The Pardoner’s Passing and How It Matters
Gender, Relics and Speech Acts

Alex da Costa

Abstract
This article looks again at the figure of the Pardoner in the Canterbury Tales and reconsiders the possibility that ‘he’ is a woman passing as a man. The importance of such a reading is revealed by exploring the anxieties this raises over the relationship between outward appearance and inner substance or reality, and demonstrating parallels with medieval anxieties over the authenticity of relics and the validity of religious speech acts, including those involved in the transubstantiation of the elements of the Eucharist.

Keywords: gender, oaths, Pardoner, relics, speech acts, transubstantiation

thise cookes, how they stampe, and streyne, and grynde,
and turnen substaunce into accident...
—‘Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale’, ll. 538–539

The question of what is ‘accident’ and what is ‘substaunce’ whispers through the ‘Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale’. Anxieties about the capacity for outward appearance or declaration to depart from underlying reality cluster around the figure of the Pardoner, relics and oaths. ‘Chaucer’, the narrator, invites the reader to suspect that the Pardoner’s clothes conceal an anomalous body in the General Prologue; the Pardoner teases his pilgrim audience with the thought that his (and others’) gaudily displayed relics are mere animal bones; and greed makes a mockery of the idea that the three rioters’ fraternal oaths create a lasting bond between them. Chaucer’s audience is repeatedly put in a position where they must doubt what is presented or promised, even as others continue gaily to trust. The narrator questions the Pardoner’s gender as an aside to the audience rather than voicing his doubt to
his supposed fellow pilgrims. The audience listens as the Pardoner shares the tricks of his trade with his companions, who nevertheless travel onward, obstinately oblivious to the implications for their own pilgrimage. *Both* audiences (within and outside the poem) enjoy the privileged knowledge of the rioters’ treacherous manoeuvring even as each continues to believe that, despite their oath breaking, they are protected by the others’ word. The suppression of doubt by the narrator, the pilgrims and the rioters is thus as much at the heart of this text as the anxiety about what is real.

It is ironic then that critics have been ignoring the particular doubt the narrator raises over the figure of the Pardoner when he says ‘I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare’ (l. 691). Even as the Pardoner has been embraced as ‘a complicated sort of gay “ancestor”’ by first gay and lesbian studies and later by queer theorists, just one critic has been prepared to doubt his essential masculinity, though several have accepted his masculinity as neutered or castrated.1 ‘Over the years, he has been identified variously as “feminoid”, as a literal or metaphorical eunuch, as a hermaphrodite, as “homosexual” or “gay”, as a “normal” (i.e. “heterosexual”) man, etc.’2 The question of whether the Pardoner is a ‘mare’, a woman passing as a man,3 was thus ignored, despite being the most straightforward gloss, until Jeffrey Rayner Myers ventured to suggest in 2000 that ‘this sexually ambiguous character might be a woman’.4 In this article, I want to add further support to Myers’ assertion and to suggest that understanding it in these terms allows a parallel to emerge between the figure of the Pardoner, relics and oaths, bringing out a narrative interest across General Prologue, Prologue and Tale in accident and substance, doubt and complicity.

The primary, and now overly familiar, reason for the Pardoner being claimed as that ‘complicated sort of gay “ancestor”’ lies in the description of the Pardoner in the General Prologue:

A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot.  
No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have,  
As smothe it was as it were late shave.  
I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare. (ll. 688–691)

It was Walter Curry in 1919 who suggested that ‘gelding’ should be taken as meaning ‘eunuch’, and Robert Miller built on this in 1955 by suggesting that eunuchry was associated with sin in the Middle Ages, symbolizing a man ‘sterile in good works, impotent to produce spiritual fruit’.5 Monica McAlpine then suggested that ‘mare’ should be understood as meaning ‘effeminate male’ and, by association, ‘a
homosexual’. This meaning then became fossilized in the *Riverside Chaucer*’s gloss of l. 691, ‘a eunuch or a homosexual’, and has led to ‘growing critical interest in the Pardoner as queer’.7

Putting aside the problematic assumptions about homosexuals and the anachronistic mapping of modern concepts of sexuality onto the medieval period that underlie the readings of the Pardoner as gay – which have been dealt with comprehensively by others – even a moment of close reading reveals the jarring slips that occurred during this accretive interpretative process.8 One word, *gelding*, was interpreted as a straightforward simile to mean either a congenital eunuch or a castrated man; the other word, *mare*, was interpreted in a convoluted fashion to mean a man who desires other men. Yet, while there are many instances in the *Middle English Dictionary* of *gelding* being used literally to mean ‘a gelded horse’ and euphemistically ‘a castrated man’, the only recorded uses of *mare* are concerned with horses and female promiscuity.9 As Myers puts it, this is ‘one of the oddest misinterpretations ... the term for a female horse, has, with no compelling justification, been interpreted for the last fifty years as meaning the Pardoner might be a homosexual instead of the more obvious implication that “he” might be a “she”’.10 In other words, the narrator suggests that the Pardoner might be a eunuch or a woman passing as a man, successfully enough but not faultlessly enough to allay entirely the narrator’s suspicion of the high voice and lack of beard.

Yet the narrator’s assertion that the Pardoner ‘were a geldyng or a mare’ has only been read in terms of effeminate or impaired masculinity, and once rather confusingly as a ‘testicular pseudo-hermaphrodite of the feminine type’.11 This has provoked readings, such as Carolyn Dinshaw’s ‘eunuch hermeneutics’, that have emphasized lack.12 As she put it, ‘constituted by absence, he [the Pardoner] sets his listeners to thinking about Presence, about radical Being in which there is no lack and in which all difference and division are obviated’.13 Following a similar vein, Robert Sturges argues that ‘neither clearly male nor clearly female, indeterminate in gender and erotic practice as well as anatomical makeup, his fragmented gender identity and possibly dismembered body are without authority’.14 While these critical readings offer much, they only speak to one part of the ‘gelding or a mare’ line, the part that implies a neutered masculinity.

This critical lacuna is all the more puzzling given that when Chaucer was writing there were several texts in which writers presented
women passing as men. The widely circulated *Gilte Legende* included two saints’ lives in which a female dresses, lives and passes as male, without suspicion, until her death. Gower included the legend of Iphis and Achilles’ successful disguise as a maid in the *Confessio Amantis*. There were also Old French texts with similar episodes, such as *Yde et Olive* and the *Roman de Silence*, while Boccaccio included the tale of Pope Joan in *De mulieribus claris*, as well as the stories of a female disguised as an abbot and a steward in the *Decameron* (Day II, Tales III and IX). Myers alludes to ‘a tradition of cross-dressing women’ in his article as part of Chaucer’s cultural milieu, but the term ‘cross-dressing’ obscures the extent to which these texts illustrate a medieval understanding that gender could be performed and that someone could ‘pass’ for a different gender. To cross-dress means to wear the clothes of the ‘opposite’ gender without necessarily attempting or having the ability to pass, and can imply just the opposite. For instance, when Sir Lancelot dresses as a maid to joust with Sir Dinadan in the *Morte Darthur*, the ruse is immediately apparent: as soon as Sir Dinadan sees ‘a maner of a damesell, he dradde perellys lest hit sholde be Sir Launcelot disgysed’. As Judith Butler puts it in a discussion of drag:

> If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the ‘reality’ of gender: the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks ‘reality’, and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance … we think we know what the reality is, and take the secondary appearance of gender to be mere artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion.

In contrast, when someone passes, ‘it is no longer possible to derive a judgement about stable anatomy from the clothes that cover and articulate the body’. Although ‘passing’ is a modern term, these examples suggest that the underlying notion that someone might be accepted as another gender was familiar to Chaucer’s contemporaries and, in particular, the idea that a woman might successfully pass as a man. In such texts, the only people who see through the gender presentation of the figure concerned are the narrator and the reader, who ‘know’ the anatomy beneath the clothing.

For instance, in Book IV of the *Confessio Amantis*, Gower retells the Ovidian tale of Iphis and Ianthe. The reader is told that King Ligdus had promised to kill any girls his wife bore, and that when she ‘hadde a dowhter’ (l. 456) she said instead that ‘it were a Sone’ and ‘the fader was mad so to wene’ (ll. 459–461). This Iphis is accordingly ‘clothed and arrayed so / Riht as a kings sone scholde’ (ll. 464–465) and manages to
pass so successfully as male that she is married to Ianthe, ‘a Duckes dowhter’ (l. 469). Although Gower’s efficient tale leaves much unsaid, the implication is that beyond the queen’s intimate circle, Iphis passes as male in both the king’s and the duke’s households. In Book V, Gower gives us a similar story in the form of the tale of Achilles and Deidamia, but here it is a son who passes as female and the idea of passing is unpacked further. The reader is told that his mother, Thetis, brings him up as a girl in order to protect him. It is not simply clothing that makes Achilles ‘seme a pure maid’ (l. 3009), but his ‘sobre and goodli contenance’ (l. 2964), his ‘vois’ and his ‘pas’ (l. 3151), which he has been ‘tawht’ with ‘gret diligence’ (ll. 3003–3004). Gower describes Thetis teaching him how ‘He scholde his wommanhiede avance’ (l. 3006) and so suggests that Achilles’ femininity is as much ‘his’ as any claim to masculinity, and that it might be developed.

More relevant to our purpose, the popular Gilte Legende acquainted many devout, late medieval readers with the lives of St Marina and St Theodora, both of whom were supposed to have lived for a substantial period as monks, only being discovered to have female bodies at their deaths. ‘The Liff of Seint Maurine’ tells the story of a ‘noble virgine’ who enters a monastery with her father after the death of her mother, the father changing her clothing ‘so that men wende that she hadde be his sone’. The reader is told that after many years the father died, but not before swearing Maurine to continued secrecy about her sex and so she ‘contynued her lyff as an holy monke vnknouynge to alle creatures that she was a woman’ (p. 371). Although the text emphasizes only that Maurine dressed as a monk, the performance of masculinity is so convincing that the abbot believes a local woman’s claim that ‘the monke Maryn … hadde gote her withe childe’ (p. 372) and is only disabused of this notion after Maurine dies and the monks tasked with washing the body ‘perceyued that she was a woman’ (p. 372). The ‘Liff of Seint Theodore’ is very similar in many respects. In this life, there is a prelude in which Theodore commits adultery before repenting so much that ‘she toke the clothinge of a man and wente to a chirche of monkes … and required that she might be receyued withe the monkes’ (p. 458). In this Life, it is only supernatural beings that can see through the outward display of masculinity and the ‘fend’ in particular who sees her as a ‘wicked woman … and avouterere’ (p. 458). Even her abandoned husband, who passes near her in town and whom she greets, does not recognize her as female until an angel informs him ‘that … was thi wiff’ (p. 458).
While St Maurine and Theodore are portrayed as interacting with relatively few people, and then only on monastic business, enclosed within their monasteries and immediate surrounds, Boccaccio offers the tale of ‘de Iohanna anglica papa’ or Pope Joan in De mulieribus claris in which a woman passes as a male ecclesiast within a much wider world. He begins by saying that ‘from her name John [she] would seem to be a man, but in reality she was a woman’ and outlines how, after falling in love, she fled her father’s house, changed her name and dressed as a young man, following him to England where she was ‘universally taken for a cleric’ (‘clericus ex[is]timatus ab omnibus’). 21 He goes on to tell how she discovered a love of learning after her lover died, and progressed through the clerical ranks until she became pope. She was only discovered when – having taken another lover after a long period of virtue – she gave birth in the street during a procession for the Rogation Days, celebrated on 25 April. Boccaccio emphasizes throughout the short tale that Joan ‘was believed by everyone to be a man’ (‘homo ab omnibus creditus’, p. 439) and that it was only through childbirth that she revealed ‘how long she had deceived everyone except her lover’ (‘enixa publice patuit qua fraude tam diu, preter amasium, ceteros decepisset homines’, p. 441). Moreover, he stresses that she was famous both before and after the deception was revealed. While she was thought to be a man, through her ‘outstanding virtue and holiness’ (‘singulare honestate ac sanctitate’, p. 439) she ‘became widely known’ (‘ideo notus a multis’, p. 439), and since her discovery, all popes ‘condemn her foul actions and perpetuate her infamy’ (‘detestandam spurcitiem et nominis continuandam memoriam’, p. 441). In ‘de Iohanna anglica papa’, Chaucer would have found all the inspiration he needed for the Pardoner in the form of an English woman passing not just as a man, but as the highest male ecclesiast of them all on a religious procession in April. 

All these medieval tales of passing share an interest in uncovering what lies beneath the clothes of their protagonists, as if the imagined physical body offers a point of stable truth if only the gait, mannerisms and voice of gender expression can be put aside by stripping and stilling the body, either in bed or in death. Gower dwells on the image of Iphis and Ianthe ‘liggende abedde upon a nyht … so that thei use / Thing which to hem was al unknowe’ (ll. 475–479), the last phrase suggesting both virginal exploration and the use of genitals – like the Wife of Bath’s ‘thynges smale’ (l. 121). The Gilte Legende displays Maurine’s body first to the brethren who ‘perceyued that she was a woman’ (p. 372) and then
to the abbot, who ‘seigh that she was a woman’ (p. 373), and Theodore is similarly seen first by the abbot who ‘uncovered her and fonde her a woman’ (p. 460) and then by the brethren who ‘toke awaye the clothe and sayen that she was a woman’ (p. 461). Even more graphically, Boccaccio has Pope Joan give birth in public. Such moments of revealing work to reassure the reader that no matter how successful these women’s performance of masculinity is, they remain female bodied.

Diane Watt argues that the reason why Gower doesn’t condemn Iphis for living as a king’s son is that, because ‘women were perceived to be inferior to men, such a transformation from female to male could only be seen as an improvement, a change from an imperfect state to a perfect one; it could bestow on woman a potency she would otherwise lack’. We could equally apply this to Saints Maurine and Theodore, but this does not seem to explain the need to emphasize these figures’ naked bodies. Rather, there seems to be a parallel here with the way in which the subversive potential of men performing femininity is contained by ultimately emphasizing the performers’ masculinity. For example, in the Confessio Amantis, Thetis takes the decision to disguise her son, not Achilles himself; he is referred to throughout by male pronouns; he uses his disguise to gain sexual advantage with a woman; and his male, heroic future is never in doubt. In another example, the Morte Darthur, Lancelot disguises himself as a maiden only so that he can sneak up on the unsuspecting Sir Dinadan and strike him off his horse in a show of martial ability. As Ad Putter puts it, writers partly defuse these episodes’ ‘subversive potential … because of the a priori assurance that all its active participants are male anyway’. Such episodes suggest that Achilles’ and Lancelot’s performances of femininity are only transient and that masculinity has only been temporarily surrendered, containing any sense of profound upheaval. This is mirrored in the final emphasis on female bodies in the lives of Maurine, Theodore and Joan and in the tale of Iphis before Cupid’s transformation, as if it assuages an anxiety about the ability of women to lay claim to masculinity by marking its limitations. Perhaps the emphasis on the underlying feminine body is made all the more necessary because these tales are primarily about women gaining control over their lives: by passing as a king’s son, Iphis not only escapes death, but becomes heir to her father and husband to a duke’s daughter; by passing as a boy, Maurine avoids being left an orphan by her mother’s death and father’s vocation, as well as gaining a monastic home and a community; Theodore moves from being an adulterous wife to a valued member of the monastery. Most strikingly
Critical Survey, Volume 29, Number 3

of all, Joan gains ‘the Fisherman’s throne’ (‘Piscatoris cathedram’, p. 439), the ‘highest apostolate’ (‘apostolatus culmen’, p. 439). Seen in this light, the reminder of their female bodies acts as counterbalance to the image of these women passing as male, much as Iphis’s apparently thwarted desire, the unjust punishments of Maurine and Theodore and the public exposure of Joan act as a counterbalance to their social gains. The emphasis on the naked, female body narratively castrates their performance of masculinity, containing its potential to unsettle power relations.

It perhaps also reflects an anxiety about women usurping not just the outward manner of men, but their sexual role too. Although fewer than ten cases survive of prosecutions of female homosexuality from before the French Revolution for the whole of Europe, those that do suggest that the women who were punished were those who passed as men and used dildos. ‘Since the definition of sexuality was phallic, criminal lesbian sexuality could only be phallic, which led ultimately to the definition of a lesbian act punishable by death … as one in which a woman has sexual relations with another woman by means of “any material instrument”.’ For instance, Katherine Hetzeldorferin of Nuremberg was put on trial in Speyer in 1477 for presenting as a man and fabricating a dildo. She was found guilty and drowned, while her partners were banished, making a ‘distinction between the “guilty” manlike woman and her “innocent” partners’.

Such historical examples suggest that these tales’ emphasis on the uncovered, implicitly unsupplemented female body works to position their central figures’ transgression as acceptably limited by excluding the possibility – according to medieval understanding – of them engaging in sex with other women. Since they make no attempt to ‘pack’, that is, to create a phallus for themselves, their sexual ability is presented as unsatisfactory in the case of Iphis or denied in the case of the saints, where pregnancy is used as proof of sex, focusing the readers’ attention exclusively on sex that is simultaneously phallic and procreative. These women passing as men can be recuperated by divine transformation into either men or saints not just because ‘a transformation from female to male could only be seen as an improvement’ but because their bodies remain stable beneath their clothes. Iphis’s, Maurine’s and Theodore’s portrayal as needing to disguise themselves for safety’s sake – because of their social isolation or to atone for sin – and the final images of female nakedness deny that any claim is being made to full male ‘potency’.
The idea that the performance of another gender could be learned was not restricted to those retelling fabulous stories, even if it was not widespread. A contemporary of Chaucer’s, John or Eleanor Rykener, exemplified this possibility. In 1384, the aldermen of London heard the trial of ‘John Rykener, calling [himself] Eleanor’ who had been arrested ‘having been detected in women’s clothing’ having sex with John Britby, who claimed he had no idea that Eleanor was not a woman. The record states that Britby ‘accosted John Rykener, dressed up as a woman, thinking he was a woman, asking him as he would a woman if he would commit a libidinous act’. This formulation emphasizes both the outward appearance of Rykener and its persuasiveness. Moreover, the records reveal that Rykener was also ‘living and doing embroidery as a woman in Oxford’ under the tutelage of Elizabeth Brodeurer, who ‘first dressed him in women’s clothing’. As the editors of the record point out, it ‘stands practically alone for medieval England as a description of same-sex intercourse and male transvestism’, and the questions it raises about the ‘performative nature of the medieval understanding of gender and the issues of “passing” that arise from it … are a heavy burden for John/Eleanor Rykener to bear alone’. Nevertheless, in combination with Gower’s tales of Iphis and Achilles and the lives of Maurine, Theodore and Joan, it suggests that Chaucer and his contemporaries would have been acquainted with the idea of passing.

If texts in which women passed for men were familiar to Chaucer’s contemporaries, they must still have raised questions for them: did those around Iphis, Theodore or Maurine really never notice a difference, or to put it another way, how were they able to pass? In the narrator’s description of the Pardoner, Chaucer playfully suggests an answer to this conundrum: the viewer is conscious of doubt but for some reason allows himself no more than a passing speculation over the smooth face and high voice. Nevertheless, though suppressed, the doubt remains implicit in the way the narrator keeps returning his eye to the Pardoner’s lap, drawing the reader’s attention there too. Having described the Pardoner’s long, lank hair that ‘his shuldres overspradde’ (GP l. 678), he adds that ‘he’ did not wear a hood, but rather ‘it was trussed up in his walet’ (l. 681). Five lines later, the narrator again mentions ‘his walet, biforn hym in his lappe / Brettful of pardoun’ (ll. 686–687) and three lines after describing the small voice and smooth cheeks of the Pardoner, refers to how in ‘his’ pouch or ‘male he hadde a pilwe-beer’ (l. 694). Unless we are to imagine a Pardoner festooned
with bags, Chaucer seems to be giving us a wry image of a person who lacks some signs of adult masculinity with a lap or crotch area stuffed with a hood, a bundle of pardons and a pillowcase purporting to be Our Lady’s veil. Indeed, the use of the homonym ‘male’ for wallet, with its latent connotations of masculinity, seems deliberate in this context. If we approach this image from the starting point that the Pardoner has a male body, we might see this only as a joke about an emasculated man – congenital or otherwise – overcompensating for his lack. But if we approach the image open to the alternative that the Pardoner is a woman passing as a man, then there are ideas in play not only of lack but also of substitution through the allusion to packing – the stuffing of the lap or the fashioning of a ‘material instrument’ in emulation of a male crotch – and this in turn offers a rich comparison with the relics the Pardoner says ‘he’ has and the way ‘he’ uses them:

... a gobet of the seyl
That Seint Peter hadde, whan that he wente
Upon the see, til Jhesu Crist hym hente.
He hadde a croyes of latoun ful of stones,
And in a glas he hadde pigges bones. (ll. 696–700)

The narrator describes how the Pardoner offers these manufactured relics to the flock of ‘a povre person dwellynge upon lond’ (l. 701) in return for ‘moore moneye / Than that the person gat in monthes tweye’ (ll. 701–704). In this way, there are a series of substitutions: replacing the ‘povre person’, the Pardoner acts the part ‘in chirche [of] a noble ecclesiaste’ (l. 708); replacing Our Lady’s veil, ‘he’ offers a pillowcase; in place of a reliquary, ‘he’ offers pig’s bones encased in glass. However, at each stage others accept what ‘he’ offers and the claims ‘he’ makes for these objects.

Robyn Malo persuasively argues that the Pardoner is successful in cozening the parishes because of ‘his’ manipulation of relic discourse. ‘Before he brings out his supposedly holy objects, he predisposes his audience, by his rhetorical strategies, to believe the relics he will show them are real.’ However, for such strategies to be convincing there has to be a degree of cooperation on the part of the listener, and this is secured for the Pardoner by ‘his’ listeners’ desire to have access to these lesser relics. Since the most notable relics, like those at Canterbury, were ‘often jealously guarded and rarely exposed to the public-at-large’, less notable relics offered greater access to spiritual power than was usually available to the laity. As Malo argues, in the ‘Pardoner’s Tale’ the laity’s desire to have access to what is usually inaccessible encourages them
to suspend their doubts, since to admit or voice them would be to acknowledge and accept the carefully controlled distance between them and more notable sacred objects. Enquiring too deeply into the veracity of the Pardoner’s claims would also require the consistent doubter to question claims made by more reputable relic custodians, since they rely upon the same strategies. The pig’s bones and sheep’s jaw are accepted, therefore, not just because of the way they are presented, but because of the willingness of the viewers to collude with the idea that presentation verifies what lies beneath.

There is a parallel then between the experience of looking at the Pardoner and looking at a relic, where the viewer can never really know what lies beneath, whether it is a portion of a saint’s skeleton or just ‘pigges bones’. Unlike Gower or the translator of the Gilte Legende, Chaucer refuses the reader confirmation of an underlying anatomical ‘truth’. Instead of stripping the Pardoner bare, he teases the reader by successively placing more material layers over the Pardoner’s genitals, making it impossible to know what lies beneath: complete male genitals, male genitals that lack something, unadorned female genitals, or female genitals that have been supplemented? The viewer must choose whether to suppress or voice their doubt and take the attendant risk of bringing into question the very idea that the performance of gender is underpinned by the body underneath. Thus, the Pardoner’s ‘bretful’ lap offers a fuller parallel to ‘his’ cynical supplanting of parish priests and replacing of relics if both the meaning of ‘gelding’ and ‘mare’ are allowed to play, as it suggests not only a deliberate deception on the part of the Pardoner but both the complicit acceptance on the part of those looking and the motivation for it. This reading abolishes the division the narrator places between himself and those he sees as the Pardoner’s ‘apes’ (l. 706), the ‘povre person and the peple’. In recognizing that the Pardoner might be a ‘gelding or a mare’, but continuing to call the Pardoner ‘he’ and refraining from any challenge, the narrator’s response to this ambiguous gender performance echoes contemporary responses to relics and suggests why the Pardoner’s fakes are successful.

By the time, then, that Chaucer’s audience encounter the ‘Pardoner’s Tale’, they have been primed to question the relationship between surface and underlying reality. This way of thinking is further encouraged when the Pardoner begins ‘his’ preaching by helping the audience (pilgrim and real) to understand the world of the ‘younge folk that haunteden folye’ (l. 464) allegorically. They eat and drink ‘thurgh
which they doon the devel sacrificse’ (l. 469) in ‘stywes’ and ‘taernes’ (l. 465) that are the ‘develes temple’ (l. 470), and enjoy the company of ‘tombesteres ... frutesteres, / Syngeres ... baudes, wafereres’ (ll. 477–479) who are ‘the verray develes officeres’ (l. 480). Like Lot, ‘[they] nyste what [they] wroghte’ (l. 487). As part of this introduction to ‘his’ exposition on sin, the Pardoner gives a particularly gruesome example of how language (and not just actions) might be conceived of as doing more than is immediately apparent:

Hir othes been so grete and so dampnable
That it is grisly for to heere hem swere.
Oure blissed Lordes body they totere
Hem thoughte that Jewes rente hym noght ynough. (ll. 472–475)

It was a commonplace of medieval sermons that swearing by ‘Goddes precious herte ... his nales ... the blood of Crist ... Goddes armes’ (ll. 651–654) renewed Christ’s wounds. Such rebukes were meant to arouse the listener’s pity for Christ’s suffering and make them think twice about using this language by emphasizing its callousness and their lack of reflection on the purpose of the wounds they invoked through a comparison with the cruelty and lack of understanding of those who were at the Crucifixion. They were meant to convey that swearing was a sin that devalued Christ’s sacrifice by the invocation of his pains for expressive effect. As the Parson puts it: ‘semeth it that men that sweren so horribly by his [Christ’s] blessed name, that they despise it moore booldely than dide the cursed Jewes or elles the devil, that trembleth whan he heereth his name’ (l. 598). These admonishments also drew on the notion that Christ died for mankind’s sins, even those not yet born, and so every Christian’s sins were impetus to his suffering.

Yet this complex use of the physical tearing of Christ’s body as a metaphor for the way in which swearing both devalued the meaning of the Crucifixion and – through a theology of the Cross that emphasized Christ making satisfaction for man – necessitated his suffering was often flattened into the simplistic idea that swearing actually wounded Christ anew. We can see this blurring in the lines quoted above and in the ‘Parson’s Tale’ where the language hovers between the metaphorical and literal: ‘ne swereth nat so synfully in dismembrynge of Crist by soule, herte, bones, and body. For certes, it semeth that ye thynke that the cursed Jewes ne dismembre hym moore than ynoogh the precious persone of Crist, byt ye dismembre hym moore’ (ll. 590–591). But as ‘his’ Tale progresses, the Pardoner repeats this notion in a form that entirely
obscures its complexity: ‘And many a grisly ooth thanne han they sworn, / And Cristes blessed body they torente’ (ll. 708–709). In these lines, the oaths are explicitly presented as doing something, moving from being ‘grisly for to heere’ to being described simply as ‘grisly’, as if the words were material and could enact torture, becoming besmirched with the blood of Christ’s torn body. Far more is going on than is immediately apparent from the oaths’ surface meaning. By beginning the tale in this manner – with an allegorical reading of the rioters’ feasting and swearing – Chaucer focuses attention on trying to discern truth from surface detail and raises the question of what some speech does beyond communicate. This is an important prelude to a tale with oaths at its heart.

Modern linguists would describe the swearing of oaths as performative speech. John L. Austin originally defined such speech acts as meeting two conditions: ‘A. they do not “describe” or “report” or constate anything at all, are not “true or false”; and B. the uttering of the sentence is, or is part of, the doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as, or as “just”, saying something’.\(^{36}\) An example of this would be “I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth” – as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stern’.\(^{37}\) Although Chaucer lacked the theory and vocabulary of modern linguists, he seems to have been particularly intrigued by this notion that saying something did something.\(^{38}\) William Orth, for instance, has argued that ‘we can … trace a proto-awareness of performativity’ in the ‘Prioress’s Tale’ which hinges on the ‘misperformance of the Alma redemptoris mater’\(^{39}\) by the schoolboy, who sees it as merely a representative utterance – to use John Searle’s term – that praises Mary’s virtuous qualities, as opposed to a directive utterance that requests something of her.\(^{40}\) Similarly, Mary Godfrey has proposed that the old woman’s curse in the ‘Summoner’s Tale’ allowed Chaucer to explore how cursing ‘exists as not merely the speech act, the enunciated words, but at the beginning of the promised act – the outcome of the curse’.\(^{41}\)

As the Pardoner progresses in his discussion of swearing, Chaucer adds to this idea that language might do something:

Gret sweryng is a thyng abhominable,
And fals sweryng is yet moore reprevable...
‘Thou shalt swere sooth thyne othes, and nat lye,
And swere in doom and eek in rightwisnesse’;
But ydel sweryng is a cursednesse. (ll. 631–638)
The distinction made by the Pardoner is between the swearing of oaths in confirmation of a truth, which might be classed as representative utterances, and swearing casually as an expressive utterance. Although Chaucer did not have such terms available, the Pardoner makes a similar division between oaths that have a role within ‘doom and ... rightwisnesse’, and ‘gret’ or ‘ydel’ swearing. The Parson expands on this at more length: ‘Thou shalt sweren eek in doom, whan thou art constreyneyd by thy domesman to witnennes the trouthe. Eek thow shalt nat swere for envye, ne for favour, ne for meede, but for rightwisnesse, for declaracioun of it, to the worshipe of God and helpynge of thyne evene-Cristene’ (l. 594). The Pardoner’s use of Jeremiah 4.2 in lines 635–636 thus reminds the reader that well-made oaths perform a range of actions: they witness, declare justice and worship God. At the same time, the allusion to ‘fals sweryng’ introduces the notion that while oaths have this immense potential, they can also be deceptive or misleading, failing to bear true witness, establish justice or praise God. In other words, that the words of an oath are not enough to bring about such effects, or as Austin put it:

> The uttering of the words is, indeed, usually a, or even the, leading incident in the performance of the act ... but it is far from being usually, even if it is ever, the sole thing necessary if the act is to be deemed to have been performed. Speaking generally, it is always necessary that the circumstances in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, appropriate...42

Austin called these necessary circumstances ‘felicity’ conditions and went on to outline them:

(A.1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further;

(A.2) the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.

(B.1) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and

(B.2) completely.

(Γ.1) Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further

(Γ.2) must actually so conduct themselves subsequently.43
When conditions A-B are not met, he called the performative utterance a ‘misfire’, but he termed failures to meet \( \Gamma \)-conditions as ‘abuses’. So in the case of ‘fals sweryng’ there is an abuse in that the person’s thoughts or feelings do not match what they say and so they deliberately mislead their hearers. The reference to such a familiar abuse of performative language as swearing at the start of the ‘Pardoner’s Tale’, as well as other references in the tale’s opening to ‘lesynges … deceite, and cursed forswerynges’ (ll. 591–592), foregrounds an anxiety that apparently solemn performative utterances may be void.

It is not just the extended discussion of oaths that achieves this. The Pardoner also uses language associated with transubstantiation to decry cooks in the lines that began this article, bringing to the reader’s mind the declarative utterance that would usually transform the ‘substaunce’ of bread into the body of Christ, leaving only the ‘accident’ or appearance of bread. It is hard to disagree with Robinson’s assertion that ‘Chaucer can hardly have used this phrase without thinking of the current controversy about the Eucharist’, which centred in part on Wyclif’s objection that a priest does not “‘make” the body of Christ daily by saying mass … he simply “makes” in the host a sign of the Lord’. Contemporaries persuaded by Wyclif’s arguments did not see the priest’s words over the bread as performative. More importantly, even those who did believe in transubstantiation might be concerned about the words of the mass being void. As Niamh Patwell points out, the Lollard text \textit{Of Prelates} argued that ‘\( \text{Ye preiers of cursed prestis in Ye masse ben cursed of god & his angelis, & certis a prest may be so cursed 7 in heresie \( \text{\'at he make\( \) not ye sacrament}\)’. The regularity with which conservative religious writers assured their readers that, on the contrary, the spiritual state of the celebrant did not affect the efficacy of the sacrament suggests that Chaucer’s contemporaries had some notion that there were felicity conditions for the Eucharist to be transformed:

\[
\text{…What man hath takyn the ordyr of presthode, be he nevyr so vicyows a man in hys levyng, yyf he sey dewly tho wordys ovyr the bred that owr Jord Jhesu Criste seyde \( \text{… it is hys very flesch and hys blood and no material bred} \)…}
\]

Although writers such as Margery Kempe tried to assuage such doubts, even while asserting their own orthodoxy, the fact that such assertions continued to be made until the sixteenth century suggests that they were unsuccessful in convincing the laity that the only felicity conditions for the offering of the Eucharist were that there be a priest, that he say the words Christ said and that there be bread. The combination
of the references to swearing and transubstantiation at the start of the ‘Pardoner’s Tale’ focuses attention on the way in which the effect of a performative utterance might not match what it purported to do. Thus, the concerns of the General Prologue and the Pardoner’s Prologue with the ways in which surface presentation can occlude or misrepresent an underlying reality are extended to encompass language at the very start of the tale.

Indeed, the ability of performative utterances to misfire or be abused is what gives the tale its dramatic tension. The listener’s pleasure in following the tale as it unfolds lies in the heightened awareness that the rioters’ fraternal oaths do not offer them the safety they assume. The rioters in the tale make a declarative utterance when they swear to be brothers: ‘Lat ech of us holde up his hand til oother, / And ech of us bicomen otheres brother’ (ll. 697–698). In doing so, they meet Austin’s A-B conditions: the clasping of hands and the swearing of familial ties was accepted as creating a special bond between unrelated people (A.1); as men, they are appropriate people to invoke the procedure of swearing brotherhood (A.2); and they all raise their hands and swear the oath correctly (A.3–4), allowing one to assert later, ‘Thow knowest wel thou art my sworen brother’ (l. 808). Yet it swiftly becomes apparent that even if the men did initially have fraternal and loyal feelings towards each other (Γ.1), they do not conduct themselves accordingly but become murderously rivalrous (Γ.2), resulting in an abuse of the performative utterance.

There are other speech acts in the ‘Pardoner’s Tale’ that also clearly lack efficacy because the felicity conditions are not present. For instance, the old man in the tale makes three declarative utterances when he blesses the ‘riotoures’ (l. 661):

‘Now, lorde, God yow see!’ (l. 715)
‘And God be with yow, where ye go or ryde!’ (l. 748)
‘God save yow, that boghte agayn mankynde, / And yow amende!’ (ll. 766–767)

In doing so, he appears to meet at least conditions A.1 and B.1–2, competently uttering customary words of benediction appropriate for any layman to offer. However, there is a misfire because the people he blesses are inappropriate subjects for a blessing (A.2). They are immersed in the sin of gluttony, committed to doing ‘the devel sacrifise / Withinne the develes temple’ (ll. 469–470), and resolutely suppressing any contrition that would allow God to look after them, accompany them in their actions or save them from damnation. Similarly, in his final address to the listening pilgrims, the Pardoner repeats the
declarative utterance that he would use to forgive a sinner, which relies on the extra-linguistic institution of absolution: ‘I yow assoille, by myn heigh power’ (l. 913), but it is not at all clear that the Pardoner has the power to offer this under the terms of his office (A.2).50

What all these examples draw attention to is the way in which medieval life was patterned by speech acts that were meant to offer consolation through the idea that with words truth could be verified, brotherhood and loyalty created, bread transformed, blessing bestowed and absolution offered. Yet the desire for such speech acts to be effective — and their repeated citation is evidence enough of this — coexisted with a persistent anxiety that they would not be, or even could not be. In the ‘Pardoner’s Tale’, the reader is gradually made to question the potential effect of performative speech even as the tale’s figures curse, swear fraternity and bless others. In this way, the tale has the potential to reveal the reader’s own investment in, and compulsion to uphold, a belief that words can change reality because what is at stake in paying too much attention to felicity conditions is a crumbling of a whole edifice of consolation. In much the same way that the coexistence of a relic cult with doubt about the veracity of relics can only be explained in terms of complicity, a belief in the efficacy of performative speech acts is only possible by turning away from too close a consideration of their felicity conditions. Through the figure of the Pardoner and his Tale, Chaucer made his readers newly aware of the delicate balance required by their faith between opposing ideas. As Wendy Love Anderson put it, ‘otherwise unremarkable laypeople perform[ed] relatively sophisticated mental operations in order to integrate doctrinal tensions … into their daily lives’.51

To return then to the tale-teller, we can see a rich parallel in the narrator’s suppressed doubt over the Pardoner’s gender and the ways in which the congregations in the Prologue accept ‘his’ relics and the tale’s figures continue to believe in their speech acts. The narrator cannot question the Pardoner too closely because that would be to acknowledge that what is declared – either by speech or outward symbol – is no good predictor of what is true. A whole system of structuring the world by male and female is at stake in the instance of gender. Similarly, to challenge one relic’s value is to open the door to doubting all relics, along with the idea that they might not be efficacious, and to doubt the ability of solemn performative utterances to transform reality is to challenge a whole religious system. Yet to stay silent is to become complicit, whether in the masquerading of a woman within
the lower orders of the Church, the passing off of animal refuse as relics or the abuse of speech acts. In this way, the Pardoner’s passing (and others’ response to it) matters because it allows the reader to begin to think through the implications of ignored doubt long before the more serious questions of relic veracity or Eucharistic transformation are introduced. Ultimately, the reason why the Pardoner offers fellow pilgrims ‘his’ ‘relics’ even after revealing ‘his’ tricks is because ‘he’ is cynically conscious of this desire to affirm their veracity; this compulsion to avoid thinking too deeply about the relationship between reality and outward appearance. The reason why the Host reacts angrily is because in rejecting the relics, he is – against his will – forced momentarily to call into question the whole basis of the pilgrimage.

Alex da Costa is a Senior Lecturer in the English Faculty, University of Cambridge. Her research focuses on incunabula and early printed books meant for an English readership.

Notes

I am very grateful to Jacqueline Tasioulas and Lucy Allen for their comments on an earlier version of this article.


3. ‘Passing’ can be defined as ‘being accepted, or representing oneself successfully as, a member of a different ethnic, religious, or sexual group’. The first recorded use of this word with this sense was in 1926 but the meaning of the word has broadened to encompass ideas of gender and when used in such a context it means being accepted, or representing oneself successfully as, a different gender from the one assigned at birth. See ‘pass, v.’, OED Online, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/138429?rskey=Qwcr0S&result=6&isAdvanced=false (accessed 4 September 2014).


9. The *Middle English Dictionary* records two primary meanings for gelding: ‘(n.) 1(a) A gelded horse, gelding’, e.g. ‘Geldynge or gelde horse: Canterius’ (*Promptorum Parvolorum*) and ‘2(a) A castrated man, a eunuch, a naturally impotent man’, e.g. ‘Deut.23.1: A geldynge, þe ballogys brusyd or kut off, & þe yarde kut awey, shal not goon yn to þe chirche’ (*Wycliffite Bible*). For mare, it offers the meaning ‘1. A riding horse, a steed ... any beast of burden, specifically a female horse and ‘fig. a bad woman, a slut’, e.g. ‘A, Lechery, thou skallyd mare!’ (*Castle of Perseverance*).


12. Even Donald Howard, who labelled the Pardoner ‘feminoid’ and refused to ‘soften this unnerving fact into “feminine” or “effeminate”’, argued that ‘he lacks something: like a gelding the physical equipment, or like a mare the male gender-identity’. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, 344, 343.


15. I am grateful to Jacqueline Tasioulas for drawing my attention to Boccaccio’s depiction of Pope Joan.


18. Ibid., xxiv.

19. All line references are to *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G. Macaulay (Oxford, 1900).


25. Ibid., 116.
26. ‘Packing’ is a usefully succinct modern term for the strapping on of a soft or hard dildo to emulate the look of a male crotch and/or for sex.
31. Ibid., 481.
32. GP refers to the General Prologue here. Hereafter line references are incorporated in the text.
33. Melvin Storm draws attention to how the Pardoner also functions within the structure of the Canterbury Tales as a ‘meretricious surrogate for what the other pilgrims seek’. Melvin Storm, ‘The Pardoner’s Invitation: Quaestor’s Bag or Becket’s Shrine?’, PMLA 97, no. 5 (1982): 810.
35. Ibid., 86. Malo defines the types of relics: ‘Notable relics must always consist of a body part, and, as a rule, they must be bigger (and better) than their non-notable counterparts. Non-notable relics extend to include the smaller or less important body parts of saints, as well as the material objects associated with the saints’. Ibid., 85.
37. Ibid., 6. Austin later abandoned the distinction between constatives and performative utterances, since even statements perform the act of stating, in favour of a distinction between ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’ performatives.
40. John Searle refined Austin’s approach by categorizing different performative utterances: ‘1. Representatives, which commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition (paradigm cases: asserting, concluding) 2. Directives, which are attempts by the speaker to get the addressee to do something (paradigm cases: requesting, questioning) 3. Commissives, which commit the speaker to some future course of action (paradigm cases: promising, threatening, offering) 4. Expressives, which express a psychological state (paradigm cases: thanking, apologising, welcoming, congratulating) 5. Declarations, which effect immediate changes in the institutional state of affairs and which tend to rely on elaborate extra-linguistic institutions (paradigm cases: excommunicating, declaring war, christening, marrying, firing from employment)’. Geoffrey Finch, Linguistic Terms and Concepts (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 182.
42. Austin, How to Do Things, 8.
43. Ibid., 14–15.
44. Ibid., 16.
45. For the fullest discussion of these lines, see Paul Strohm, ‘Chaucer’s Lollard Joke and the Textual Unconscious’, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 17 (1995), 23–42.


47. Paraphrased by Nicholls, ‘The Pardoner’s Ale and Cake’, 502.


