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Chapter 7

“Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones”: Chaucer’s Queer Cavities

Dum tua bursa sonat, comitum te turba coronat:
exausto sonitu comes incipis esse tibi tu.

As long as your purse jingles, a crowd of friends makes a fuss over you.
When the sound is gone, you become your own friend.¹

The Pardoner, the famous extortionist of the *Canterbury Tales*, carries with him objects that promise transformation and reward. Robyn Malo has shown that when Chaucer introduces the Pardoner in the *General Prologue* he “makes it clear that we should pay special attention to the Pardoner’s relics.”² Where, though, does the Pardoner contain all of these fraudulent treasures? This essay locates the object of the “purs” as a queer cavity, a hollow orifice that hoards, swallows, and transforms all that enters its circuit. In addition to its pedestrian use as a money-sack, the image of the purse stands in as a descriptor of reproductive genitalia.³ The economic and erotic registers of Middle English words for purse – “purs,” “bagge,” “male,” “waleit” – articulate the ideological association between production and procreation.⁴ As such, the pecuniary and sexually inflected object of the purse challenges intersecting modes of social organization based on class, gender, and sexuality. For instance, the Wife of Bath’s admission

1 *Dum tua bursa sonat* in *Medieval Latin Poems of Male Love and Friendship*, trans. Thomas Stehling (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), 94–95.

2 Robyn Malo, “The Pardoner’s Relics (and Why They Matter Most),” *The Chaucer Review* 43 (2008): 82–102 at 82.

3 Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 164; and Robert S. Sturges, *Chaucer’s Pardoner and Gender Theory: Bodies of Discourse* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 15–17, 68–69. See also David Rollo, *Kiss My Relics: Hermaphroditic Fictions of the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), specifically chapter 9.

4 See various entries in *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath, 13 vols. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001), s. v. “purs(e),” “bagge,” “mal(e, (n.(2)),” and “waleit.”

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that she picks her husbands based on their “nether purs and of here cheste” (l. 44b) equivocates purses and genitalia with accumulation – it is her husbands that multiply, not her progeny.⁵ Similarly, *The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse* despairs over empty purses as sites of both economic and sexual depletion.⁶ Death is the outcome for the speaker if the purse does not become “hevy ageyn” (ll. 7, 14, 21). At the close of the poem the *Lenvoy de Chaucer* emphasizes the king’s authority “by lynne” (l. 23); the king is in a position to fill the speaker’s purse through patronage. Money, pleasure, and power materially collapse in the image of the “purse” (l. 1). In this way purses as cavities must be “hevy,” filled and stored with pleasures, to have value.

Cavities, apertures, and openings threaten to engulf the pilgrimage – and the audience – in the Canterbury project. The purses, bags, sacks, and wallets that the Pardoner bears transform their owner into a Charybdean cavity. This essay looks to the purse as a queer hole, an opening that refuses socially prescribed models of production: that is, the purse as queer cavity swallows and repurposes all that enters its domain. Purses as cavities cache what enters them, removing contents from social, economic, sexual, and spiritual circulation.⁷ Chaucer uses the image of the purse to critique models of transactional productivity. As the image of the purse shifts between its valences as sacks of money and reproductive genitalia, Chaucer asks how the items and ideologies the purse contains are exchanged and exploited by the pilgrimage on the route to Canterbury.

This project locates the “purs” as a gendered, sexualized, and economized site of social exchange. Meg Wesling’s articulation of queer value joins together psychic desire and material accumulation that establishes value through social hierarchies based on exchange, commodification, and production.⁸ By recognizing queerness in value we see that desire – socially categorized by sexuality and gender – is oriented by the dominance of materialized capital.⁹ Asking

5 All references to Chaucer’s works are cited in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987).

6 For a discussion of the kaleidoscopic nature of gender in *The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse*, see Sturges, *Chaucer’s Pardoner and Gender Theory*, 15–17.

7 I use the term “cache” throughout the essay in its sense of a hole or concave space used to hide objects as well as a phenomenon of enveloping something to obscure it from view. See the noun and verb forms of “cache” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The economic valence of caching – storing goods for later reward – makes the term a potential pun with “cashing.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition, ed. John Simpson and Edmund Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

8 Meg Wesling, “Queer Value,” *GLQ* 18.1 (2011): 107–25.

9 Wesling, “Queer Value,” 122–23. See Rosemary Hennessey, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Scattered

how value is queer, Wesling remarks that this enables us to “think about the labor of sexuality and gender identity beyond what is recognizably queer.”¹⁰ In the case of the *Canterbury Tales*, and the figure of the Pardoner in particular, the purses, bags, sacks, and wallets that the Pardoner carries and comments upon speak perhaps more overtly to his queerness than readings of his potentially castrated body attend to. The Pardoner is a self-sufficient unit and he carries his false relics, brimming bags, and compartmentalized body along for the pilgrimage to act as a site of exchange: a traveling marketplace of material, spiritual, and sexual transaction.

The Pardoner’s purse is his site of queer (re)production, the location where objects generate and transform. Purses act as self-sustained cavities that swallow and hoard the items that move beyond the threshold of the opening. Cavities have capacity to eliminate items from social, sexual, or spiritual circulation. These cavities have the ability to absorb something and transform items into something new. In this way cavities are autarkic systems that operate in a self-sufficient, closed method of (re)production. If something cannot be circulated it cannot be critiqued or obstructed, enjoyed by or benefit a larger social collective. The cavity-as-purse stands in as an antisocial, closed creative outlet that produces and reproduces without aid. Beyond its role of production, the purse also connotes excess because of its capacity to withhold things from social circulation, often to the benefit of the possessor.

Physically, the makeup of the purse-as-cavity is a “middling” phenomenon where transformative possibility happens in the middle. Glenn Burger has suggested in *Chaucer’s Queer Nation* that Chaucer’s pilgrimage to Canterbury is more a process of becoming and suggests itself through the trans-ness of travel, of telling and giving an account, of a fusion of various groups within medieval society who all repurpose, process, and produce in the “middle” of the journey to Canterbury.¹¹ To borrow Burger’s image of processing in the “middle,” we might look to the “purs” as a middling site, one that engulfs and extinguishes the tales and tellers in the Canterbury project. The materiality of the Pardoner’s position as an ecclesiastical official, a member of the pilgrimage, and a queer subject extends to the fellowship through the object of the purse. His desire to

Speculations on the Question of Value,” in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 154–75. On orientation, value, and Marx’s model of “commodity fetishism” see Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 42–43.

¹⁰ Wesling, “Queer Value,” 122.

¹¹ Glenn Burger, *Chaucer’s Queer Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xiii and chapter 5.

proffer his relics and open his purse to the pilgrims is both a method to profit and a mode of social seduction. Burger writes that the Pardoner's desire consumes "both the material resources of the communities he 'ministers' to and the symbolic capital that has accumulated within the church."¹² In a similar vein, Will Stockton measures the Pardoner's economic activity as profiteering, stating that the "Pardoner must exploit his audience's will to misperception if he wishes to profit financially from the spiritual economy – an economy that must trade in material objects, that must make something out of nothing."¹³ The Pardoner and his purse appeal to the power of the Church and operate outside of its authority. His acknowledgement of his own fraudulence shows that the Pardoner understands the ideological "impoverishment"¹⁴ of his purse and all that it represents.

This essay will first discuss how Chaucer's queer cavities operate by looking at the General Prologue portraits of the Pardoner and his riding companion, the Summoner. Reading the bodies of the pilgrims not just for purses but as purses articulates the social threat and personal possibilities that queer cavities afford. Building on the Pardoner's affiliation with purses and sacks, the second section will take on the transformative qualities of cavities as objects of exchange value. The final section asks how queer cavities are cached, enveloped, and unbuckled as forms of social and economic control. Chaucer uses the image of the cavity to consider the panic of hidden things, whether objects or abstractions. The anxiety surrounding these cavities reveals a disjunction between the Canterbury collective and the objects that initiate exchange between pilgrims. In this way, purses, cavities, and holes in the *Canterbury Tales* construct queerness through objects and the way that people relate to each other through modes of exchange. By mapping a few of Chaucer's many cavities in the Canterbury project we begin to uncover how the medieval queer is assembled, reassembled, and interchanged among a social collective.

Into the Hollow

We meet the Pardoner in pieces. Chaucer's presentation of the Pardoner's fragmented body directs the fellowship to interact with the Pardoner's cavities. The

¹² Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation*, 157.

¹³ Will Stockton, "Cynicism and the Anal Erotics of Chaucer's Pardoner," *Exemplaria* 20 (2008): 143–64 at 148.

¹⁴ Stockton, "Cynicism," 143.

Pardoner’s debut as a cavity begins with his mouth which opens “ful loude” (l. 672); he sings “Com hider, love, to me!” (l. 672). His song beckons the pilgrimage to approach him, and his open mouth threatens to swallow those who come. At work, the Pardoner sings offertories while collecting alms. He “wel affile his tonge,/ to wynne silver” (ll. 712–13), and sings “murierly and loude” (l. 714). His mouth acts as a cajoling orifice.¹⁵ Outward from the vortex of his mouth, we learn of his smooth, yellow hair that hangs like flax over his shoulders, a sign that many scholars read as a mark of his queerness.¹⁶ We are able to imagine the Pardoner’s locks because the Pardoner decidedly does not wear his hood, a cavity and container for his abundance of hair. Instead the hood is “trussed up” (l. 681) in his “walet” (ll. 681, 686) – he does this for “jolitee” (l. 680) – that lay in his lap while riding. The “walet” of the Pardoner, brimming, “bretful” (l. 687), with pardons, shows the operation of the Pardoner’s productive mode through an economically inflected object.

Imagining the Pardoner’s aesthetic as economy, the narrator measures and weighs his body into fragments.¹⁷ The Pardoner’s hair hangs like “a strike of flex” (l. 676) and it dangles “by ounces” (l. 677). His flaxen hair is so long that it envelops his shoulders, but it covers his body like cut pieces, “by colpons oon and oon” (l. 679). The Pardoner is on display and for sale. These mercantile analogies are undergirded by the narrator’s perception of the Pardoner: that he thought himself to be riding in “al of the newe jet” (l. 682). The Pardoner is a newfangled object, a novel curiosity that threatens the pilgrimage with his gadgetry. The Middle English word “jet” has the meaning of “fashion” and “new custom” as well as signifying a contrivance or device.¹⁸ In the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, for instance, when the devious canon prepares the crucible to dupe the priest, the “crosselet” (l. 1276) is referred to as a “false jet” (l. 1277). It is significant that the

¹⁵ On the Pardoner and the Orphean tradition see Michael A. Calabrese, “‘Make a Mark That Shows’: Orphean Song, Orphean Sexuality, and the Exile of Chaucer’s Pardoner,” *Viator* 24 (1993): 269–86; and see Sturges, *Chaucer’s Pardoner and Gender Theory*, 107–22.

¹⁶ For an overview of scholarship on the Pardoner’s sexuality and gender, see Sturges, *Chaucer’s Pardoner and Gender Theory*, 21–62. Scholarship that explicitly takes on the Pardoner’s sexual and gendered identity: Glenn Burger, “Kissing the Pardoner,” *PMLA* 107.5 (1992): 1143–56 and *Chaucer’s Queer Nation*, specifically chapters 4 and 5; Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press (1989): 156–84.

¹⁷ Sturges sees fragmentation as the Pardoner’s “defining attribute,” *Chaucer’s Pardoner and Gender Theory*, 124. He grounds this fragmentation in the Pardoner’s potentially castrated body (see chapter 6, specifically). I am disinterested in determining the Pardoner’s genitalia; it is the objects that the Pardoner carries on his body which convey his embodiment in a social collective.

¹⁸ See *Middle English Dictionary*, s. v. “get.”

Pardoner, wearing “al of the newe jet” (l. 682), is decked out with devices; his purse, hood, hair, vernicle, and song all convey his reliance on newness. What the narrator perceives of the Pardoner, that the Pardoner thought himself “newe,” characterizes this pilgrim as a locus of curiosity. Patricia Ingham’s work on medieval constructions of newness considers how debates on novelty engage questions about value and profit, invention and creation.¹⁹ Ingham notes that, unlike late capitalism, the “new” in medieval culture did not carry with it a progress narrative. Rather, new things “served as a means to adjudicate the ethics of invention and eventual change, leveraging thorny problems of fate, creativity, and desire.”²⁰ When the Pardoner has finished his tale and asks the pilgrims to receive his pardon, he styles the act as “newe”:

Al newe and fressh at every miles ende –
 So that ye offren, alwey newe and newe,
 Nobles or pens, whiche that be goode and trewe. (ll. 928–30)

That the Pardoner equivocates exchanging money for pardons with newness reinforces the link between the pecuniary purses and cavities as contraptions. The “nobles” and “pens” are deposited into the Pardoner’s cavities, and these offers – in exchange for pardons – are “alwey newe and newe,” always changing. The Pardoner, then, is this site of newness, or, to use a favorite word of Chaucer’s, “newfanglednesse” – his body a locus for Chaucer to question the slippage between innovation and machination.²¹

We might imagine the Pardoner wearing a fourteenth-century peddler’s coat, high on his horse stealthily opening his coat to show his body covered in illicit items for sale. The gadgets and instruments that the Pardoner carries on his person reinforce his own body as a contraption: his cavities are his contrivances. The Pardoner has loosened two cavities: his mouth in song and his hood to unleash a growth of hair while packing another cavity, his purse, that is overflowing with pardons, false relics, his hood, and money. That the brimming purse lay “in his lappe” (l. 686) on his groin marks the Pardoner’s over-productive eroticism. When describing what his brimming purse contains, the narrator switches to “male” (l. 694), a term for a sack that emphasizes its

¹⁹ Patricia Clare Ingham, *The Medieval New: Ambivalence in the Age of Innovation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

²⁰ Ingham, *Medieval New*, 4.

²¹ The fifteenth-century *Promptorium parvulorum*, a bilingual English and Latin dictionary, glosses “get” and “gyn” for the Latin “machina.” *The Promptorium Parvulorum: The First English–Latin Dictionary*, ed. A. L. Mayhew. EETS 102 (London, 1908).

anatomical and testicular qualities. The Pardoner’s “male” is a fourteenth-century Mary Poppins bag: it contains a “pilwe-beer” (l. 694), a pillow-case, a cavity within a cavity, that he flaunts as the Virgin Mary’s veil; a “gobet” (l. 696), a fragment, of a sail that St. Peter used when he traveled to see Christ. In his “male” he also carries a brass cross “ful of stones” (l. 699) and a glass container stocked with the bones of pigs. This image that asks us to read the Pardoner’s anatomy and the contents of his “male” as teeming follows the narrator’s uncertainty of how to interpret his body:

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. 689–91)

The narrator’s inability or, more likely, refusal to read the Pardoner as a legible body is undone by his initial up close and personal reading of the Pardoner. We first learn more about what the Pardoner looks like than we learn of his practices. The narrator is certain – expressed in the verb “trouen” – of his inability to interpret the Pardoner.²²

Efforts to read the Pardoner as a castrated eunuch or an effeminate queer dandy are often held in contrast to the futile and transphobic attempts to redeem the Pardoner of his masculine ethos through over-inscribing a cisgender male embodiment onto his character.²³ Forcing the Pardoner to have or not have a phallus betrays his queerest articulation: his purse. Scholars have looked to the line “I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare” to debate the Pardoner’s sexual, erotic, and gendered identity, and this discussion constantly focuses on the possibility of the

²² See *Middle English Dictionary*, s. v. “trouen.”

²³ For an inclusive and respectful article on the Pardoner’s gender identity see Kim Zarins, “Intersex and the Pardoner’s Body,” *Accessus: A Journal of Premodern Literature and New Media* 4 (2018): 1–63. For other scholarship that has engaged the question of the Pardoner’s sexuality, gender, or both, see variously: Richard Firth Green, “The Pardoner’s Pants (And Why They Matter),” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 15 (1993): 131–45; Stephen F. Kruger, “Claiming the Pardoner: Toward a Gay Reading of Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale*,” *Exemplaria* 6 (1994): 115–39; Monica McAlpine, “The Pardoner’s Homosexuality and How It Matters,” *PMLA* 95 (1980): 8–22; and Robert P. Miller, “Chaucer’s Pardoner, the Scriptural Eunuch, and the *Pardoner’s Tale*,” in *Chaucer Criticism: The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Richard Shoock and Jerome Taylor (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960), 221–44. Elspeth Whitney falls into a diagnostic of the Pardoner’s body, explaining away his queerness against medieval humoral theory: “What’s Wrong with the Pardoner? Complexion Theory, the Phlegmatic Man, and Effeminacy,” *The Chaucer Review* 45 (2011): 357–89. Other scholars attempt to heterosexualize and cisnormativize the Pardoner: see Richard Firth Green, “The Sexuality Normality of Chaucer’s Pardoner,” *Mediaevalia* 8 (1982): 351–58; and C. David Benson, “Chaucer’s Pardoner: His Sexuality and Modern Critics,” *Mediaevalia* 8 (1982): 337–49.

Pardoner's dismembered genitals. Robert S. Sturges sees the Pardoner's obsession with dismemberment as a destruction of form that results in the Pardoner's "imaginary union of male and female, masculine and feminine, in one body – the longing for a state in which the sexes and genders are not differentiated."²⁴ Sturges, who works to reassemble the Pardoner's body, suggests that the Pardoner hopes to achieve this bodily union by appealing to the divine in order to restore "wholeness and phallic authority,"²⁵ a unity that the Pardoner never receives. This tidy solution to the Pardoner's possible dismemberment shifts focus from the way the Pardoner presents himself through the assorted appendages that he bears on his body. Unification is not on the Pardoner's mind, but rather transformations and (re)productions.

Chaucer writes the Pardoner as a corporeal and spiritual contortionist, and his movements stir and pulse in the objects that he carries, wears, and becomes. If the body of the Pardoner behaves like a cavity, then his riding companion, the Summoner, is linked into the Pardoner's network of concavity. The Summoner famously supports the Pardoner's singing with a "stif burdoun" (l. 673), often cited as a phallic pun but which may also be a pun on a woman's *burden* to pregnancy or the marital debt.²⁶ With his "trompe" (l. 674), the Summoner assists in the Pardoner's siren-song to incite the pilgrims to come look at his cavities. Together the Summoner and the Pardoner act as an over-productive unit in the pilgrimage, but their production is one of "fruitless expenditure."²⁷

Although the Summoner does not carry a purse, we might consider that the Pardoner himself acts as the Summoner's "male" – both as his male counterpart and as his accompanying purse. Because both the Summoner and the Pardoner work in offices prone to corruption, their association with pecuniary extortion is unsurprising.²⁸ In the *Friar's Tale*, for instance, the Friar typecasts a summoner as the evil protagonist who loves to turn a profit. For the Friar, the summoner of his *Tale* is a "false thief" (l. 1338) like Judas:

He took hymself a greet profit therby;
His maister knew nat alwey what he wan.
Withouten mandement a lewed man
He koude somne, on peyne of Cristes curs,

²⁴ Sturges, *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory*, 138.

²⁵ Sturges, *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory*, 138.

²⁶ Stockton, "Cynicism," 149.

²⁷ Stockton, "Cynicism," 149.

²⁸ On the portraits of the Summoner and the Pardoner see Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 137–51.

And they were glade for to fille his purs
 And make hym grete feestes atte nale.
 And right as Judas hadde purses smale,
 And was a theef, right swich a theef was he;
 His maister hadde but half his duetee. (ll. 1344–52)

This unfavorable portrait linking summoners to Judas locates the role of the purse in a salvific history of betrayal and duplicitousness.²⁹ This duplicity underscores the Summoner in his role as an ecclesiastical court official accustomed to taking bribes – “ful prively a fynch eek koude he pulle” (l. 652).

Even though the description in the *Friar’s Tale* typifies summoners as avaricious thieves, the Summoner’s own sentiment on purses in his General Prologue portrait seems largely disavowing. The Summoner figures the “purs” as a site of retribution, one that can and should be monetarily and physically abused. The Summoner’s introduction to the pilgrimage defines him in terms of his corruptive office. His drunkenness animates his tongue to Latinize legal pronouncements – both the Pardoner and the Summoner expel words that hurt and entice – and he excuses misdemeanors with one exception:

But if a mannes soule were in his purs;
 For in his purs he sholde ypunysshed be.
 “Purs is the ercedekenes helle,” seyde he. (ll. 656–58)

For the Summoner, the “purs” is open to legal and religious punishment. Equated with the archdeacon’s hell, the purse stands in and epitomizes the bottomless depth of Satan’s territory. The Summoner further associates hell as a cavity in his *Prologue*, a response to the Friar’s tale. He explains a vision of an Angel who leads a friar to Satan’s hell. The Angel commands Satan to hold his tail in the air and show his anus to the friar. Satan releases his tail and the friar sees a “nest of freres” (l. 1691) that swarm out of Satan’s cavity like bees swarming out from a hive. The anal whiplash of the friars swarming “al aboute” (l. 1696), “on a route” (l. 1695) all “thurghout helle” (l. 1696), accelerates as they “comen agayn as faste as they may gon” (l. 1697). The rapidity of their swarming is truncated by their leisurely creeping back into Satan’s cavity: “And in his ers they crepten everychon”

²⁹ John 12:6, “Dixit autem hoc non quia de egenis pertinebat ad eum sed quia fur erat et loculos habens ea quae mittebantur portabat” (Now he said this not because he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief and, having the purse, carried the things that were put therein). Latin in *Bibla sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*, 5th edition, ed. Robert Weber (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), the translation in *The Holy Bible: Translated from the Latin Vulgate* (New York: The Douay Bible House, 1941), 106. See also *Riverside Chaucer*, n. to ll. 135051, 875.

(l. 1698). Once all the friars have wriggled inside of Satan's anus, he violently shuts his tail to seal his anal opening. The verb "clappen," used to signal the sealing of Satan's cavity, has a primary meaning of pulsating and throbbing as well as closing by thrusting, such as a window or door.³⁰ Once Satan has "clapte" (l. 1699) his tail shut, he ceases to move – he "lay ful stille" (l. 1699). The Summoner's anatomical lesson of Satan's ass cinching calls attention not simply to the condemnation of "freres and feendes" (l. 1674), but rather to the precarity of cavities. The friars are only ever able to swarm free around hell when Satan chooses to unleash them from his own body. Cavities act as swallowing machines that eject what they consume at their own discretion.

The comeuppance that the Summoner advocates in his *Prologue* suggests that the purse-as-cavity acts as a site of punishment. In this way, one who puts his soul "in his purs" (l. 656) is punished in the same place. Effectively, the more productive a purse, the greater the punishment. Purses might well be the corporate symbol of the sins of *luxuria* and *avaritia*, the physical site where desire and greed convene. The Summoner uses the space of his *Tale* to punish the Friar's ornery depiction of summoners as thievish devils. In his *Tale*, the Summoner recounts the story of a greedy friar who nags an ill man named Thomas for money. The friar tells Thomas that a "ferthyng" (l. 1967) is worth nothing when divided into twelve parts. At the end of the *Summoner's Tale* Thomas finally assents to give money to the friar and says "in me shal be no lak" (l. 2139), a visualization that anticipates Thomas's anus as an endless cavity. Thomas explains the directions to the friar that he must fish for the money with his own hands:

"Now thanne, put in thyn hand down by my bak,"
 Seyde this man, "and grope wel bihynde.
 Bynethe my buttoke there shaltow fynde
 A thyng that I have hyd in pryvetee." (ll. 2140–44)

Thomas's direction that the friar grope "doun" into his backside, "bynethe" his buttocks to find what he has "hid" renders his anal cavity as a hoard. The indescribable "thyng" – what the friar assumes is money – is cached "in pryvetee," highlighting the site of hoarding as a bodily orifice as well as a socially unspeakable phenomenon. In this exchange the obscured cavity presents the panic of hidden things and the problematic desire to uncover, expose, and possess the contents.

Hoarding and hiding an object – "a thyng" (l. 2144) – removes that object from social circulation until, of course, the hoarder chooses to distribute the

³⁰ See *Middle English Dictionary*, s. v. "clappen."

object.³¹ Satan expels the friars from his anus when he wishes, and the Pardoner’s wallet is visually brimming in his lap. Thomas’s hidden “thyng,” however, must be sought out, and this mode of seeking illustrates the desirability of the cavity. Without hesitation the friar “launcheth to the clifte” (l. 2145) of Thomas’s backside and reaches his hand further down to find the money that Thomas has hidden. Like the Summoner’s description of Satan’s anal cavity, Thomas designs the terms and controls the contents of his cavity. In a ventricular magic trick, Thomas can feel the friar’s hand groping “aboute his tuwel” (l. 2148). It is precisely when he feels the friar’s hand “amydde” (l. 2149) his anus that he lets out a fart from his anal cavity.

The act that takes place in the middle of the cavity is the transformative zone of production: the friar learns that his gift is paid out to him in a fart and that the hidden cavity is an anus.³² The unknowability of Thomas’s “thyng” inspires the friar to enter into the hollow and determine if the hidden “thyng” is indeed what he desires it to be. Of the *Summoner’s Tale*, Tiffany Beechy has argued that excess of desire and greed does not merely limit production, but also has the power to turn “the desired object itself into shit.”³³ Crucially, the friar tells Thomas that he will “abye this fart” (l. 2155), joining the economic, scatological, and erotic registers of Thomas’s rectum.³⁴

Determined to figure out how to divvy up his gaseous gift, the friar gets a lesson from a “lordes squier” (l. 2243) in “ars-metrike” (l. 2222) on how to “karf” (l. 2243) up a fart. Using a cartwheel to demonstrate the distribution of gas, the squire explains that noses of twelve friars will sit at the ends of twelve spokes on a cartwheel, ready to take in the stench from a fart centered at the hub.³⁵ Centralizing the fart at the center of the circular cartwheel plays on the image of enclosure and circling that the cavity encourages. These examples of cavity punishment by the Summoner suggest that these hollow sites – purses, anuses,

31 On hoarding and collecting as a perverse activity see Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1996), 85–105.

32 On money in the *Summoner’s Tale* see Robert Epstein, “Sacred Commerce: Chaucer, Friars, and the Spirit of Money,” in *Sacred and Profane in Chaucer and Late Medieval Literature: Essays in Honour of John V. Fleming*, ed. Robert Epstein (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 129–45.

33 Tiffany Beechy, “Devil Takes the Hindmost: Chaucer, John Gay, and the Pecuniary Anus,” *The Chaucer Review* 41 (2006): 71–85 at 73.

34 See *Middle English Dictionary*, s. v. “abien,” as well as a potential pun with “abeien,” which means to “bend down.”

35 For a scientific and scholastic understanding of the twelve-spoked cartwheel see Robert J. Hasenfratz, “The Science of Flatulence: Possible Sources for the *Summoner’s Tale*,” *The Chaucer Review* 30 (1996): 241–61.

hell, or otherwise – are instruments of desire. The queer value assigned to cavities orients the realm of desire with the operation of material exchange: the friar goes into the hollow desiring to find a hidden “thyng.” The fart that he receives in exchange for his desirous groping resignifies the production of the cavity and reorients the value that the friar assigned to it in the first place.³⁶

Pledges of Transformation

Punishment is not the only outcome when interacting with cavities. In fact, the Pardoner is a sort of “purs” representative in that he publicizes the value that his many cavities can offer. The Pardoner is a conduit for the pilgrimage to access his cavities, but the value of cavities is in their self-sustaining quality. Queer cavities act as autarkic systems because they are self-sufficient and able to thrive and survive without external aid. The Pardoner and his self-sufficient “purs” challenge the political project of the *Canterbury Tales* that promotes community-building and interdependence. In particular, the Pardoner’s “purs” protests the burden of exchange between pilgrims – of tale-telling, of the potential for winning the game and eating a free supper at the *expense* of the community that each pilgrim is embedded within. Purses, then, are the symbol of loss in the Canterbury project because these objects, when opened, lose contents at the expense of another’s gain.

Community-building in the *Canterbury Tales* relies on larger fourteenth-century ideas of “commune profit,” a model of collective labor that works to ensure the salvific future of a community.³⁷ How does a body share in the “commune profit” when that social community rejects the body to begin with? The Pardoner acknowledges the system that betrays him, and yet he is adamant on exchanging, sharing, and communing with a pilgrimage contingent that refuses his tale –

³⁶ I have in mind Leo Bersani’s essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” in *Reclaiming Sodom*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (New York: Routledge, 1994): 249–64: “It may, finally, be in the gay man’s rectum that he demolishes his own perhaps otherwise uncontrollable identification with a murderous judgment against him” (262).

³⁷ For work on fourteenth-century conceptions of the *commune profit* see variously: Mark W. Ormod, “The Good Parliament of 1376: Commons, *communes*, and ‘Common Profit’ in Fourteenth-Century English Politics,” in *Comparative Perspectives on History and Historians: Essays in Memory of Bryce Lyon (1920–2007)*, ed. David Nicholas, Bernard Bachrach, and James M. Murray (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2012), 169–88; Kellie Robertson, “Common Language and Common Profit,” in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 209–28; and Yasunari Takada, “*Commune Profit* and Libidinal Dissemination in Chaucer,” in *The Body and the Soul in Medieval Literature*, ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 107–21.

“But right anon these gentils gonne to crye,/ Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaude!” (ll. 323–24). Models of obligatory community-making and world-building have come under scrutiny in queer theory discussions of the “antirelational turn.”³⁸ Theories of queer antisociality, inaugurated by Leo Bersani’s *Homos*,³⁹ have asked if the queer subject has any obligation to uphold sociality and community-building. Antirelationality figures the queer subject as anti-productive, antisocial, anti-future, anti-family.⁴⁰ Advocates of the queer antirelational turn, Lee Edelman and Jack Halberstam, have followed Bersani’s critique, linking the heteronormative future-orientation to capitalist ideologies of social productivity.⁴¹ In *The Queer Art of Failure*, for instance, Halberstam writes, “capitalist logic casts the homosexual as inauthentic and unreal, as incapable of proper love and unable to make the appropriate connections between sociality, relationality, family, sex, desire, and consumption.”⁴² Under a capitalist model, queer bodies are failed subjects, bodies that cannot “embody the connections between production and reproduction.”⁴³ Chaucer’s Pardoner, of course, lives outside of modern conceptions of capitalism, and yet, through the image of the “purs,” the Canterbury project questions how words are valued, judged, and exchanged among communities. The “purs” lives outside of community, in that it swallows and absorbs

38 See the MLA Forum publication on “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory: MLA Annual Convention, 27 December 2005, Washington, D.C.” *MLA* 121.3 (2006): 819–27. This includes responses from the panel by Robert L. Caserio, Lee Edelman, J. Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean.

39 Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

40 This position has been importantly criticized by José Esteban Muñoz in his *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), where he instead focuses on queer potential, possibility, and utopia. Muñoz rejects Edelman’s conception of the queer death drive, the desire to have “no future” and no responsibility to a future as this position is available to a white, cisgender, queer male subject. Halberstam, too, has condemned Edelman’s ideation as an “excessively small archive,” that is, the “gay male archive” (824). Instead, Halberstam asks where the space exists for “dyke anger, anticolonial despair, racial rage, counterhegemonic violence, punk pugilism,” (824) since Edelman’s polemic does not account for these anti-futures. See J. Halberstam, “The Politics of Negativity in Recent Queer Theory,” in “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory: MLA Annual Convention, 27 December 2005, Washington, D.C.” *MLA* 121.3 (2006): 823–25.

41 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); and J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). On the relationship between queer identity and capitalist-nationalist projects see John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3–16; and Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

42 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 95.

43 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 95.

what enters it, and yet the “purs” also opens and beckons for interactive investment. The meaning of the Pardoner’s purse – and all his accoutrements like it – figures his identity in the pilgrimage far more industriously than questions of his sexuality or gender, all of which boils down to repealing or redeeming his genitalia. Purses are production machines for the Pardoner, and his ability to reproduce their contents is totalized in his role to exchange pardons for payment.

Self-sufficient cavities threaten models of social production that require exchange of labor to operate. The pilgrim sees the Pardoner’s cavities as hazardous because they are self-sustaining units of production. The Pardoner, his purse, and his various other cavity-systems do not need the pilgrimage to be fruitful – he arrives at the tavern already with pardons from “Rome al hoot” (l. 687). At the same time, the Pardoner invites the fellowship to share in his cavities with the promise that what he carries inside of those cavities has the power to transform.

The Pardoner’s reliance on cavity-systems frames his portrait as a pilgrim and informs how he tells his tales, both as a preacher and a tale-teller. He uses the space of his *Prologue* to think “upon som honeste thyng” (l. 328) while he drinks. His mouth takes in liquid and transforms his thinking so that he may tell a moral tale: “Now have I dronke a draghte of corny ale,/ By God, I hope I shal yow telle a thyng/ That shal by reson been at youre likyng!” (ll. 456–58). The act of ingestion provides the Pardoner with the words he needs to tell his *Tale*, and his *Prologue* acts as the cauldron. Like the Summoner, the Pardoner explains that he uses Latin like saffron to pepper his preaching and “stire” (l. 346) people to devotion. He conducts his mouth like a vessel as it cooks up a linguistic feast to deliver to the pilgrimage. These culinary allusions attest to the transformative possibilities that cavities have on community-making. The Pardoner says that it pains him to have “an hauteyn speche” (l. 330), and to ring out as loudly as a church bell in his sermons. Yet, because the pilgrims know of his predilection for singing, the Pardoner becomes a factotum of cavitory speech.

As the Pardoner speaks, then, his *Prologue* becomes a Charybdean text. Throughout his pseudo-autobiographical *Prologue*, the Pardoner figuratively proffers several of his cavities to the pilgrims, with the promise that these items have a transformative quality. While his portrait in the General Prologue already mentions his false relics, it is in his *Prologue* that he recounts how he auctions his goods at the church:

Thanne shewe I forth my longe cristal stones,
Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones –
Relikes been they, as wenen they echoon.
Thanne have I in latoun a sholder-boon,
Which that was of an hooly Jewes sheep. (ll. 347–51)

The image of the Pardoner in his peddler’s coat works all too well here since he becomes an exhibition of illicit materials that he owns – “my longe cristal stones.” Like his purse “bretful of pardoun” (l. 690), the Pardoner’s long crystal stones are “ycrammed” full of fragmented pieces of cloth and bone. The verb “crammen” illustrates the relic-cavity as packed to capacity, but also the act of stuffing it in the first place: a space can be crammed and packed full, but one can also cram things into cavities. These possibilities make the cavity as vulnerable as the carrier. This is to say that the Pardoner’s cavities are insatiable because they are always already brimming, always already begging for more material exchange.

Further delivering the selling points, the Pardoner explains that the shoulder bone contained in a “latoun,” a brass container, if submerged into water in a “welle” (l. 353), will have the property to heal sick livestock. By licking, drinking, or tonguing the bone-touched water, the farm animals are promised to “be hool” (ll. 357, 359) and rehabilitated from disease. From one cavity, the “latoun,” into another, the well, the bone has the power to imbue and transform the water. This water then can be transferred into another cavity, the mouth of the livestock, in order to cure the animals and make them “hool” (ll. 357, 359). Equally playful and threatening, the Pardoner’s ability to make something “hool” is both remedial and hollowing. Sturges remarks of this passage that “wholeness is paradoxically to be achieved through fragmentation; or fragmentation is to give way to an idealized wholeness.”⁴⁴ Cavities betray and resist ideas of wholeness. For the Pardoner, the ideation of wholeness is to embrace being a hole: to become “hool” is to become a cavity. Becoming a cavity is the Pardoner’s pledge of transformation.

Curative fantasies of restoration through reproduction decorate the Pardoner’s sales pitch. Beyond healing diseases, the bone-touched well water can help livestock reproduce. If a householder has his animals drink from water from the well each week, “his beestes and his stoor shal multiplie” (l. 365). The Pardoner’s fragmented bones and false relics not only can restore wholeness but also duplicate bodies through multiplying. Further, the Pardoner pledges that this bone-touched well water can heal “jalousie” (l. 366) between a husband and wife. Consuming soup made with the water ensures that the husband trusts his wife, even though he knows the truth “of hir defaute” (l. 370). Here the Pardoner’s remedy circumvents sin: the wife may still sin but the husband will not dwell on it in jealousy.

The transformative promise becoming “hool” requires that one engage with hollow things: the “latoun,” the “welle,” mouths, and bodily orifices. In the

44 Sturges, *Chaucer’s Pardoner and Gender Theory*, 125.

Pardoner's recreated preaching pitch, he holds up his final cavity, a mitten, to speak of its transformative value:

Heere is a miteyn eek, that ye may se.
 He that his hand wol putte in this mitayn,
 He shal have multiplying of his grayn,
 Whan he hath sowen, be it whete or otes,
 So that he offre pens, or elles grotos. (ll. 372–76)

In order to benefit from the cavity, one must go inside of it. The Pardoner optically entices the audience, just as he showed his “longe cristal stones.” The catch is that the audience must want to put, “wol putte,” a hand inside the mitten. The verb “willen” suggests that the act of putting a hand inside a cavity is one of volition.⁴⁵ The cavity will ensure that his fields will yield and then multiply the grain that he has planted. The mitten-as-cavity is only effective if a person “offre pens, or elles grotos”; the cavity's transformative function only works in exchange for money. Crucially, the Pardoner's suggestion that grain will multiply by engaging with the mitten-hole privileges the reproductive work of cavities over cisnormative models of procreation.

The transformative capacity of cavities cements in the Pardoner's moralizing tale. The *Pardoner's Tale* undermines the role of exchange in community-building through the image of the cavity. The three rioters, who swear a fraternal vow to each other, seek out Death in an attempt to kill him.⁴⁶ As the tale goes, the three brothers encounter an Old Man who instructs them on Death's location. It is not Death that they find under a tree but rather gold florins, which they decide to divvy up equally among themselves. When one brother goes to town to acquire food and drink, the other two brothers conspire to kill him upon his return. The third brother, likewise, prepares his brothers' drinks with poison. All die, and only gold is left behind.

The collective fratricide of the three rioters is made possible because of cavity-systems. At the beginning of his tale, the Pardoner draws our attention to bodily cavities as the culprits of “lechery” (l. 481), “glotonye” (l. 482), and “excesse” (l. 514). Citing the false swearing of Jews, the drunkenness of Lot and Herod, and the corruption of Adam and Eve, the Pardoner bewails the act of ingestion, of entertaining a beckoning cavity. He explains that the “shorte

⁴⁵ See *Middle English Dictionary*, s. v. “willen.”

⁴⁶ Tison Pugh notes that it is interesting that the Pardoner satirizes brotherhood as he himself rides in the pilgrimage with his “freend” and “compeer,” the Summoner. See Tison Pugh, *Chaucer's (Anti-) Eroticism and the Queer Middle Ages* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2014), 91.

throte” and “the tendre mouth” (l. 517) is the site on the body that makes “men to swynke” (l. 519) and require food and water to sustain labor. Providing more evidence, the Pardoner paraphrases Paul’s epistle to the Philippians, suggesting that the enemies of Christ have one end in death because “wombe is hir god” (l. 533).⁴⁷ The Pardoner exclaims,

O wombe! O bely! O stynkyng cod,
 Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun!
 At either ende of thee foul is the soun.
 How greet labour and cost is thee to fynde! (ll. 534–37)

Physically leading the pilgrimage from the throat to the “wombe,” the Pardoner effectively swallows the pilgrimage whole with his tale. Consumption moves from the throat to the belly, where the corruption of gluttony transforms a man’s throat into a latrine: “his throte he maketh his pryvee” (l. 527). Before telling a tale on the annihilation of avarice, the Pardoner’s emphasis on gluttony warns the pilgrimage that the body-as-cavity has the capacity to corporeally transform. By making one’s throat into a privy, the body becomes spiritually and physically “fulfilled of dong” (l. 535). These bodily cavities are “deed” (l. 548) while they live.

Bodies are cavities in life and the Pardoner shows this paradox in the figure of the Old Man who, held captive in his life-body – he is literally “forwrapped” (l. 718) – cannot seem to die. He asks his deceased mother if he may join her underground, begging to leave one cavity (his body) for another (the grave): “Leeve mooder, leet me in!” (l. 731). The Old Man tries to exchange with his mother, one cavity for another:

Allas, whan shul my bones been at reste?
 Mooder, with yow wolde I chaunge my cheste
 That in my chambre longe tyme hath be,
 Ye, for an heyre clowt to wrappe me! (ll. 733–36)

The Old Man knows that cavities operate networks of exchange. He desires to exchange a chest in a chamber for a cloth to be wrapped in and placed underground. Yet, death is beyond the reach of exchange: these items have no value to the mother underground; the transaction cannot take place. The Old Man, “forwrapped” (l. 718) with a desire to be further wrapped and enveloped by a hair cloth, begs to prepare for his final subterranean cavity. Seeta Chaganti reads the Old Man’s description of the enclosure of death as “instrumental to

⁴⁷ *Riverside Chaucer*, 908, n. ll. 529–35.

acts of transformation.”⁴⁸ She argues that the Pardoner’s relics and the objects within his *Tale* “reveal the material realities of death and ask the viewer to envision a process of symbolic and literal transformation through their enclosure.”⁴⁹ The *Pardoner’s Tale* teaches that transformation happens through the exchange of cavities. The Old Man’s longing to be enveloped speaks to the affinity between cavities and enclosure and the exchange necessary to seal a cavity. Yet, the potential for a cavity-enclosure to open and engulf is what the pilgrim sees as a threat from the Pardoner and his purses.

Enveloping, Unbuckling, Shrining

Our Pardoner operates between two modes of concavity. His purse acts like Satan’s anus that has the power to contain and seal items from circulation. At the same time, the Pardoner’s “male” threatens to be a Pandora’s Box, a cavity that unleashes objects and information without election. The Pardoner’s body, too, moves between registers of containment and expulsion. His body is like an accordion: it absorbs its exterior environment in order to contain it but has the capacity to expel what it contains in order to transmit a new form. In this way the body of the Pardoner becomes both extremely porous and sealed tightly shut, and the boundaries of the Pardoner’s body are contingent on the interaction between these two modalities. The Pardoner’s purse, filled as it is with haphazard and fraudulent material, unfastens for those who come into the Pardoner’s circuit.

The opening of the Pardoner’s cavities is nowhere more pregnant than in his exchange with the Host at the close of his *Tale*. His initial reflection of his preaching technique in his *Prologue* takes form when he invites the pilgrims into his purse:

But, sires, o word forgat I in my tale:
I have relikes and pardoun in my male,
As faire as any man in Engelond,
Whiche were me yeven by the popes hond. (ll. 919–22)

⁴⁸ Seeta Chaganti, *The Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary: Enshrinement, Inscription, Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 137; see the larger chapter for a reading of reliquary enclosure in the *Pardoner’s Tale*.

⁴⁹ Chaganti, *Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary*, 133.

Filled with relics and pardons for the taking, the Pardoner’s contents in his “male” are likened to “faire” men in England. That the Pardoner’s “male” is as fair as any man in England is his selling point. Granted by hand by the pope and hand-delivered to the pilgrimage by the Pardoner, the brimming “male” serves as the Pardoner’s attempt to authorize the queer cavities that he carries. He articulates that his presence as a “suffisant” (l. 932) pardoner, one who was able to deliver a moral tale, ensures that he is a “seuretee” (l. 937) to the fellowship. Still, the Pardoner recognizes and openly admits and commits to a fraudulent and faulty ideological system.⁵⁰ The Pardoner’s insistence that he can pardon the sins of the pilgrimage requires that he open his “male” to the community, to let his fellowship touch his relics and to swallow monetary reward in return. The Pardoner must participate in a system that has already failed him.

In the Pardoner’s mind, what he failed to state in his *Tale* through forgetting he is able to recover with his purse. His purse stands in as the material answer for the “o word” he “forgot” to tell the pilgrims. As Beryl Rowland has observed, poets used the image of the wallet to envisage mental storage systems for memory recall.⁵¹ Rowland cites Stephen Hawes’s use of the “male” as a storage site in his sixteenth-century allegorical poem *The Passetyme of Pleasure*. In the text Hawes presents Dame Rhetoric explaining the art of memory to poets, where she associates tale-telling and oratory with looking inward to access images in a purse:

Yf to the orature many a sundry tale
 One after other treatably be tolde
 Than sundry ymages in his closed male
 Eache for a mater he doth than well holde
 Lyke to the tale he doth than so beholde. (ll. 1247–51)⁵²

Unbuckling a purse, in this instance, is associated with unlocking one’s memory treasury.⁵³ Chaucer scatters the command to unbuckle one’s purse three

⁵⁰ Stockton, “Cynicism,” 143–64.

⁵¹ Beryl Rowland, “Bishop Bradwardine, the Artificial Memory, and the *House of Fame*,” in *Chaucer at Albany*, ed. Rossell Hope Robbins (New York: Burt Franklin, 1975), 46–47.

⁵² Cited in Rowland, “Bishop Bradwardine,” 47. See also *The Pastime of Pleasure*, ed. William Edward Mead. EETS 173 (London, 1927), 52.

⁵³ Unbuckling one’s purse to tell tales is similar to the Old English trope of unlocking one’s word-hoard in *Beowulf*: “Him se yldesta ondswardode, werodes wisa, wordhord onleac” (The eldest answered him, leader of the band, unlocked his word-hoard” (ll. 258–59) in *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, 4th edition, ed. R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). This also occurs in the opening to *Widsith*: “Widsið maðolade, wordhord onleac” (Widsith spoke, unlocked his word-hoard) (l. 1) in *The Exeter Book*, The Anglo-Saxon

times throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, and two are spoken by the Host.⁵⁴ In response to the Knight's finished tale, the Host explains that his story was worth recalling from "memorye" (l. 3112):

That he ne seyde it was a noble storie
 And worthy for to drawn to memorie,
 And namely the gentils everichon.
 Oure Hooste lough and swoor, "So moot I gon,
 This gooth aright; unboked is the male.
 Lat se now who shal telle another tale;
 For trewely the game is wel bigonne." (ll. 3111–17)

Opening the "male" of memory allows the speaker to recall images that make tale-telling possible. The first tale-teller, the Knight, must draw his tale out from his memory just as one might extract an item from a purse. But the purse must be open for that extraction to take place.

The Canterbury project is framed by the unbuckling of purses. In the Parson's *Prologue* the Host encourages the Parson to open his "male" for the pilgrims so that he may not "breke" (l. 24) the "pley" (l. 24) of tale-telling:

Unbokele and shewe us what is in thy male,
 For trewely, me thynketh by thy cheere
 Thou sholdest knytte up wel a greet mateere.
 Telle us a fable anon, for cokkes bones! (ll. 26–29)

If the Parson refuses to "unbokele" his purse and "shewe" the pilgrims what it contains, he will fissure the activity of the game. The Host's request that the Parson first unbuckle his purse is tamed by his follow-up suggestion that the Parson can "knytte up" a good tale from the contents of his "male" – a purse should never stay open too long. Harry Bailly commands the Parson to "beth fructuous" in "litel space" (l. 71), conveying that the Parson's unlocking of his purse should be efficient in its multiplicity of words.⁵⁵ That the Host comments

Poetic Records III, ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936). See Martin Stevens, "The Structure of *Beowulf*: From Gold-Hoard to Word-Hoard," *Modern Language Quarterly* 39 (1978): 219–38.

⁵⁴ The Host's request to unbuckle a purse occurs in the *Miller's Tale*, l. 3115 and the Parson's *Prologue*, l. 26. The other two occurrences are voiced by the Pardoner in his *Tale*, l. 945 (discussed below). There is a fourth reference to unbuckling a "galoche," shoe, in the *Squire's Tale*, l. 555: "Ne were worthy unbokelen his galoche."

⁵⁵ John Plummer, "'Beth fructuous and that litel space': The Engendering of Harry Bailly," in *New Readings of Chaucer's Poetry*, ed. Robert G. Benson and Susan J. Ridyard (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 107–18.

at the beginning of the pilgrimage that the “male” has been opened, and here at the close of the pilgrimage he must encourage the Parson to show the pilgrims what his “male” contains, envelops and circles the *Canterbury Tales*.

For the Host, the breaking of the game results in social and economic panic. The Host’s stake in unbuckling purses is one of investment: the game of tale-telling to and from Canterbury is a supper at the cost of the collective – “at oure aller cost” (l. 799). Twice the Host explains that those who refuse his judgment will “paye al that we spenden by the weye” (l. 806) and “whoso be rebel to my juggement/ Shal paye for al that by the wey is spent” (ll. 833–34). These two economic modes of exchange – that all pay for one tale-teller, or one rebellious loser pay for all – is in itself a game of caching the pilgrims: hoarding the value of stories in purses. The Host sets the price of the supper and rules over the pilgrims “at his devys” (l. 816) and the Host himself rides along with the pilgrims as their guide at his “owene cost” (l. 804).

The spending habits of the pilgrimage – the payment, the cost – are contingent on the Host’s valuation of the tale-teller with the “best sentence” and “moost solaas” (l. 798). For the Host, then, the image of the purse represents his own social and economic control over the Canterbury group. He encourages the pilgrims to unbuckle their purses and tell their tales, ensuring that the Host’s terms of the game will operate as he desires. The Pardoner’s overt affinity with purses, and his place in the center of the tale-tellers,⁵⁶ acts as a maelstrom of speechmaking and opening of cavities. Purses may act as vaults for memory, but the Pardoner’s association with purses relies on this rhetorical activity to ask those in the pilgrimage to face what their purses may contain.

Since the Host’s association between unbuckling purses and telling tales centers on the economic crisis of the game, that is, paying for what is spent “by the wey” (ll. 806, 834), the fracas with the Pardoner at the end of his tale is the Host’s attempt to reauthorize the terms of the pilgrimage. As Tison Pugh has aptly noted, the Host’s construction of his own authoritative masculinity is built into the design of the tale-telling game.⁵⁷ After the Host assumes his role over the pilgrimage, the narrator reports that the Host “roos” up and was “oure aller cok,/

⁵⁶ Glenn Burger writes that Fragment VI is “apparently uniquely isolated within the Canterbury project and curiously alienated from (or by) its ordering principles” (*Chaucer’s Queer Nation*, 119). Burger cites Donald Howard’s *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* where Howard states that “You can put the fragment in any of the gaps in the existing structure . . . and manufacture a literary or thematic relationship, but none asserts itself” (*Chaucer’s Queer Nation*, 334).

⁵⁷ Tison Pugh, “Queering Harry Bailly: Gendered Carnival, Social Ideologies, and Masculinity Under Duress in the *Canterbury Tales*,” *The Chaucer Review* 41 (2006): 39–69.

And gadred us togidre in a flok” (ll. 823–24). The phrase “oure aller cok” complements the Host’s request that the winner will have supper at “oure aller cost” (l. 799) where “cok” and “cost” become nearly synonymous. Although the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the first use of “cock” as phallus in 1618 and the *Middle English Dictionary* does not have the sense of “cok” as phallus listed in the entries, this description of the Host assuming control over the pilgrimage, gathering the company as a flock, reinforces a masculinist approach to community-building. With or without the phallic pun, the centering of male authority is crucial in this slippage between “cost” and “cok.”⁵⁸ Harry Bailly has assembled himself as the political and economic center of the pilgrimage as well as a ridiculous, rising phallic pillar of the community flock. The Pardoner’s predilection for cavities inverts the Host’s necessity for cisnormative phallic governance.

The Pardoner refuses the Host’s sovereignty and terms of rule when he upends the Host’s role as guide and commands that the Host unbuckle his own “male.” If unbuckling a purse figures the act of telling a tale, then the Pardoner’s command that the Host open his purse is a request for payment from the Host to the pilgrimage. He seeks to equalize the terms of the community, ousting the Host’s position of “masculine and bourgeois”⁵⁹ control. The Pardoner wants the Host to pay up to the pilgrimage, to offer something in return than simply ruling over the community and paying his own way. Framing this request, the Pardoner offers to pardon those in the fellowship beginning with the Host because he is “moost enveloped in synne” (l. 942). Asking the Host to come forth first and kiss his relics, he requests payment – “for a grote” (l. 945). Then, the Pardoner commands that the Host unbuckle his purse:

I rede that oure Hooste here shal bigynne,
 For he is moost enveloped in synne.
 Com forth, sire Hoost, and offre first anon,
 And thou shalt kisse the relikes everychon,
 Ye, for a grote! Unbokele anon thy purs. (ll. 941–45)

Reading the purse as a queer cache reframes the Pardoner’s demand that the Host unbuckle his purse. Instead of a joke that centers queer panic, the interaction between the two pilgrims suggests a more complicated exchange that involves the violent exposure of a cavity and its hidden contents. It is in this scene that we see the Host’s body being read like the Pardoner’s image. The Host’s unbuckling of his purse is linked to his envelopment of sin. Envelopment in this instance figuratively wraps and encases the Host in immorality; that he is “moost

⁵⁸ See the entry for “cock” n.1 in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁵⁹ Pugh, “Queering Harry Bailly,” 56.

enveloped” in sin approximates the act of enclosure that the purse-as-cavity conveys. In a move to wrest control from the Host’s game, the Pardoner requests that the Host now make a payment to the pilgrimage. In requesting that the Host unbuckle his purse, the Pardoner is asking the Host to contribute something to the community: coin, tale, or favor.

By suggesting that the Host should unbuckle his purse the Pardoner teases the boundaries of sin that engulf the Host. Not only is the Host’s purse vulnerable to opening his cavities but also, in order for the Pardoner to access his purse, the Host’s veil of sin must be punctured. The Host’s angry refusal to the Pardoner is not simply because he has asked him to kiss all of his relics, but rather that the Pardoner has overturned the Host’s power over the pilgrimage by threatening the Host’s own cavity. The Host exclaims that he will not unbuckle his purse because if he does he will have “Cristes curs” (l. 946). In this way, the Canterbury project shows that the Host’s request of opening purses is part of the play and rules of the game, but the Pardoner’s attempt to seize control results in spiritual damnation. The Host replies:

Thow woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech,
 And swere it were a relyk of a seint,
 Thogh it were with thy fundement depeint!
 But, by the croys which that Seint Eleyne fond,
 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! (ll. 948–55)

If the Host is to kiss the Pardoner’s relics, purse, fundament, or breeches, the Host must, as Stockton writes “come face-to-face with the solid material foundation of the spiritual economy of the pilgrimage.”⁶⁰ That spiritual economy is contained within the queer cavities that the pilgrims embody and carry with them. In the Host’s pursuit to hold and carry the Pardoner’s “coillons” in his hand, the Host attempts to withdraw the Pardoner’s aberrant objects from his purse in order to reveal what he himself believes the objects to be. The problem is that the purse itself stands in as a space that has the power to alter objects which, even if withdrawn, reforms the object into something entirely different. In effect, the Pardoner’s rightful provocation of the Host’s authority incites the Host to cache him in response. Enraged by the Pardoner’s request, the enveloped Host censures the Pardoner by verbally caching and enveloping his items and body. By construing his fraudulent relics as smeared with “fundement,”

⁶⁰ Stockton, “Cynicism,” 151.

the Host conceptually removes the relics from the Pardoner's cavity to expose not just that the relics are products of his cavity, but *how* they are transformed within it. As the Host verbally uncovers the tainted relics, his scatological panic inflames him to quickly envelop the Pardoner again through shrining. Because the Host is uncertain which cavity to control, the Host's anger at the Pardoner splits direction between the Pardoner's purse and his testicles. Exchanging one purse for another, the Host violently asserts his desire to cut off the Pardoner's "coillons," in order to enshrine them as relics within hog shit.⁶¹

Marijane Osborn's work on this passage uses the poetic *integumentum*, "a covering, cloak, disguise,"⁶² to discuss Chaucer's shifting discourses, that is, how his language acts as a shroud, enclosing and caching the meaning and translatability of words. Chaucer, then, uses envelopment as a literary-poetic tool of queer caching. As the Host and Pardoner attempt to cache the other, they both obscure and disclose the meanings that they seek to control. Once the Host has threatened the Pardoner with enshrinement, the spiral of governance over the game is reinstated by the Host when he silences the Pardoner – "This Pardoner answerde nat a word;/ So wrooth he was, no word ne wolde he seye" (ll. 956–57). Formerly, the Host's remarks on the Knight's tale-telling suggested an initiation of opening of purses, of speaking and exchanging tales in a community. Now, in silencing the Pardoner at the close of his tale, the Host metaphorically seals the Pardoner's purse and revises the terms of the game. He brings the Knight back into the fold to reinstate his authority since the Knight's tale-telling unbuckled the purse of the pilgrimage, authorizing the exchange of speech between pilgrims. Harry Bailly commands that the Pardoner's newly closed mouth kiss the "worthy" (l. 960) Knight.⁶³ The kiss between the Knight and the Pardoner seals their mouths together in a promise to make all hollow orifices cooperate for the duration of the pilgrimage.

Chaucer's queer cavities punctuate the pilgrimage as sites of concavity scattered on and among the pilgrims, modeled in the stories they share. Purses highlight the possibilities and limits of the erotic economic exchange between bodies where caching is the process of making one into a cavity. The pilgrimage is formed by queer cavities as the Host beckons the pilgrims to unbuckle their purses and mouths in exchange of stories. Tale-telling becomes currency as the

⁶¹ For an excellent reading of these lines against the *Roman de la Rose* see Marijane Osborn, "Transgressive Word and Image in Chaucer's Enshrined *Coillons* Passage," *The Chaucer Review* 37 (2003): 365–84, specifically 370–72.

⁶² Osborn cites Dolores Warwick Fresne, *An Ars Legendi for Chaucer's Canterbury Tales: Re-Constructive Reading* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1991), 236.

⁶³ See Burger, "Kissing the Pardoner," 1143–56 and Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation*, 140–56.

fellowship will all pay out for the one who can unbuckle their purse the best. It is the figure of the Pardoner and his purse that demonstrate the pecuniary and sexualized stakes of the queer cavity in a social collective. As the pilgrim most affiliated with orifices and openings, the Pardoner’s pursuit in transforming the authority of the pilgrimage through his cavity-systems fails as the Host violently seals all cavities tightly shut. Chaucer’s queer cavities epitomize the fraudulence of a socioeconomic system that refuses to regard nonnormative bodies as productive and withdraws all reward, salvific, social, sexual, or economic. Possibilities of community-making, transformative politics, connectivity, and reciprocal exchange are hidden and remain within the Pardoner’s purse.

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