The Pardoner in Canterbury: Class, Gender, and Urban Space in the Prologue to the Tale of Beryn

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Geoffrey Chaucer died in 1400 without bringing his pilgrims to the goal of their pilgrimage, the city of Canterbury with its cathedral’s relics of St. Thomas à Becket. Within a few decades, however, several anonymous fifteenth-century poets had contributed their own additions to Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, and one of them provided a vivid comic description of the pilgrims’ sightseeing activities after their arrival in Canterbury, most memorably of the Pardoner’s misadventures with a tapster, or barmaid, named Kit. This story precedes the inserted, non-Chaucerian Tale of Beryn in one fifteenth-century manuscript of The Canterbury Tales (the Northumberland manuscript), and is known both as the Prologue to the Tale of Beryn and as The Canterbury Interlude. The Northumberland manuscript dates to the second half of the fifteenth century. The Prologue to the Tale of Beryn, howev-
er, has been plausibly associated with the then most recent Canterbury jubilee, and has therefore been dated a half-century or so earlier than the manuscript, to approximately the year of that celebration, that is, to the 1420s (Brown 1991, 152-53; Bowers 1992, 57).

Criticism of the *Prologue to the Tale of Beryn* has focused almost exclusively on how “Chaucerian” it is or is not. Some critics, for example, have suggested that, because it is concerned with the Pardoner’s sexual pursuit of Kit the tapster, the *Prologue* can serve as evidence that Chaucer’s early readers (and even Chaucer himself) understood the Pardoner as physiologically normal and straightforwardly “heterosexual” (Benson 1982; Green 1982; Patterson 2001, 659 n.84) rather than as the sexually ambiguous and troubling figure other critics have found in him (McAlpine 1980; Sturges 2000, 152-68; Burger 1992; Dinshaw 1989, 156-84; Dinshaw 1999, 100-42). John Bowers, on the other hand, has suggested that one particularly Chaucerian aspect of the *Prologue* is precisely that it requires a reading of its Pardoner as an anatomical or spiritual eunuch, as Chaucer’s own Pardoner is for such earlier critics as Curry and Miller (Bowers 1985, 30; Curry 1960; Miller 1955). Even critics who are not focused on defining the Chaucerian Pardoner’s genital status or erotic preferences also tend to interpret (and to judge) the *Prologue* on the basis of its fidelity to Chaucer: E. J. Bashe, Karen A. Winstead and Frederick B. Jonassen, for instance, find the *Prologue* distinctively Chaucerian, while Stephen Kohl and Jean E. Jost find it just as distinctively un-Chaucerian (Bashe 1933; Winstead 1988; Jonassen 1991 and 1992; Kohl 1983; Jost 1994).

There has, however, been virtually no criticism considering the *Prologue to the Tale of Beryn* as a literary work in its own right, one that responds to the specific concerns of its own period and culture. This critical failure is certainly understandable: the *Prologue* is a deliberate addition to *The Canterbury Tales*, and its relation to Chaucer cannot be ignored. Nevertheless, the *Prologue* should be considered not only as a response to Chaucer, but also within its own late medieval, urban social context. This is to say that the *Prologue* is in need of a reading that asks not only how faithful its author is to Chaucer’s intentions, but also how its author uses Chaucer to serve his own contemporary ends. From this perspective, the question is not so much how Chaucerian the *Prologue* is, but how adaptable Chaucer is to the needs of a later poet concerned with his own cultural circumstances. Specifically, I would contend that the *Prologue to the Tale of Beryn* reorients *The Canterbury Tales* to a consideration of class and gender as played out in terms of late medieval urbanization and the specific urban spaces of the city of Canterbury.
My argument begins with a consideration of three such spaces: the city walls, the cathedral itself, and, most importantly, the mercantile space of the inn where the pilgrims stay and where the Pardoner pursues Kit, spaces that historically define the development and representation of the medieval city. These spaces, I argue, also serve in the Prologue to the Tale of Beryn as appropriate sites for the representation of class tensions, which had intensified in the period following the late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century outbreaks of the Black Death. It is the Pardoner, depicted here as a lower-class social climber, who most clearly figures these tensions. Turning from class and spatiality to gender, I go on to argue, in a more detailed discussion of the inn, that the character of Kit is a point of intersection between these class anxieties and related ones concerning gender: as a working-class woman who wields power in the microcosm of the inn, Kit is a representative of the changing status of single working women in this period, and of contemporary societal concerns over these perceived changes, concerns that center on the figure of the whore. The Pardoner and Kit, both attempting to claim symbolic capital to which they are not entitled, may thus be understood as comic critiques of fifteenth-century urban social transformations in class and gender, critiques that manage to subvert the Pardoner’s social pretensions more thoroughly than they do Kit’s.

To begin with fifteenth-century urban space: Chiara Frugoni (1991), in her book on medieval images of the city, suggests that early medieval representations of the urban experience tend to imagine the city as an enclosed, physically protective space represented most often by its walls. In the high Middle Ages, however, as cities become more closely identified with their bishops, representations focus more on the spiritual protection afforded by their religious spaces, such as the cathedral. Finally, in the later Middle Ages, as urban political institutions evolve in favor of the bourgeoisie, a more secular image of urban space emerges. Frugoni’s history of representations may be illuminated by an architectural historian like Howard Saalman (1968), whose essay on medieval urban planning discerns a similar pattern of development: from wall to cathedral to bourgeois space. While the military, religious, and mercantile spaces may remind us of the classic three estates (those who fight, those who pray, those who work), we should not understand the medieval city simply in terms of such rigid divisions. As Saalman points out, the walls and gates, in addition to their obvious military functions, also control the flow of goods and services into and out of the city, while the cathedral itself in some cases served as a thoroughfare for urban traffic moving in one side and out the other. The three types of urban space thus constantly interact.
The interaction among these urban spaces, in fact, is what Robert Paine emphasizes in his introduction to the architectural gazetteer of Canterbury published in 1970: Canterbury forms "a cell roughly ovoid within its wall . . . it has adhering to it on the inner side a sub-cell (the Precinct of Christ Church) which [along with St. Augustine's] contained one of the two generative forces—religion. . . . Trade, the other generator, contrived to occupy most of the remaining space within the wall line" (1970, 7). Thus the mercantile spaces of Mercery Lane and the Buttermarket are "complementary to the Cathedral and a prelude to it" (7). It is here, for instance, that some of the pilgrims to the Cathedral's shrine of St. Thomas à Becket had their lodging and might have purchased their pious souvenirs (as the Pardoner and his friends do in the Prologue, ll. 171-79). The Prologue to the Tale of Beryn is structured in terms of these interacting urban spaces of wall, cathedral, and mercantile space (specifically the inn), and affords the modern reader insight into the ways in which an early fifteenth-century English poet might imagine urban experience, particularly the experiences of class and gender.

In the first part of the Prologue to the Tale of Beryn, the pilgrims arrive at the "Checker of the Hope" (a real fifteenth-century Canterbury inn), where the Pardoner immediately undertakes his erotic pursuit of Kit the tapster. The pilgrims then go off to see the city's sights. The Pardoner and his friends, including the Miller and the Summoner, seek out the cathedral and buy souvenirs, while the Knight and the Squire inspect the city walls and the other pilgrims pursue other activities. In the second part of the Prologue, the Pardoner returns to his pursuit of Kit, who turns the tables on him, eating the supper he had ordered and egging her "paramour" on to beat him with his own staff. After a mock-battle, the Pardoner is defeated and packed off to spend the night in the dog's kennel.

The representative roles played by Kit and the Pardoner, and their functions in urban spaces, may be most usefully understood in the context of the late medieval English economic and demographic changes that made the working classes and women into sources of anxiety within traditional patriarchal culture. Ultimately, these changes in class and gender status are part of the larger system of social transformations set in motion by the Black Death of 1348-1349 and the lesser outbreaks of plague that followed it (the most recent as of the 1420s—the date of the Prologue to the Tale of Beryn—had occurred in 1405). After the preliminary shock of such massive depopulation, the Black Death proved ironically beneficial to those members of the peasantry and working classes (like Kit) who survived it. Due to the scarcity of labor, wages and the standard of living rose dramatically in the long run, despite short-term efforts to return laborers to their pre-plague economic status (such as the 1349
Ordinance of Labourers and the 1351 Statute of Labourers) and social status (such as the sumptuary laws). As David Herlihy suggests,

 Europeans, even as their numbers declined, were living better. . . . Conspicuous consumption by the humble threatened to erase the visible marks of social distinctions and to undermine the social order. The response [to] the alleged prodigality in food and clothing was sumptuary laws, which governments enacted all over Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. . . . The repetition of these laws suggests their futility. High wages to the poor and improved living standards came to be irremediable facts of late medieval economic and social life. (Herlihy 1997, 47-48; c.f. Ziegler 1969, 232-51; Freedman 1999, 262 and 287)

The existence of such laws, and of ordinances like the 1351 Statute of Labourers, is evidence of the cultural anxieties caused by the laborers' new status. The Statute of Labourers suggests that the distinction between “servants” and “great men” may have seemed to be undergoing erasure:

 . . . the servants, having no regard to the [1349] ordinance, but to their ease and singular covetousness, do withdraw themselves from serving great men and others, unless they have livery and wages double or treble of what they were wont to take in the 20th year and earlier, to the great damage of the great men and impoverishment of all the commonalty; whereof the commonalty prays remedy. (Myers 1969, 993)

The laborers seek a life of leisure, it is claimed, and threaten to withdraw themselves from service. Not only a demand for higher wages seems to be at issue here, but the blurring of the lines among the traditional three estates as well. The problem is a double one: the laborers are gaining, in Bourdieu's terms, economic capital, and in doing so also threaten to make inroads into the traditional aristocracy's reserves of symbolic capital; the "symbolic economy" imagined here is a zero-sum one. This impression of a perceived zero-sum symbolic economy is confirmed by the sumptuary laws' attempts, especially after the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, to keep members of the third (laboring) estate from dressing, and thus looking, like members of the first (noble) estate. Similar laws also disallowed "low persons" from participating in other aristocratic pastimes such as hunting, because, as in a 1390 statute,

they assemble at such times to hold discussions, and make plots and conspiracies, to make insurrections and disobedience to your majesty and laws, under colour of such manner of hunting. . . . Reply: The king consents [to a prohibition on hunting], adding to this . . . all other devices to take or destroy beasts of the forest, hares or rabbits, or other sport of gentlefolk. (Myers 1969, 1004)
There are two points of interest here. The first concern, as the royal reply suggests, is the usurpation of the “sport of gentlefolk” by the lower orders. As in the case of the sumptuary laws, the imitation of the upper classes by the lower is in itself a source of anxiety, as a usurpation of the upper classes’ symbolic capital. Second, this form of imitation is also imagined as a source of unruliness and, indeed, rebellion: it is a short step from counterfeiting class and upward social mobility to overthrowing “proper” class relations altogether.

In the Prologue to the Tale of Beryn, such class anxieties are evident not only in the pilgrims’ behavior in different urban spaces throughout their stay in Canterbury, but specifically in the Pardoner’s relationship with Kit as well. To begin like the architectural historians, we find the Knight performing his expected aristocratic military function at the city wall: examining and commenting on the city’s defenses, which, the narrator informs us, is entirely “as to a knyght befall” (l. 238); such activities are marked as appropriate class behavior. In fact, he is passing on his knowledge of fortifications to his son, the Squire; not only the examination of the walls, but also the transmission of patriarchal knowledge from father to son, is part of his aristocratic identity. The Knight displays his understanding of military technology and tactics, explaining to his son the Squire “the perell and the dout / For shot of arblast and of bowe, and eke for shot of gonne” (ll. 240-41), both how the town might be captured and how it might be defended. It is worth noting that, despite the military importance of Canterbury’s coastal defenses, the walls were not in good condition by the 1420s: town records show extensive and frequent repair work being undertaken beginning in the fourteenth century (Cantacuzino et al. 1970, 22-23). As in The Canterbury Tales, the Knight is a noble but somewhat outmoded figure whose aristocratic heritage is in need of preservation: his concerns are not those of the modern fifteenth-century city described elsewhere in the Prologue, and his military expertise will eventually be parodically degraded by the Pardoner. The Squire himself is represented exactly as Chaucer represents him in the General Prologue, engaged in the aristocracy’s other medieval literary-conventional activity, devotion to an absent lady: “it semed that his mynde / Was much in his lady that he loved best, / That mad hym offt to wake when he shuld have his rest” (ll. 248-50). These conventional aristocratic concerns with battle and with love will be comically inverted in the Pardoner’s later encounter with Kit: the Prologue to the Tale of Beryn is less concerned with eulogizing the military aristocracy than with the lower orders’ attempts to appropriate its trappings.

Turning to the second urban space, the cathedral, we find that the Knight’s genuine knowledge of military matters is contrasted with the ignorance of the Pardoner and his lower-class companions, who try to decipher
the heraldic symbolism represented in the cathedral’s stained-glass windows, “[c]ounterfeiting gentilmen, the armes for to blase” (l. 150). The narrator reminds the audience that in fact they are only dissembling, like the peasants cited in earlier statutes and sumptuary laws who dress and behave in a manner reserved for the gentlefolk: “The Pardoner and the Miller and other lewde sotes / Sought hemselff in the chirch, right as lewd gotes, / Pyred fast and poured highe oppon the glase” (ll. 147-49). The repetition of “lewd” at the ends of lines 147 and 148 drives the point home: these lower-class pilgrims may try to “counterfeit” the behavior of gentlemen and in doing so to achieve upward social mobility, but, reassuringly, their true class can still be correctly recognized through their ignorance of heraldry and of military technology, as they argue over what sort of weapon is depicted in the window. It appears to be a type of halberd, a popular infantry weapon of the fifteenth century (DeVries 1992, 29-32), “a spere . . . with a prik tofore” (l. 155), but the “lewd” pilgrims fail to identify it; the Pardoner, indeed, compares it to “a rakes ende” (l. 153), linking him to agricultural labor rather than to warfare, and emphasizing even more clearly the non-aristocratic background underlying his counterfeit gentle status. Contrast this to the Knight’s discourse on the city walls. Several Canterbury Cathedral windows in the spaces frequented by pilgrims depict a halberd, sometimes associated with an apostle, sometimes with an English king (Caviness 1981, 244-45, 246, 271, 319); the halberd is thus iconographically associated with an exalted status—religious or noble—that the Pardoner can only try, and inevitably fail, to counterfeit. That the argument is about a staff-weapon is also significant: the Pardoner’s attempt to counterfeit gentle status is linked to a specifically phallic offensive weapon as a source of class power, which is therefore closely connected to gender privilege. Phallic weapons and implements are in some sense a reification of the respective symbolic capitals of upper and lower classes, symbolic symbolic capital, as it were. Given late medieval patterns of urban development and representation, it is also significant that the contrast between the genuine and the counterfeit aristocrat, Knight and Pardoner, is played out in the urban spaces of wall and cathedral: whereas the wall allows the Knight an opportunity to display his class-related military expertise, the cathedral serves the related function of containing or exposing the lower-class pilgrims’ social pretensions. (The Prologue to the Tale of Beryn is relatively uninterested in the Pardoner’s ecclesiastical function.) Even as their importance in representations of the city gives way to a more bourgeois space, the wall and the cathedral serve complementary symbolic functions in maintaining the traditional ideals of class structure. (William Townsend even suggests that the technical achievement of the
cathedral nave was itself a sign of the church's secular concern with wealth and status [1950, 44]).

This depiction of the Pardoner and his companions thus responds quite clearly to late medieval anxieties about members of the lower classes rising above their station and counterfeiting a higher status—and, with its play on phallic weaponry whose correct use is accessible to the Knight but not to the Pardoner, the *Prologue* also reorients the Chaucerian Pardoner's genital ambiguity in order to do so. The sumptuary laws and the Statute of Laborers both represent aspects of an anxious late medieval discourse concerning the threat of social mobility after the Black Death, and so does the *Prologue to the Tale of Beryn*, which, like the laws and ordinances, also attempts to bring its laborers back into line, in this case by comically exposing their social pretensions.

Another long-term effect of the Black Death and subsequent epidemics was an increase in the rate of urbanization. Philip Ziegler has surveyed the literature on the detachment of peasant laborers from the manors (Ziegler 1969, 236-49), and P. J. P. Goldberg's influential work suggests that many of them headed for the towns between the late fourteenth century and the early decades of the fifteenth:

> Towns, as the principal centers of trade and commerce, following the initial disruption of the Black Death itself, probably experienced a period of prosperity for several decades from the later fourteenth century. Certainly the poll tax and, more problematically, franchise evidence suggest towns were able to recruit migrants in very considerable numbers despite the greater availability of land and lack of labour in the countryside. (Goldberg 1992, 289-90)

In fact, Goldberg attributes this movement to "the twin effects of rising wages and falling grain prices" that "necessitated a retreat from arable farming" after the Black Death (1992, 292), and suggests that this retreat lasted well into the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (291-92).

Turning now to my second concern, gender, these economic and demographic shifts affected young women in particular. Women's historians have found that women were attracted to town life in even greater numbers than men, and that they found there both economic survival and a degree of independence unavailable to them in the countryside. Goldberg suggests that real economic recovery from the Black Death did not occur until late in the fifteenth century, and that in the meantime the labor shortage created new opportunities for women. The *Prologue to the Tale of Beryn* was composed in the middle of a period that, extending from about the second to the fifth decade of the fifteenth century, represents the high point of female economic activity. . . . [c]ontinued demo-
graphic recession in the face of endemic disease and possibly declining birth rates consequent upon delayed marriage and a growing proportion of women failing to marry, served to further undermine the supply of labour. Women may thus have been drawn into the labour force in yet greater numbers and to have begun to fill some formerly male economic niches. (Goldberg 1992, 337)

The result was a growing number of single women migrating from the country to the cities: “young women would have been especially prominent among these migrants since they would have been most vulnerable in a depressed labour market” (Goldberg 1992, 292; c.f. Mate 1999, 33-34). Urban women in many cases came to outnumber men, especially in the later periods (Goldberg 292; c.f. Jewell 1996, 84; Mate 1999, 46-47).

Kit the tapster is one such woman, a young, single woman earning her living as a live-in “servant,” that is, a woman who works not for herself or her husband but as an employee; she apparently receives a portion of her wages in the form of lodging in the inn where she works (specifically in the taproom), an arrangement that would not have been unusual (Mate 1999, 47; Jewell 1996, 101-04): “She haled hym into the tapstry, there hir bed was maked” (l. 27). Kit also exemplifies another demographic trend, the post-Black Death tendency of many women to marry later in life than had traditionally been the case, or not to marry at all, due to the greater possibilities of independence offered by employment in town:

Women did not enter into matrimony at the earliest opportunity despite the trend in wage levels. Nor did women play an essentially passive role in marriage formation; economic opportunity allowed them a degree of independence and thus of choice that was otherwise denied them. (Goldberg 1992, 361)

Kit is precisely the sort of woman Goldberg here describes, unmarried and exercising the power of choice—not only in marriage but, in Kit’s case, in extramarital sexual relations—over the men who are interested in her: Kit has in fact chosen a “paramour” whose behavior she controls, and she tricks, then rejects the Pardoner.

The true economic power of women in this period certainly should not be overestimated. In comparison with men, women at all levels of society remained fairly powerless despite the changes here discussed. Nevertheless, Goldberg’s views have been highly influential, and the Prologue to the Tale of Beryn suggests that, whether or not such women were a significant social force in reality, they were perceived as enjoying their chosen economic independence, and as exerting power—specifically phallic power—in a way that men might find threatening. In other words, regardless of their economic capital, women’s symbolic capital was threatening men’s in the zero-sum
symbolic economy, as that of the laboring classes was threatening the aristocracy's. Judith Bennett's point about unmarried brewsters applies equally to the related trade of tapster:

As depicted in a wide range of cultural media, brewsters were seen as untrustworthy, disorderly, and unreliable tradeswomen . . . . Not-married brewsters might have particularly suffered from these characterizations because they had "not any man to control them," because, in other words, the nefarious behaviors associated with their sex were not mitigated by the governing presence of a husband. (Bennett 1996, 55)

Women out of men's control took on the burden of an intensification of traditional, misogynous male anxiety about women in general; and independent lower-class women like Kit were also burdened by the mainstream discourses about the unruliness of the lower orders already discussed.

Socially, it is the figure of the urban whore that embodies these anxieties about independent women and class, anxieties that Kit represents in literary form. Ruth Mazo Karras has shown that the categories of "single-woman" and "whore" overlapped in this period (1996, 52). Although Kit is never accused of prostitution, nor even called a whore, she would nonetheless be recognizable to the late medieval/early modern audience as an appropriate object of the cultural discourse surrounding whoredom. Her association with the third urban space, the mercantile space of the inn, is thus highly appropriate, and the power she wields there signals another fifteenth-century shift in the perception and representation of class as well as gender relations.

She fits this "whore" paradigm from a number of different perspectives. For one thing, she simply is a tapster (that is, a female aleseller or barmaid), a trade associated with loose sexual morals, and indeed with whoredom, throughout this period, as in a 1413 London borough ordinance condemning the violence resulting from men's visits to "common prostitutes at taverns, brewhouses of hucksters, and other places of ill repute," or a 1492 borough ordinance from Coventry directed at "tapsters and harlots":

Also that no person within this city from henceforth keep, hold, receive, or favor any tapster, or woman of evil name, fame, or condition with whom any contact is inclined to be sinful, pertaining to lechery, upon the penalty that every such household lose 20s for every offense (Goldberg 1995, 211-12; c.f. Bennett 1996, 133; Karras 1996, 71-72).

Kit is automatically suspect because of her trade and the associated space she occupies.

Kit is, further, a "common woman," one who makes herself available to all comers (Bennett 1996, 133; see also 129): she claims to be mourning a dead "love," one "Jenkyn Harpour" (ll. 28-32), but is also involved with the
"paramour" mentioned above (l. 427), and offers herself to the Pardoner as well (ll. 345-62). As Ruth Mazo Karras has demonstrated, though the whore might be expected to exchange sex for money, it is not that exchange which primarily defined her in this period (as it defines the modern prostitute). Instead, it is her body's universal availability that defines the whore or "common woman," that is, the woman whose body is, like Kit's, common to all men (1996, 10; 27).

Kit does, however, like the modern prostitute, profit from her sexuality; though not the defining characteristic of the late medieval/early modern whore, this sort of exchange is regularly associated with her (Karras 1996, 3). For example, Kit accepts money for the preparation of a caudle that the Pardoner intends to eat with her (ll. 363-68), but then consumes it with her paramour instead (ll. 426-31); payment in food and drink rather than money might characterize late medieval whoredom (Karras 1996, 79-80) and further cements Kit's association with mercantile space. Kit is somewhat coy about taking money, since she does not claim the identity of whore, but after their first flirtatious encounter she does accept payment from the Pardoner:

And therwith he stert up smertly and cast down a grote.

"What shal this do, gentill sir? Nay, sir! For my cote, I nold ye payde a peny here and so sone pas."

The Pardoner swore his gretter othe; he wold pay no las (ll. 87-90).

He apparently intends it as a sort of down payment: "... ye list be my tresorer, for we shuU offter mete" (l. 98), and Kit eventually accepts it (ll. 90-93). Karras suggests that the penny payment mentioned by Kit would have been "typical of the lower end of the trade" (1996, 80). Such exchanges associate Kit, like all whores, with the money economy, which, as Karras points out, was still a source of distrust late in the Middle Ages:

[They relationship between a prostitute and her client could serve as a paradigm of the anxiety ... that money dissolved personal ties and obligations and substituted for them impersonal one-way transactions which contributed nothing to the maintenance and renewal of the social fabric. (Karras 1996, 133)"

Whoredom in general, and Kit's association with it in particular, can therefore stand for more fundamental cultural changes, in this case perceived threats to the class and gender systems, like the unruly mercantile space of the inn itself.

Most significantly, Kit is associated with whoredom because this very unruliness also characterizes her gender and lower-class identity. Karras argues that the late medieval/early modern institutionalization of whoredom
was one aspect of the patriarchal attempt to control women's sexuality and independence, suggesting that "[s]crutiny of women's sexual behavior was a major means of social control" and that

the connection of feminine sexuality with prostitution made it extremely difficult for any woman to maintain her independence. . . . [A] single woman was a threat, and if she did not settle down with one man—whether because she had more than one lover or because she had none—she ran a strong risk of being labeled "common," a whore. Even at a time when work opportunities were relatively good for women and there was less economic pressure to turn to prostitution, independent women might for that very reason present more of a threat. (Karras 1996, 141-42)

Various measures were instituted in late medieval and early modern England to keep prostitution under control, ranging from further sumptuary laws directed specifically at whores and intended both to identify them and to separate them from respectable women (they were often required to wear a striped hood) (Karras 1996, 21-22), to official brothels whose employees were strictly regulated (32-47), to the religious texts extolling repentant prostitute saints like Mary Magdalene and Thaïs (102-30). Kit, as an amateur whore, falls outside all of these attempts at social control. Exemplifying the discourses of whoredom but never identified as a professional by either dress or place of employment, and certainly unrepentant, Kit retains control of her own life and the lives of her actual and potential sex partners, as well as of the inn, to a remarkable (and, in real-life terms, unrealistic) degree. Kit thus also fails to conform to another conventional portrayal of the whore, that of innocent or exploited victim (57-64): precisely because she cannot be categorized so easily, she remains a disturbing source of anxiety throughout the Prologue. In that sense, Kit is to gender and sexuality as the Pardoner is to class: she apparently belongs to one category, the whore, but counterfeits another, the respectable woman (and even, as we shall see, the courtly lady).

Jacques Rossiaud suggests that medieval prostitution is "a mirror image of the city" (1988, 160), and the inn where Kit plies her trade, "The Checker of the Hope," is thus the third, mercantile urban space that structures class and gender relations in this narrative. The inn is typically understood as a site of secular disorder opposed to the cathedral (Jonassen 1991 and 1992; Tupper 1914; Hindley 2000), but once again, these distinctions tend to break down in the Prologue to the Tale of Beryn, and "The Checker of the Hope" exemplifies the interaction between the religious and secular life of the city particularly well. Standing on the corner of Mercery Lane and the High Street, it belongs to the secular, bourgeois world of trade, yet it was built by the Cathedral chapter's Prior Chillenden in the 1390s as one of the chapter's many city investments: the prior and chapter received rents from the ground-
floor shops as well as income from the pilgrims lodging there (Dobson 1995, 139-40). Kit, in plying her trade, represents the secular and mercantile nature of late medieval urban life—but she does so on church property. The inn will also shortly become a parodic battlefield, associating it with the fighting aristocracy and their military space, the defensive walls, as well. The inn thus becomes a microcosm of the city itself (as Rossiaud suggests of prostitution), an urban space where class and gender, religion and trade, simultaneously clash and overlap.

I have suggested that Kit represents the forces of disorder associated with the whore, but not society's methods of controlling them. The Prologue to the Tale of Beryn contains her in another way, through humor and parody. Kit's unruliness is exemplified primarily in her comical relations with the Pardoner, and it is in these relations also that anxieties over class and gender intersect. Just as the Pardoner tries to counterfeit gentle status in his visit to the cathedral, in contrast to the Knight's genuine nobility exhibited on the walls, so the Pardoner and Kit in the inn try together to gain symbolic capital by engaging in class behaviors that conventionally—at least in medieval literary texts—belong to the aristocracy; in fact, their flirtation echoes and parodies the fin'amors in which the Squire is more straightforwardly engaged. Kit's coyness about accepting money—the refusal to identify herself as a whore—is one aspect of this confusion of class categories, but so are the love-language and gestures exchanged between her and the Pardoner. Kit, speaking of her deceased lover during their first encounter,

\[
\ldots wyped soft hir eyen, for teres that she out lassh
As grete as eny mylstone, upward gon they stert
For love of hir swetyng that sat so nygh hir hert.
She wept and wayled and wrong hir hondes, and made much to done,
For they that loven so passyngly, such trowes they have echon.
She snyffeth, sigheth, and shooke hire hede, and made rouful chere, (U, 34-39)
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The sighs, tears, and “to-do” conventionally characterize those courtly ladies of romance who “loven so passyngly,” not a woman like Kit, a barmaid who is shortly also to be revealed as a whore and thief. They are belied when her body rebels against this artificial performance with a more natural response to tears that is absent from the conventions of courtly love: a runny nose ("therwith she gan to fnese" [l. 43]). The Pardoner responds like the courtly gentleman he will shortly be counterfeiting in the cathedral, pretending to believe that Kit might actually pine away for love like Alcione in The Book of the Duchess:
So kynde a lover as ye be oon, and so trew of hert,
For by my trewe conscience, yit for yewe I smert
And shall this month hereafter for yeur soden disese...

Ye made me a sory man; I dred ye wold have sterved. (ll. 49-51, 55)

Again, the high-flown sentiments and the language of love-sickness belong to the romance tradition, but Kit and the Pardoner inhabit the world of the fabliau (Darjes and RendaU 1985); the audience, and both these characters, know that getting her into bed is, in an outrageous pun, “his hole entencioun” (l. 301). And only the Pardoner is unaware that Kit intends to cheat him in return: “etheres thought and tent was other to begile” (l. 126). For each of them, this beguiling includes the pretended identification of the other as noble or gentle. Kit calls the Pardoner “gentil sir” and “a nobill man” (ll. 56-57), while the Pardoner, though he neither disavows this noble identity nor suggests that Kit is his equal, does claim that her manners toward him are inappropriately humble: “yeur maners been too alowe” (l. 94). As in Fragment I of The Canterbury Tales, the concerns of the upper classes—in this case, the Squire’s fin’amors as detailed in the General Prologue—are parodied by the lower orders.

From this perspective, the Prologue to the Tale of Beryn is not only a fabliau, but also a parody of the popular late medieval romances of social mobility such as The Squire of Low Degree (or even The Wife of Bath’s Tale), in which inner gentilesse is seen to overcome class differences. Such romances often culminate in a marriage between social unequals, and the Pardoner too hints, without actually promising marriage, that this could be the outcome for Kit: “ye shul have a husbond that shal yewe wed to wyve” (l. 111). The parody of romance continues in the Pardoner’s second encounter with Kit, in which he orders and pays for the cauldle: he awakens Kit in order to do so, and their ensuing banter about imprisonment is reminiscent of the similar scene in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Tolkien and Gordon 1972, ll. 1208-40):

“A, Benedicite! Sir, who wist yewe here? Out! Thus I myght be take
Prisoner,” quod the tapstere, “being al aloon!”—
And therwith breyd up in a frighte and began to groon.

“Nowe sith ye be my prisoner, yeld yewe now; quod he.” (ll. 314-17)

Along with the language of courtesy (l. 323) and enchantment (l. 339), these romance references reinforce the comical disjunction between both characters’ actual and performed classes.

Kit, however, additionally represents the second source, besides class, of late medieval/early modern cultural anxiety, that rooted in gender. In the
scenes just described, the Pardoner, though he engages in a false performance of class, also performs masculinity in a way that would have seemed culturally appropriate: he claims phallic power over Kit, as in the imprisonment scene where he is the aggressor and she plays the role of damsel in distress. Traditional gender roles are reinforced by the Pardoner's later reflections, in which he sees himself as entirely in charge of the situation, both sexually and financially: he

\[
\ldots \text{hoped sikerlich to have had al his will,}
\]

\[
\text{And thought many a mery thought by hymself aloon:}
\]

\[
\text{“I am i-logged,” thought he, “best, howesoever it gone!}
\]

\[
\text{And thoughte it have costed me, yit wol I do my peyn}
\]

\[
\text{For to pike hir purs tonyghte and wyn my coste ageyn.” (ll. 372-76)}
\]

In some sense, the Prologue to the Tale of Beryn—or at least the Pardoner himself—proposes the kind of libidinal economy later theorized by the nineteenth-century "marginalist" economists critiqued by Goux: rather than calculating value according to the labor taken in production, the marginalists calculated value according to the consumer's subjective desire, and the Prologue here performs a similar operation. Its refusal to name Kit as a whore seems a coy erasure of the value of her labor in favor of the value of the Pardoner's prospective jouissance (1990, 198-212).

The Pardoner's belief in his own phallic power is, however, badly mistaken, for he has already symbolically given up the phallus itself to Kit. Immediately following his initial observation of the various class behaviors on display at the inn, the Pardoner hands his pilgrim's staff over to her:

\[
\text{“The hostelere was so halowed from o plase to another, / He toke his staf to the tapstere” (ll. 21-22).}
\]

Bowers reminds us that the pilgrim's staff was often, in medieval literature, "suggestive of a tumescent phallus," citing the well-known ending of the Roman de la Rose (Bowers 1992, 165). The Pardoner thus symbolically hands the phallus—the reification of his own symbolic capital—over to Kit at the very outset of their relationship, and with it the masculine authority and privilege that he continues trying, but failing, to exert throughout the rest of the story. Kit shows no sign of the "wandering womb" sometimes thought to characterize women in medieval and early modern medicine (Cadden 1993, 14-15), but the Pardoner will be sadly beset by his own wandering phallus as it passes from Kit to her paramour. The genital ambiguity of Chaucer's Pardoner is not exactly reproduced here, but clearly the notion of detachable genitalia is common to both texts; here, though, such detachability expresses a specifically late medieval, urban concern over both gender privilege and social mobility. The question is not, as it is for critics of Chaucer, whether or not
the Pardoner is a eunuch, but rather how the detachable phallic staff is deployed in the late medieval, urban symbolic economy being imagined here.

The story's narrator initially suggests that any woman can get the better of any man: "But who is that a womman coud nat make his herd / And she were thereabout and set hir wit thereto?" (ll. 436–37). But this fairly conventional example of medieval misogyny is quickly narrowed down to a condemnation of women specifically like Kit: the narrator declares that he will not speak against women in general or "hir estates" (l. 442), "but of lewd Kittes / As tapsters and other such that hath wyly writtes / To pik mennes purses and eke to bler hir eye" (ll. 443–45). It is specifically the "lewd" working-class women like Kit who pose the threat. Kit's appropriation of the phallus, in fact, allows the ultimate comical representation of late medieval and early modern cultural anxieties over the independence of working-class women in a money-based economy: just as they took over some traditionally male economic power and exercised a greater degree of control over their own marriage and erotic choices in the early fifteenth century, so Kit claims traditionally masculine power by transforming the literal staff into a symbolic phallus—and uses it against its original owner in the text's zero-sum symbolic economy.

After Kit, her paramour, and their co-conspirator the "hosteler" or innkeeper have consumed the Pardoner's caudle and had a laugh at his expense (ll. 447–53), Kit comes back to the subject of the Pardoner's staff, which is still in her possession: she

... sodenly kissed his paramour and seyd, "We shul sclope Togider hul by hul as we have many a nyghte, And yf he com and make noyse, I prey yew dub hym knyght."

"Yis, dame," quod hir paramour, "be thow nat agast. This is his own staff, thow seyest; thereof he shal atast." (ll. 454–58)

The hosteler also makes "a vowe to the pecock" (l. 462) to assist them in warding off the Pardoner. The entire passage ironically brings together some of the themes I have been pursuing here. We are reminded of Kit's whorish venality, as well as the mercantile space that supports it, in consuming the meal that the Pardoner paid for. We are also reminded that Kit possesses the phallic staff, and that she wields its authority in the microcosm of the inn: note the imperative tone she takes with the paramour, both in making the choice to sleep with him rather than the Pardoner, despite their earlier assignment, and in commanding him to attack the Pardoner if the latter makes any trouble. Both the discourses of whoredom and of working-class female independence are operating here: symbolic capital, normatively the exclusive
property of men and reified in the phallic staff or other weapons, is here usurped and deployed by a woman.\textsuperscript{13} The discourse of class as it relates to the Pardoner’s counterfeit gentility is similarly usurped and deployed: he is ironically to be made a knight through a “dubbing” with his own phallus, a dubbing, or conferral of phallic authority, which will really be a drubbing, a demonstration of the Pardoner’s lack both of status and of masculine potency, like his earlier unfamiliarity with the signs of aristocratic phallic power displayed in the cathedral. The hosteler’s vow to the peacock (“a chivalric ceremony involving love or knightly service” [Bowers 1992, 172]) reinforces Kit’s and her paramour’s sarcastic treatment of the Pardoner’s supposed nobility: like the tale’s audience, these characters have not been fooled by the Pardoner’s class counterfeiting.

Gender privilege and class power are linked here by the symbolic appropriation of the phallus, and they continue to be linked in the battle that ensues. The phallic-symbolic nature of the staff is emphasized when the Pardoner shows up at Kit’s door: hearing another man within, he falls into a “frensy” of sexual “gelousy” (l. 499-500)—and the best he can do in this condition is to demand the return of his staff: “He axed his staff spitouslich with wordes sharp and rowe” (l. 520). If it were only a literal staff, one might wonder why it takes on such extreme importance at this point, but if it did not serve the function of phallus before, it clearly does now that the Pardoner has lost it.\textsuperscript{14}

The paramour fulfills Kit’s earlier command by attacking the Pardoner with it:

“In soth,” quod he, “I woll nat fro the dorr wend
Tyll I have my staff, thow bribour!”—”Then have the toder end!”

Quod he that was within, and leyd it on his bak,
Right in the same place as chapmen bereth hir pak.
And so he did too mo, as he coude arede,
Graspyng after with the staff in length and eke in brede,
And fond hym otherwhile redlich inowghe
With the staffes ende highe uppon his browe. (l. 523-30)

Beaten with his own phallus, the Pardoner tries to fight back, but succeeds only in parodying his own earlier attempts at counterfeiting gentle status, and thus unwittingly reinforces Kit’s mockery of him: needing to arm himself like a knight, he can do so only with the inn’s kitchen equipment.

“Aha-ha!” thought the Pardoner; “beth there pannes aryn?”

And droughe oppon that side and thought oppon a gynne.
Robert S. Sturges 69

So atte last he fond oon and set it on his hede,
For as the case was fall, thereto he had grete nede.
But yit he grasped ferthermore to have somwhat in honde,
And fond a grete ladill right as he was gonde. . . . (ll. 569-74)

Having been dubbed "knight" as Kit commanded, the Pardoner now gets a comic version of the knights' arming scenes popular in medieval romance, but all he can come up with is a pan for his head and a ladle for a weapon, feminine implements of the domestic economy: the blunt weapon is a poor substitute for the fifteenth century knight's increasingly sharply-pointed weapons (DeVries 1992, 24-25), and an even poorer substitute for the phallus. The Pardoner winds up not only robbed, wounded, and sexually humiliated, but dehumanized, as he is forced to spend the night in a space even lower on the social order than the inn itself: the dog's kennel (ll. 619-55). The drubbing thus converts the staff's symbolic exchange-value back to its literal use-value. Again as in Fragment I of The Canterbury Tales, the lower-class pilgrims parody the concerns of the aristocracy. At this point their parody is directed at the Knight's own concern with warfare, signaled earlier on the city walls; the aristocratic urban space is thus degraded in the mercantile space of the inn, through which this mock-battle rages (Jost 1994, 139).

But once more, Chaucer's parodic technique is reoriented to late medieval urban problems. It is noteworthy that this battle is exactly the kind of disorderly conduct that late medieval/early modern laws regarding urban prostitution tried to control. Karras notes that "the presence of prostitutes in a community could cause significant disruption" (1996, 95) and that this disorder, as much as their sexual crimes, was the object of attempts at urban social control, as evidenced in various legal charges brought against whores and those who consorted with them:

Angelo Taylor's stewhouse was accused of causing "many quarrels, beatings, and hues and cries at night." Petronilla Bednot's stew "about midnight, on several nights, when the neighbors living thereabouts were in their beds, came with sticks to their windows and beat on them maliciously and said to the neighbors, 'You who are in there, come out and be beaten!' In King's Lynn, Henry Cook and Nicholas Wick quarreled when the former interrupted the latter with three prostitutes; the incident led to Henry's death from a stab wound in his cheek. (Karras 1996, 95-96)"1

The last example cited provides a particularly close analogue to the violence associated with Kit and her friends in the Prologue to the Tale of Beryn, but the larger point is what is essential: Kit and her friends represent exactly the kind of social disruption associated with mercantile urban space and being prosecuted in fifteenth-century urban society at large, which in turn reflects dis-
ruptions of class and gender and cultural anxieties about them. The new urban social arrangements coming into being after the Black Death posed for late medieval and early modern culture the question of who possessed the phallus, and the frightening possibility that it might be passing from the upper to the lower classes, and from men to women, is addressed throughout this tale. The Pardoner, as a lower-class pilgrim, is reassuringly unable to wield the phallus; but whatever comfort the audience might gain from seeing him get his comeuppance is disturbed by the fact that it comes from an even lower-class, uncontrollable, disruptive young woman. In some ways, he is himself at fault for giving up his authority to a woman who is common in every sense, “That he wold trust a tapster of a comon hostry,/For comenly for the most part, they been wyly echon” (ll. 654-55). From this perspective, the Pardoner appears in the Prologue to the Tale of Beryn as he appeared in the original Canterbury Tales: not most significantly as a “heterosexual” man, but rather as a locus for an exploration of the troubled rule of the phallus. However, the trouble in this case is caused by specifically late medieval, urban social anxieties.

In the long run, it is the story’s comic or carnivalesque tone that contains Kit and renders her harmless. But perhaps it is not the comic tone alone that does so. Also noteworthy is the fact that Kit wields the wandering phallus only through men, specifically by passing it to her paramour and the hosteler, a fact about Kit’s authority that perhaps brings the tale closer to the true nature of female power in the late Middle Ages. At all social levels in this period, from urban trader to queen, women exercised power primarily through their husbands. Female traders most often worked in their husbands’ trades and were usually allowed guild memberships only in their husbands’ names (Bennett 1996, 37-76; Jewell 1996, 88-95; Mate 1999, 46-56), while even queens in the later Middle Ages lost much of their direct political power and—like Kit with her consorts in her realm of the inn—exercised influence primarily as intercessors with their royal husbands (Parsons 1993 and 1995; Huneycutt 1995; McCartney 1995). Indeed, if we date the Prologue to the Tale of Beryn later rather than earlier in the 1420s, and consider its ironic image of an armored “knight” being beaten by enemy “soldiers” under the command of a threatening female military leader, it is tempting to see it as a response to the French victories over the English under Joan of Arc—another lower-class woman who claimed male prerogatives and was as a result called a disorderly whore.16 In any case, all such women, like Kit, exercised what power they possessed only through men, while women who were imagined as being truly independent of men—like whores—usually remained at the lower ends of the economic spectrum. As I suggested earlier, though women gained some economic power
and independence in late medieval towns, and though these gains were a source of the cultural concerns expressed in the Prologue to the Tale of Beryn, in reality they were comparatively minor and short-lived in comparison to male power and authority. The cultural imaginary that produced literary representations like Kit may have found in her a source of anxiety, but real-life Kits wielded little power (as opposed to localized resistance) against the forces of patriarchy.

In a world, then, in which spatiality and sexuality are fundamental experiences, and in which sexuality, race, class, and gender have been constructed as significant axes of difference, it should come as no surprise that struggles organised around these differences feature prominently in a process like urbanisation. Their contingent interconnections, their resistance to reduction (one to the other) and their spatial dynamism are testaments to the restlessness, contingency and spatial instability of power itself. As long as human beings continue to exist in space, and as long as our bodies and experiences encompass difference as well as sameness, this contradictory situation will continue. (Knopp 1995, 159)

I conclude with Lawrence Knopp’s suggestion that the issues of gender, class and urbanization are transhistorical as well as specific and local. In this essay, I have been trying to emphasize the latter aspects: The Prologue to the Tale of Beryn’s specific relevance to the cultural anxieties of its own late medieval period and urban setting. At the same time, however, the problems of spatiality, bodies, urbanization, class, and gender—in short, of the intertwined political, economic, gendered and symbolic forms of power I have been discussing—are of just as much interest to students of Chaucer. They all play their part in Chaucer’s construction of his Pardoner, and in modern readings of Chaucer that have sought to understand the Pardoner’s relevance to modern readers. The Prologue to the Tale of Beryn may perhaps be understood as an initiatory text in this process, the first critical reading to adapt the Chaucerian Pardoner to its own cultural use.

Notes

1 The following discussion draws on some ideas originally developed in Sturges (2000, 153–56). See also Sturges (2003, 41–42).

2 Jonassen sees the opposition between cathedral and inn as a structuring device of both The Canterbury Tales and the Prologue to the Tale of Beryn: see Jonassen (1991 and 1992). As shall become apparent, I find a third urban space equal in thematic importance, the city wall, and also find that, at least in the Prologue, the meanings of these spaces overlap rather than standing in opposition to one another.

3 On economic and symbolic capital, see Bourdieu (1990,112–21). I am also indebted to Goux (1990, 9–63).

4 All quotations of the Prologue to the Tale of Beryn are taken from the Bowers edition (1992), where it is called the Canterbury Interlude, and are cited by line num-
bers in the text. I prefer Bowers's recent and easily accessible text to Furnivall and Stone's older EETS edition (1909).

5 A pioneer in this regard is Uitz (1994). The English subtitle of her book overstates Uitz’s case considerably—she does not claim that medieval town life “liberated” women—but nevertheless, Uitz’s work does suggest that medieval townswomen made small but significant gains in economic independence and legal recognition.

6 Even a fairly skeptical critic of Goldberg like Mavis E. Mate finds that their difference “is primarily one of emphasis” (1999, 58); see also Jewell (1996, 100; 108).

7 Kit’s name may also anticipate the later term “kittock,” sometimes shortened to “kit,” referring to “a woman of loose character”; the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives 1470 as the date of the earliest occurrence (s.v. “kittock”; see also “kit”). I am indebted to Catherine Loomis for this suggestion.

8 R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250* (New York: 1987) 95, cited by Karras (1996, 133). Karras also points out the continued popular and ecclesiastical distrust of money even as “the monetary segment of the economy continued to grow in importance” in the period under discussion (133).

9 Bowers identifies the dead “Jenkyn Harpour” as Kit’s husband (Bowers 1992, 61 n. 2), but there is no textual reason to do so; Kit refers to him only as her “love” (l. 29).

10 For an analysis of the intersection of class and gender in several such romances dating from this period, see Hudson (1994).

11 Gary Taylor argues that the obsession with the phallus is a modern, essentially post-Freudian one (2000), and certainly Chaucer’s original Pardoner, and the other pilgrims, are more concerned with his possibly missing “coillongs,” but Taylor greatly overstates the case: the play on staffs etc. in medieval literature (not to mention royal scepters) suggests that the phallus as a representation of power was quite familiar to the Middle Ages and early modern period as well as to the twentieth century. On the Pardoner’s phallic staff, see Jost (1994, 138-39).

12 Karras notes that a phallic rod was, like the striped hood, a symbol identifying a whore (1996, 15; see also 149 n. 10).

13 On the deployment of symbolic capital specifically in gender relations, see Bourdieu (2001).


15 This episode is also reminiscent of the skimmington folk ritual or “rough music,” an English variant of the charivari in which various sorts of gender transgressors, including men who allowed themselves to be beaten by women, underwent public humiliation; it involved pots, pans, and especially the skimming ladies for which it is named, as well as cross-dressing. On the history and form of the skimmington, see Alford (1959); she discusses the use of kitchen implements at 505 and 508. The use of the ritual to humiliate subservient men is discussed by Thompson (1972, 293), and by Ingram (1981, 259 and 263). Kegl suggests that the skimmington was “also associated with unsanctioned peasant rituals and the threat of class sub-
version" (1994, 272). Jonassen draws the connection between the Pardoner's mock armor and the skimmington (1991, 120). I thank Catherine Loomis for pointing out the skimmington overtones in this passage.

Joan of Arc’s military activities occurred between May, 1429, and May, 1430. Her major victories, first against the English and then also against their Burgundian allies, took place in the spring and summer of 1429. On contemporary perceptions of Joan of Arc as a military leader, see DeVries (1999): for the discourses of female unruliness and whoredom as applied to Joan, see especially the English military leaders’ letter about her quoted on 1, the testimony offered at her nullification trial quoted on 77 and 80–81, John of Bedford’s letter quoted on 136–37, and the testimony offered at her original trial quoted on 151–52.

Works Cited


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