermaphrodites” are fantastic fictions whose bodies help non-intersex people sort out their own,

even as they ignore actual mistreated, silenced intersex bodies. Literary scholars often work in metaphor, but can we point the focus back to the marginalized we claim are being represented? Can we serve in other ways?

If Death Were Intersex: an Intersex Thought Experiment

If listening to intersex voices is the least we can do, then *The Pardoner's Tale* presents an opportunity to read a tale as told by a potentially intersex character and to consider its figurative language in that context. Seeta Chaganti argues that the old man is the figuration of *figura*, and she discusses the old man's temporal paradox of degenerating yet not actually dying, which we can compare to the Pardoner's paradox of being castrated and threatened with castration.⁸² The oppressions of the past become indistinguishable from the future, and the only seeming relief is the terminus of death. If Chaucer's figurative language is meant to mock the Pardoner (gelding / mare, goat's voice, hare's eyes), and the Host's figurative language is meant to threaten and bully the Pardoner, the Pardoner offers something quite different in his highly figurative language. It is highly self-conscious language—creating a figuration of *figura* suggests the Pardoner's awareness of the literary tradition, and his own reply as a way of out-figuring the figurative texts that have defined him in the past. But it's how he uses his figurative language that is really interesting. Like the narrator and Host, Pardoner is also capable of scathing remarks

82. Seeta Chaganti, *The Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 137.

and manipulations, but at his most powerful, his figurative language explores raw needs and locates meaning—truths—in the body. Noting the alliteration in the old man's apostrophe to his mother, Chaganti draws attention to the literary device working with the old man's embodied proposal to leave his stagnant "chamber" and imprisoned "chest," for release and "change": "Mooder, with yow wolde I chaunge my cheste / That in my chamber longe tyme hath be, / Ye, for an heyre clowt to wrappe me!" (VI 74–76). She writes, "If the old man resists metaphoric attachment to any one particular vehicle—death, despair, greed—he can instead contain figurative representation within his body; in the chain of alliterative terms surrounding him . . . he becomes *translatio* inherent in metaphor."⁸³ The old man indeed resists attachment to any one of these metaphors, but his body matters, and so do the metaphors, because they serve that body. They express real pain and a processing of experience and a desperate need for release. In *The Pardoner's Tale*, the body is not left behind—painfully so.

At the center of the tale is another shadowy figure, the intriguing presence-absence of Death, that personification always looming but never appearing in the flesh. A personification assumes a gender, but Death's gender is unclear. To the rioters, he is a threatening male: "this false traytour Deeth . . . he that so manye sleeth" (VI 699–700). To the old man, I would argue that she is a mother, or is at least conflated with the motherly grave—Death "ne wol nat han myn lyf...I knokke with my staf, both erly and late / And saye 'Leeve mooder, leet me in!" (727–31). Why this destabilizing collapse of Death with the mother, when surely they are opposites, or at least separate figures according to the tale's young page, who tells the rioters about Death and says he learned this information from his mother. What if they aren't separate people, and the mother warns her son about herself as that male figure? It is possible that the Pardoner is crafting

83. *Ibid.*, 141.

a dual character, Mother / Death whose story is located not only in sex and gender, but also in the family—a character that is an intimate part of our family, our mother who gave us life and will ease us into the next life.

There is precedent for Death being both male and female. Early on in his *Mirour de l'Omme*, John Gower already established as much with his personification of Death, *La Mort* in Anglo-Norman, as the male child of Sin and her father / mother Satan, who bore and breastfed her, as I will discuss below. Along with committing incest with his mother Sin, Gower's Death is also the father of the Seven Deadly Sins, whose children are themselves intersex. Gower struggles—and perhaps parades that struggle—to underscore the indignity that Sin and her son Death's granddaughters are intersex:

Car de nature a leur naiscant
 Trestous sont mostre hermafodrite:
 Sicome le livre m'en recite,
 Ce sont quant double forme habite
 Femelle et madle en un enfant:
 Si noun de femme les endite,
 Les filles dont je vous endite
 Sont aici homme nepourquant. (lines 1025-1032)⁸⁴

84. G.C. Macaulay, ed., *The Works of John Gower: The French Works* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1899).

[for at birth by nature all were hermaphroditic monsters. As the book tells me, these are when a double form, male and female, lives in a child. If I lay on them the name of female, the daughters of whom I am telling you are nonetheless males.]⁸⁵

As offensive as this passage might be, it gets closer to the reality of intersex than the Hermaphroditus myth does. In the Hermaphroditus narrative, intersexuality is not a reality at birth; it happens to a beautiful careless boy who swims in waters far from home. Gower is trying to dehumanize these intersex daughters, and yet notes their childhood, their infancy: “Femelle et madle en un enfant.” It is difficult to demonize babies without the attempt backfiring at least to some degree—these monstrous babies are still *babies*—and because of these lines, we remain aware that these deadly ladies were once young and vulnerable, surely all the more vulnerable for being intersex. The holy incest between God and Mary is prefigured by the unholy incest between Satan and Sin to produce Death, and then between Sin and Death to engender the Seven Deadly Sins. Gower clearly frames Satan and his family as malicious and evil, and yet the parody’s maternal overtones subverts the censure. There is something so familial and human about Satan and his family. Unlike Athene gloriously springing fully armed from Zeus’ head or a Miltonic Sin springing from Satan’s head in Book 2 of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,⁸⁶ Gower’s Sin is born a baby, and her mother is Satan himself. As a father and mother both, Gower’s Satan conceives and engenders his daughter (“De sa malice conceiveit / Et puis enfantoit une file,” *MO* 207-8) and even nurses her (“Il mesmes sa norrice estoit”) and watches over (“gardoit,” 12) the

85. John Gower, *Mirour de l'Omme (The Mirror of Mankind)*, trans. William Burton Wilson (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1992).

86. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Macmillan, 1957), Book 2, lines 648-815.

helpless infant.⁸⁷ Later, when Sin's granddaughter Homicide is born, Satan sings at the cradle and nurses her on his own milk: "Ly deable y vint et la norrist / Du lait mortiel" ["the devil came and nourished her with deadly milk"] (line 4791, 4796–7).⁸⁸ Gower's text offers the only account

87. G.C. Macaulay, ed., *The Works of John Gower: The French Works, Mirour de l'Omme*, 207-12. For context, the full passage is as follows:

Ly deable, qui tous mals soubtile
 Et trestous biens hiet et revile,
 De sa malice concevoit
 Et puis enfantoit une file,
 Q'ert tresmalvoise, laide et vile,
 La quelle Pecché noun avoit.
 Il mesmes sa norrice estoit,
 Et la gardoit et doctrinoit
 De sa plus trichouse guile;
 Par quoy la file en son endroit
 Si violente devenoit,

Que riens ne touche que n'avile. (*MO*, 205–216)

["The devil, who contrives all evils and who hates and reviles all good, in his malice conceived and gave birth to a daughter, who was very evil, ugly, and vile, who had the name of Sin. He himself was her nurse, looked after her and indoctrinated her in his most treacherous guile, whereby the girl in turn became so fierce that she touched nothing without vilifying it."]

Translation by Wilson, *Mirour de l'Omme (The Mirror of Mankind)*.

This stanza clearly presents Satan as a mother. The verbs "concevoit" and "enfantoit" describe not a father's but a mother's birth process of conception and parturition. Satan seems oddly comfortable with this female role and continues to mother the child after the birth, serving as his daughter's "norrice" or nurse.

88. G.C. Macaulay, ed., *The Works of John Gower: The French Works, Mirour de l'Omme*, 207. Translation by Wilson, *Mirour de l'Omme (The Mirror of Mankind)*. Satan nursing his daughter is interesting because many medieval mothers, particularly upper-class women, did not nurse their own infants. See Margaret Miles, *A Complex Delight, The Secularization of the Breast, 1350-1750* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 8. According to Miles, wet nurses were carefully appointed, for nurses who did not produce enough milk might substitute animal milk, which was thought to cause stupidity in infants. So important was healthy human milk that the only women subjected to medical examination by male doctors rather than midwives were wet nurses; this precaution was to ensure the birth family of the nurse's qualifications for her job (93). Nursing Sin on "sa plus trichouse guile," Satan represents metaphorically what many parents feared literally, that milk from a bad breast would harm their children. The female breast was a vital source of power that was increasingly regulated by men—both clergy who admonished mothers for not following Mary's example of nursing her own infant, and husbands who signed the contracts with wet nurses in part to shorten the time allowing for their wives' next pregnancy. As father and mother, Satan retains both masculine and feminine power over the family, allowing him / her to bring up the child as he / she pleases.

of a lactating Satan I have encountered, and I imagine the intention is to condemn his behavior (and his milk, an important accusation in a time of wet nurses and anxiety over infant nutrition), yet the patient physicality of breastfeeding makes him at that moment a little less “Satanic,” a little more intimate for his / her maternal attentions. Satan’s maternal simplicity, a quality passed down the incestuous family line, is groundbreaking and complicated to interpret. Gower’s Satan is a non-binary parent who nurtures his offspring with maternal care and *instructs* Sin and Death to engender the Seven Deadly Sins (there is no rape scene as in Milton—Gower’s Sin is happy to expand the family with her son), whose daughters in turn have their own offspring with the World. Though Gower vilifies incest and non-binary bodies, he also has God copy Satan’s strategy, by breeding his allegorical female Virtues with Reason, and finally follows suit through his own incest with his daughter, Mary. Who is parodying whom? If Milton did know—even develop his work from—Gower’s account, he took pains to define a more primary role for God’s originality than did Gower: and Gower’s location of God as an *imitator* is a sign of the reversibility of original and imitation in language itself that Gower demonstrates throughout the *Mirour*. Part of what makes Gower’s strategy backfire (assuming his intentions were to condemn Satan and his family) is the slippage between the figurative and the literal. Calling upon the vulnerability of intersex infants and upon the devotion of their mothers complicates Gower’s text and questions its condemnatory gestures.

Like father / mother, like son / daughter: Death is Satan’s intersex child. Diane Watt has discussed the gender play, not of Satan as a mother, but of Death (La Mort) and his daughters and granddaughters.⁸⁹ Interestingly, Death was intersex in older traditions, specifically

89. Diane Watt, *Amoral Gower* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 26–28.

Gnosticism.⁹⁰ Chaucer's Death fits in this overall tradition, but more importantly, this is the *Pardoner's* Death we are talking about, *his* choice to construct the character so, and it seems significant that a potentially intersex character is writing a story around a known intersex personification. *The Pardoner's Tale* is bitter, both despairing and laden with authority, but what is significant is that Death's character is conveyed by both the rioters' and the old man's points of view, and the composite image for this character conveys attributes of those pursuing Death. The old man (who might also symbolize death) embodies shame but also eloquence, and the old man's longing for Death softens one of the most fearsome personifications, lending Death femininity and the power to impart the physical "grace" of a final resting place to the wanderer. Death as mother is like Gower's lactating Satan, but the lines the old man speaks are so much more resonant with longing, as though the Pardoner is taking this intersex representation more earnestly and not as satire (VI 737). With his vitality long gone, the family long dispersed or dispossessed in some form of exile, perhaps death itself, the old man seems a lost, eloquent child, his desire for his mother's embrace truly heartbreaking. As in Gower's text, the Pardoner's intersexual characterizations lend humanity to these characters rather than take it away, though I believe the effect is more intentional coming from the Pardoner and crafted to be this way. While Death is introduced as a stereotyped villain in *The Pardoner's Tale*, Death becomes so much more and goes beyond this thin script: Death is a powerful and distant person to be dreaded, yet also someone deeply loved and longed for, a mother.

90. Brisson, *Sexual Ambivalence*, 104.

As with Gower's text, Death is not alone; Death's presence invokes an intersex family.⁹¹ The Pardoner does not depict a happy family, though, cursed as it is with a great deal of shame, secrecy, and silence. If *The Pardoner's Tale* rewrites Gower's *Mirour de l'Omme's* story of the care and feeding of Sin and all her family, *The Pardoner's Tale* gestures at a dwindling, unconnected intersex family, partly because Gower's characters are too simple, too unburdened, to work in the Pardoner's complex, burdened tale. What is burdening the old man, when no specific tragedy is named? The old man is reticent where a reader might prefer to hear the whole story in all its details. Like Foucault adjusting to Barbin's reticence in her memoirs, so readers must adjust to what the Pardoner says and doesn't say. The Pardoner is considered one of the least credible figures in all of literature, and it is considered a flaw to find moments of sincerity in his performance when all is nothingness and lack. An intersex reading, though, would give the Pardoner more somethingness and variation, and perhaps more credibility and sympathy at times; perhaps an intersex reading would teach us new ways to listen, so that the words of the *General Prologue* or those of the Host are not the last word on the Pardoner.

Earlier in this essay I pointed out that the modern intersex experience has operated with a great deal of shame, secrecy, and silence, and this holds true in its own way in *The Pardoner's Tale*: the old man's shame at living beyond his body's endurance, the rioters figuring out the secret of Death's nefarious plots, and then harboring their own secretive, deathly inclinations, and finally Death—the figurative intersex character pursued and found by literal-minded rioters, while the figurative-minded old man seeking his mother is denied the access to a literal death.

91. If the old man feels betrayed by his mother, it is only because she is not acting enough like the betrayer-father the rioters describe. The old man longs for that contact and intimacy. Death / motherhood for him is not just a key relationship, but the defining one, the one that offers grace and the fullness of an embrace.

There is some commentary here from the Pardoner on the frustrated, crisscrossed and double-crossed pursuit of the concrete and figurative, and he indicates some form of punishment against or at least suffering endured by the far smarter person who lives in a figurative state and cannot meet the physical reality of death. The old man is trapped in the role of being old, so the old man appeals to family, but that role too has limits. Death meets the young rioters but not the old man, betraying the old man's hopes once again. As an intersex character, Death upends the reductive stereotype of the lascivious tongue with the reality of the silenced intersex experience—Death as an empowered personification is the silent and the silencer alike, doing unto others what had been done unto those like her / him.

Death is the character in the position of power, a position the Pardoner himself does not have, for all his skill and eloquence, but Death is a person he can author, and as such, craft a narrative. Both are fictitious characters, but it is interesting to pair the Pardoner and Death as literal intersex author (in a work of fiction notwithstanding) and figurative intersex character, though perhaps this isn't the case. It can't be proven, as Benson and others have noted. My paper really isn't about marshaling evidence to steer you, but I would argue that there's no need to mock the possibility of intersex. We should take the possibility very seriously. So many readers have balked at the diagnostic approach to the Pardoner because it feels reductive or anachronistic, and the approach has its limitations, but casting a pejorative tone about intersex as if it were beneath consideration could very well be more problematic and exclusionary. If we try an intersex reading, as I have just done, what we find is how much this text yields—we gain not Hermaphroditus' lascivious speech, but Philomela's tapestry, and a voice that does not ventriloquize marginalized voices but speaks from the margins.

An epilogue: when I began this paper, I was writing to critique an isolated, non-intersex ivory tower that either dismisses or plays with “hermaphrodites” but ignores the human rights violations suffered by intersex people today, and I wanted to question how medievalists might be unwittingly appropriating the voices of marginalized groups. More recently in medieval studies, appropriations of the medieval beyond the ivory tower have taken place. David Perry sums up recent events in an article about the Nazis’ obsession with medieval studies:

White supremacists explicitly celebrate Europe in the Middle Ages because they imagine that it was a pure, white, Christian place organized wholesomely around military resistance to outside, non-white, non-Christian, forces. Marchers in Charlottesville held symbols of the medieval Holy Roman Empire and of the Knights Templar. The Portland murderer praised “Vinland,” a medieval Viking name for North America, in order to assert historical white ownership over the landmass: Vinlander racists like to claim that whites are “indigenous” here on the basis of medieval Scandinavian lore. Similarly, European anti-Islamic bigots dress up in medieval costumes and share the “crying Templar” meme. Someone sprayed “saracen go home” and “deus vult”—a Latin phrase meaning “God wills it” and associated with the history of the Crusades—on a Scottish mosque.⁹²

Such examples of white supremacists who style themselves as modern Crusaders and knights are a reminder that if we do nothing, no one will know we as scholars stand against such visions of the past. Perry adds that he once lectured on medieval objects “never thinking about the ways in

92. David Perry, “What to do when Nazis are Obsessed with Your Field: How medieval historians can counter white supremacy,” *Pacific Standard*, September 6, 2017, accessed November 3, 2017: <https://psmag.com/education/nazis-love-taylor-swift-and-also-the-crusades>.

which white supremacists might well seize on my narratives.”⁹³ This comment interests me in light of what I said earlier about ventriloquizing intersex voices. Ventriloquizing can happen to our field. It seems timely to shake off fears of anachronism and articulate how the past and the present speak to one another, how this dialogue matters and what it can look like. The more we speak, the less easily we can be ventriloquized, and if we use terminology (like “hermaphrodites”) that is painful and offensive today, we might be sending some bad messages to the wider public. Isolating medieval representations of intersex as having nothing to do with the present is callous at best and leaves medieval studies and medievalists in the position of not taking a position. Such obsolescence would be a mistake ethically and professionally, and we cannot allow the fear of anachronism to outdate medieval studies, render our research myopic, and avoid all terrain where the stakes are high. I understand the fear of entering these discussions. I am a timid soul. It has been a difficult time seeing narratives of past and present issued by people with violent objectives: could it be they have filled in vacuums where we have been silent? If so, we must stop allowing ourselves to be ventriloquized and speak for medieval studies and for the present moment.

In my own recent teaching, I have taught the Pardoner as more sinned against than just a sinner. I also shamelessly encouraged my students to read my novel, *Sometimes We Tell the Truth*, to meet the Pardoner in a modern retelling. After one lecture, a student who’d never spoken in class before lingered after everyone else left to tell me how much he identified with my character Pard. The student said that he was trans and gay, and that Pard seemed to be written just for him. Fortunately, this Pardoner-identifying student didn’t look full of the kind of despair we read about in Pardoner scholarship. Recognition in his eyes, he looked pleased to find himself

93. Ibid.

in the pages of a novel, and by extension in the pages of an old, revered book. Enjoying the California weather, we briefly chatted outside about the medieval Pardoner and modern Pard, about how they both kept quiet on their difficult backstories and managed to build lives for themselves and use their voices. I brought attention to my student's voice and thanked him for taking the time to speak to me, and that he'd made me glad. He was glad too. I felt that occasional feeling of what an honor it is to teach and know that our lives intersect, that what we share matters, and that books can provide the occasion for those intersections.

If that's anachronism, I'll take it.

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