Abstract  By means of some veiled hints related to the figure of the Pardoner, Chaucer introduces his readers to a peculiar character whose ambiguous moral and sexual identity might be discovered in a far-flung Germanic past once prevailing in Anglo-Saxon England. The description given in the General Prologue recalls Old Norse Gylfaginning where Snorri Sturluson tells the story of Loki: a god who once turned into a mare. It is plausible to think that Chaucer might have drawn from a faded mythologema still known and accessible to his readers’ understanding. This Pardoner–Loki correlation stands as another testimony of the Pardoner’s homosexual nature.

The frontispiece of CCC Ms 61, also known as Chaucer reciting to the assembled court, depicts the Father of the English language reading a passage from his own works to an audience. Such a painstaking portrait of leisure time in the Middle Ages may be related to Chaucer’s Pardoner whilst addressing the company of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. In fact, the Pardoner does not tell just an ordinary tale but he shares an “alwey oon” and “evere theme” (334) 1 which is part and parcel of the sermon he delivers at some point in “Cristes holy werk” (340) from the pulpit. 2 Without further ado, one realises that this story is told to entertain the company but, most importantly, to denounce the immorality and lasciviousness of a religious world which is falling short of Christ’s teachings. 3 By his outstanding use of

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1 The order of the verse components has been changed. Lines and pages, both of this tale and the General Prologue, all refer to Benson (ed.) (1988), p. 194.


diminutio and amplificatio of rhetorical figures\textsuperscript{4} and a metaphorical language, Chaucer shows the spiritual discontent of his time with the priestcrafts of some of the ecclesiastical institutions which are embodied by the Pardoner and his associates. The purpose of this article is to analyse some of the veiled hints related to the figure of the Pardoner by means of a new perspective. Thus, I will be straying off the beaten track in order to find some hidden analogies which can be associated with a far-flung Germanic past once prevailing in Anglo-Saxon England.

Pardoners in the Middle Ages

During his mortal ministry, the Saviour conferred the priesthood, that is the authority to act in his behalf and lead his Church, upon the Twelve and some other faithful disciples. That holy stewardship also included the power to remit people’s sins in Christ’s name. During the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), a decree was issued entitled \textit{Omnes Utriusque Sexus}. This made confession obligatory at least once a year.\textsuperscript{5} Once the “doctrine of Purgatory” was introduced and made official, the Church allowed penitents to shorten their repenting process by purchasing forgiveness by means of indulgences sealed with the papal bull. Thus, the authority of priests was dwarfed by that of some new religious officers in the priesthood hierarchy: pardoners and summoners. The abbreviation of the process of self-atonement soon became a business; the Church lost control of it and many started to take advantage of ignorant people by selling both false indulgences and presumed relics. Simony became a true scourge for the Church; such an unrighteous practice was highly condemned by both Bible scholars and low religious orders who found their doctrinal foundation in the story of Simon Magus, the sorcerer who was condemned by the apostles for attempting to buy the priesthood’s power from them.\textsuperscript{6}

Chaucer introduces his Pardoner as a \textit{sui generis} deft fraud,

\begin{quote}
But with thise relikes, whan that he fond
A prove person dwellinge upon lond,
Upon a day he gat him more moneye
Than that the person gat in monthes tweye.
And thus, with feyned flaterye and japes,
He made the person and the peple his apes (701–706).
\end{quote}

The first striking feature of the character spoken of is his total lack of reverence and spirituality; one would never picture a man of God singing “ful loude” a disrespectful tune such as “Come hider, love, to me” (672). His light-mindedness and loudness are \textit{bona fide} hints of the Pardoner’s blasphemous behaviour. In a thorough reading of the \textit{General Prologue} I realised that the language used to

\textsuperscript{5} Merlo (2002\textsuperscript{2}, pp. 105–170).
\textsuperscript{6} The \textit{New Testament} reports: “But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money” (Acts 8:20).
describe this character is somewhat ambiguous; thus, I started to picture the Pardoner as a Loki-type trickster.

An ambiguous-veiled Description

The General Prologue provides a vivid physical description of the Pardoner; Chaucer introduces him in a very grotesque way:

This pardoner hadde heer as yellow as wax,
But smothe it heng, as dooth a strike of flex;
By ounces henge his lokkes that he hadde,
And the therwith he his shuldres overspradde;
But thinne it lay, but colopons oon and oon;
But hood, for jolitee, wheret he noon,
For it was trussed up in his walet.
Him thoughte he rood al of the newe jet;
Dischevele, save is cappe, he rood al bare.
Swiche glaringe eyen hadde he as an hare.
A vernicle hadde he sowed on his cappe.
His walet lay biforn him in his lape,
Bretful of pardoun comen from Rome al hoot.
Avoys he hadde as smal as hath a goot.
No berd hadde he, ne never sholde have,
As smothe it was as it were late shave:
I trowe he were a gelding or a mare (675–691).

There are some issues in the description above which I am now going to discuss: the Pardoner’s heer is neither fair nor dark; it is yellow: a pale and ashen colour. This can be seen as a foreshadowing of his dull spirituality. His voice is smal and sounds like a goot. According to medieval bestiaries goats were thought to be lecherous animals. Lechery is one of the seven deadly sins. The use of such a metaphor is self-explanatory—the Pardoner is not pure in heart, and maybe not physically either. Possibly, he does not keep the law of chastity which was a requirement of Catholic lower orders. His face is smooth; he does not have a beard. This can be seen both as a lack of masculinity and as a token of sexual vanity. The Pardoner’s description escalates and, as Moseley suggested, “Chaucer here builds up to the climax of this typical description in the persona’s tentative suggestion that the Pardoner is a eunuch either artificially (gelding) or from birth (mare)”.

Critics have gone even farther than this statement. Some claim that the Pardoner is a homosexual whilst others argue against that such statements are just strained interpretations. Derek

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7 “The Pardoner and Summoner are undoubtedly two of the most grotesque and repellent figures in medieval literature, but Chaucer offers no definite evidence that their association is mutually amorous” in Benson (1982, p. 343).

8 Moseley, p. 73. See also Warwick (1991, pp. 39–49).
Pearsall, recalling R. Miller,\(^9\) views this physical deficiency as a reflection of his spirituality. The Pardoner, who is a eunuch by birth, is not only an outcast of society but he is also a sinner who has committed the “crime against nature”.\(^{10}\) “The association of effeminacy (the mare) with homosexuality is age-old, and several of the physical features attributed to the Pardoner concur (people can “concur” but “features” cannot—maybe say in suggesting that he is a homosexual”).\(^{11}\) Although she agrees with the homosexual theory, Monica E. McAlpine poses a question which deserves to be taken into serious consideration, “[...] A final question cannot be evaded. Why does Chaucer treat the possibility of the Pardoner’s homosexuality so allusively? Does his indirection betray some allegiance, or at least some submission, to the phobic view that homosexuality is so abhorrent it must not be spoken or written about?”\(^{12}\) She continues by stressing the fact that Chaucer had been showing a characteristic degree of caution as this was probably a taboo issue in his time. J. R. Myers defines the Pardoner as a “homosexual” and a “eunuch”\(^{13}\) and other critics also labelled the character spoken of as “queer”\(^{14}\) or “gay”.\(^{15}\) Benson’s article quotes some other critics who have pictured a homosexual relationship between the Pardoner and the Summoner, “Some who support the idea of the Pardoner as homosexual make much of the supposed pun on ‘stif burden’ which the Summoner is said to hold to the Pardoner’s rendition of ‘Come hider, love, to me’. Paul Baum first suggested that in addition to the literal musical meaning of bass accompaniment, Chaucer is playing with other words, including bourdon, ‘staff,’ to suggest a homosexual relation between Summoner and Pardoner.”\(^{16}\) Hence, whether one interprets “Come hider, love, to me” literally: “come here, love, to me” or construes come-hider as a noun: “a provocative glance” (evidently with a sexual connotation), the lyrics of the tune are a further confirmation of the fact that the Summoner is the Pardoner’s “friend” and “companion”.

A Bent Trickster
Considering the role the word mare plays in this whole close examination, there is another reference from Benson’s article, already quoted previously, which I found deeply inspiring, “As with the eunuch theory, the homosexual interpretation also starts from that one line in the General Prologue: ‘I trowe he were a geldyng or a gelding or a

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\(^9\) Miller (1955).

\(^{10}\) “For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet.” Romans 1:26–27.


\(^{13}\) Myers (2000, pp. 54–62).


\(^{16}\) C. D. Benson, pp. 342–343.
mare’ [...] The word ‘mare’ certainly suggests that the Pardoner is in some way effeminate, but, as with ‘geldyng,’ the metaphorical language and subjunctive mood preclude precise definition”. Although Jill Mann asserts that the “image of the mare” is used by Walter of Châtitillon to refer to male homosexuals, the actual phrase she quotes, “equa fit equus”, is a play on Latin grammatical gender and not really parallel to Chaucer’s term. No one has found other examples of such a use of “mare” in either Latin or English. “If no one has found other examples of such a use of “mare” in either Latin or English, indeed, I feel it is compulsory to take into serious consideration the Old Norse Gylfaginning where Snorri Sturluson tells the story of Loki: a god who once turned into a mare. When the Æsir built Asgard, a crafty giant offered to encircle it with mighty walls. If he were to finish the building of the wall in one winter, the gods must give him the fair Freyja along with the sun and the moon. As they thought he would never accomplish such a task they agreed. However, three days before the coming of the spring the wall was almost completed and the Æsir were quite troubled. It was the witty Loki who found a way to solve the problem. He turned into a mare and he whinnied at Svaðilfari, the giant’s stallion and lured him away. From the mating of the two horses a colt was born: Sleipnir, Odin’s eight-legged steed. The story of Loki is worthy of further study; among the divinities of the northern pantheon, he is the one to have a multi-faceted personality and a negative character; in addition, he plays a central role in several myths. As Ellis Davidson pointed out, “He is evidently an ambivalent character, neither wholly good nor wholly bad [...] By the late Viking age the wicked and dangerous side of his character seems to have been strengthened by comparison with the Christian devil.” This very aspect also reached Anglo-Saxon England during the so-called Anglo-Norse period. The Gosforth Cross, for instance, stands as a testimony of the large influence of Scandinavian heathenism in Christian Northumbria. It represents a scene where Loki on one occasion was seized by the Æsir who tied him to a rock below a poisonous snake. The idea of Loki as a trickster was proposed in 1933 by Jan de Vries. Subsequently, other scholars have put forth additional versions sui generis. John McKinnell wrote an essay where he listed the variety of roles which Loki plays within Old Norse literature; among the many points, I found two which are rather significant in relation to this parallel with the Pardoner:

1. Loki’s capability of changing sex
2. Loki’s extreme cunning in his doings

17 IBIDEM, p. 342.
18 “Gylfi’s tricking”. It is the first part of the so-called Prose or Snorra Edda.
20 For a complete account: Jónsson (ed.) (1931) or in English: Faulkes (1982, pp. 42–43).
21 Davidson (1977, p. 176).
24 McKinnell and Ruggerini (1994, pp. 29 (29–55)).
In *Locasenna*, an eddaic lay which accounts for the insults of Laufey’s son to the Æsir gathered together in a banqueting hall, Loki is addressed once as *argr* and later as *ragr*:

Óðinn kvað:
‘Veiztu, ef ec gaf, þeim er ec gefa ne scylda,
inom slævorom, sigr:
áta vetra varti fyr iörd neðan
kýr mólcandi oc kona,
oc hefir þú þar born of borit,
oc húgða ec þat *args* aðal.’
Niðrðr kvað:
‘Þat er vàltit, þótt sér varðir vers fái,
hós eða hvárs;
hitt er undr, er áss *ragr* er hér inn of kominn,
oc hefir só born of borit’.26

Maria Elena Ruggerini explained that, “Il termine *argr* ‘effeminato; vigliacco’ doveva avere una notevole carica dispregiativa, se negli antichi testi di leggi si sanciva il diritto, per l’offeso, di vendicare tale epiteto anche con l’omicidio. L’accusa espressa attraverso la parola *argr* sembra facesse riferimento, oltre che ad una generica mancanza di coraggio, più specificamente a un comportamento omosessuale passivo.”27 This juridical procedure is also supported by a corpus of Norwegian laws known as *Gulþingslög*. Ellis Davidson’s interpretation of Loki in “comparison with the Christian devil” is confirmed in the so-called *Wessobrunner Gebet*.28 It is an Old High German prayer (about 800) which deals with the creation of the world. However it also expresses a feeling of anxiety for the conversion of still-heathen Germanic peoples and the fear of the end of the world. In the poet’s plea to God it is written *enti arc za piuuisanne*, that is “(help me to) keep from the Devil”. Old High German *arc* is the same word as the Old Norse word, *argr*. However, it has been “Christianised” and from an accusation of passive homosexuality, it shifted to describe Satan, the Fiend *par excellence*.29


26 *Locasenna* 23, 33 in *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern, i: Text*, Neckel (ed.) and Kuhn (rev.) (1983, pp. 101–103). English translation from: Dronke (1997, pp. 338–340). “Óðinn said: ‘You know, if I gave whom I should not have given—the less valiant—the victory, eight winters you were under the earth a milker of cows and a matron, and there you’ve born babies—and that I thought an unmanly (*argr*) nature’. Niðrðr said: ‘There is little harm though ladies get themselves a man, a boy on the side, or both. But it is an outrage, that an emasculate (*ragr*) god has got entry here, and this fellow’s born babies!’”. Italics and *argr/*ragr in parenthesis added.

27 Ruggerini, p. 58. See also Mckinnell–Ruggerini, p. 57, where it is said: “The other main type of accusation levelled against the gods is that of *ergi*. A word which means both “cowardice” and “sexual perversion or deviation”, which includes prostitution, sex-changing, adultery, sex with giants and *seiðr* (perverse magic, especially when practiced by men, since it was normally associated only with women).” Further on *argr*: Ström (1974) and Sørensen (1983).

28 Staatsbibliothek, Munich, Clm 22053, III, 65v/66r.

29 In modern German one of the ways to call Satan is *Arge*, “the evil one”.

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Conclusion

Hence, Loki is a character inclined to homosexuality. This is testified by his capability of turning into a mare, by being called *argr*/*ragr* and by his cunning, tricking ways.

Chaucer’s Pardoner presents these same features:

1. He is portrayed in a veiled way as homosexual.
2. He is described as a mare and gelding.30
3. He truly is a trickster as he beguiles the liability of a sinner’s rueful soul.31

This Pardoner–Loki correlation may seem strained to all those who believe that since the Norman Conquest in 1066, Anglo-Saxon England turned in an instant into an ersatz of romance background. The linguistic change from “Old English” to “Middle English” was not an abrupt transition which wiped out five centuries of culture and folklore.32 Furthermore, although it is not fully considered, Scandinavian languages played an active part in the development of Middle English: “Middle English draws heavily on French and Latin, and also on the languages of Scandinavian settlers who had populated areas of England [...] in the later Anglo-Saxon period”.33 Language does not mean just grammar and syntax; it also means culture, folklore, style and sensibility. Indeed, the Vikings left numerous traces of their heathenism in late Anglo-Saxon England. Some are still evident; others survive as a vague reminiscence of a far-flung Germanic past. All in all, some centuries later, Chaucer introduces the Pardoner in such a peculiar way. It is unsure whether he had in mind the exact myth spoken of; however, it is plausible to think of Chaucer drawing from a faded mythologema still known and accessible to his readers’ understanding. Thus, one can picture the Father of the English language—aware of exploring an uncharted territory—saying to his readers: “Goode men and wommen, o thing warne I yow”.34 The Pardoner here introduced is a peculiar character; by way of a careful listening to a *straight*-saintly tale, a *bent*-blasphemous nature of the Pardoner will surely be unfolded.

31 *The General Prologue* describes him as the best at swindling money out of people by selling his indulgences and relics (692–714).
32 It is proved that Chaucer knew Old English homilies for instance; thus we can imagine the same for Germanic myths as well. See Godden (et alii) (1994, pp. 90–91).
33 Burrow and Turville-Petre (1992, p. 4).
34 *The Pardoner’s Prologue* (377).
References

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