

Chaucer's Pardoner:  
The Medieval Culture of Cross-Dressing and  
Problems of Religious Authority  
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ONE OF THE MOST ambiguous and contentious characters in Geoffrey Chaucer's fourteenth-century *Canterbury Tales* is the Pardoner, the last (and arguably worst) of the pilgrims described in the *General Prologue*. The Pardoner, accused of being a gelding or a mare endowed with several effeminate traits, plays on multiple gendered associations—including that of a cross-dressing woman. Throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer manipulates gender expectations and assumptions in the figure of the Pardoner without fully clarifying the Pardoner's sex, sexuality, or gender, leaving the text open to potentially subversive interpretations, including cross-dressing, or homosexuality.<sup>1</sup> A pardoner with papal sanction to grant indulgences,

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An earlier form of this article was first delivered at the International Medieval Congress at the University of Western Michigan, Kalamazoo, May 2005 as "Robing and Disrobing Gender: The Cross-dressing Culture of the Fabliaux." The current incarnation was inspired by long discussions with my Chaucer class (Spring 2011), and I am grateful to my students for sharing their insight, unclouded by years of reading criticism. I am indebted to Peter G. Beidler, Laura F. Hodges, Holly Crocker, Ellen L. Friedrich, Gila Aloni, Rikk Mulligan, Sarah Salih, Dorothy Kim, and A.E. Christa Canitz for their insightful comments on early drafts of this piece. I am especially grateful to Amy Vines for her suggestions and questions.

1. While both "homosexual" and "heterosexual" are ahistorical terms, they are the clearest way of denoting same-sex intercourse and opposite-sex intercourse. I use those terms only in reference to sexual activity, not identity. Sarah Salih provides a compelling discussion of heteronormativity in the Middle Ages, particularly in relation to marriage, and concludes that heterosexuality did exist, but not as we know it.

sell relics, and speak authoritatively on matters of sin might be expected to embody the heteronormative masculine identity insisted upon by the Church, which denied these kinds of offices to women and decried sexual sins as immoral. A cross-dressing female pardoner subverts the expectations for the office and contradicts the admonition against women preaching. In his 2000 article “Chaucer’s Pardoner as Female Eunuch,” Jeffrey Rayner Myers makes a compelling linguistic argument for reading the Pardoner as female, but that interpretation has received little or no attention since. Myers concludes that Chaucer’s purpose was to “show that the constricting gender roles available to women, whether embraced or shunned, could often require a denial of sexual identity, a kind of social castration that includes gender and class.”<sup>2</sup> However, Myers goes no further in analyzing the analogues and the implications of such an interpretation. The cross-dressing motif, especially among women, was a popular one that may have gained traction, in part, with the emergence of the thirteenth-century myth of Pope Joan, the ninth-century woman who adopted male dress to follow her lover, gained prestige in the Curia, and was proclaimed pope.<sup>3</sup> There are several medieval cross-dressing analogues to Chaucer’s work in Old French fabliaux (*Frere Denise*), in hagiography (the lives of Marina, Pelagia, and Theodora), and romance (*Le Roman de Silence*) that feature a woman who dresses and lives as man to remove herself from the gendered stigma of femaleness.

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See: “Unpleasures of the Flesh: Medieval Marriage, Masochism, and the History of Heterosexuality,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 33 (2011): 125–47. Warren Johansson and William A. Percy quite correctly assert that while medieval men and women could engage in sodomy, a term that covers a range of sexual activity including those now associated with homosexuality, “no one in the Middle Ages was or could be have been ‘homosexual,’ ‘gay,’ or ‘queer.’” “Homosexuality,” in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, vol. 1696 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 156. However, same sex desire, referred to here as homoerotic or homosexual desire, certainly did exist and was a concern for medieval audiences who were constantly bombarded with the Church’s message that non-procreative sex in any form should be avoided.

2. Jeffrey Rayner Myers, “Chaucer’s Pardoner as Female Eunuch,” *Studia Neophilologica* 72 (2000): 54.

3. Alain Boureau, *The Myth of Pope Joan*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 2.

Valerie Hotchkiss lists more than thirty cross-dressing female saints in the introduction to her *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe*.<sup>4</sup> Boccaccio includes tales of cross-dressing women in *The Decameron*.<sup>5</sup> By the fourteenth century, cross-dressing was a relatively common literary motif, one upon which Chaucer may have drawn in the construction of his transgressive and ambiguously gendered Pardoner.

The Pardoner remains an enigmatic figure whose mere presence troubles the cultural gender assumptions of Chaucer's pilgrims and his audience. If the Pardoner's rhetoric represents orthodox theology, revealing the Pardoner as a cross-dressing woman undermines the efficacy of the message because women were considered unfit to preach publicly.<sup>6</sup> While women (both fictional and historical) like the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe certainly deploy orthodox rhetoric, they do so from outside the authoritative structure of the Church and can

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4. Valerie Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe* (New York: Garland, 1996), 4. Vern Bullough cites the popularity of female transvestitism in hagiography in which "the female who donned male garb and acted the role of a male was a much admired figure." Vern L. 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 Publishing, 1999), 100. In addition to Hotchkiss's work, several studies have been done on female transvestite saints. Ad Putter provides ample evidence of transvestite knights in his article "Transvestite Knights in Medieval Life and Literature," in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 2000): 279–302, though he focuses primarily on male cross-dressing. See also Larissa Tracy, *Women of the Gilte Legende: A Selection of Middle English Saints' Lives* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003). Cross-dressing often figures into discussions of gendered sanctity; see Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih, eds., *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2002); and Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001).

5. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, 162n1.

6. Alastair Minnis deftly analyzes the fallibility of both the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath, interrogating the perceived heterodoxy of their rhetoric and concluding that they are orthodox figures. *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

be easily dismissed as ignorant or incompetent.<sup>7</sup> A woman who could convincingly employ orthodox rhetoric from within the institutional structures, with the sanction of the Church, even if she is not visibly a woman, would undermine the argument against giving women a greater pastoral role and more authority. However, by not confirming anything either way, Chaucer leaves open the possibility that the words of female (or even homosexual or castrated male) preachers are untainted by the vice of their gender. Chaucer's ambiguous description of the Pardoner potentially plays on cultural associations of cross-dressing, drawing from a host of literary analogues, challenging the primacy of male religious authority and legitimizing the rhetorical power of female preachers by providing a platform otherwise denied to women.

The model of female transvestitism in a variety of medieval genres is useful for examining the gender fluidity in the Pardoner's portrayal. The Pardoner is a subversive figure regardless of gender identity or sexuality—corrupt and duplicitous, but honest in telling his audience that he is cheating them. He has papally sanctioned indulgences but admittedly fake relics. He is both authentic and inauthentic. The question of his sexual orientation or gender adds another dimension to these layers of subversion. If gay, he subverts the social and religious attitudes regarding sodomy. If female, she subverts the social and religious attitudes regarding the sinful nature of women designed to keep them from the pulpit. It is possible to read the Pardoner, in maintaining the masculine guise as the preferred identity, as transgender. The Pardoner can be seen as a queer figure moving in and out of genders, but the contextual evidence of analogue narratives enhances the possibility for interpreting the Pardoner's biological and gendered identity in terms of *medieval* attitudes regarding the social and religious position of women. Thus, it is possible to refer to the Pardoner as “she.”<sup>8</sup> In this context, the Pardoner could assume the subversive role of a cross-dressing woman whose religious authority is reified by cloaking female gender in male clothes; such a performance subverts the religious restrictions

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7. See Minnis, *Fallible Authors*.

8. In his analysis of the Pardoner as a cross-dressing woman, Meyers refers exclusively to the Pardoner as “she,” a model I follow here to avoid confusion in constructing my own argument about gendered identity and perception.

on women and places her within the sphere of clerical protections. She gains access to the privilege of religious and social institutions closed to other members of her sex. Keith Busby correctly questions whether the modern term “transvestitism” can be applied to medieval secular texts because “instances of cross-dressing are not presented as manifestations of a sexual inclination or lifestyle but rather as a means of disguise which enables authors to develop their narrative structures and at the same time to generate comedy.”<sup>9</sup> But transvestitism *does* apply in circumstances where the cross-dresser takes on aspects of the opposite gender identity and *lives* as a member of the opposite sex.<sup>10</sup> This is particularly true of female transvestite saints, whose decision to adopt male clothing does not generate comedy but mistreatment, humility, and eventually sanctity post-mortem. In these narratives—*Frere Denise*, *Roman de Silence*, transvestite hagiography, and (potentially) the *Canterbury Tales*—socially constructed gender is determined by clothing and demeanor that mask biological sex.<sup>11</sup>

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9. Keith Busby, “Plus acesmez qu’une popine’: Male Cross-Dressing in Medieval French Narrative,” in *Gender Transgressions: Crossing the Normative Barrier in Old French Literature*, ed. Karen J. Taylor (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 45. Busby offers a compelling discussion of male cross-dressing in French romances (*Meraugis de Portlesgues*, *Roman de Silence*, and *Claris et Laris*) and two fabliaux (*Trubert* and *Wistasse le Moine*). He concludes: “The theme of male cross-dressing in medieval French narrative literature is not common, and even though the use made of it varies from one text to another, it is always closely related to, and illustrative of, the central concerns of each individual text. As a type of disguise, it often articulates questions of appearance and reality as well as providing narrative impetus” (57).

10. While transvestitism is a form of transgendered identity, I am not arguing that the Pardoner is specifically transgender—born with a biological sex that does not fit her identity. Instead, I am arguing that the Pardoner is female but simply presents as male to gain access to authority otherwise denied to members of her sex.

11. See Judith Butler: “gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence.” *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990; rptd. 2008), 34.

## What is in a Pronoun?: The Linguistic Construction of the Pardoner's Gender

Engaging in a deception constructed of linguistic tropes, Chaucer describes his last pilgrim as a “gentil” Pardoner of Rouncivale, the “freend” and “compeer” of the Summoner (1.669–70), using the masculine pronoun.<sup>12</sup> This is not to suggest that every character in the *Canterbury Tales* is sexually ambiguous because of the gendered pronoun. Only the Pardoner has physical traits that can go either way. Judith Butler argues that when the “constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.”<sup>13</sup> The ambiguity of the Pardoner’s gendered performance forms this kind of free-floating artifice where nothing is quite what it seems. Gender is only an artificial façade constructed and shaped by the physical and visual markers that delineate one identity or another. Clothing can be exchanged and swapped out, and with it, all sense of gender; Chaucer’s language describing the Pardoner forms almost an androgynous picture based on physical features and clothes that can be either male or female.

Using the opposite pronoun is a common motif in cross-dressing narratives that changes audience perception about the protagonist’s gendered identity. In the late thirteenth-century *Roman de Silence* (hereafter *Silence*), extant only in Nottingham MS Middleton LM 6, the narrator “engages in highly complex play with the rhetorical possibilities and social implications” of the female heroine who not only dresses like a boy, but is raised like one as well.<sup>14</sup> The poet uses “grammatical inconsis-

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12. All quotations from the *Canterbury Tales* are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). Fragment and line numbers are given in parentheses.

13. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 9.

14. Sarah Roche-Mahdi, ed. and trans., introduction to *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1999), xxi. I am grateful to Lorraine K. Stock and Natalie Grinnell for bringing these parallels to my attention. There are numerous avenues to explore here that are beyond

tency” to refer to a boy that the audience *knows* is female. As a result, the text “interferes with the functioning of language as a code that upholds conventional distinctions, constantly challenges the legitimacy of social classification by gender.”<sup>15</sup> Silence’s parents try to hide her gender and her nature in the very form of her name:<sup>16</sup>

“Il iert només Scilenscius;  
Et s’il avient par aventure /  
Al descobrir de sa nature  
Nos muerons cest –us en –a,  
S’avra a non Scilencia”  
(2074–78)

(“He will be called Silentius. / And if by any chance / his real nature is discovered, / we shall change this –us to –a, / and she’ll be called Silentia”)<sup>17</sup>

In the hagiographical stories of transvestite saints, the author/scribe changes the personal pronoun as the saint changes gender, from “she” to “he” and back to “she” to mirror the change in the reader’s perception of the saint, as well as that of the monks living with her. As Anke Bernau notes, the ongoing “oscillation” between names and pronouns “undercuts any clear separation of the ways in which masculinity and femininity signify.”<sup>18</sup> This mirrors the fabliau *De Freire Denise Cordelier* (Brother Denise the Franciscan) or *Frere Denise* (Brother Denise) (ca. 1300) by Rutebeuf when the friars accept Denise: “onques son non ne li muerent: / frere Denise l’apelerent” (159–60; They never changed

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the scope of this article, but that are part of a larger book project.

15. Roche-Mahdi, introduction to *Silence*, xxi.

16. As R. Howard Bloch points out, artifice or hiding is “bound to the transgression of grammatical property, sexual inversion, and the deflection of proper succession.” *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 196.

17. All quotations of *Le Roman de Silence* are from *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*, ed. and trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1999).

18. Bernau, “Gender and Sexuality,” 120.

her name; / They called her Brother Denise).<sup>19</sup> But the poet makes the distinction by calling her “damoisele” (157) before her acceptance into the order and stresses that the other members take her in innocently and only with pure intent. By referring to Denise in the feminine, the poet clearly marks the boundaries of perception; the audience should not accept that she is a man, even if the other friars do. The humor is derived from the knowledge that the lecherous friar and the seemingly innocent Denise are carrying on under the noses of his brethren rather than from any perception or suggestion of same-sex intercourse. Chaucer does not slip back and forth between pronouns, but the innuendo of the Pardoner’s appearance and potential relationship with the Summoner suggest that some audiences may have understood “he” as “she.”<sup>20</sup> Even though Chaucer only ever refers to the Pardoner as “he,” this masculinity may only be a role, a performance—a female cross-dressing performance.

Chaucer takes great pains in describing the Pardoner’s physical attributes. She has “heer as yellow as wex, / But smothe it heeng as dooth a strike of flex” (1.675–76) spread over her shoulders where it lay thinly “by colpons oon and oon” (1.679). She wears no hood, for “jolitee” (1.680) to show off her fine strands, following the latest fashion. She rides, hair unbound and hanging loose under her cap, except for which she “rood al bare” (1.683). She has staring eyes, “as an hare” (1.684), a “veranycle” (pilgrim badge of the veil of Veronica) on her cap; her sack sits in a large pocket in her lap full of freshly scripted papal indulgences.<sup>21</sup> Her

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19. All quotations of *Frere Denise* are from *The French Fabliau B.N. MS. 837*, ed. and trans. Raymond Eichmann and John DuVal (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985), 2:246–59. Line numbers are given in parentheses.

20. There is similar tension in *Silence* where the girl Silence is not the only one engaging in cross-dressing disguise. Michelle Szkilnik closely examines the grammatical solutions French romance authors adopt from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries to deal with this sensitive issue, positing that it shows a progressive, though temporary, reconsideration of cross-dressing: “suggesting at first the fluidity of gender boundaries, the topos later serves to reinforce their rigidity, implying that there is an essential, a natural difference between men and women.” “The Grammar of the Sexes in Medieval French Romance,” in *Gender Transgressions: Crossing the Normative Barrier in Old French Literature*, ed. Karen J. Taylor (New York: Garland, 1998), 62.

21. Susanna Fein argues that the poems collected by the compiler of Harley

voice is “as small as hath a goot” (1.688). She has no beard, “ne nevere sholde have; / As smothe it was as it were late shave,” (1.689–90) leading Geoffrey to speculate whether she is “a geldyng or a mare” (1.691). She is known throughout England for her relics: a pillowcase touted as the veil of the Virgin Mary, a bit of sail from Saint Peter’s ship, a brass cross full of stones, and a glass jar of pigs’ bones. She fleeces the poor and the faithful, “with feyned flaterye and japes” (1.705), making “the person and the peple” (1.706) her apes. She is a “noble ecclesiaste” (1.708) who could read a lesson or sermon well, but “alderbest” she “song an offertorie.” (1.709–10). The Pardoner knows well “whan that song was songe,” (1.711) she must preach and “wel affile” (1.712) her tongue to “wynne silver” (1.713). To this end, she sings “murierly and loude” (1.714).<sup>22</sup> The Pardoner is clearly a charlatan, a liar, and a cheat—but her biological sex

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MS 2253 present “the catalogue of a woman’s alluring body parts, a catalogue that works downwards, as the rhetoricians recommended,” concluding “teasingly but unambiguously, with the part that is hidden under ‘bis’ (a kind of linen), or under ‘gore’ (a triangular-shaped cloth or skirt)” which has “tantalizingly suggestive second meanings—for *gore*, ‘a triangular piece of land,’ and for *bis*, ‘a kind of dark fur.’” “A Saint ‘Geynest under Gore’: Marina and the Love Lyrics of the Seventh Quire,” in *Studies in the Harley Manuscript: The Scribes, Contents, and Scribal Contexts of British Library MS Harley 2253* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 354–55. Similarly, Chaucer emphasizes the placement of the wallet in the Pardoner’s lap.

22. Various medical diagnoses have been given to account for the Pardoner’s indeterminate sexuality. Beryl Rowland categorizes him as a “testicular pseudo-hermaphrodite of the feminine type.” “Animal Imagery and the Pardoner’s Abnormality,” *Neophilologus* 48 (1964): 56–60. In his Lacanian analysis of the *Franklin’s Tale*, Tison Pugh, finds a hermaphroditic analogue in the figure of the Courtly Lady, noting that power and gender dynamics resonate throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. See “Mutual Masochism and the Hermaphroditic Courtly Lady in Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 33 (2011): 149–81; 177. Most recently, Alan J. Fletcher has revised his brief discussion of the Pardoner and concludes that an intimation of hermaphroditism “may become not simply one of a strangely unmeasurable sexuality, but also a contemporary partisan construction, one in which Chaucer’s Pardoner, a confounder of the material and spiritual, just as his body seems to confound the traditional exclusivities of gender, might also be reckoned to have participated.” *The Presence of Medieval English Literature: Studies at the Interface of History, Author, and Text in a Selection of Middle English Literary Landmarks* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 172.

is somewhat less clear. Casting the Pardoner as a female in disguise, one who preaches well and profits from it, challenges the masculine exclusivity of the preaching profession—even if she is corrupt, she is a powerful orator. The immorality of a preacher did not necessarily diminish the authority of his/her speech, nor the doctrine; that was the orthodox view, and Chaucer seems to have followed it “to devastating effect in the construction of his deviant Pardoner.”<sup>23</sup> As such, the exact nature of the Pardoner’s sexual identity has produced a variety of interpretations.

### Queering the Pardoner: Feminine Physicality and Sexuality

Geoffrey’s insulting description in the *General Prologue* had led critics over the last sixty years to read the Pardoner variously as a eunuch, a homosexual man, a rapacious heterosexual man, or a hermaphrodite.<sup>24</sup> Traditionally, “a study of cross-dressing cannot help but consider

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23. Minnis, *Fallible Authors*, 344.

24. Donald R. Howard prefigured queer readings of the Pardoner in *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 339–80. Since then, several authors have advanced this interpretation including: Monica E. McAlpine, “The Pardoner’s Homosexuality and How It Matters,” *PMLA* 95 (1980): 8–22, doi:10.2307/461730; Glenn Burger, “Kissing the Pardoner,” *PMLA* 107 (1992): 1143–56, doi:10.2307/462870; Steven F. Kruger, “Claiming the Pardoner: Toward a Gay Reading of Chaucer’s Pardoner’s Tale,” *Exemplaria* 6 (1994): 115–39; Allen J. Frantzen, “*The Pardoner’s Tale*, the Pervert, and the Price of Order in Chaucer’s World,” in *Class and Gender in Early English Literature: Intersections*, ed. Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994); and Robert Stuart Sturges, *Chaucer’s Pardoner and Gender Theory: Bodies of Discourse* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). C. David Benson and Richard F. Green have both read the Pardoner as too actively *heterosexual*, suggesting that his fallibility and feminization rest in excessive sexual encounters with women: Benson, “Chaucer’s Pardoner: His Sexuality and Modern Critics,” *Mediaevalia* 8 (1985 for 1982): 337–49; and Green, “The Sexual Normality of Chaucer’s Pardoner,” *Mediaevalia* 8 (1985 for 1982): 351–58. Lee Patterson offers a thorough and compelling analysis of the Pardoner in the context of what a fourteenth-century audience would have truly understood about his body or his sexuality, arguing that in later medieval England, castration as punishment for any crime was very rare, “if not entirely absent.” As such, the castrate or eunuch would have been a novelty in late-medieval England. Likewise, accusations of sodomy (usually unfounded) were often leveled against political

concepts of sexual orientation, polarity, and attributes of maleness/femaleness.”<sup>25</sup> Vern L. Bullough analyzes the “problem” of the Pardoner and provides a synopsis of each interpretation of her sexuality including the “little investigated option” of a cross-dressing woman.<sup>26</sup> Alastair Minnis suggests that the “constituent discourses of effeminacy have been enlisted in the service of caricature,” which should not be mistaken for “homophobic mockery of one who smells a gay pardoner in the wind.”<sup>27</sup> However, there is a lingering sense that the narrator suspects the Pardoner is deviant in some way, but cannot put his finger on *how*.<sup>28</sup> The biological masculinity of the Pardoner has been taken for granted, though Chaucer’s language, oscillating among various possibilities (eunuch, homosexual, hermaphrodite, female cross-dresser), “suggests less a stable, finished gender identity than one that is perpetually under construction.”<sup>29</sup> Myers argues that the Pardoner “as a female eunuch exemplifies in an almost iconic fashion the new problems of female sexuality for the many women who struggled to realize their increasingly humanistic and material goals [. . .] in the context of what was by Chaucer’s time an outmoded God-centered ideology (characteristic of the more hierarchical social structure of the waning Middle Ages).”<sup>30</sup> In many ways, the Pardoner is a symbol for sexual ambiguity perhaps reflecting the “ambiguities in the medieval mind about effeminate males.”<sup>31</sup> There are several effeminate males in the *Canterbury*

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enemies, and one of the themes of reformist attacks against corrupt clergy, like that in *The Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards* (1395), was that they were sodomites. Patterson, “Chaucer’s Pardoner on the Couch: Psyche and Clio in Medieval Literary Studies,” *Speculum* 76, no. 3 (July 2001): 638–80; 659, 660, 661.

25. Charlotte Suthrell, *Unzipping Gender: Sex, Cross-Dressing and Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 7.

26. Bullough “Medieval Masculinities,” 93–110.

27. Minnis, *Fallible Authors*, 156.

28. Conor McCarthy, ed., *Love, Sex and Marriage in the Middle Ages: A Sourcebook* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 10.

29. Robert S. Sturges, “The Pardoner, Veiled and Unveiled,” in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 262.

30. Myers, “Chaucer’s Pardoner,” 60.

31. Bullough, “Medieval Masculinities,” 102

*Tales* (Sir Topas, even the Squire with his long curled locks), but their gender identity is not in doubt. Only with the Pardoner is the question of sexual ambiguity unresolved.

The barbed comment about whether the Pardoner is a “geldyng or a mare” (1.691) raises issues of linguistic identification, literal and figurative. Larry D. Benson glosses the phrase as “a eunuch or a homosexual.”<sup>32</sup> While the queer lens is useful for interpreting the Pardoner, a medieval audience would not necessarily have understood this comment—or even the term “mare”—as a reference to homosexuality.<sup>33</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the secondary meaning for “mare,” which originates in Middle English, is simply a commonly derogatory term for “a woman.”<sup>34</sup> In Middle English “mare” was specifically used to designate a loose woman, which fits in the context of her relationship with the Summoner and his “stif burdoun” (1.673).<sup>35</sup> The *Middle English*

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32. Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 34. Carolyn Dinshaw has offered several interpretations of the Pardoner as queer, reading this both literally and symbolically as a mark of homosexuality. Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989). Chapter six, “Eunuch Hermeneutics” is a revised version of Dinshaw’s earlier article of the same name in *English Literary History* 55 (1988): 27–51. See also Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Post-Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

33. McAlpine glosses “mare” as a synonym for “homosexual,” arguing that it was a term “commonly used in Chaucer’s day to designate a male person who, though not necessarily sterile or impotent, exhibits physical traits suggestive of femaleness, visible characteristics that were also associated with eunuchry in medieval times and that were thought to have broad effects on the psyche and on character.” “The Pardoner’s Homosexuality,” 11. However, Patterson correctly points out that while the interpretation of “mare” as the passive partner in same-sex male intercourse may be plausible, it cannot be supported with specific citations. “Chaucer’s Pardoner on the Couch,” 661n93.

34. Noun 1, def. 2. *Shorter Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, rpt. 2002). The *OED* lists another, obsolete, definition for “mare”: noun 2, def. 1—“nightmare” (OE), def. 2—“a spectre, a hag” (LME). The latter late Middle English definition has some interesting implications for the use of “mare” in reference to the Pardoner, and later the Pardoner’s association with the Wife of Bath.

35. “Patterson, “Chaucer’s Pardoner on the Couch,” 661n93. Literally “burdoun” means the bass line of the song sung by the Pardoner, but it also means “staff,” with all the attendant phallic euphemisms. See Shayne Aaron Legassie, “Chaucer’s

*Dictionary* only records literal meanings of “mare” as a horse of some kind; the figurative definition is “a bad woman, a slut; also, a rabbit,” citing the insult to the Pardoner as one of its examples.<sup>36</sup> So it is likely that the word means just that, a loose woman—a woman whose chastity is called into question by her proximity to men in her masculine guise or even her presence on a pilgrimage, as with the Wife of Bath.<sup>37</sup> The phrase was often used in other literary contexts as an insult to denote femaleness, actual and figurative, and thus sexual submission. As Alan Fletcher asserts, “society’s objects of polemical attack might find themselves tarred with some infraction of those gender normativities through which society customarily articulated its sense of selfhood.”<sup>38</sup> Using “mare” as an insult is certainly not unusual in medieval literary tradition. In the Old Norse Eddic poem *Helgaquíða Hundingsbana*, Sinfjotli is accused of being a gelding or a mare in a *flyting*—insult exchange—by the trollwoman who guards the harbor.<sup>39</sup> It may be that Chaucer’s choice

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Pardoner and Host—On the Road, in the Alehouse,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 29 (2007): 183–223; 183.

36. Def. 2e. *The Middle English Dictionary* online, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=byte&byte=112354230&egdisplay=compact&egs=112372850>, accessed July 18, 2013.

37. See Legassie, “Chaucer’s Pardoner and Host,” 222–23. Myers argues that as “gelding” is the “equine equivalent” of eunuch, so “mare” is the equivalent of woman. “Chaucer’s Pardoner,” 54.

38. Fletcher, *The Presence of Medieval English Literature*, 170–71. See also Alan J. Fletcher, “The Topical Hypocrisy of Chaucer’s Pardoner,” *Chaucer Review* 25 (1990): 110–26, and “The Preaching of the Pardoner,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 11 (1989): 15–35.

39. Rory McTurk has drawn compelling parallels between Chaucer’s work and Old Norse texts like Snorri Sturluson’s late-twelfth, early-thirteenth century *Gylfaginning*. *Chaucer and the Norse and Celtic Worlds* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 94. Gabriele Cocco sees the insult as an analogue to the episode in the *Gylfaginning* where Loki turns into a mare to seduce the stallion Svaðilfari and gives birth to the eight-legged Sleipnir, concluding that this connection is further testimony of the Pardoner’s homosexuality. “‘I trowe He Were A Gelding or a Mare’: A Veiled Description of a Bent Pardoner,” *Neophilologus* 92, no. 2 (April 2008): 359–66. However, in this instance, the shape-shifting Loki becomes *female* in order to copulate with the stallion and give birth; it is not a same-sex union, nor would it have been seen as one by a Norse audience. Along the same lines, however, cross-dressing is a rather

of words is meant to evoke an actual woman, performing as a man. This would, in Butler's words, upset the political forces "with strategic interests in keeping that body bounded and constituted by the markers of sex."<sup>40</sup> In which case, it is not the Pardoner's orientation that is problematic, but the words that she speaks and the religious authority with which she speaks them. The derogatory remarks about the Pardoner's sexuality may be nothing more than political and religious insults designed to discredit the pilgrim who embodies some of the worst traits of clerical corruption.<sup>41</sup> But it may be a marker of her masked sex, an insult that hits close to home in its accuracy. The effeminate physical traits that potentially identify the Pardoner as a eunuch, a hermaphrodite, or even a homosexual: long, fine hair, a concern with fashion, a high voice and beardlessness, and glaring eyes connoting lechery, are the same ones used to denote lascivious women. Eunuchs were often compared to women in their sensual, licentious behavior, their vanity, and their femininity and both were seen as equally dangerous to virile men.<sup>42</sup> Monica

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common motif among the Norse gods; Thor and Loki dress as women in the eddic *Þrymskviða* as a ruse to deceive the giant *Þrymr* who has stolen Thor's hammer and demanded the goddess Freyja as payment. Thor and Loki go in her place, as bride and bridesmaid, and participate in the ceremony until Thor can reclaim Mjöllnir and kill everyone. See *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Lee M. Hollander (Austin, TX: University of Austin Press, 1962), 104–9.

40. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 175.

41. Patterson argues that the narrator of the *General Prologue* calls the Pardoner a gelding "not to imply that he is actually missing his testicles but in the nearly universal substitution of physical traits for ones of character," analogous to the modern insult of calling someone an "asshole." "Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch," 661. Patterson concludes that "the Pardoner's actual (by which of course I mean fictional) sexuality was, for Chaucer and his audience, likely to have been of far less psychological interest than it is to readers today. If neither castration nor sodomy seems to have mattered much as historical practices in fourteenth-century England, perhaps we should concentrate instead on what they might have meant symbolically [. . .] The central fact about the Pardoner, for Chaucer, is neither that he is physically maimed nor that his sexual habits make him a social outcast but that he is to be understood as spiritually sterile" (663–64). Patterson further writes that the Pardoner is a "spiritual sodomite sunk in the gross commercialism and materialism that pervert religious truth" (670).

42. See: Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and*

McAlpine is quite correct that effeminate men were often interpreted as homosexual, and that effeminacy, eunuchry, hermaphroditism, and homosexuality were often conflated,<sup>43</sup> but it is equally possible that a cross-dressing woman could perform as a eunuch or an effeminate man as a more effective means of hiding in plain sight.<sup>44</sup>

In the same breath labeling the Pardoner a gelding or a mare, Geoffrey remarks that she has no beard, “ne nevere sholde have; / As smothe it was as it were late shave” (689–90). Beardlessness in a “man” suggests eunuchry.<sup>45</sup> In female transvestite hagiography, male disguise may “represent an artifice for neutering”; many of the female saints were presumed to be eunuchs because they were beardless; they also cut their hair, which has been read in Freudian terms as symbolic castration.<sup>46</sup> Denise cuts her hair voluntarily, but the Pardoner does not cut her hair to further her disguise, nor does she symbolically cut herself off from the world of physical delights.<sup>47</sup> Her hair lies across her shoulders like an unmarried maiden’s, almost teasing the audience to *see* her as a woman, but no one on the pilgrimage seems to catch on.

The description of the Pardoner’s “glarynge eyen [. . .] as an hare” (l.684) has also been read as a signifier of homoerotic lust or deviant passions. As with “mare,” there seems to be no linguistic evidence directly connecting the term “hare” with homosexuality; however, considering the associations of hares with sexual promiscuity, it is possible that it is

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*Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Shaun Tougher, ed., *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond* (London: The Classical Press of Wales, 2002); Jacqueline Murray, “Hiding Behind the Universal Man: Male Sexuality in the Middle Ages,” in Bullough and Brundage, *The Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, 123–52; and Larissa Tracy, ed., *Castration and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013).

43. McAlpine, “The Pardoner’s Homosexuality,” 11–12, 13.

44. Shakespeare employs this popular motif in *Twelfth Night* when Viola initially thinks about disguising herself as a eunuch before settling on dressing as a boy (1.2.56).

45. Though there are examples of transvestite saints divinely sprouting a beard to put off would-be suitors.

46. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, 27.

47. Myers, “Chaucer’s Pardoner,” 59.

a euphemism for the female genitalia.<sup>48</sup> The *Middle English Dictionary* does not record such a use, but in Middle English “rabbit” or “hare” was often interchangeable with “cony” with obvious sexual associations.<sup>49</sup> The Latin *cunnus* is the origin of Old French *con*, which translates literally in the fabliaux as “cunt.” The Latin *cuniculus* also became *conil* or *connil*, then *conin*, and so an animal known for its “fertility and connections of one kind or another with sex became the perfect symbol of a specific part of the female anatomy, and thence of the woman as a whole.”<sup>50</sup> In fact, the Monk, an “outridere, that lovede venerie” (1.166), a “manly man” (1.167) who has “Ful many a deyntee hors” in stable (1.168), a “prikasour aright” (1.189), “Of prikyng and of hunting for the hare/ Was al his lust, for no cost wolde he spare” (1.191–2). This “holy” man, who presents a rather phallic portrait with his bald head “that shoon as

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48. McAlpine uses this association of hares and goats with lechery as part of her analysis of the Pardoner as homosexual. “The Pardoner’s Homosexuality.” Seventeenth-century sources like Edward Topsell’s *History of Four-Footed Beasts* (1607) associate the term “hare” with hermaphrodites. Marta Powell Harley, “Rosalind, the Hare, and the Hyena in Shakespeare’s ‘As You Like It,’” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (Autumn 1985): 335–37; 335. John Boswell provides a thirteenth-century gloss for “hare” as hermaphrodite from encyclopedist Alexander Neckham (d. 1217), who follows his description with the comment that “Effeminate men who violate the law of nature are thus said to imitate hares, offending against the highest majesty of nature.” *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 306, qtd. in Harley, “Rosalind, the Hare,” 336. Boswell also argues that between 1050 and 1150, hunting and the terminology associated with it “figure prominently in poetry by or about gay people, and it is possible that it represented what ‘cruising’ describes in the gay subculture today” (243, qtd. in Harley, 336). However, hunting imagery, especially as “venerie”—the Sport of Venus—was more frequently used both literally and as a euphemism for heterosexual sex. See Fein, “A Saint ‘Geynest under Gore,’” 356.

49. Edmund Reiss, “The Symbolic Surface of the ‘Canterbury Tales’: The Monk’s Portrait, Part 1,” *The Chaucer Review* 2, no. 4 (1968): 254–72; 257. Susanne Hafner explores the same linguistic connection in her article “Coward, Traitor, Landless Trojan: Æneas and the Politics of Sodomy,” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 19 (2002): 61–69; 63, and in *Maskulinität in der bofischen Erzäblitteratur* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004). I am grateful to Dr. Hafner for making her article available to me.

50. Claude K. Abraham, “Myth and Symbol: The Rabbit in Medieval France,” *Studies in Philology* 60, no. 4 (1963): 589–97; 592.

any glas, And eek his face, as he hadde been enoynt" (1.198–99), a "lord ful fat and in good point; / His eyen stepe, and rollynge in his heed, / That stemed as a forneys of a leed" (1.200–2), is interested in chasing and trapping "hare" in an exposition of Venus's sport. Perhaps the "hare" the Pardoner resembles is the female kind.

The Pardoner has come straight from the court of Rome and sings "Com hider, love, to me!" (1.672) to the Summoner who accompanies her with his deep bass and bears her a "a stif burdoun" (1.673). The Summoner, a notorious womanizer, may have already caught his "hare"; the Pardoner may be his paramour as well as his business partner. While the Summoner's predatory nature can be read with overtones of sexuality, it also ties directly to a sexual power relationship—domination and submission, especially unwilling or apparently unwilling submission, that is not limited to specific gender diodes. The Summoner is hot-blooded, and lecherous as a sparrow: "He wolde suffre, for a quart of win, / A good felawe to have his concubin" (1.651–52); "In daunger hadde he at his owene gise / The yonge girles of the diocise" (1.665–66). The Summoner, with his appetites and his tendency to prey on young women, closely resembles the friar who corrupts Denise in *Frere Denise*, and perhaps Chaucer draws this motif from the fabliau. Layers of linguistic possibilities suggest that the suggestively female Pardoner—if not a eunuch, then a beardless "mare"—may actually be female. But unlike Denise, who turns away from her masculine identity and religious career with the discovery of her true sex, the Pardoner embraces hers and indulges in a subtle subterfuge that continues to confound her fellow pilgrims. While she embodies the greed against which she preaches, she can nevertheless "turn others away from the same sin through her preaching,"<sup>51</sup> potentially mitigating the sin of cross-dressing. Denise will only be absolved of that sin once she is restored to her original (and correct) gender identity. The fabliau flirts with transgression, but re-establishes the correct order, while Chaucer's Pardoner continues her (successful) deception, because no one unmasks her at the end.

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51. Myers, "Chaucer's Pardoner," 59.

## The Cultural Context of Cross-Dressing

The point of cross-dressing for many women was *passing*, maintaining the illusion of masculinity in carrying out official duties. Around 1250, the legend of Pope Joan appeared in the accounts of a handful of authors and by 1300 it was a widespread, accepted story.<sup>52</sup> The Benedictine Geoffrey de Courlon included Joan in his chronicle of the Abbey of Saint-Pierre-le-Vif at Sens (ca. 1290), closely following the text of Dominican Martinus Polonus or the anonymous redactor who added to Martinus' *Chronica de Romanis pontificibus et imperatoribus* (Chronicle of the Popes of Rome and the Emperors) around 1280–1285.<sup>53</sup> The canonical version is that around 850, Joan, a woman born in Mainz but of English origin, disguised herself as a man to follow her lover who had taken up a life of study that was exclusively male.<sup>54</sup> She went on to study in Athens and was so successful that she went to Rome, where she was “so warmly welcomed and admired that she entered the hierarchy of the Curia and was in due course elected pope.”<sup>55</sup> Her biological sex was not discovered until she gave birth during procession from St. Peter's in the Vatican to the Church of St. John Lateran, dying in childbirth.<sup>56</sup> This event allegedly gave rise to a tradition whereby the physical gender of newly elected popes was verified by a “manual” ritual that involved reaching through a hole in a special throne to confirm that the pope had male genitalia.<sup>57</sup> Joan's story, myth or reality, appears around the same time that the large collections of hagiography like Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea* (Golden Legend) (ca. 1260) were being copied and disseminated throughout medieval Europe. The emergence of her legend corresponds with the increased production of saints' lives, which includes several cross-dressing women. By the fourteenth century the story was entrenched in medieval popular culture and may have continued to influence the popularity of cross-dressing narratives.

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52. Boureau, *The Myth of Pope Joan*, 10.

53. Boureau, 10.

54. Boureau, 2.

55. Boureau, 2.

56. Boureau, 2.

57. Boureau, 2.

By the end of the thirteenth century, cross-dressing (specifically female to male) was a fairly common motif in medieval literature.<sup>58</sup> The narratives of saints like Marina, Theodora, and Pelagia circulated in the widely popular thirteenth-century *Legenda aurea*, to which Chaucer had access.<sup>59</sup> Susanna Fein suggests that Chaucer may have been familiar with the contents, if not the actual manuscript, of London British Library, MS Harley 2253, which includes a version of the life of St. Marina.<sup>60</sup> In the lives of “holy transvestites,” women “were able to capitalize on the handicaps and advantages afforded by the system of relations between the sexes” precisely because they cease to be women in the eyes of society.<sup>61</sup> Their decision, while quietly executed, is powerful because they challenge the social structure of gender relations where women are instructed to be subordinate and silent, placing some women outside normal constraints and giving them freedom to act outside their proscribed gender roles, leading to what Christiane Klapische-Zuber calls “the hidden power of women.”<sup>62</sup> In order to access the social liberties often denied to women—freedom to fight, to be independent, to travel, to engage in non-marital sex, to cohabitate, to speak freely and even preach, some women took on male clothing, risking an accusation of heresy in order to participate without the restrictions of gender hierarchy.

This act of cross-dressing was often employed for comedic effect, precisely because it upended social conventions and poked fun at gender norms. The corpus of Old French fabliaux includes a series of tales that generate comedy, while also challenging and disrupting traditional assumptions of gender and distorting the boundaries of social position.

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58. Szkilnik, “The Grammar of the Sexes,” 61.

59. Bullough, “Medieval Masculinities,” 100.

60. Fein, “A Saint ‘Geynest under Gore,’” 363–64. I include a translation of St. Marina’s life from the *Gilte Legende* and discuss the implications of her transvestitism in *Women of the Gilte Legende*.

61. Christiane Klapische-Zuber, “The Hidden Power of Women,” in *A History of Women in the West, vol. II: Silences of the Middle Ages*, ed. Klapisch-Zuber (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 161.

62. Klapisch-Zuber, “The Hidden Power of Women,” 161. On the general sense of misogyny in the Middle Ages, see R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

The acquisition and renunciation of gendered clothing satirically jabs at cultural hierarchies and notions of sexual propriety—men dress as women to consummate illicit relationships, as in *De la Saineresse* (The Lady Healer), and women dress as men to experience freedom, sexual and social, that would otherwise be unacceptable as with the young “monk” in *Frere Denise*. Wrapped in the guise of appropriate garments, the characters of the fabliaux can shed their identities and their clothes without consequence or retaliation. In *Frere Denise*, Denise chooses male dress by adopting a Franciscan habit, but in so doing is ensnared by a lecherous friar. *Frere Denise* may parody not only the genre of cross-dressing female saints, but the tale of the legendary woman who died as a man after achieving the highest office in Christendom. At the beginning of *Frere Denise*, Rutebeuf quips that “Li abis ne fet pas l’ermite” (The robe does not make the hermit; 1). Clothes are nothing if a friar does not live the pure life indicated by his habit. The Pardoner’s masculine habit may hide transgressive sexual habits with the Summoner that would have been illicit regardless of biology; either a homosexual relationship or a heterosexual one would violate various religious prohibitions regarding intercourse. But cross-dressing is only occasionally a means for achieving sexual gratification; in certain circumstances it allows access to positions and institutions otherwise denied to women as with Pope Joan and the later, historical, Joan of Arc (1412–1431) who led French armies to victory in male dress and was burned at the stake as a heretic for it.<sup>63</sup>

Joan of Arc may have been an anomaly on the fifteenth-century battlefield, but there were literary precedents for women who put on armor and fought as men. In *Silence*, the heroine is raised as a boy—believes that she is a boy—to circumvent discriminatory inheritance laws in post-Arthurian England. In *Silence*, the child is not given a choice but raised as male from birth. She only struggles with the socially constructed aspects of gender—Nature vs. Nurture—at puberty. Nurture and Reason win out, and she remains a boy until the end of the romance when she is reinscribed as female: “Silence atorment come feme” (They dressed Silence as a woman; 6664). The protagonist Silence is a “live

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63. See Marty Williams and Anne Echols, *Between Pit and Pedestal: Women in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 1994), 105.

metaphor that opens up revolutionary possibilities for the redefinition of male and female.”<sup>64</sup> The cross-dressing women of hagiography, fabliaux, and romance provide a template for reading the Pardoner as a woman who disguises herself as a man to enter the traditional male role of a preacher to access the power structure otherwise unavailable to her, regardless of whether her goal is a sexual liaison with the Summoner.

Dress is such a significant part of identity in the Middle Ages that any contravention of accepted social practice, however fleeting, is subversive—especially where the boundaries of gender are crossed. By the high Middle Ages, as fashion became more androgynous, the ideals of male and female beauty seem, “at times to have fused.”<sup>65</sup> The Church made distinctions about gender and fashion, exhorting young women to avoid sumptuous clothing, and if they had to wear it, to at least hate wearing it, and in doing so imposed the connection between sumptuous dress and sexuality. Sumptuary laws regulated the clothing of both sexes, but women were more threatened by its controls, often petitioning for release from these regulations.<sup>66</sup> While in the twelfth century the effeminacy of a courtier was connected with sodomy, extravagant dress and manners were condemned in the later Middle Ages as wasteful or dishonest.<sup>67</sup> Refined dress was also associated with sexual debauchery.<sup>68</sup> Writers chastised men and women equally for extravagant dress on the grounds of vanity and lust, not cross-dressing.<sup>69</sup> As the Middle Ages progressed, apparently so did the incidences of cross-dressing, literary and literal.

In its litany of instructions regarding clothing, Deuteronomy 22:5 prohibits cross-dressing: “A woman shall not be clothed with man’s apparel, neither shall a man use woman’s apparel: for he that doeth

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64. Roche-Mahdi, Introduction to *Silence*, xxi.

65. Roberta Davidson, “Cross-Dressing in Medieval Romance,” in *Textual Bodies: Changing Boundaries of Literary Representation*, ed. Lori Hope Lefkowitz (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997), 60.

66. Diane Owen Hughes, “Regulating Women’s Fashion,” in Klapisch-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 153.

67. Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 46.

68. Karras, 46. See also Minnis, *Fallible Authors*, 147.

69. Karras, 46.

these things is abominable before God,” an admonition that was used against those who transgressed.<sup>70</sup> But certain women (primarily prostitutes) were granted dispensations to wear clothing that was distinctly masculine, including trousers, which gave them a certain “transvestite freedom” to control their bodies.<sup>71</sup> Silence uses this control to participate in masculine feats of chivalry and join a group of jongleurs—singers or storytellers. “Frere” Denise exercises the same control over her body when she adopts the dress of a man, but the impact of her decision is mitigated by the friar’s seduction. The situation is made more piquant by both the real friar (Simon) and the fake friar (Denise) wearing garb that resembles female clothing more than secular male dress and that visually emasculates both the real man (Simon) and the woman who pretends to be a man but does so by wearing a quasi-dress (the fraternal habit).<sup>72</sup> The Pardoner is dressed in the garments of religious office, including the “wallet” (1.686) of pardons and the “male” (1.694) of relics—not a habit but a recognizable costume. Cross-dressed women perform “monkhood” as well as men, often better; and “they distinguish themselves by their humility and obedience, while their brothers are subject to criticism.”<sup>73</sup> In the narratives of cross-dressing female saints, hagiography emphasizes the appropriateness of religious male clothing for these women; the masculine clothing matches the virility of the women’s spirits: they perform “externally what is understood as an inner masculinity,” a more perfect spirituality that only men could innately possess. Women had to work at it, but in cross-dressing and living visually as men, they can achieve that sanctity.<sup>74</sup> They *live* as men and erase all traces of their female identity even to the point where they are (falsely) accused of impregnating another woman. Fein points out that,

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70. *The Holy Bible: Douay Rheims Version* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1971).

71. Hughes, “Regulating Women’s Fashion,” 150.

72. As Holly Crocker suggests, “a piece of clothing (a habit) can easily substitute for the manhood that is effectively lacking in the monastic celibate male.” Holly Crocker, introduction to *Comic Provocations: Exposing the Corpus of Old French Fabliaux* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 8.

73. Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 104.

74. Anke Bernau, “Gender and Sexuality,” in *A Companion to Middle English Hagiography*, ed. Sarah Salih (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), 119.

By medieval misogynist thinking a woman who maintains her chastity by hiding her gender is already on the way to sainthood. If she endures the penitential vows and existence of a monk, compounded with an imposed penance designed for a man, she is doubly, even triply, proven. What marks her sainthood is not merely that she suffered innocently and grievously, but that she suffered as a *man*, being merely *a woman*. Her sainthood is thus figured in terms of a bigendering, which allows Marina to experience God in her lifetime as no man can.<sup>75</sup>

Marina is an example to other women and her fellow saints because she accepts her punishment, however unjust, in great humility and silence. These transvestite saints are generally silent—not even speaking up to defend themselves against defamation, because that would involve revelation and the repudiation of their masculine identity. Female virgin martyrs, however, are often lauded for the masculine power of their speech, even though they are shrouded in feminine garb.<sup>76</sup> The Pardonier appears to embody both aspects of this ideal; “inner masculinity” is projected outward by adopting male clothing that would allow a woman to safely preach, in a manly way—with authority and the sanction of the Church.

While Denise seems to assume a masculine identity and sexuality, and appears equally gratified by the sexual relationship, the extent of her control is questionable. The poet writes: “Et cele, qui fu ja atainte / et conquise et mate et vaincue, / si tost comme ele ot entendue / la reson du Frere Meneur” (And she, who was already attacked, / Conquered, overcome, and overwhelmed, / As soon as she had heard / The discourse of the Franciscan Friar; 46–49) expresses her heart-felt desire to join the order. She is literally *conquered* and *vanquished*, suggesting that she is only an innocent victim of the friar’s lust. But as the tale progresses, Denise becomes more complicit and abandons her identity and the

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75. Fein, “A Saint ‘Geynest under Gore,’” 363–64.

76. Maud Burnett McInerney gives several examples, focusing on the early Christian saint Thecla, “feminine in her identity as a virgin and masculine in her identity as skilled orator” (55) and the most famous medieval cross-dressing woman, Joan of Arc. *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

prohibitions of her gender freely. There is, in the exchange of clothing, an exchange of sexual power and a parody of gender and sexual fears. The more innocent Denise seems, the more insidious her corruption. Her decision represents every father's nightmare—that his daughter will defy his authority and choose a path aberrant to social conventions. But as a cross-dressing woman, the Pardoner takes authority for herself by shrouding her body in men's clothes, a recognizable, but potentially dangerous, means of appropriating a masculine identity.

To many medieval people, cross-dressing represented a core fear of emasculation. If women can “become” men, then men can “become” women.<sup>77</sup> Contemporary with comic portrayals of cross-dressing male knights in chivalric romance and spectacle, transvestitism was condemned in Hildegard of Bingen's *Scivias* (ca. 1150), and the *Summa Theologica* attributed to Alexander of Hales (ca. 1240).<sup>78</sup> Men who impersonated women, even as a disguise to escape from violence, risked a loss in status and were often accused by medieval writers of adopting women's clothing from a desire to have easier, sexual access to women—precisely the motive of *la saineresse* and queen Eufeme's male lover in *Silence*.<sup>79</sup> Medieval criticisms of cross-dressing worry that the “ability of women to look like men might validate their ambitions to become clerics”<sup>80</sup>—a fear realized in both the figure of a cross-dressing Pardoner and Pope Joan, even though they represent very different forms of this appropriation. Hotchkiss points out that *Frere Denise*, the oldest extant version of its kind of anti-fraternal satire, may have been engendered by accounts of actual women who lived as members of monastic orders like the twelfth-century Cistercian Hildegund von Schönau (d. 1188).<sup>81</sup>

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77. McAlpine, “The Pardoner's Homosexuality,” 11.

78. Putter, “Transvestite Knights,” 281.

79. Bullough, “Cross Dressing and Gender Role Change,” 225; Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 111. According to Ad Putter, transvestitism seems to have been classified as a mortal sin—one against nature—with two exceptions: actors on stage and women *in periculo castitatis*, whose purity was at risk. “Transvestite Knights,” 282.

80. Putter, “Transvestite Knights,” 282.

81. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, 41 and 156n39. In his adept study of anticlericalism in the fabliaux, Daron Burrows only refers to *Frere Denise* in passing because the friars in question do not perform sacerdotal functions. But his overall

Pope Joan, though legendary, was accepted as fact after the thirteenth century.<sup>82</sup> As Alain Boureau points out, from about 1250 until 1450, and even as late as 1550, the Church believed in Joan's existence and encouraged the faithful to believe in her as well.<sup>83</sup> He writes that medieval men "faced that reality and attempted to accommodate it within their conceptions of the world; the act of narration and interpretation became part of the many single tactics and strategies surrounding the fundamental questions of ecclesiology—theories regarding the status of the Church."<sup>84</sup> At a tournament in Berwick in 1347, women dressed as men fearing neither the "anger of God for their shamelessness," nor the comments of shocked citizens, enjoying the privilege of license through their disguise.<sup>85</sup> Women disguised themselves as men to gain access to institutions—the Church, universities, chivalric contests—that excluded women.<sup>86</sup> The number of contemporary examples of women escaping marriages in male disguise and female saints entering monasteries as monks, suggests that medieval tolerance was higher for women than for cross-dressing men, because "the transformation of a woman into a man could at least be conceptualized as a change in the right direction."<sup>87</sup>

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analysis, which includes an entire chapter on the castration of corrupt, adulterous priests in the fabliaux, ties the anticlerical satire to reformist movements like the Cathars and the Lollards. He does notes that Rutebeuf voices a particular aversion to mendicants—the more than fifty lines of "virulent diatribe" against them in *Frere Denise* is the longest of any polemical outburst in the fabliaux. *The Stereotype of the Priest in the Old French Fabliaux: Anticlerical Satire and Lay Identity* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), 167n10.

82. Vern L. Bullough, "Cross Dressing and Gender Role Change in the Middle Ages," in Bullough and Brundage, *The Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, 230.

83. Boureau, *The Myth of Pope Joan*, 4.

84. Boureau, 3.

85. Davidson, "Cross-Dressing in Medieval Romance," 59.

86. Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 111.

87. Putter, "Transvestite Knights," 282. Bernau makes a similar point in "Gender and Sexuality." In her discussion of gender role reversals, including cross-dressing, among female mystics, Caroline Walker Bynum points out that men generally only described of themselves as women in "moments or statuses of liminality." *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 36. Bynum provides a list of historical women mystics who actively dressed as men to change socially ascribed gender roles,

The transvestite saint inverts signs of gender, subverting the views of women as inferior and illustrating anxieties about female sexuality.<sup>88</sup> In hagiography, the depiction of young women attaining positions of authority within the monastic community dressed and living as men “highlights the potential agency of such an identity, which does not so much *erase* or level gender roles, but shows how they are translated and redefined when moved from one arena to another.”<sup>89</sup> As a cross-dressing woman, the Pardoner realizes these anxieties by appropriating a powerful role within the Church hierarchy, preaching, and selling indulgences and relics with papal approval and license. Pope Joan was beloved and apparently sincere in the exercise of her religious role, while the Pardoner is overtly rapacious in her deceit and dishonesty, the worst kind of religious masculine authority.

The linguistic complexities of the Pardoner’s portrait, combined with these well-known cross-dressing analogues suggest that a fourteenth-century audience may have seen the similarities, especially in the context of a pilgrimage.<sup>90</sup> Travel allowed gendered spaces to shift, removing the gendered subject from the space where identity is codified and reaffirmed.<sup>91</sup> Women might cross-dress as a safety measure when traveling, and even though more examples of this occur in literary sources than in court records, it was not at all implausible that women actually did this in practice.<sup>92</sup> Engaging in a masculine performance through the appropriation of a male gender identity in clothing, speech, and occupation, the Pardoner actively challenges prohibitions against women’s religious

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because many of them actually saw themselves a truly androgynous (38–39).

88. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, 13. Myers argues that in the *Canterbury Tales* “both the female pilgrims and many of the women in the tales must deny, in some way, their sexuality in order to benefit materially.” “Chaucer’s Pardoner,” 60.

89. Bernau, “Gender and Sexuality,” 120.

90. Chaucer was intimately acquainted with the fabliaux as a genre. See Peter G. Beidler, *Chaucer’s Canterbury Comedies: Origins and Originality* (Seattle, WA: Cooftown Press, 2010); Thomas D. Cooke, *The Old French and Chaucerian Fabliaux: A Study in Their Comic Climax* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978); Larry D. Benson and Theodore M. Andersson, eds., *The Literary Context of Chaucer’s Fabliaux: Texts and Translations* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971).

91. Legassie, “Chaucer’s Pardoner and Host,” 201.

92. Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 111.

speech and destabilizes orthodox discourse. Ambiguity allows the Pardoner to maintain social (and potentially sexual) license and religious authority whereas the reinscriptions of gender identity in the fabliaux, hagiography, and romance do not sustain that kind of freedom. Judith Halberstam demonstrates that there are multiple masculinities and that the “heroic” masculinity of white middle-class males relies on the “subordination of alternative masculinities.”<sup>93</sup> But medieval women who adopted masculine roles (even in their feminine clothes) were a paradox: they were lauded for transcending the perceived weakness of their sex (usually after death) but at the same time they threatened the gendered order of society. A woman who successfully disguised herself as a man to *preach* would have been insidious for usurping the position reserved for male members of the religious hierarchy. The literary analogues of cross-dressing suggest that Chaucer may have appropriated this popular trope as a means of veiling his own criticism of religious orthodoxy and its subjugation of the female voice.

### The Paradox of a Female Preacher

It is through preaching that the Pardoner affects the greatest transgression. The Pardoner’s female identity and her role as a Church official (especially a corrupt one) threaten the stability of Church doctrine and undermine the prohibitions against women’s preaching. Because, whatever else she may be, she is an effective preacher and a skillful rhetorician. The obscurity of the Pardoner’s gender only deepens that duplicity: as a woman, traveling on pilgrimage in close (and probably dubious) companionship with the Summoner, carrying relics that she proclaims as false (just as she is false) but still offers as genuine (as genuine as her message about greed and faith) undermines the sacerdotal nature of her sermon. This was a major concern for the institutional Church because rejections of polluted sacraments remained a “common feature”

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93. Judith (Jack) Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 1–2. For a complex and insightful discussion of *medieval* masculinities, in context, see Clare A. Lees, ed., *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

in heretical or heterodox movements throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>94</sup> But what the medieval Church condemned as heresy can often be read as anticlericalism “inspired by disappointment—if not fear—at the failure of the Church’s representatives to fulfil the spiritual expectations and demands of a laity still filled with the religious fervour and promise of the eleventh-century reform.”<sup>95</sup> In such a context of dissent, fashioning the Pardoner as a fair, feminine, female who (like her hagiographical and fabliaux counterparts) thumbs her nose at Church conventions and restrictions by doing the very things they feared most from women, is a resounding indictment of religious hypocrisy.

Casting the Pardoner as a cross-dressing woman challenges the underlying assumption of masculine religious authority while maintaining the efficacy of Christian orthodoxy. Women were prohibited from preaching; moreover, they were urged to keep silent in church. Thomas Hoccleve’s “Remonstrance Against Oldcastle” (1415) argues that women are too feeble minded to participate in biblical or religious discourse, so they should just leave it to men.<sup>96</sup> Fiona Somerset aptly asserts that Hoccleve’s argument is dissuasive because behind it “lurks the fear that women *are* attempting to participate in theological argument.”<sup>97</sup> This particular piece post-dates *The Canterbury Tales*, but Hoccleve (ca. 1368–1426) was one of Chaucer’s contemporaries and was certainly aware of the same religious concerns.<sup>98</sup> The Pardoner fully participates in the

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94. Burrows, *The Stereotype of the Priest*, 149.

95. Burrows, 149–50.

96. “The Remonstrance against Oldcastle,” in *Selections from Hoccleve*, ed. M. C. Seymour (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 60–74, lines 145–52, cited in Fiona Somerset, “*Eciam Mulier*: Women in Lollardy and the Problem of Sources,” in *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 246.

97. Somerset, “*Eciam Mulier*,” 246.

98. Michaela Paasche Grudin argues that Chaucer turns the traditional juxtaposition of uncontrollable speech and women into an “exploration of discursive freedom.” *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 99. Several critics have pointed out that Lollardy “is in the air” in the *Canterbury Tales*; Dinshaw writes that the “atmosphere of Lollard and anti-Lollard propaganda sustains and nourishes the Pardoner’s self-presentation as a hypocrite” and Chaucer’s characterization of the Pardoner “hits many polemical

spiritual discourse—participation that her gender and sexual ambiguity troubles. If she is a convincing preacher as a woman because the pilgrims and parishioners listen with rapt attention, and (she claims) they buy her relics and her rhetoric, then any woman could be. The belief she inspires with her sermons, even if we only have her word for it, suggests that she can negotiate the language of devotion as effectively as the clerical disguise, successfully convincing her audiences that she is both a man and a faithful servant of the Church. She is deft in her hypocrisy and her scriptural manipulation (much like other clergy around her), hiding in their rhetoric as well as their clothes.

Clerical deception contributed to a larger trend in the fourteenth century of challenging the Church, particularly from the onset of the Great Schism (1378–1418), in which various forms of reformist dissent, speculative theology, and women’s movements played a part.<sup>99</sup> Alcuin Blamires notes that the precedent of women instructing others in theology “became well known to the laity through the dissemination of hagiography,”<sup>100</sup> revealing “persistent and acute paradoxes which must sometimes have embarrassed those holding the orthodox position and which heterodox groups could naturally exploit.”<sup>101</sup> Saints’ lives promoted subversive ideas about women preaching, especially among the virgin martyrs—the most vocal and instructive category of female saints.<sup>102</sup> Chaucer, who knew the *Legenda aurea*, which not only includes lives of female transvestite saints but also several accounts of vocally instructive and defiant women as well, may have adopted them in conjunction with the anti-fraternal fabliaux as a model for his ambiguous Pardoner.<sup>103</sup> But

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hot-button issues.” *Getting Medieval*, 115.

99. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, “*Eciam Lollardi*: Some Further Thoughts on Fiona Somerset’s ‘*Eciam Mulier*: Women in Lollardy and the Problem of Sources,’” in Olson and Kerby-Fulton, *Voices in Dialogue*, 262.

100. Alcuin Blamires, “Women and Preaching in Medieval Orthodoxy, Heresy, and Saints’ Lives,” *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 26 (1995): 135–52; 136, doi:1484/J.VIATOR.2.301138.

101. Blamires, “Women and Preaching in Medieval Orthodoxy,” 136

102. Blamires, 142.

103. Sturges asserts that while the Pardoner *could* pose a threat to patriarchal authority, he appears as Chaucer’s “straw man” who introduces subversive potential “only so that it can be disciplined by representatives of medieval authority, especially

his female Pardoner operates within the corrupt system, speaking with authority denied to most women, and actively promoting the orthodox agenda of the Church. Because she negotiates this system so well and remains hidden within her gender performance, the Pardoner embodies anti-clerical commentary; she lies on such a fundamental level and gets away with it, revealing the flaws of religious institutions in her rhetoric.

Rhetorical strategies are at heart of the Pardoner's gendered performance, and transgression. She begins her prologue by affirming that in churches when she preaches, "I peyne me to han an hauteyn speche, / And ryngge it out as round as gooth a belle, / For I kan al by rote that I telle" (6.330-32). She has memorized all her lines for her performance and delivers them clearly and loudly. Her rhetorical strategies are designed to disarm; she beguiles her audience by taking them into her confidence. She flavors her sermon with a bit of Latin, to stir their devotion before presenting them with her false relics and her false words. The Pardoner is rather honest in her dishonesty: "For myn entente is nat but for to wynne, / And nothyng for correccioun of synne" (6.403-4), and even more honest about the hypocrisy of sermons in general:

"For certes, many a predicacious  
Comth ofte tyme of yvel entencioun;  
Som for plesance of folk and flaterye,  
To been avaunced by ypocrisye,  
And som for veyne glorie, and some for hate."  
(6.407-11)

Those who slander her, regardless of whether they speak the truth, "I styngge hym with my tonge smerte" (6.413) during her sermon: "Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe / Of hoolynesse, to semen hooly and trewe" (6.421-22). Like Eve, whose words were often conflated with that of the serpent who tempted her, the Pardoner stings her enemies and cloaks her rhetorical venom in holiness.<sup>104</sup>

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the Host and the Knight." *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory*, 1. Myers says that in feminist terms, both the Wife and the Pardoner replicate the "roles of their exploitative foes instead of providing an alternative model of relationship." "Chaucer's Pardoner," 58.

104. The danger attributed to female speech in the Middle Ages by Church

The Host reacts to both the sexual presence of the Pardoner and her blasphemy in offering relics she has acknowledged as fake:

I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond  
In stide of relikes or of seintuarie.  
Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;  
They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!  
(6.952–55)

Lee Patterson offers three possibilities for interpreting the Host's threat to cut off the Pardoner's testicles: as a threat to castrate an already effeminate Pardoner; a threat to turn her into a *eunuchus Dei* ("a castrate for Christ" [*sic*]); or as a conspiracy between the Host and the Pardoner to mock "not merely the capacity of relics to bear spiritual power but the resurrection of the body itself."<sup>105</sup> But the Pardoner deliberately mocks the sanctity of relics and the powerful belief her audience has in them.<sup>106</sup> She parodically crosses the line between the material and the spiritual. As Sachi Shimomura writes, the Pardoner elicits the Host's violent judgment "through a failure to maintain discontinuity between 'true' and parodic performances," a discontinuity that the Pardoner's public preaching denies her.<sup>107</sup> But it may signify the success of the Pardoner's masculine performance; the Host is so offended at her flirtatious gesture that he threatens to make the Pardoner (whom he believes to be male) a eunuch, effeminizing what is already female. She is honest about her methods as a pardoner and is not seriously attempting to sell salvation to the Host.<sup>108</sup> But this implies that Harry Bailey's response is in jest,

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and secular authorities is well established. See Williams and Echols, *Between Pit and Pedestal*, esp. 7; and Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, eds., *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

105. Patterson, "Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch," 676.

106. Patterson, 676.

107. Sachi Shimomura, *Odd Bodies and Visible Ends in Medieval Literature* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 117.

108. Myers, "Chaucer's Pardoner," 60. He writes that she "attempts a joke at which the group is invited to laugh and to admit, as she has just done, the greed they all share. Harry, however, trumps the Pardoner by appealing to hierarchy through its most potent symbol and necessary foundation inside or outside the Church, the

or that he recognizes the Pardoner's ultimate deception—her sex. The Host's response is fairly similar to that of a man who realizes he has just been beaten or outsmarted by a girl.

Rita Copeland categorizes the Host's outrage and desired punishment as directed at the Pardoner's speech: through her ambiguous and transgressive body, the Pardoner reproduces the nature of the crime—rhetoric.<sup>109</sup> But the Pardoner may never have been male in the first place, which makes her body and speech even more transgressive because it denies the inherent masculinity of rhetoric. While the Host expresses the need to contain and discipline rhetoric through a threat of violence against the Pardoner's body as Copeland suggests, the rhetorical transgression is even more dangerous and less containable in the Host's potential misinterpretation of the Pardoner's gender performance.<sup>110</sup> Shimomura describes the Host's sharp response as a physical attack that conflates the “suspect relics with the Pardoner's suspect body—the one, deliberately displayed; the other, involuntarily revealed;” a conflation that imbues these false relics with both her “spiritual and bodily filth,” exhibiting her very culpability and physicalizing the Pardoner's display of hypocritical preaching.<sup>111</sup> The Pardoner's body is suspect whether it is a male already castrated, a homosexual male threatened with castration, or a female body disguised as an effeminate male whose female biology bears signs of emasculation. The Pardoner, presented as part of a satirical portrait of clerical corruption, embodies the nuanced gender performance that was usually attributed to women—part of a shifting landscape of

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presence of testicles [. . .] Similarly, the cross-dressed Pardoner is in a precarious, if ambiguous, situation, and the pilgrims join Harry in laughingly putting back into place the one whose testicles are in question” (60).

109. Rita Copeland, “The Pardoner's Body and the Disciplining of Rhetoric,” in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 154.

110. Copeland, “The Pardoner's Body,” 154.

111. Shimomura, *Odd Bodies*, 116. Legassie argues that the Pardoner's performance and the Host's response “provide the occasion for the *Canterbury Tales*' most sustained exploration of the vulnerability of the types of masculine self-constitution that rely on quotidian forms of violence to achieve their sense coherence and to enforce their social precedence.” “Chaucer's Pardoner and Host,” 210.

gender identity, particularly in religious orders.<sup>112</sup> Very often, the social constructions of gender were troubled in accounts of female sanctity and in clerical celibacy—and Chaucer’s satire of religious corruption in the Pardoner may also satirize the contradictions of requiring men to remain celibate, or encouraging women to behave masculinely to transcend the perceived weakness of their sex, as in female saints’ lives. Gender affects sanctity and sanctity affects gender; “sainthood often works by breaking with normal social values, and gendered identity may be amongst these: constructing one’s gender identity differently may be a marker of holiness.”<sup>113</sup> And while male holiness may be a default position because of the male dominance of the Church, it may also “demand a radical break from the secular norms of masculinity.”<sup>114</sup> Chaucer inverts this entire proposition by parodying not only the holiness a Pardoner *should* embody as a purveyor of relics and indulgences (and as a preacher), but by masking her biological identity in a series of conflicting possibilities that her audience would recognize as transgressive.

### Sexual License in Masculine Garb

Despite the fluid nature of gender in representations of cross-dressing in the fabliaux and the parody of sociosexual fears of homoeroticism, these tales maintain and often reestablish the gender hierarchy. Cross-dressing allows only temporary freedom since each tale ends with the retention of sexual norms and reaffirmation of the status quo. The biologically female characters engage only in sexual intercourse with those biologically male, the “correct” biological sex is unveiled, and the

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112. Allen Frantzen argues that holy men are manly, but not sexually male, and as Salih contends, this manliness is attainable by cross-dressed virgins, though they physically remain women. She writes that gendered performance is so “completely separated from anatomy that the two fail to interact.” *Versions of Virginity*, 104. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler argue that biology is not irrelevant, “but making a boy out of a body born with a penis is a cultural process just as complicated and life-long as ‘girling’ a body declared female on the basis of her vagina.” “Becoming and Unbecoming,” in Cohen and Wheeler, *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, xix.

113. Riches and Salih, *Gender and Holiness*, 5.

114. Riches and Salih, 5.

gender norm reinscribed with the re-veiling in proper clothes. Likewise, female transvestite hagiography relies on the revelation of the woman's true gender for its efficacy. Subverting societal proscriptions of gendered dress gives Silence, Brother Denise, and (potentially) the Pardoner sexual freedom, however temporary. In fabliaux, the cross-dressing of one partner opens the door to the suggestions of homosexuality on the part of both—so in every way the sexuality is transgressive. However, the fabliaux do not break the parameters of “acceptable” sexual practice; the characters engaged in the sexual intercourse (and the audience) know the biological sex of each character. In *Frere Denise*, the husband fears his wife is attracted to the young friar—who the audience knows is a woman—and the lady is aware of a strange affection between the two friars travelling together, but she figures out that one of them is female. There is no real homoerotic tension, no sense of mistaken identity that leads to an embarrassing encounter. Any traces of homoerotic possibility have been diluted and dissipated in favor of heterosexual intercourse that briefly but ineffectually challenges masculine superiority and suggests only a temporary subversion of male authority. Not so for the Pardoner whose indeterminate gender, potentially recognizable to a fourteenth-century audience as a female body in male clothing, destabilizes social gender constructions more effectively and more permanently because there is no resolution at the end.<sup>115</sup>

In Chaucer, the charge of homosexuality leveled at the Summoner and Pardoner is alleviated by the act of cross-dressing, but the possibility of fornication remains. The social implications of switching gender identity for sexual gratification include the potential for same sex encounters,<sup>116</sup> a factor in most stories of cross-dressing from the

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115. Myers asks why Chaucer did not make “the nature of his creation more blatantly obvious than he did,” but suggests that perhaps he intended to in an epilogue that he never got a chance to complete, but would “clarify some of the ambiguities” of the *General Prologue*. “Chaucer’s Pardoner,” 60.

116. See Butler: “The construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to follow from gender—indeed, where none of these dimensions of significant corporeality express or reflect one another. When the

medieval French romances to the transvestitism of the Renaissance portrayed by Sidney, Shakespeare, and Marlowe.<sup>117</sup> In *Silence*, the evil queen Eufeme develops an attraction for the beautiful blond jongleur she thinks is a boy, stages an accusation of bloody rape to mask her desires, all while entertaining a male lover disguised as a nun. Michelle Szkilnik provides an example of similar deception from the *Roman d'Ysaïe* that resonates with this interpretation of the Pardoner: the heroine Marte dresses as a male minstrel, and as such, becomes the object of a noble woman's affections.<sup>118</sup> The text makes it clear that the lady is first aroused by Marte's beardlessness. When Marte responds to the query about her age with a statement that she is not "conditionés comme hons, ainchois [a] deffaly a toutez naturelles oeuvres et autressy sont [s]es frères que [lui]" (equipped as a man and does not perform what Nature requires and neither do (her) brothers; 179), the lady is horrified and assumes that Marte is a eunuch.<sup>119</sup> Marte is being honest, as she will be later when she sings a song about a woman in love (using the feminine pronouns) but she does it in such a way that the lady misunderstands her.<sup>120</sup> The lady's revulsion for eunuchs is the "normal" reaction; if "writers acknowledge that there are beings neither male nor female, they dismiss them as abnormal."<sup>121</sup> But the perceived abnormality, the deception, allows for a measure of truth. When Marte performs, she says exactly what she wants, she confesses, and, "as long as she is dressed as a man, or at least as a minstrel," she can reveal that she is a woman on an adventure, exposing herself to danger, and by "revealing everything about herself

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disorganization and disaggregation of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence, it seems that the expressive model loses its descriptive force." *Gender Trouble*, 185.

117. Winfred Schleiner, "Male Cross-Dressing and Transvestism in Renaissance Romances," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 19, no. 4 (Winter, 1988): 605–19; 605, doi:10.2307/2540989.

118. Szkilnik, "The Grammar of the Sexes," 76–82.

119. *Roman d'Ysaïe le Triste*, ed. André Giacchetti (Rouen: Press of the University of Rouen, 1989), qtd. in Szkilnik, "The Grammar of the Sexes," 77.

120. Szkilnik, "The Grammar of the Sexes," 78. Szkilnik also argues that the writer clearly finds homosexuality ludicrous: "One can only talk about it in a derisive way, and that is why the writer sets up a situation that is pure *fabliau*" (78).

121. Szkilnik, 78.

she is actually shielding herself most efficiently.”<sup>122</sup> It is possible to read the Pardoner the same way—a woman who reveals her religious rather than her gendered duplicity in her honesty but is shielded by it because no one can quite conceive that she has deceived them *this* way.

Public revelation is usually necessary in a transvestite narrative, especially with the negotiable bodies of reformed prostitutes who adopt a male persona in popular hagiography.<sup>123</sup> In hagiography, once the (false) accusation of sexual misconduct is leveled, the female transvestite saint is cast out; she is only invested with sanctity when the truth is uncovered in the physical unveiling of her body (and her sex) after death. As Fein points out, Marina’s cross-dressed state maintains “her unspotted record of purity. The unknowing monks did *not* desire her. Her woman’s body could *not* have raped the dairyman’s daughter. She herself could not have comprehended what actions lay behind the accusation.”<sup>124</sup> While Marina remains steadfastly silent through the accusation and her subsequent punishment, her body speaks for her when she dies; it becomes the voice and the spectacle of her purity and her innocence, while providing a titillating glimpse of the forbidden for all the monks who have crowded in to witness this miracle. She is made a saint specifically because they discover that she is a woman who bears the humiliation and false accusation with fortitude and humility often associated with pious men. In Chaucer, the Host denounces and threatens the Pardoner in front of the other pilgrims, a humiliation tantamount to the punishment of public shaming which was often used against transgressive women, especially those whose speech was deemed to be offensive.<sup>125</sup> But unlike the fabliaux or female transvestite hagiography, there will be no public (for pilgrims or for audience) *unveiling* of the Pardoner—the truth of her biological sex will not be revealed.

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122. Szkilnik, 78.

123. Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 104.

124. Fein, “A Saint ‘Geynest under Gore,’” 363.

125. Copeland, “The Pardoner’s Body,” 154.

## The Veil of Masculinity

The Pardoner is dressed as a man, but with articles of clothing that signify femininity—the sham veil of the Virgin Mary and the veil of Veronica depicted on her cap. Marjorie Garber has pointed out the historical association of veils with crossing gender boundaries.<sup>126</sup> The Pardoner's veils of gender ambiguity may be a construction of homosexuality, but the Pardoner's clothing, the veil of socially identifiable dress that constructs gender, may also be a mask for cross-dressing.<sup>127</sup> The veil represents a “readable code,” but only for those in the know; “others won't even notice the presence of such a code, much less be able to interpret it.”<sup>128</sup> The Host fails to recognize the Pardoner's code and cannot interpret it, hence his outburst. The absence of (actual) veils worn by most women for the Pardoner or for women dressing as men in hagiography, *Silence*, and *Frere Denise* signifies that they are to be seen as men, even if the audience knows better. The Pardoner's second veil, the fake relic of the Virgin Mary “allows the potential rhetorical construction of a masculine role from this mass of ambiguous details. As a kind of costume or drag, the veil also suggests that this masculinity is *only* a role, never achieved but only assumed.”<sup>129</sup>

The assumption of male clothing by female transvestite saints, *Silence*, and Brother Denise exemplify a defiance of male authority, while the Pardoner adopts this authority for herself. In the resolution of the tales, Denise, *Silence*, and their saintly counterparts return to

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126. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 304–52.

127. Sturges hints at the possibility of transvestitism and asks whether the Pardoner might be seen as “participating not only in the performative construction of masculinity but unconsciously in its transvestic deconstruction as well? For the Pardoner's veils both specifically represent women's garments, the veils of Veronica and of Our Lady.” “The Pardoner, Veiled and Unveiled,” 273. He associates the Virgin Mary with the Lacanian concept of a woman with a hidden phallus, the phallic mother, arguing that the “veiled phallus in this case is even more clearly a construction: a performance or masquerade, and the Pardoner's veils a kind of drag” (274).

128. Sturges, 264.

129. Sturges, 267.

their accepted status as women and wives, either of Christ or man. In the initial deception, Denise's adoption of male clothing is a means of seducing her to the desires of friar, not an act of liberation, unless the liberation is the temporary sexual freedom her disguise affords her. At the end of the tale, her traditional dress (and her honor) is restored by another woman, one whose life has been defined by upholding the strict parameters of gender identity. The Pardoner maintains that masculine identity and all the freedom and authority that goes with it. There are many examples in the fabliaux (e.g., *Du chevalier a la robe vermeille* [The Knight of the Red Robe] and *Les braies au Cordelier* [The Friar's Pants]) where the exchange of clothing has potentially dangerous consequences, for the economic and social structures.<sup>130</sup> In the transvestitism tales, the exchange endangers the gender and sexuality structures.<sup>131</sup> Chaucer's Pardoner threatens both—the adoption of male clothing allows her to participate in economic and religious life in a capacity denied to other members of her sex, and she subverts the expectations of her gender and the prohibitions against women preachers. She realizes all of the transgressions only hinted at in the fabliaux and romance. The clothing is a gendered veil, not dissimilar to those carried as a relic and as a mark of pilgrimage by the Pardoner.

Cross-dressing figures like the Pardoner threaten social and economic boundaries delineated by clothing. When women “breach” these social conventions, they gain access to a world from which they have been excluded. Boureau asks: “What happens when Peter, the rock and keystone of the central edifice, becomes Joan, and when divine election changes into human (and female) trickery?”<sup>132</sup> The answer is

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130. Crocker, introduction to *Comic Provocations*, 8; Mary E. Leech, “Dressing the Undressed: Clothing and Social Structure in Old French Fabliaux,” in Crocker, *Comic Provocations: Exposing the Corpus of Old French Fabliaux* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

131. The fabliaux articulate the struggle of class and gender by flouting the traditional expectations of fashion codified in increasingly stringent sumptuary laws. The subversion of dress codes seems a natural outlet in a genre of parody—for both men and women. Crocker explains that clothing “often confuses the office, status, and gender of fabliau characters.” Introduction, *Comic Provocations*, 8.

132. Boureau, *The Myth of Pope Joan*, 3.

fabliau, or a satirical indictment of masculine ecclesiastical structures, or the threat of female sacral power circumscribed by the constraints of hagiography—sanctity shaped only by gendered (mis)perception. The Pardoner maintains the ruse and retains her position; but in the fabliaux the boundaries are only breached temporarily. In *Frere Denise*, gendered fashion and the religious symbolism of the Franciscan habit are challenged, inverted, and then restored. At the end of the tale, the friar has paid her dowry, reminiscent of Chaucer's friar who "maad ful many a marriage / Of yonge women at his owene cost" (l. 212–13), and she weds one of the knights who first pledged suit to her, from whose affection she sought refuge with the Franciscans in the first place. *Frere Denise* includes a biting commentary on the hypocrisy of the Church and the corruption of the mendicant and monastic orders, just as in Chaucer. The lady rails against the corruption that leads Denise astray, using Brother Simon as a representative of all the evil and lecherous priests who seem to float through the fabliaux: "Faus papelars, faus ypocrite, / fausse vie menez et orde" ("False bigot, false hypocrite, / You lead a false and putrid life"; 244–45). The lady continues for another twenty-two lines, indicting the order, the lascivious friars who populate it, and their hypocrisy in condemning secular revels while "reveling" in secret themselves.<sup>133</sup>

Following the pattern of female transvestite hagiography in which young women take almost any form of religious piety available to them to avoid the earthly constraints of marriage and parodying that tradition by having the virgin willingly become concubine rather than saint, the fabliau suggests that Denise is neither dupe nor victim. She is aware of her transgression and is anxious to keep it secret, much like the Pardoner

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133. As with the ambiguity of the Pardoner, there is humor in the idea of a woman who manages to deceive an entire order and perhaps even herself. Denise seems to be completely ignorant of the biological difference in her willingness to serve God and live by what she believes is the rule of the Franciscans, and yet when her secret is revealed, she weeps in shame and says she was beguiled: "et puis de chief en chief li conte / que il l'a trest de chiés sa mere / et se li conta qui ele ere, / si que riens ne li a celé" (And then she told her completely from beginning to end / how he drew her away from her mother's house; / And then she told her who she was / So that she hid nothing from her; 236–39).

who embraces her vocation and potential disguise as a eunuch to further her own desires. Denise's culpability in the fabliau has the potential to either reinforce misogynist views of women as duplicitous and licentious, or elevate them as social equals to men.<sup>134</sup> Likewise, the Pardoner potentially validates religious prohibitions against female preachers—as a woman disguised as a man, engaging in an illicit (albeit heterosexual) affair, preaching against greed and hypocrisy, she embodies all the negative traits associated with overly vocal women.

Chaucer briefly treads on this same dangerous ground with the Wife of Bath, foreshadowing the possibility that “the *corpus* and the corporeality of a *doctrix* do not necessarily constitute an impediment to the authority of her doctrine.”<sup>135</sup> According to Minnis, Chaucer does not stray for long with the Wife; the “gender-inverting charivari of the old woman's moral disquisition gives way to the sexually charged values of the traditional narrative.”<sup>136</sup> If Chaucer's foray into feminine discourse is meant to reestablish the status quo prohibition of it, then the Pardoner, as a morally corrupt preacher who is secretly a woman, may also bolster misogynist stereotypes. The Pardoner dupes the other pilgrims, much as she does her regular audience of the faithful and makes “the person and the peple” her apes (1.706). Denise's desire to take monastic orders is more of a rebellion against enforced marriage and an assertion of her sexual freedom than an unwitting seduction at the hands of a lascivious priest, but her rebellion is short-lived. Silence will succeed in her deception and regain her hereditary rights but will then assume the female dress and identity she was unaware of for most of her life.<sup>137</sup>

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134. Szkilnik, “The Grammar of the Sexes,” 69.

135. Minnis, *Fallible Authors*, 344.

136. Minnis, 344.

137. According to Hotchkiss, “most of these characters do not attempt to achieve male sociopolitical status. Instead, they use the authority and privilege of maleness to reclaim female roles.” *Clothes Make the Man*, 83. Whatever freedom Denise may have experienced is circumscribed by her confession to the lady, a parody of the confession the lady was to give to her as Friar Denis. The lady gives her a dress to wear, and in an elaborate scene Denise seems to regain her knowledge of her gendered status and reinstates her forgotten modesty (308–13). Hagiographical transvestites are set as an example to other women and their fellow saints because they accept their punishment, however unjust, in great humility and silence. However, *Frere Denise* serves as a

The final disrobing and re-robing of Denise restores her to her ascribed social and gendered position.<sup>138</sup> She will become the wife, supposedly discarding her previous sexual desires and submitting to those of her husband. Similarly, Silence will transform from the masculine form “Scilensiüs” (Silentius; 6666) to the feminine “Scilentiä” (Silentia; 6668) upon her marriage to the king who decreed against female inheritance in the first place; Nature had “recofree sa droiture” (recovered her rights; 6670) and erases all traces of Silence’s masculine identity. However, the Pardoner rejects the idea of marriage out of hand, jesting with the Wife of Bath that she would marry, but not risk her dear flesh: “I was aboute to wedde a wyf; alas! / What sholde I bye it on my flesh so deere? / Yet hadde I levere wedde no wyf to-yeere!” (3.166–68).

The Pardoner recognizes the reality of marriage—and the limited opportunities to those acknowledged as female, a reality from which she saves her tender flesh. This comment “cuts to the flesh of the matter,” since “conduct in marriage is about flesh, and the Wife has presented the physicality of that particular ‘meat market’ as well as the Pardoner who will later show the physicality of that other more dedicated meat

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condemnation of this kind of sacrifice; Denise does not enter a convent after her adventure, which might seem like the appropriate avenue for a girl who wished to live a holy life, but instead marries and goes on to fulfill her intended role in medieval society, that of a wife and mother. While the Franciscan Order is no place for a girl, obviously neither is a convent. There is no discussion of it, the marriage is automatic, and the lady’s concern is making sure her prospective husband doesn’t know what Denise has been up to.

138. Perhaps the ultimate message of the fabliau *Frere Denise* is that fate cannot be avoided. It may be postponed, but at the end of the day it is inevitable. The revelation of Denise’s true sex acts as absolution; she is forgiven by the lady who treats her justly and arranges to wipe her slate clean but who condemns the friar willing to corrupt her. With the lady’s gift and kindness, Denise “‘miraculously’ resumes a femininity that is only as permanent as the pieces of fabric she uses to cover her body.” Crocker, introduction, 8. The striking thing about the fabliau is that Brother Denise need not have been corrupted. Like the female transvestites of the *Legenda aurea* she could have lived peacefully among the order, preserving her virginity as was her original intent and serving God, had it not been for the desires of Brother Simon and his manipulation of her innocence. But then, she may have fallen prey to the same slanders and accusations leveled later against the pious women of the *Legenda aurea*.

market: relics.”<sup>139</sup> In cross-dressing, the Pardoner (like Denise) removes herself from the meat market of marital expectations and can experience an otherwise-prohibited sexual license. Perhaps the Wife of Bath is an example of what a “dissolute woman” will do on a pilgrimage, and the Pardoner is a “cautionary embodiment of travel’s socially destabilizing potential” who uses the opportunity abroad to exercise homosexual desires.<sup>140</sup> But it is equally plausible that the unregulated space of the pilgrimage gives the female Pardoner a refuge, or a stage for her masculine gender performance. This may be why Chaucer’s construction of the Pardoner’s sexuality is so ambiguous; if no one is ever quite sure, then they cannot be certain in their accusations of misconduct. James F. Rhodes posits that the Pardoner’s intrusion is a “well-calculated gesture” to disguise homosexuality, advancing a “false image,” but also conveying “an enthusiasm and respect for the Wife and her message” as if she were championing and pleading the cause of male same-sex desire.<sup>141</sup> However, the Wife’s call for sovereignty in marriage, for a sense of gender autonomy or at least equality, resonates with the Pardoner as a woman. Unlike the noblewoman in *Frere Denise*, who redresses Denise in feminine garb and inducts her into the constraints of her gender within marriage, and Silence, who is fully integrated into her “natural” gender role, the Wife of Bath offers other opportunities to the cross-dressed Pardoner in a voice that is identifiably and unabashedly female.

## Conclusion

The uncertainty of the Pardoner’s “fluid gender, erotic practice, and even sex” is never fully dealt with in the text, neither in the prologue, nor in the Pardoner’s tale, or her interaction with other pilgrims.<sup>142</sup> Her body

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139. Shimomura, *Odd Bodies*, 96.

140. Legassie, “Chaucer’s Pardoner and Host,” 223.

141. James F. Rhodes, “Motivation in Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale*: Winner Take Nothing,” *Chaucer Review* 17 (1982): 40–61; 42.

142. Sturges, “The Pardoner, Veiled and Unveiled,” 262. Though Sturges sees the Pardoner as “ostensibly male” (262). According to McCarthy, the narrator visibly finds the Pardoner “difficult to pin down” and cannot easily categorize him, but Chaucer “does seem to be suggesting that the Pardoner’s sexual actions contribute

and behavior “gesture toward a variety of incompatible identities without fully conforming to any.”<sup>143</sup> In her detailed discussion of the historical transvestite John/Eleanor Rykener (a man dressed as a woman) who was interrogated under a charge of prostitution in an English court in 1394, Carolyn Dinshaw aptly argues that Chaucer “took up the kinds of issues Rykener’s interrogation raises” in the fabliaux in the first section of the *Canterbury Tales*, but more thoroughly in the “confessional performances” of the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner.<sup>144</sup> The Pardoner calls the Wife of Bath a “prechour,” drawing her “into relationship with the Pardoner’s own traditionally male occupation” but which they both subvert in different ways by their preaching.<sup>145</sup> There is a lively critical debate about whether the Wife is actually a preacher since she misquotes (either deliberately or ignorantly) some of her religious sources. The orthodox view that women could not be preachers persisted.<sup>146</sup> Any

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importantly to his identity.” *Love, Sex and Marriage*, 10.

143. Sturges, “The Pardoner, Veiled and Unveiled,” 262.

144. Like John/Eleanor, Dinshaw argues that the Pardoner appears sexually and gender-indeterminate, revealing again like John/Eleanor, the unnaturalness of the behaviors and desires of those—like the Wife of Bath—around him. *Getting Medieval*, 104. She further contends that the Pardoner’s “queering effects” resonate with John/Eleanor’s. She offers an important observation on the effect of John/Eleanor’s trial: “The interrogation of this cross-dressed male caught in a sodomitical act suggests that laws based on clear and apparent sex difference (that is heterosexually based laws)—laws regulating prostitution, for example, that presume that only women act like women—are irrelevant or inadequate in the face of queer desires or queer truths about the inessentiality of gender, the inadequacy of binary gender categories of heterosexuality, and the resistance of bodies to their official gender constitution and categorization” (112). Dinshaw does not apply this analysis to the possibility that the Pardoner may be a woman cross-dressing as a man, though she acknowledges that women, “particularly harshly regulated by gender in this culture [. . .] are the ones who know best how to exploit the fact that gender can be performed” (111). This inadequacy can also be applied to the situation of a woman who dresses and performs as a man in order to obtain certain social privileges and freedoms restricted to men. Legassie analyzes the Rykener case in terms of the license created by travel “in transient and erotically charged spaces such as alehouses, taverns, and inns, gender was remarkably open for negotiation, and not just for the men who passed through them.” “Chaucer’s Pardoner and Host,” 218.

145. Myers, “Chaucer’s Pardoner,” 58.

146. Minnis, *Fallible Authors*, 23.

woman who purported to be one would be a monstrous creature, an idea potentially validated by the Wife's age and the hag who dominates her tale.<sup>147</sup> Minnis writes: "If female form is incapable of authoritative *character-ization* [sic] then it must be de-formed [sic] in order that its possessor may become an acceptable medium for the transmissions of high message."<sup>148</sup> As such, the re-formed figure of a female Pardoner dressed as a man would make her a suitable vessel for religious doctrine.

While cross-dressing often evokes fear of transgressive sexuality, sexual license is not always the point. In hagiography, the author usually wants the audience to see the saint as a man, whereas the fabliau-poet wants the audience to see that it is *not* a man (or woman), but the gullible think it is. What appears to be sexual subversion, in fact, never alters the social structure. Denise has had her fun and must go back to her assigned role, or risk exposure and censure, and Silence will finally take up the role Nature ordains for her as both woman and wife. The true subversion lies in the multitude of possibilities these tales reveal—the notion that nothing is what it seems, that not even the tightly regulated proscriptions of medieval fashion and dress codes can guarantee that everyone is in his or her proper place. In the romances, the cross-dressing women have set up an impossible ideal; they must end their experiment, revert to their former gender, and be "socially recognized as women."<sup>149</sup> There is a similar re-establishment in *Frere Denise*, but there is no revelation in the *Canterbury Tales* and the Pardoner's gender ambiguity is never fully clarified. Chaucer has "enclosed his radical view within a structure which . . . defuses the explosive, while allowing its threat to exist."<sup>150</sup> The Pardoner is actually dressed more femininely than Denise—as though she is hiding in plain sight. That Chaucer questions whether she is a gelding or a mare raises both the question

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147. Minnis concludes that while the Wife of Bath's tale is "framed by suppressive attitudes and threatened by the gravitational pull of the original and underlying romance narrative, [it stands] as a challenge to tradition, an affirmation that women can teach and indeed 'preach'" even in the loosest terms of teaching their husbands. *Fallible Authors*, 23.

148. Minnis, 23.

149. Szkilnik, "The Grammar of the Sexes," 69.

150. Minnis, *Fallible Authors*, 345.

of eunuchry and transvestitism. By the end of the text, the audience is no more certain of whether the Pardoner is a gelding or a mare or the nature of her relationship with the Summoner; in fact, the only thing Chaucer's audience can be certain of is that the Pardoner is a master—or rather mistress—of deception.

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