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Gender and Castration in the Pardoner's Tale

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* has several famous tales, pilgrims, and lines, but perhaps none as infamous as the Pardoner, his tale, and the line "I trowe he were a gelding or a mare" (General Prologue, 691). This line, which appears in the description of the Pardoner in the General Prologue at the very beginning of the work, is one of the first impressions the reader gets of the Pardoner, and it is a line which leaves much to be interpreted. Some interpret this line to signify an intersexuality apparent in the Pardoner, like Kim Zarins, who, in her modern reincarnation of Chaucer's original poem, titled "Sometimes We Tell the Truth," revives the character of the Pardoner as intersexual teenager Pard. Some, like Monica McAlpine, take this line to mean that the Pardoner is a homosexual character, which she argues in "The Pardoner's Homosexuality and How It Matters." In almost all interpretations, this line seems to exist to alert the audience of some kind of irregularity in the Pardoner's sexual or gender identity, and we as modern readers can use the sentiments surrounding gender and sexuality during the Medieval period to unravel the character of the Pardoner and how that iconic line fits. Chaucer uses the intellectual conflict surrounding eunuchs to exploit the ambiguity of Medieval gender, sex, and bodies in order to criticize the Medieval Christian church through the character of the Pardoner.

Medieval sentiments about gender revolved mainly around the Galenic One-Sex Model, which introduces a culture where intersexuality or gender ambiguity is not only possible, but almost expected. The Galenic One-Sex Model is a theory proposed by Thomas Laqueur and evidenced by Galen's philosophy, which Laqueur asserts to have originated in Ancient Greek and Roman thought and to have persisted up to the eighteenth century in Europe. The One-Sex Model defines women and men as not two separate sexes with separate reproductive organs, but instead as two versions of the same sex. Women and men had identical reproductive organs, the only difference being that female reproductive organs were "inverted" versions of their male counterparts. Furthermore, the model assumed that women were cold and moist, while men were hot and dry. While this model upholds the structure of misogyny by stationing women as "imperfect" sub-men, it also introduces the idea that gender and sex exists on a spectrum, where men and women are on the opposite extremes. The spectrum implies that it is possible to be in-between the two extremes, and exist as something not female or male, but something entirely different. There is also historical evidence to suggest that people who existed "in the middle" of the spectrum did exist. In *The Shape of Sex*, Leah DeVun uncovers the record of a person named Berengaria, who is found to have both male and female genitalia, as well as "flaps" of skin which do not typically exist on male *or* female bodies (DeVun, 1-5). The story of Berengaria, among countless other instances of symbolic representations of sexual ambiguity outside of the binary proves that this interpretation of the Galenic One-Sex Model was in the reality and in the minds of many Europeans during the Medieval period, and was very likely at the forefront of Chaucer's mind amidst his conception of the Pardoner.

However, the imagery linked with the word “gelding” implies that the Pardoner is not intersex, but rather a castrated man. The line “I trowe he were a gelding or a mare” is paradoxical because, while the narrator is unsure of the nature of the Pardoner, the reader remains unsure whether the line is simply a jest or a genuine observation. However, the wording of the line can give us an idea of what Chaucer was trying to communicate, which is that the Pardoner is anything but a “real” man. A mare describes a female horse, while a gelding describes a castrated male horse. Castration describes the practice of removing either the testicles, phallus, or complete genitalia of a male animal, and was practiced infrequently but regularly throughout the Medieval European era, on both animals and human men. It was used as a form of punishment, either in retribution for crimes or as a deterrent against crimes, as well as a means of solidifying power and suppressing rebellion, as seen when it was performed on William Wallace, a Scottish rebel, during his public execution. Castration signified emasculation, as virility and potency was extremely important, given that passing on wealth and land to a male heir was crucial. Virility was so important, DeVun argues, that there existed injury tariffs that were levied in the case of accidentally wounding male genitalia. Therefore, castration itself signified a paradox, calling into question the entire model of gender that had been taught: “[Castration calls into question] the binary categories of human thought... The eunuch confuses not only the categories of ‘male’ and ‘female,’ but the categories ‘nature’ and ‘accident,’ ‘biology’ and ‘culture,’ ‘reality’ and ‘representation,’ ‘essentialism’ and ‘constructionism’” (Taylor, *Castration*). Since gender was defined not by what your genitals are, but where they are placed, men who had no testicles or ovaries fell outside of the realm of gender which was defined on the model. Like the word “gelding,” these ideas of castration aligned castrated men with the invisible “third party” on the

One-Sex Model, which encompassed the intersex and gender ambiguous. Chaucer's use of castration as a means of describing, even in joking form, the Pardoner therefore aligns him with the middle of the spectrum, the intersex, and makes him gender ambiguous.

Whether or not the Pardoner is actually canonically castrated has no effect on the reader's intended interpretation, because it is more important that Chaucer clearly wants the reader to think that he is. Whether or not the Pardoner is actually a "gelding" or simply a very feminized stallion, the use of the Pardoner's "purs" throughout his tale shows the reader that he is at least *metaphorically* castrated. In the General Prologue, it is noted that the Pardoner keeps his relics and his money in a very opulent "walet," a small pouch or bag which is situated between his legs (General Prologue, 686). Chaucer goes on to say that in this bag are "pardoun comen from Rome al hoot," (687), emphasizing the commodity of the pardons themselves as if they were fresh off the factory line, but also reiterating the connection between the purse and testicles. As shown in the Galenic One-Sex Model, an inherent quality of maleness is heat— the fact that the pardons are notably "hoot" then create a stronger connection between the Pardoner's masculinity and potency and the symbolic pardons. This image, along with the several quips and allusions to the purse throughout the pilgrimage, show the reader that Chaucer wants the obvious connection to be made: a purse, filled with fake Christian relics and money obtained through scam, sits in the spot where the Pardoner's testicles may or may not be. Chaucer further demonstrates the Pardoner's metaphorical castration through his attributes as a character. Kuefler states that "Eunuchs, despite their maleness, were often portrayed as the equivalent of women in early medieval writings, and the stereotypes of their character are virtually the same as those of women: carnal, voluptuous, wanton, irrational, fickle, manipulative, deceitful," (*Castration and*

Eunuchism, 291), evidence that castration had a “feminizing” or “queering” effect. We can further see evidence of this “feminizing” effect in the description of the Pardoner as he is introduced in the General Prologue: most pointedly, he has no beard, which was an important cultural symbol of masculinity and virility in the Medieval period (Greenlees).

Matthew 19:12 describes three forms of castration which parallel the sexual “options” of the Pardoner: “For there are eunuchs, who were born so from their mother’s womb [intersex]: and there are eunuchs, who were made so by men [castrated men]: and there are eunuchs, who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven.” The “auto-castration,” or castration done by the self as a form of religious worship, allows us to connect the Pardoner’s character as a eunuch to the Pardoner’s character as a corrupt member of the religious order. By doing so, we can further unravel Chaucer’s use of castration and gender ambiguity in the text. However, castration as a religious practice itself had paradoxical effects on society: while it supported the Christian Church’s desire for sexual purity and chastity among the members, it was often argued against as it provided a “cheap fix” to the problem of sexual arousal. Ruth Mazo Karras states that castrating oneself “physically took a one-time great act of will, but, once it was done, there was no further struggle against temptation, whereas castrating oneself metaphorically was a constant battle” (*Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, pg. 39), and therefore castration bypassed all of the spiritual discipline which sexual purity was built upon. This conflict of ideas places religious castration in a difficult position, as for some it entails a method of achieving spiritual elevation within the church, while at the same time was a reason for expulsion from the church and ban from certain sacred locations or activities. In other cases, auto-castration within the Church was sometimes used to defend the Church against accusations of sexual immorality. This use of

religious castration seems to be pointed at and utilized by Chaucer in his conception of the Pardoner. Although the Church may have castrated the Pardoner, he still represents a grotesque and corrupt side of the Church. Despite his supposed sexual purity, Chaucer points out his immense and harmful greed, which motivates the exploitation of everyone he preaches to, including the pilgrims and the reader. Chaucer utilizes the ambiguity of the gender spectrum and castration during the Medieval period to align the Pardoner more closely with the stereotypes and behaviors of women in order to poke fun at and critique the Church. Rather than curing the Pardoner of his sexual desire, the Church, through their sexual repression, has instead created a monster far more evil, one which is no longer accepted as a man in society, and uses money to compensate for that fact.

Chaucer implies a metaphorical (and perhaps physical) castration of the Pardoner, done so by his involvement in the Church, and the Church's search for sexual purity and discipline. However, in curing the Pardoner of his sexual desire, his "castration" turns the Pardoner into something non-male. He is characterized with the stereotypes of women and queer individuals, and is, even on this pilgrimage, isolated and ostracized. In a patriarchal society which values masculinity, potency, and male genitalia more than almost anything else, the Pardoner, in his castration, loses everything which matters socially. The only thing which might "compensate" for his loss of privilege and respect would be replacing his masculine value in society with monetary value, which he readily does. Compensation for masculinity with wealth is a concept which is familiar, even in modernity. A large, expensive car might be considered "compensating for something," or flaunting wealth in the pursuit of sexual achievement. In this way, the Pardoner is then likened to something feminine, dangerous, and emasculating, as he might be

considered a “gold digger.” “Penetration symbolizes power. For men of one group to have sex with women of another is an assertion of power over the entire group” (Karras). This is depicted best in the Miller’s tale, which involves several cases of emasculation shown through three different forms. The first, being the cuckoldry practiced when Nicholas has sex with John’s wife Allison. This is the “classic” version of emasculation, which is described as Karras’s definition of “penetration.” The second is the emasculation of Absolon, which is done through the form of humiliation when he is tricked into being on the wrong end of a practical joke. The third emasculation happens against Nicholas, whom the reader is more or less meant to “root for” throughout the story. His emasculation takes the form of literal penetration and differs from Karras’s classic definition. Rather than being metaphorically emasculated through sex with women of his group or household, Absolon literally penetrates Nicholas with a hot iron, a symbolic representation of Absolon’s phallus. These instances of emasculation, done through one of the more comedic stories in *The Canterbury Tales*, show the reader Chaucer’s versions of emasculation as he sees them, the different ways that we exert power over each other. This happens again in the Wife of Bath’s tale, in which we see another method of dominating over others through the form of marriage and sex. The Wife of Bath very explicitly argues for the emasculation of men in the service of women and wives, where we get a new interpretation of “emasculation” as done by a female person, without the use of a phallus or penetration. The Pardoner is just another one of Chaucer’s experiments with power and how we wield it against others. Rather than using sex or symbolic phalluses, the Pardoner is likened to the Wife of Bath and uses her very feminine method of manipulation to extort people. He emasculates others and gains back a sense of masculine power by manipulating others into giving him money.

This sense of emasculation is most explicit during the argument between the Host and the Pardoner in the aftermath of his tale. After he finishes his story, the Pardoner asks the Host to “unbokel thy purs” in order to get money out and hand it to him. This evokes a connection to “gold digging” and emasculation, as the money, in the “purs” or symbolic scrotum, becomes a symbolic form of semen or liquid masculinity. This reiterates ancient ideas of *menos* as used in Ancient Greek writings like Hippocrates’s *Diseases of Women I. Menos*, or “life force,” is vital for human life and takes the form of different bodily fluids like blood, bile, urine, water, and semen. *Menos*, while naturally occurring in male bodies, provides masculinity or “manly-excellence,” but must be obtained regularly by women through sexual intercourse with men. This concept of *menos* reasserts the notion pushed by the Galenic One-Sex Model that women are “incomplete” or dependent on men. The Pardoner therefore attempting to take *menos* or semen in the form of money from the Host’s “purs” or testicles aligns him not only with women but creates a new form of emasculation which had not been touched on before. The “penetration” in this case happens in the metaphorical sex that happens between the Pardoner and the Host in the exchange of money. Rather than emasculating the Host by penetrating him, the Pardoner emasculates by being penetrated (given *menos*), the same way Allison, the Wife of Bath, or the modern “gold digger” does. This attempt at emasculation is why the Host becomes so enraged. Fittingly, he responds in a way that reinforces this interpretation; he responds to the attempted metaphorical emasculation with a threat of literal emasculation: “I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond/ In stede of relikes or of seintuarie./ Lat cutte hem of!” (952-4). This, again, is an instance of paradoxical ironic humor, as the Host threatens to cut off testicles which

Chaucer has convinced the reader have already been cut off, or may never have existed in the first place.

With the character of the Pardoner, Chaucer makes an argument against the Church— not only accusing them of manipulation and highway robbery, but attributing this corrupt behavior to the requirement of spiritual purity which the Church imposes upon society. Enforced sexual repression, conceptualized through the Pardoner's castration, emasculates and feminizes men within the Church, leading them to exploit and emasculate others in order to regain a sense of masculine privilege in a patriarchal society. In the Pardoner's tale, there are many different motifs and allusions working simultaneously to give us a sense of distrust and complexity to the Pardoner's character. Whilst trying to make us laugh, Chaucer is also using these ironic paradoxes to critique structures of Medieval society revolving around money, religion, and power. The curious case of the Pardoner's testicles are just another complexity that makes up the entirety of the character. Through his metaphorical and implied lack of testicles, we as readers can begin to uncover the rest of the Pardoner as he would have been received by a Medieval audience: as a eunuch, he brings forth questions of gender and sex and challenges notions of binary simply by existing; as eunuch in the Church, he raises questions about the priority of sexual purity within the Church, and how it may negatively affect those who exist in it; by replacing his testicles with fake relics and money, the Pardoner critiques the Church's manipulation and greed, and questions the legitimacy of organized religion itself; by symbolically emasculating others through scam, he makes the connection between power, money, and masculinity, and points out the inherent human need for masculine power and privilege in a patriarchal society. With this interpretation, Chaucer presents a use of gender in

character development which highlights human moral failings. However, it is important to note that Chaucer does not develop a gender-ambiguous character which critiques the concept of intersexuality or non-binary genders, but instead critiques the binary One-Sex Model through showing the reader a character which subscribes to the notions of the spectrum while falling outside of the intended take-away from the model itself. While Chaucer does not argue against the existence of non-binary people, he does seem to turn them into a joke– the Pardoner, not only an “evil” character, but an unattractive one, seems to represent the fear surrounding emasculation and intersexuality. In his feminization, he is “othered,” and corrupted. Though Chaucer’s use of gender in the Pardoner seems to challenge the gender binary, it also seems to ostracize everything that is outside of the binary. The Pardoner is not simply a non-binary person, he is a man who has been robbed of his masculinity, and embarks on a vengeful quest to regain it. Not only is the Pardoner the villain, he is the jester as well. Chaucer therefore takes a broad stroke in challenging the gender binary whilst also using stereotypes which reinforce the binary and turn intersexuality and gender fluidity into something bad and grotesque. While Chaucer may simply be adhering and taking advantage of current Medieval ideas, the modern reader can quickly recognize that he is in fact making his own assertions about gender: while gender fluidity does exist, the gender binary– and specifically maleness– is the ideal, and anything outside of that is something to be threatened by.

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