

# THE HOMOSEXUAL PARDONER and Chaucer's Social Tolerance

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A century and more ago George Lyman Kittredge proclaimed the Pardoner in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to be a lost soul on the pilgrimage to Canterbury. Assuming that Chaucer held his own values, Kittredge amply displayed the prevailing critical interest in psychologically complex characters, but not a hint of a prevailing fear of the queer that erupted in Chaucer criticism in the twentieth century. The Pardoner's fortunes have varied since then, with historicist arguments about whether he is to be considered homosexual, and what "homosexual" as a label would mean when applied anachronistically to Chaucer's social context. But also the discussion has focussed on the relationship between the Pardoner's manifest immorality as an ecclesiastical conman and his sexual indeterminism: what does Chaucer mean by putting these things together? One thing for certain: the Pardoner has something to say. In the following essay, Roisin Boyle weighs the evidence for the complex question about the complex Pardoner, how culpable is Chaucer, within the limits of his own culture, of homophobia? In Boyle's nuanced reading, neither character nor author can be simply glorified or simply damned.

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**T**he Narrator's description of the puzzling Pardoner in the General Prologue draws attention to the

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man's questionable sexuality: for example, what can it mean when he calls the Pardoner a female horse? Upon analysis, it can be established that the Pardoner is in fact homosexual. He is subject to degrees of homophobia often founded on religious doctrine, not the least of which is internalized hatred. Chaucer, however, is different than some of his contemporaries in terms of social tolerance, and uses this example of homosexuality to suggest that such sexual deviance does not define the man.

In the General Prologue, Chaucer's Pardoner is described as being feminine in appearance:

This Pardoner hadde heer as yellow as wex,  
But smothe it heeng as dooth a strike of flex.  
By ounces henge hise lokkes that he hadde,  
And therwith he hise shuldres overspradde.  
[ . . . ]

A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot.  
No berd hadde he, ne never sholde have:  
As smothe it was as it were late [y]shave.  
I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare.

(*CT I*, 675-678, 688-691)

This final line is the portion of the text that calls particular attention to the Pardoner's ambiguous sexuality: the line "I trowe he were

a geldyng or a mare” lends itself to three main interpretations: the Pardoner is a hermaphrodite, a eunuch, or a homosexual.

While the possibility that the Pardoner is a hermaphrodite has been considered, it has found less support from the academic community than the other theories. For example, Cooper dismissively mentions hermaphroditism in *Oxford guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, saying only, “the hare to which [the Pardoner] is compared was supposedly hermaphrodite” (Cooper 59). For this reason, hermaphroditism seems to be the least likely solution to the puzzle to the Pardoner’s sexuality, and there will be no further discussion of it in this essay.

The word “geldyng” could be literal or metaphorical: in either case, the Pardoner has no manhood. This could apply to either a eunuch or a homosexual. Some scholars, such as Walter Curry, favour the theory of eunuchry, supporting it using the medieval science of physiognomy (the study of how facial and bodily characteristics are related to character). One of Curry’s examples is that the Pardoner’s “long, stringy yellow hair [ . . . ] indicates impotence and lack of manhood” (596). Curry concludes that the Pardoner

“carries upon his body and has stamped upon his mind and character the marks of what is well known to the medieval physiognomists as a *eunuchus ex nativitate*” (597).

Yet Helen Cooper, a more modern scholar, labels the physiognomic data “dubious” (59). Moreover, even if Chaucer did intend to use physiognomy to develop the character of the Pardoner, the physiognomic descriptions do not eliminate the possibility that the Pardoner is a homosexual. As Monica McAlpine points out, “homosexuality was long confused with eunuchry” (12).

Following the line of thought suggestive of homosexuality, Cooper list the hints found in the opening lines that imply homosexuality rather than eunuchry:

the love song [the Pardoner] sings with the Summoner, the latter’s rousing bass chorus taken through a double series of puns-  
‘bourdon’ meaning not only chorus but staff, staff being a phallic image. (59)

Furthermore, homosexuality lends itself well to the glossing of the slippery term “mare”. Lee Patterson writes, “the narrator’s other insult – that the Pardoner is a mare – seems to imply that he is the passive member in a homosexual

relation" (661). Homosexuality, therefore, seems to be the most plausible answer to the question of the Pardoner's sexuality. McAlpine confirms this, stating that,

while the categories "effeminate," "hermaphrodite," and "eunuch" can each account for some of the Pardoner's characteristics, only the category "homosexual" can account for all of them. (13)

Assuming the Pardoner's homosexuality, an association of the Pardoner's effeminate physical appearance with certain negative preconceptions of homosexuality accounts for the pilgrims' reaction when the Pardoner is asked to tell a "myrie tale" (*CT VI*, 316): "'Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye'" (*CT VI*, 324). They are expecting a dirty, impudent story, one to which they would rather not listen. This is but one example of homophobia in the text: homosexuality is considered a grave sin, and the pilgrims approach the homosexual with discomfort. McAlpine gives reason for the relative tameness of this discomfort to be of interest:

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In the *Canterbury Tales* the Pardoner's behavior and the reactions of the other pilgrims reflect a setting in which a homosexual person, while possibly aware of the severe penalties sometimes inflicted on his kind, did not feel a proximate fear for his safety [ . . . ] what the Pardoner must confront in others is not their outright condemnation of him but their discomfiture, with its varying degrees of amusement, fear, sympathy, disgust, and ambiguous tolerance. (15)

Fortunately for the Pardoner, the people he meets on a day-to-day basis (like the other pilgrims) are not especially hostile to homosexuals. Yet the "severe penalties" McAlpine mentions lead to recognition of the fact that, even within the context of *The Canterbury Tales*, there are degrees of realistic homophobia. For example, in calling homosexuality "thilke abhomynable synne" in the Parson's Tale (CT X 910), the Parson is showcasing the more intense homophobic side. These degrees of realistic homophobia are in place to be questioned by Chaucer, who did not believe something such as homosexuality meant a man could do no good.

Homosexuality, of course, is not a modern concept. While it is impossible to know exactly how common homosexuality

was in the fourteenth century, Arno Karlen notes that: "Around the end of the Middle Ages [ . . . ] Salimbene di Adamo wrote that homosexuality was common in his day" (51). In fact, Karlen remarks upon an

apparent increase in homosexuality [ . . . ] [but] the fact that homosexuality and prostitution were increasingly open does not mean that they were tolerated. (47)

Karlen pins the upsurge in homosexuality largely on urbanization, but forbearance of sexual deviance did not grow along with the cities. While homosexuals have been commonplace and widely accepted in some cultures, such as that of ancient Greece, homophobia was a reality in Chaucer's lifetime and was heavily associated with the Church:

We have come to recognize that there was a relative tolerance in Europe toward same-sex relationships until the eleventh century and then, coincident with other forms of social control, including the imposition of clerical celibacy, a growing repressiveness. (Patterson 662)

It can be stated quite certainly, therefore, that the Church played a role in creating and in

perpetuating homophobia.

The Church's distaste for same-sex couplings is based largely on Biblical interpretation. For example, the Bible commands: "Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind, because it is an abomination" (*Douay-Rheims Bible*, Leviticus 18.22). Such homophobic notions in the Church were encouraged by infamous figures such as St. Thomas Aquinas, who "considered same-sex relations to be a vice against nature and said so plainly" (Eugene Rogers 30). Generally, "In the medieval period [ . . . ] the only appropriate sexual activity was for the procreation of children. In such a world view, homosexual behaviour was forbidden" (Harry Woggon 161).

It is clear that the Church in medieval England did not favor homosexuality. Beyond simple religious indoctrination, however, the Church had power: "in the Middle Ages, as we know, the Church was in harmony with the dominant mores and most other institutions" (Karlen 62). These means that the Church had a great deal of authority, and was responsible for punishing certain crimes: "Homosexuality, like heresy, was a religious offence, until Henry VIII took over the church and made sodomy a



separate civil infraction" (Berliner 138). Before that, homosexual acts were subject to canon law: "Homosexuality was investigated by ecclesiastical courts [ . . . ] [by the end of the] twelfth century - homosexuality had already been designated 'the nameless crime not fit to be named by Christians, to be punished by burning, drowning, hanging or being buried alive'" (Karlen 49).

Chaucer, however, was relatively progressive compared to the Church. He did not wish to simply condemn the Pardoner, to reduce him to nothing but a part of what he is. One example of his relative tolerance is found in his use of the word "mare," which "avoids provoking an immediate response of condemnation" (McAlpine 11). There was no word explicitly for "homosexual" in the Middle Ages. "Homosexual" did not exist as a term until 1869 (McAlpine 11). Chaucer had to find another way to describe the Pardoner's sexuality. However, he could have referenced homosexuality "by making a biblical reference (to sodomites) [ . . . ] or a philosophical reference (to sinners against nature)" (McAlpine 11). He could equally have used again the term employed in the Parson's tale: "thilke abhomynable synne" (*CT* X, 910). These

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expressions seem to have very negative connotations, and Chaucer chose not to use them. McAlpine sums up Chaucer's tolerance with respect to the Pardoner's homosexuality:

Any physical acts in which the Pardoner expressed his homosexuality would be viewed by the medieval church as sinful, and Chaucer does not challenge this teaching. But he does challenge the belief that such sins are uniquely abhorrent, poisoning the whole character and extirpating all good and all potential for good. [ . . . ] Because the facts about the Pardoner's sexuality are not given but must be established, readers cannot easily retreat into one-dimensional judgments of this pilgrim; they are forced to consider the whole character of the pardoner in a way that should in turn contribute to a nonreductive appreciation of his sexuality and its spiritual implications. (18)

It seems to be Chaucer's view, therefore, that the Pardoner should not be reduced to his sexuality. This is further credited by the fact that the Narrator takes time to note the Pardoner's talents:

But trewely, to tellen atte laste,  
He was in chirche a noble ecclesiaste.  
Wel koude he rede a lessoun or a storie.  
But alderbest he song an offertorie,

For wel he wiste whan that song was songe,  
He moste preche and wel affile his tonge.  
(CT I, 707-712)

This idea of Chaucer's tolerance is nicely wrapped up in the final portion of the Pardoner's Tale, when the Knight relieves the tensions between the Pardoner and Harry by making them kiss in mutual tolerance: "Anon they kiste and ryden forth hir weye" (CT VI, 968).

As Chaucer did not want to reduce the Pardoner, the Pardoner seems to be one of the most psychologically complex characters in *The Canterbury Tales*. He is therefore one of the most enigmatic: he tries to convince the pilgrims to venerate the relics he carries, despite having already admitted they are fake; he tells a tale about the tavern sins while he sits in a tavern, drinking; his story is moral, while he is not. He is a man of incongruities and falsehoods. Chaucer is too competent a poet for these inconsistencies to be passed off as oversights. They say something about his character. Specifically, this idea of incongruity responds to the argument that the fact that the Pardoner is "about to wedde a wyf" (CT III, 166) and that he has a "joly wenche in every

toun" (*CT III*, 453) conflicts with the theory of the Pardoner's homosexuality. On the contrary, these statements are more of a cover, as the Pardoner may not in fact be happy with his sexual status.

McAlpine supports this theory, suggesting that the Pardoner, whose profession serves the Church, has internalized the homophobic hatred. The Pardoner refers to himself as a "ful vicious man" (*CT III*, 459). She says that the Pardoner hopes "the forgiveness he dispenses will magically flow back to cleanse himself" (McAlpine 16). This theory ties in nicely with the mysterious figure of the Old Man in *The Pardoner's Tale*: Patterson reads "the Old Man as a figure for the Pardoner's own despair; that condition is typically represented in medieval writing as always dying but never dead" (657).

By writing a Pardoner who cannot be summed up by his initially unclear homosexuality and who has internalized the homophobic hatred propagated by the Church, Chaucer forces his audience to rethink some of its prejudicial assumptions. While Chaucer is not pro-homosexual, there is evidence to suggest that he would not simply condemn the Pardoner for his sexuality. He would rather insist upon evaluating the man as a whole, as

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each pilgrim would deserve.

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