

5-19-2013

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Christopher Samuel Striker
Dickinson College

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Saints' Bones or Sinner's Words?:
Rhetorical Destabilization, Chaucer's Pardoner, and Boccaccio's Frate Cipolla

By
Chris Striker

Submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors Requirements for the Departments of Medieval and
Early Modern Studies and English

Professor Johnston, Supervisor
Professor Reed, Supervisor
Professor Schlitt, Supervisor
Professor Earenfight, Reader
Professor McMnamin, Reader

25 April 2013

--Acknowledgements--

I originally began this project determined to pursue a broadening of my own critical toolset, following in the steps of the New Historicist scholars I have read, the valuable guidance of my own advisers, and on whose critical paths I imagine myself to follow. The first iteration of this project was born after a field trip to the Walters Museum in Baltimore, Maryland. Walking along the exhibits of 12th-14th century reliquaries, I found myself lost in contemplating the objects while my guide, Dickinson Professor Phillip Earenfight, discussed an example of *furta sacra*, or the theft of sacred relics. In the company of Professor Thomas Reed, the instructor of my class on Chaucer that semester, I indulged in a sidebar conversation discussing the relics Chaucer's Pardoner sells to villagers. Professor Reed told me that day that I had hit on a topic worthy of a senior thesis, and I filed the conversation away in memory. The following spring, I enrolled in an Art History course primarily concerned with a medieval Christian understanding of relics and the afterlife, taught by my tour guide, Professor Earenfight. These experiences shaped my interests and the focus of my thesis, and the conversations that I have shared with these professors provided the initial impetus for the directions of this project. I want to offer special and extensive thanks to my family for always supporting my endeavors, to Sarah Ganong and Mary Nolte for their time-consuming and attentive readings, to Ryan Karr for late night deliberations on the function of language, and to Sean Holliday, Andrew Miller, and Ella Miller for their constant support. I am also indebted to my English 404 group for a truly wonderful and supportive environment, and most particularly to the three faculty advisers who have guided me through this thesis and through my college career: Professor Carol Ann Johnston, Professor Thomas Reed, and Professor Melinda Schlitt.

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.

--F. Scott Fitzgerald

--Preface--

The essay that follows this Preface has little to do with the question I set about answering in January of 2013 when I first sat down to write about relics, rhetoric, Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale," and Boccaccio's *Decameron* character Frate Cipolla. As I delved into the "Pardoner's Tale," looking at how the Pardoner treated his relics and how he presented them to his audiences, I realized that the Pardoner's words meant different things to different people and that this idea was a primary focus of the text. I also realized that the process of denoting particular meanings to particular audiences mimicked the workings of any literary text. It is no groundbreaking discovery to learn that a text— that the *words* of a text— contain multiple layered meanings, but the processes by which those meanings are constructed became my grounded interest over the course of this project. Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale" has everything to do with multiple meanings that inhere within a passage of text, but the proper format to treat such a meta-textual focus—that is, a text whose meaning is about the creation of textual meaning—remained a troubling question for the duration of this process. In addition, the subject of the discourses I investigate, relics as they existed for the Pardoner, Frate Cipolla, and in Chaucer's England, demonstrated the same need for a theoretical approach as multivalent as the relationships I set out to understand.

The Pardoner allows his speech to contain multiple meanings and readings at the same time, based on who hears what he says. The idea of a layer, as I said above, is nothing new. But the process by which layers of meaning develop and behave in Chaucer's text relies on a relationship between Frate Cipolla, for whom layering exists as a comparatively straightforward exercise in placing one meaning of a text directly on top of another, and Chaucer's understanding

that such a model has ramifications Boccaccio never ventured to examine. The Pardoner's speech demonstrates that a positive idea and its contradiction can exist simultaneously.

Practically speaking, the Pardoner can sin while he saves souls, and he can damn souls while he teaches them to avoid sin. Words here do not contain one stable meaning, nor do the ideas to which they refer remain fixed. Instead, the Pardoner's rhetoric renders language unstable and multivalent. This rhetoric erodes structured and logical relationships between ideas.

The language I have chosen to discuss these multiple meanings still gives me pause, but I would like to set forth here as useful an explication of my choices, and the theory I apply to do so, as I am able. Speaking abstractly, the words he uses invoke relationships sequentially, progressing from point to point, in an approximation of logical relationships. If the connections between the Pardoner's ideas followed a sequential structure entirely, logic would hold. However, in addition to the relationships established by sequentially progressing layers of meaning, the Pardoner's ideas interact with one another across multiple layers as well, as this essay will show. The ideas the Pardoner invokes on the surface of his prose may open up references that allow access to a second layer of meaning below the more apparent first. However, the third, fourth, and fifth layers of meaning below that second layer may also relate directly to the first, most apparent meaning the Pardoner's rhetoric addresses. Moreover, these layers may do so with separate, individual links to other layers of meaning within the text and so deny logical progression.

As I discuss these rhetorical layers, I look at the process of rhetorical layering in which the Pardoner engages. Taking his cue from Cipolla, the Pardoner uses his words to conceal meanings, placing a layer of misdirection or overly simplistic meanings over what he covertly and actually means. At the same time, this process of layering can itself conceal realities that also

exist within the Pardoner's range of meanings. Earthly or literal language can cloak the spiritual or metaphorical meanings the Pardoner uses, and those literal meanings can change the spiritual origins from which they came, creating new meanings. Puns can conceal unpleasant or blasphemous meanings beneath jokes. As much as the Pardoner's rhetoric is layered, so too is the broad group of people I loosely term his audience. The Pardoner has at least three audiences: the villagers he dupes, the pilgrims he speaks to, and the reader of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. These three audiences access these layers of meaning to different degrees. Finally, there are layers within the individual audiences themselves. In particular, the Pardoner's audience of pilgrims draws out layers of interactions between the Host and the Pardoner. The Pardoner's sins also gain some further clarification and complexity when considered in the light of his physical characteristics. In particular, I take this avenue to add a layer of critical readings prevalent in the past 30 years of Chaucer scholarship to my own investigation of the Pardoner. While I work to characterize the Pardoner as Chaucer would have understood him, here I find it relevant to the overall scheme of this tale to explore the Pardoner's sexuality as a layer somewhat removed from the vocabulary Chaucer could and would have used. At the root of it all lies a strange but simple figure: an onion. Cutting open the onion reveals a single cohesive organism composed of only layers. It has become my task to peel back each layer of the Pardoner's rhetoric and his person, to get to the center of this compelling character and the sins he may or may not commit.

Here, I would like to defend my choice of the term "layer" to discuss a series of textual relationships that is, fundamentally, more complex than the term at first implies. My choice of using layers to discuss these unstable and multidimensional relationships between words and the shifting pluralities of ideas they represent is an historical one. Chaucer's figure of the Pardoner holds every likelihood of having grown out of Boccaccio's Frate Cipolla, whose name translates

as “Brother Onion.” The subject of Cipolla’s *novella* in the *Decameron* discusses the ability of a speaker to layer one meaning overtop another in order to conceal devious intentions from a listener. Both Cipolla and the Pardoner are skilled rhetorical speakers, and in addition to this relationship between the two characters, the rhetorical theorists of Chaucer’s day also conceived of multiple relationships in terms of layers. In particular, Augustine, as the primary figure in the discussion of religiously oriented rhetoric, uses the idea of the layer, and the idea of a multiplicity of audiences, in order to discuss the full plurality of scriptural interpretation. Both Chaucer’s Pardoner, as a member of the clerical institution, and Boccaccio’s friar Cipolla require such a religiously grounded understanding of multiple meanings that words can possess. Such an understanding also relies on the concept, which the Pardoner’s tale in many ways challenges, of the provenance of the divine Word of God. The Pardoner’s tale forms a crucial component of Chaucer’s wide-ranging investigation of the utility of earthly language, and while Chaucer does not neglect the power of the Word in God’s mouth, his Pardoner challenges the human ability to navigate language effectively.

Augustine’s invocation of multivalent, layered language hearkens an important critical context for this work in two iconic works by Chaucer scholars D. W. Robertson and V. A. Kolve. Robertson’s *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* broadly argues for the primacy of religious interpretations of the *Tales*, and articulates the Augustinian model of the fourfold allegory as his primary lens of interrogation.¹ Robertson records that scriptural allegory was generally understood to consist of four layers in medieval scholarship. First, the text in question presents a direct and simple meaning. Second, the text refers to an allegorical meaning, related to the institution of the Church. Third, the text contained a tropological meaning that

¹ This brief summary of Robertson’s writing on allegory begins on page 292 of his text, and the discussion of his ideas that follows are also found on page 292.

imparted knowledge concerning the development of the spirit. Fourth, the text contained a layer of analogical meaning that dealt with the afterlife (Robertson 292). Two decades later, V. A. Kolve's *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* turned Robertson's dominant ideological practices of Chaucer criticism on their collective head. Kolve works in two distinct directions that bear directly on my argument and its structure. First, he argues that Chaucer's texts are dominated by language using and concerning visual symbolism. Second, he argues that the visual imagery Chaucer employs finds its roots in far more sources than only Christian allegory, as Robertson argued (Kolve 3). I situate myself between these two interpretations of Chaucer, using Robertson's emphasis on religious language and the medieval styles of its analysis in the "Pardoner's Tale" while working with Kolve's broader ranging interpretations of that religious language.

Here I come up against my own struggle with language and the meaning of the word "layer." The argument that "just because Chaucer and Boccaccio lacked the specific vocabulary to discuss multivalent language does not mean that I should follow suit" seems a perfectly good one. However, changing the language with which Chaucer and Boccaccio understood their texts to function changes how any contemporary reader of my text will understand those texts to function. H. Aram Veenser, whose work promoting the New Historicist school of textual criticism remains a cornerstone of New Historicism today, argues that one of the foundational premises upon which New Historicism was founded is that "no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature" (xi).² The central tenet that I extract from Veenser is that no text remains stagnant, even in the process of its original construction and reception, as Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale" demonstrates. Such an understanding

² I am also indebted to Hayden White's texts *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Both texts were formative pieces in my developing understanding in placing historical and literary motives and motifs in conversation with one another.

informs the analysis I undertake, and forms the groundwork of the theoretical methodologies I use in order to accomplish that work. The politics of New Historicism influence this choice as much as the suitability of this tenet to the text in question. Veesper describes the conflux of opinion about what this practice would settle into when the ideas presented were still new to the scholarly community. He writes that while conservative “critics worry that New Historicism may incapacitate the scholarly armature of proof and evidence, others on the left distrust the culturalism and textualism that New Historicism seems to nourish” (Veeser x). In trying to place my work within a theoretical context suitable to the investigation I propose, I find myself working with a culturalism of Chaucer’s England in which the term “layer” comes closest to establishing what kinds of relationships exist when words or objects contain multiple dimensions of interpretive potential. I am concerned, most broadly and most fittingly, with the inability of language to describe accurately the processes it helps to determine, just as Veeser is “less concerned to project long-range trajectories than to note bizarre overlappings” (xii). With that interest in mind, I want to complicate the relatively simplistic structure with which we conceive of a layer.

I also follow Veeser’s argument that New Historicism as expresses a process of “renegotiat[ing]...relationships between texts and other signifying practices...to expose the manifold ways culture and society affect one another” (xii). Working from the same premise, I attempt to both understand the structural relationships Chaucer might have conceived in his construction of the “Pardoner’s Tale” and to interrogate those relationships with an eye to present understandings of language’s relationships to stability, meaning, and contradiction. In my investigation of the Pardoner’s language, I found myself following in a somewhat parallel fashion the conclusions that Jacques Derrida draws in the first chapter of his study *Given Time: I.*

Counterfeit Money, and the principles translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak expresses in her preface to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. Derrida's deconstructive analyses of the relationship between words and meanings provides a useful construct with which to understand the process that Chaucer's layering invokes upon words and their meanings. For Derrida, Spivak argues, a text "has no stable identity, no stable origin, no stable end. Each act of reading the 'text' is a preface to the next" (xii). In the process of examining these textual instabilities, Derrida invokes the conception of a reader and the audience of a text in a cyclic relationship that continually re-determines meaning. Such a conception is useful, though inaccurate to describe the multiplicity of meanings in the "Pardoner's Tale." Derridean deconstruction primarily opposes the tenets of structuralist arguments with the intention of reconstructing a given object in order to gain an understanding of "the rules of its functioning" (Spivak lvii). In so doing, Derrida argues, the object is reinscribed as a subjective position in its own right, eliding the differences between subject and object that are realized as the personal tint of an interpretive lens and the objective qualities of factual evidence (Spivak lvii). In my reading, the continual reinscription of subject and object parallels the rhetorical results of the Pardoner's speech about his relics. Such a process is useful in order to understand the elision of ideas that occurs in the Pardoner's rhetoric, but problematic in its focus on binaries. Deconstructionism opposes two contrasting ideas and demonstrates that the two ideas actually do not contrast, but instead form a relationship between them that allows each to undergo a process of continually reinterpreting the opposing idea. This occurs in the Pardoner's rhetorical layering, but is only one of, and possibly not even the primary, effect of some of the layers of meaning with which the Pardoner invests his speech. At the same time, deconstruction recognizes that linguistic binaries exist because language fails to

impart the truth of the object it attempts to represent, and so Derrida's theories also come to bear on the relics I examine as historically situated objects.

The process of continual reinscription demonstrates the relationship between layered text and audience the Pardoner enacts. His layers function like the figure of the onion I argue Chaucer borrows from Boccaccio. Imagining a diagram, the layer marked with a "1" at the outermost of the onion possesses a direct relationship to the layer marked "5," four layers below the first, which does not rely on any concepts elucidated in the intermediary layers. This process denies logical relationships and sequential progressions through the layers. A member of the Pardoner's pilgrim audience might possess the knowledge to make the connection between layers "1" and "5" without seeing the layers I have marked "2-4" in this imaginary diagram. For that pilgrim, the fifth layer would be the second layer. Such a relationship denotes the very subjective process of uncovering layers of meaning in Chaucer's texts that Derrida discusses. The subjectivity of different audiences forms a central layer in the processes of meanings the Pardoner destabilizes. This brief foray into abstract relationships clarifies the Pardoner's ability to erode logical relationships between ideas. Such a construction also articulates what I mean by the "unstable" and "multivalent" relationships the Pardoner demonstrates language to possess. The Pardoner demonstrates that language does not need to rely on any semblance of that structure to express meaning. Instead, each layer of the onion relates to each other layer simultaneously, distinct from each other meaning and connected to each other meaning in an exponentially expanding realm of associations. In order to establish this complex series of relationships, the Pardoner relies on physical objects that represent these processes in the physical world, his relics.

Derrida's *Counterfeit Money* and Veenser's analysis of New Historicism elide nicely here. A tenet of New Historicism holds that texts are "embedded in a network of material practices" which in this case articulates the relationship between the Pardoner's relics the language he uses to speak about them (xi). Derrida's analysis of the breakdown in the binary he establishes between economic value and the pricelessness of a gift in *Counterfeit Money* illuminates the Pardoner's relationship to his relics. Relics are objects that help determine the Pardoner's language even as they demonstrate language's inability to refer to relics with any sense of stability. The relationships the Pardoner's rhetoric describes relics to possess change even as he describes them. In fact, in some cases those relationships change *because* he describes them. Derrida's analysis draws out this binary opposition between economic value and the idea of giving a gift, demonstrating that the idea of a gift embodies both a price and a pricelessness, such that the two concepts continually make and unmake one another. For Derrida,

The simple identification of the gift seems to destroy it...If the other perceives or receives it, if he or she keeps it as gift, the gift is annulled. But the one who gives it must not see it or know it either; otherwise he begins, at the threshold, as soon as he intends to give, to pay himself with a symbolic recognition, to praise himself, to approve of himself, to gratify himself, to congratulate himself, to give back to himself symbolically the value of what he thinks he has given or what he is preparing to give. (14)

Such a relationship relates directly to the rhetorical object the Pardoner demonstrates the fourteenth-century relic to be.

Relics are objects invested with enormous material and spiritual value that has nothing to do with the "surface layer" of the objects' material composition. Bones and rotting bits of cloth were some of the most common, and least valuable, objects in medieval Europe. These objects, like the Pardoner's rhetoric, contain weight, meaning, and power because they embody ideas structured in institutions. Part of the challenges the Pardoner raises arise from the destabilization

his fake relics provide to these institutional structures, in which case the institutionalized ritual of relic worship ceases to function. The Pardoner asks whether relics must be legitimate in order not only to embody ideas, but also to empower the possessors of those objects with increased faith in the ideas they embody. Relics, in this sense, function in the same manner the Pardoner's rhetoric does. In order to flesh out this comparison, I rely on the works of Paul Binski, Peter Brown, and Patrick Geary. These scholars each interrogate a particular era of the historical uses of relics—Brown discusses the first major presence of relics in early Christian art and worship, Geary discusses the economics of relic theft in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and Binski analyzes the relic as a symbol of transgression in the fourteenth century, when Chaucer wrote. The logical erosion the Pardoner's rhetoric forces his audiences to confront exists in the relics of Chaucer's world as much as the literary relics the Pardoner sells. Also like the Pardoner's rhetoric, relics can demonstrate different meanings to different audiences. Cipolla's relics can serve as vehicles to salvation for the faithful even as they provide him with a framework for amusing puns a more sophisticated member of his audience might take as his primary purpose. The Pardoner's relics complicate Cipolla's simple layering premise. Fundamentally, the Pardoner's relics erode logical, stable, and sequential relationships not only in the context of the *Canterbury Tales*, but also demonstrate this ability in historical relics. With these ideas in mind, I will examine the Pardoner's relics, and his rhetoric about them, with an eye to historical conceptions of relics, reliquaries, and the nature of the spiritual power they represented. At the same time, I will examine the Pardoner's language, the relationships he establishes and demonstrates in the process of their identification that they break down, in order to best articulate the relationship the Pardoner's speech shares with his relics, each as rhetorical objects.

--Introduction--

The Pardoner's undiminished ability to defy definitive critical interpretation invites a re-evaluation of his character and his tale. Many critics of Chaucer's Pardoner introduce their arguments similarly to the following: the figure of the Pardoner remains an unresolved complex of psychological influences, theological arguments, and political criticisms.³ While each broad subject area articulates a distinct problem with the Pardoner, each discusses the Pardoner as a figure of difficulty and irresolution. These thematic introductions pose as many problems as they demonstrate a sort of critical consistency. The Pardoner has become an infamous figure in medieval literature for selling fraudulent relics to unsuspecting parishioners. However, *what* the Pardoner sells is a far simpler matter to investigate than *how* he sells it. The Pardoner's tale navigates through an array of relationships between speaker and audience, word and meaning, truth and falsehood. In each pairing, the Pardoner's rhetoric challenges language's ability to express a stable relationship between ideas. Words can express different, even opposing, meanings at the same time. A character can be a figure in a story at the same time he tells a story. An action can accomplish good and evil results simultaneously. As a result that action cannot be wholly good, evil, or an even mix between the two, but all three at the same time. The relics the Pardoner sells to his audiences demonstrate their ability to cause similar disruptions in process of stable and logical relationships between the ideas they represent and the uses to which they are put. Historically, I will investigate the same destabilizing power in the relics Chaucer would have

³ Marijane Osborn discusses the Pardoner as a figure of unresolved jest that hearkens a sexualized interpretation of his words, and Elizabeth Allen discusses the Pardoner's reception in the fifteenth century as an inadequately resolved attempt to make his complexities palatable by reducing his rhetoric to simplistic, clearly maligned posturing. Catherine S. Cox discusses the Pardoner as a figure whose identity resists quantification and clarification. Cox's work lead to the inclusion of Elspeth Whitney's work analyzing the Pardoner's unresolved sexual status as somewhere between a homosexual and eunuch, analyzing verbal reflections of hidden deviancy.

seen and known in England in the fourteenth century after I have interrogated the rhetoric the Pardoner invokes to discuss these objects.

The Pardoner's ability to collapse stable relationships between words and ideas evolves from a similar treatment Giovanni Boccaccio gives to his character Frate Cipolla in the *Decameron*. Boccaccio's text interrogates the relationship between words and their meanings. Cipolla, a religious figure similar to the Pardoner in his use of rhetoric, his goals, and the tools he uses to achieve them, provides a thorough study of rhetorical deception. Cipolla is a brilliantly gifted rhetorician, like the Pardoner, who also dupes villagers by profiting from the sale of false relics. Chaucer extends the boundaries that Boccaccio pushes, showing in his Pardoner that rhetorical deception can also be truthful, using relics as the focus of his deceptions. Cipolla's tale, told by Boccaccio's most carnivalesque narrator Dioneo, adopts a lighthearted, jocular attitude toward these false relics while "The Pardoner's Tale" pushes the pilgrims the nearest they will get in the *Canterbury Tales* to physically harming one another.

I am primarily concerned with the relationship between these relics and the speech that surrounds them in tale and *novella*. Both the Pardoner and Frate Cipolla use relics to demonstrate the persuasive power of words. This study will first investigate the ability of the rhetoric surrounding the Pardoner's relics to render language unstable and multivalent. In the first section this investigation I will analyze the ability of Pardoner and Frate to use rhetoric to layer language. Each figure invests language with multiple meanings that allow their rhetoric to achieve multiple ends. In particular, the Pardoner sets himself up as a rhetorical speaker whose destabilization of language affords him complete control over that language. While the Pardoner demonstrates the strengths of his argument persuasively, the characters of the Host and the Knight challenge the linguistic destabilization the Pardoner comes to represent. The conflict

between the Pardoner and the Host, as well as the compromise offered by the Knight, forms the substance of my focus in the second section of the essay. The Pardoner and Frate Cipolla each rely on the concept of layers to express the multiple meanings with which these characters invest their rhetoric. This idea of layering characterizes the multiple meanings drawn out of the relationships that form the core of this study: between word and meaning, audience and speaker, truth and falsehood. A word with multiple meanings divides and organizes those meanings in the form of layers. I will tend to organize these layers by context, presenting a reading of the Pardoner's rhetoric and the multiple alternative possibilities to the reading the Pardoner's language also invokes. In the third section, I will investigate the relics that allow the Pardoner to create the rhetorical systems he does. Historically, I will situate these relics in the theological and philosophical discourses that surrounded them in the fourteenth century, when Chaucer wrote. The rhetoric the Pardoner uses stems from his relics, and Chaucer's portrait of relics arises from the same rhetorically complex system that intellectuals in the fourteenth century understood relics to represent.

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written roughly around 1381, and Boccaccio's *Decameron*, written around 1350, are each organized around a similar structure of collected stories. Chaucer's *Tales* are set as the recounting of stories pilgrims tell each other as they travel from an inn in London to Canterbury Cathedral to visit the shrine of St. Thomas Beckett. Geoffrey Chaucer, the author of the *Tales*, features himself as a character in the story he recounts. Chaucer the pilgrim, as he is commonly called and so distinguished from Chaucer the poet, describes each pilgrim he travels with, and reports each story the pilgrims tell to an unspecified audience. According to the rules established by the Host of the inn who joins them, Harry Bailey, each pilgrim will tell two

tales on the way to the shrine, and two on the way back.⁴ When they arrive again at Harry's inn, he will decide who has told the tale of the "best sentence and moost solaas" (l. 798).⁵ The winner will receive a free dinner. The Host's categories of success, "sentence" and "solaas" translate roughly to "moral importance" and "pleasure." Boccaccio's *Decameron* follows a similar structure, but with differently articulated emphases. The *Decameron* relates ten days of ten stories told by ten nobles who have fled Florence to the countryside in order to escape an outbreak of the Black Death. Unlike the *Tales*, a semi-omniscient narrator recounts the *novelle* of the nobles as they are told. He does not feature as a character in his story. The *novelle* in the *Decameron* also address a different topic with each day of telling, while the pilgrims' tales all address the two broad concepts of producing pleasure in the audience and accomplishing some good effect. Boccaccio never has his nobles feature in their own tales, the way Chaucer does on three occasions. Chaucer investigates this layering between teller and tale in the examples of Chaucer the poet and pilgrim, as I have mentioned, in the "Wife of Bath's Prologue", and in the primary subject of this study, the Pardoner and his tale. Boccaccio's text spends less time investigating this sort of layering, and more time exploring the rhetorical implications and usefulness of storytelling.

Chaucer's text expands, reinterprets, and in many cases improves upon some of the *Decameron's* analysis of rhetorical layers. In the interest of prefacing the comparison I make between Chaucer's and Boccaccio's texts, what follows is a short summary of Chaucer's intellectual history. This brief biography provides clear evidence for two important aspects of Chaucer's writing habits. Chaucer was a widely travelled and widely read man. He travelled to

⁴ While the above is the stated plan in the text, Chaucer never finished the *Tales*. We do not possess more than one tale for the majority of the pilgrims present on the pilgrimage, let alone the additional three to four that should be available for each character.

⁵ All citations from Chaucer are taken from Larry D. Benson's edition, *The Canterbury Tales Complete*, published in 2000 by Houghton Mifflin.

France and Italy several times during his professional career. One of the most famous medieval French texts at this time, the *Roman de la Rose*, served as, in the words of F. N. M. Diekstra, “a vital formative influence on Chaucer’s ways of seeing and modes of writing” (12). Themes, stories, and specific phrases from the *Roman* appear, probably as a result of Chaucer’s partial translation of the work, in the “Summoner’s Tale,” as G. Geltner argues, through the French character of Faux Semblant, an allegorical figure representing “false-seeming” (358). Michael A. Calabrese records similar influences in “The Merchant’s Tale,” where the *Roman* figure of Raison enumerates the same mercantile values of love that appear in Chaucer’s tale (261). From Chaucer’s Italian travels, Gerald L. Bruns records another of Boccaccio’s texts, *Il Filostrato*, as a direct antecedent of the themes Chaucer reinterpreted in his *Troilus and Crisyde*, probably via a French intermediary translation (115). Chaucer’s debt to the *Decameron* is no less intensive.

After each known travelling experience, Chaucer’s written work reflects a keen and consistent attention to the local literary techniques of the country he visited, and his own extrapolations upon those themes. Derek Pearsall’s critical biography of Chaucer addresses these issues, and in particular the question of Chaucer’s literary debts to Boccaccio. In every other major instance but this one, Chaucer makes a point to inform his readers of his source texts for analogues in the *Tales*. For whatever reason, such devoted source references are absent for Boccaccio and, in particular, the *Decameron*. Pearsall records that Chaucer “brought back with him from his second visit to Italy, in 1378, copies of Boccaccio’s... the *Filostrato* and the *Teseida*, and probably copies of others of his works, too” (118). Pearsall provides the closest definitive connection we can draw between Chaucer and the *Decameron*, pointing out that “The impact of the Italian writer [Boccaccio] upon Chaucer was profound, and for a number of years he worked under his stimulus and inspiration. The *Teseida* is used in *Anelida and Arcite*, *The*

Parliament of Fowls, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the Knight's Tale, while the *Filostrato* provides the matter of *Troilus*, and the *Decameron* at least the suggestion of the *Canterbury Tales*" (118-9). As I will demonstrate using the Pardoner and Frate Cipolla, the confluences between the two characters strongly suggest Chaucer's knowledge of this text. Pearsall's note that the structure of the *Tales* also at least suggests knowledge of the *Decameron* forms an important basis for such a premise, as I outlined above.

In addition to Chaucer's knowledge of Boccaccio, his knowledge of current philosophic and theological debates also informs a large portion of the argument I make concerning the Pardoner's relics and the historical relics on which they were based. When Chaucer began frequenting Oxford in his later years, about when he began composing the *Canterbury Tales*, he also attuned himself to the debates among the burgeoning academics of his day. J. A. W. Bennett's thorough study of Chaucer's interactions with Oxford and Cambridge academics in *Chaucer at Oxford and Cambridge* provides another important context for Chaucer's uses of relics that I analyze in section three. Bennett begins his text by investigating why Chaucer includes five academics among his pilgrims. The Clerk, the Man of Law, the Physician, the Manciple, and the Nun's Priest all prove themselves to be university trained men, and this without including the Franklin's clerk or the Friar's knowledge of "scole matere," scholarly subjects (Bennett 17). The main thrust of Bennett's argument directs itself towards the library of Merton College, Oxford. Bennett argues from records of Merton library's holdings when Chaucer travelled to the area that Chaucer likely had access to the library of the college (67). Chaucer's access to Merton's texts, if he actually possessed such access, speaks volumes for his relationships with the scholars at the Oxford colleges. Books in the fourteenth century were extremely valuable, and could cost as much as a year's wages for a scholar. Bennett traces one

definitive example of a close relationship between Chaucer and Merton College through Chaucer's London neighbor Ralph Strode, a Merton logician, lawyer, and the editor of Chaucer's *Troilus and Crisyde* (63-4). Chaucer's access to an academic environment provided him with key knowledge of the philosophical and theological debates in which scholars like John Wyclif partook. Wyclif's criticisms of the institutional Church structure in which contemporary relic worship was situated forms a critical component of my analysis of the Pardoner's ability to destabilize language.

--Layers in Chaucer and Boccaccio--

In the *Decameron*, I am concerned with the *novella* of Frate Cipolla, told by the noble Dioneo. In Dioneo's *novella*, Cipolla, the much-loved friar, arrives in a village with a collection of fraudulent relics, much like the Pardoner as he accompanies the pilgrims to Thomas Beckett's shrine. When two companions recognize Cipolla as he visits to collect donations for his order, they decide to play a trick on him. His friends steal the parrot's feather he intends to pass off as the angel Gabriel's and replace it with a piece of coal. The companions design the trick in order to see how Cipolla can save himself from the embarrassment of being caught without his lauded relic. Cipolla engages in a fabulous display of engaging storytelling to save himself. When he reaches the climax of his speech and opens the locked chest where he stores the feather and finds the coals, he passes off the theft as his own error. He "admits" that he has brought the wrong relic with him to the village. He holds up the coals, proclaiming them the ashes of Saint Lawrence, whose festival it is that day, and ends up making even more money from the unwitting townspeople than he had been promised with the lure of Gabriel's feather. Cipolla leaves the village happy in his duplicitous earnings, with no ill will towards his companions, who confess to their prank after being thoroughly impressed with Cipolla's ingenuity.

“The Pardoner’s Tale” follows a more complex structure. In the frame of the pilgrimage, the Host asks the Pardoner to tell a mirthful tale while his fellow pilgrims ask for a moral tale. The Pardoner offers to tell a moral tale after, “have I dronke a draughte of corny ale,” which I interpret to mean that they have stopped at a tavern for the night and he has eaten and drunk (l. 456). The Pardoner tells a rhetorically layered tale about himself. First, he delivers a sermon to the gathered pilgrims about the sins of gluttony, alcohol, and gambling. Then he recounts the typical events of pardoning in the villages across England. He presents a sermon on greed to the pilgrims, following with a story about three thieves whose greed kills them. Finally, he rounds out his story by offering to sell the pilgrims the same relics he offers to sell to his village audiences. The Pardoner’s tale emphasizes the layers in his rhetoric and in the structure of his tale. The Pardoner’s recounting of his sales act allows him to invest the words he uses with multiple levels of meaning as he addresses both his village and pilgrim audiences. The readers of Chaucer’s text access the different meanings that the Pardoner’s pilgrims will obtain from his speech at the same time they are introduced to the meanings his village audiences will hear. The Pardoner’s status as a character in the tale he tells as well as a speaker similarly invests his tale with complexly structured narrative frames. By manipulating these different narrative levels, the Pardoner shows he can interact with each audience with equally nuanced precision. The Pardoner’s ability to craft his rhetoric such that the pilgrims can find commentary addressed to them while he ostensibly recites what he would say to a village audience allows him to establish interrelations between the two sets of layers. He demonstrates that words can possess multiple, even contradictory, meanings depending on who hears them and the context in which they are delivered. In the process of destabilizing a word’s ability to retain a constant definition, the

Pardoner demonstrates that opposed ideas held to be structural supports in Church institutionalized religion, such as what determines good or evil, are also unstable.

The Pardoner begins his Prologue by preaching, a task he has no occupational right to perform as a Pardoner. Historically, Alan Fletcher writes, the right and duty of preaching belonged to the church parsons, who lived in the parishes with their flocks, and not to pardoners, who typically wandered about like the mendicant orders of friars (118). Of the mobile church servants, only friars had licenses to preach. Fletcher takes the Pardoner's opening to his prologue, "'Lordynges,' quod he, 'in chirches whan I preche/I peyne me to han an hauteyn speche'" as a transgressive move (ll. 329-30). The Pardoner's job description does not allow him to preach at all, much less in any form of "hauteyn speche," a high rhetorical style befitting someone of education and authority. Catherine S. Cox builds upon the Pardoner's transgression here to investigate his psychology. Cox argues for the Pardoner as a "self-styled con artist, whose contempt for his victims barely conceals his desire for their approval" (131). For Cox, the Pardoner's blatant flaunting of propriety symbolizes this contempt. However, Cox's argument, focused upon the problems of the Pardoner's character, raises a significant obstacle of its own. Her study neglects the consequences for the Pardoner's audiences who listen to his rhetoric, or the ways his speech changes to suit them.

The context in which the Pardoner tells his tale draws out the same issues of destabilized language as does his rhetoric. At the end of the "Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale," the company settles at an inn for the night. The Host, who has worked himself into an emotional fit over the conclusion of the preceding "Physician's Tale," begs "but I have triacle/ or elles a draughte of moyste and corny ale/or but I heere anon a myrrie tale...Thou beel amy, thou Pardoner...Tell us some myrthe or japes right anon" (ll. 315-9). The Host's desires for food,

beer, and a merry tale fit the setting of the tavern where they stop. The Pardoner answers “It shal be doon...But first...I wol bothe drynke and eten of a cake” at which the majority of the company protests, demanding “som moral thing, that we may leere/some wit” (ll. 320-6). The Pardoner’s desire for alcohol as preface to telling a moral tale demonstrates how unsuited his character is, on one hand, to tell such a tale to an audience desiring to learn a moral lesson. Immediately following the Pardoner’s meal, he launches into a sermon deriding taverns as places of sin. Fletcher’s argument that pardoners received as much negative stereotyping as mendicant friars sees support in Chaucer’s setup of the Pardoner’s tale.⁶ However, the Pardoner’s corruption only forms half the problem. Had he not been prompted by the pilgrims to tell “som moral thyng,” but instead recounted the “japes and myrthe” the Host requested, he might not register as a transgressive figure at all (l. 329). This layer of interpretation shows the key role the Pardoner’s audiences play in shaping his rhetoric. The Pardoner fulfills both the Host’s and the pilgrims’ requests in the manner that will typify his rhetoric and the problems he poses to both his pilgrim and village audiences. He fulfills their requests while not fulfilling them at all. The tale the Pardoner tells begins with a moral against tavern sins, but the Pardoner delivers his tale in a context that makes applying the moral he shares as he instructs impossible. The Pardoner demonstrates the premises his tale will interrogate in the ambiguous context of his telling. His speech raises central questions concerning definition and transgression. His actions ask the pilgrims to decide whether a man can sit in a tavern, drink alcohol, and still preach about the sinfulness of taverns. The Pardoner demands that his pilgrim audience accept the both/and of the contradictions in his speech. As much as the Pardoner may not actively demonstrate moral virtues, he can still accurately describe those virtues as they should be emulated.

⁶ See Helen Cooper’s *Oxford Guide to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* 2nd ed. 177-83. Criticism of friars formed a common theme in politically oriented church parodies as well as less aggressive low humour.

The Pardoner's Prologue establishes the moral of the tale the Pardoner will tell and the problems that moral raises. He states "My theme is alwey oon, and ever was—*Radix malorum est cupiditas*" (ll. 333-4).⁷ In the following rhetorical stroke the Pardoner, ironically, proves the moral of his tale to be true through his own example. In the layer of interpretation above, when the Pardoner's context formed the primary lens of investigation, he demonstrated that such a process was impossible. Here, however, he shows that two contradictory premises can and do exist at the same time. He shares with the pilgrims "myn entente is nat but for to wynne/And nothing for correccioun of synne...For certes, many a predicacioun/Comth ofte tyme of yvel entencioun" (ll. 403-8). The Pardoner's theme that "greed is the root of all evil" sees no clearer justification than in the Pardoner himself. He freely confesses that the only reason he preaches, or sells relics, is to profit from the exorbitant amounts of money villagers will pay for holy artifacts. More seriously, the Pardoner also reveals that the relics he sells are "a gaude" (l. 389). His relics are as false as the Pardoner is corrupt. Despite his corruption, the Pardoner's "predicacioun," his sermon, can "stire" his village audience, "to devocioun," (l. 346). The Pardoner's ability to motivate his village audience to a devotional experience indicates another layer of examination. Here, his village audience's inability to see his corruption implicates the villagers in the sins the Pardoner urges them to commit by purchasing fake relics. Among the pilgrims travels a monk, a prioress, a nun's priest, and a friar, each of whom would have known that the Pardoner violated the bounds of his duties by selling fake relics. Nonetheless, they remain silent. So too do the village audiences accept what he says, and pay him exorbitant fees to purchase what they believe to be their own salvation in his fraudulent relics. Working through another layer of problems his rhetoric creates, if the relics the Pardoner sells to the villagers are indeed false, then the veneration of those relics violates the commandment not to worship false

⁷ "The root of evil is desire"

idols. Such a practice condemns each villager so duped to hell. As I will demonstrate throughout this study, these layered considerations exist concurrently with many others in the rhetorical world the Pardoner develops. By informing the pilgrims of his relics' illegitimacy, he provides them with the first, central key to understanding his complex rhetorical structures.

The Pardoner's transgressive act of unlicensed preaching invites the pilgrims to seek answers to the questions his sale of false relics raise. In essence, he asks his pilgrim audience to question the legitimacy of his words, just like that of his objects, and then gives them a context in which those questions all but ask themselves. He reveals this transgression in the first words of his tale. By beginning his tale with an act that many pilgrims know he performs illegally, the Pardoner sets up other acts he performs to be questioned. The same premise holds true for objects of authority or power that he wields. After he arrives in a village, he installs himself "in chirches . . . And thanne my bulles shewe I" so that "no man be so boold, ne preest ne clerk/Me to destourbe of Christes holy werk" (ll. 329-40). Here, the Pardoner establishes his authority through a combination of rhetoric and physical objects. He substantiates his assertions that he has been vested with the power to preach with his papal bulls. Bulls are the certificates of authenticity bearing the lead seal of the Pope in Rome and given to pardoners and friars who are not linked to a permanent residence in the structure of church authority. The seals in particular stand as emblematic statements of Rome's presence, and provide a direct link from the Pardoner to the Pope. However, the Pardoner's bulls could easily be as fraudulent as his relics, especially given that he has already confessed to the gathered pilgrims that he cares only for wealth, and will lie to get rich. The Pardoner presents his documents, like his relics, for scrutiny by all for just this reason—to demonstrate the ostensible authority his seals promote. These objects, his bulls and his relics, form a core element around which he builds his rhetorical layers and propel

his rhetoric with the added force of the papal authority their presence symbolizes. Ironically, the contradictions the Pardoner demonstrates most undermine the institutions that vest him with the authority he relies on to speak.

Only after such a rhetorical introduction does the Pardoner introduce the long list of fake relics that he will con his village audiences into buying. The list of his relics seems almost more than a single man could carry on his own: his “cristal stones,” glass cases, are “Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones” as well as his prize “sholder-boon/Which that was of an hooly Jewes sheep” (ll. 347-51). The effect here approximates a parody: the Pardoner ambles into town on his horse laden with multiple glass cases literally stuffed to the overflowing with scraps of cloth and bits of bone. This image provides another transition from the surface of the Pardoner’s self-presentation to the multiple meanings bound up in what he says and does. The Pardoner’s description of himself parallels the message he sends to the pilgrims by revealing that he preaches, to an audience who knows that he should not be, as his first rhetorical act. This strategy shows the Pardoner telling the pilgrims that more occurs in his speech than simply the events he recounts. However, the Pardoner does not simply tell the pilgrims to take him for more than his word. He knows that some of the pilgrims understand this, but not all of them necessarily do. The Pardoner relies on a sort of insider’s knowledge as he speaks—the more a given audience member knows, the more he will understand, but the Pardoner will not stop to educate those who simply do not get it.

The Pardoner adds another potential layer of significance here by paralleling Jesus as Matthew records in his discussion of parables. The Book of Matthew records “And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables?/He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them

it is not given...Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand” (*The Bible: Authorized King James Version* Matt. 13.11-13). Just as Jesus tells his disciples that he will not unfold for all his listeners all the meanings of his words, so too does the Pardoner deliberately give the pilgrims a key to his rhetorical layers without a guide. The Pardoner’s parallels with scripture here complicate the integrity of the book of Matthew as much as his rhetoric complicates his own language. At the same time, the Pardoner may not recognize the parallel for what it is—he may demonstrate that the Word of God, despite the Pardoner’s efforts to the contrary, remains unchanged no matter how those words are spoken. As further analysis of his tale will show, despite the challenges his rhetoric raises the Pardoner manages most clearly to warn his pilgrim audiences against sins, paralleling the effects of the Word. For the same reason, this biblical parallel between Jesus’ parables and the Pardoner’s emphasis on his bull and his relics indicates the same sort of insider’s knowledge requirement to comprehend more than the surface gestures he makes.

The Pardoner’s bull does not establish his authority; it establishes the villagers’ acceptance of the authoritative symbol he presents to them. This bull could be as fake as the relics he carries. The bull is a symbol of the Pope, of temporal and earthly authority. The relics, the other symbols of authority he carries, symbolize spiritual authority—the authority of God’s chosen saints. With these objects and his own words, the Pardoner advertises his challenges to institutional Church authority to those pilgrims who can read into his words. These institutions fix meanings, rendering language and objects stable referents. The Pardoner’s bull allows him to represent himself as an aspect of this monolithic Papal authority. He can use this position to establish his audiences’ trust in him even as he undercuts the institutions from which he derived

this aspect of his persuasiveness. The Pardoner's invocation of relics in his tale prepares the relics, and the institutional stability they purportedly represent, to be unraveled.

While the Pardoner provides his pilgrim audience with a key to begin unraveling the destabilizing effects his words produce, he does not walk the pilgrims through each step of the process. In so doing, the Pardoner's rhetoric conceals many layers from those pilgrims who cannot move past the first key the Pardoner provides by telling them that his relics are fake. In this way, the Pardoner sets up two premises, both of which Boccaccio's *novella* of Frate Cipolla will help to explain: first, just as Cipolla does, the Pardoner implicates his audience in the sins he commits and urges them to commit. Second, the Pardoner uses his rhetoric to conceal these meanings from those without the necessary knowledge to understand them. The *novella* of Frate Cipolla occurs as the last account in Day VI of the *Decameron*, a day devoted entirely to tales of "those who, on being provoked by some verbal pleasantry, have returned like for like or...have avoided danger, discomfiture, or ridicule" (Boccaccio 441).⁸ N. S. Thompson identifies Dioneo, the narrator, as a character who "presents a reversal to the day's theme in a parodic manner, with either a serious or simply deflating intent" (92). Dioneo works as a sort of conglomerate comic relief and oppositional figure in the collection of *novelle*. Dioneo's Day VI *novella* features Frate Cipolla, the wandering friar. Cipolla shares with Chaucer's Pardoner a penchant for profiting from the sale of fraudulent relics to an unwitting audience and a masterful command of intricate and misleading language. More importantly, Dioneo's role as a character who parodies or subverts the theme of the day gains particular relevance to the study of these preachers' ability to collapse and subvert stable relationships using rhetoric. Thompson's notes on Dioneo draw out the parallel consequences of Cipolla's and the Pardoner's rhetoric. Dioneo's role as a character of destabilization places him in a similarly layered position.

⁸ All citations from Boccaccio taken from G. H. McWilliam's 1995 translation of the Italian text.

Boccaccio seems more interested in exploring the ability of these layers to conceal rather than to destabilize. Dioneo and Cipolla both work as forces of disruption, but each of their disruptions results specifically from rhetorical concealment. “Cipolla” means “onion” in Italian, which fits his tale for a number of reasons. Dioneo introduces Frate Cipolla with a joking reference to the layering invested in his name: “He was called Friar Cipolla, and he always received a warm welcome there...doubtless due to his name as much as to the piety of the inhabitants, for the soil in those parts produces onions which are famous throughout the whole of Tuscany” (Boccaccio 469). Cipolla’s namesake the onion represents an object of vitality and growth, a living organism, encased in the dirt where onions grow. However, Boccaccio’s development of rhetorical layers seems to extend only this far. Cipolla’s *novella* interrogates an onion encased in dirt while Chaucer’s text take the onion as a natural organism made entirely of layers and metaphorically splits it open to reveal them all. The rhetorical layering Boccaccio invokes begins with Dioneo and his mysterious *non sequitur* introduction

I intend to show you how one of the friars of Saint Anthony, by a quick piece of thinking, neatly sidestepped a trap which had been laid for him by two young men. And if I speak at some length, so as to tell the whole story as it should be told, this ought not to disturb you unduly, for you will find, if you look up at the sun, that it is still mid heaven. (469)

Dioneo practices here the same subtle misdirection of logic that Cipolla uses to great effect on the villagers in his *novella*. Dioneo begins with the premise that a friar uses his quick wits to avoid a trap. The idea of rhetorical traps fits the stated theme of the day, as articulated by another noble in Dioneo’s company, Elissa. Elissa desires tales of “those who, upon being provoked by some verbal pleasantry, have returned like for like, or who, by a prompt retort or shrewd manoeuvre, have avoided danger, discomfiture or ridicule” (Boccaccio 445). On the surface, Dioneo’s final line has merely to do with the length of his tale. However, he plans to recount a

story of a friar who sidesteps a trap. Dioneo has chosen for his subject a theme of the final clause in Elissa's description of the day's theme, "those who...have avoided danger" using their wits and words (Boccaccio 444). While an introduction of such modest self-reproach is common to narratives of this period, the subject of Dioneo's tale begs the investigation of a deeper rhetorical premise. Dioneo has actually diverted his audience's attention from the theme of his narrative. He actually presents a rhetorically gifted speaker who uses witty words to escape danger by couching the disruptive force that his rhetoric represents in humor. In so doing, he uses layering to conceal, and sets the stage for Cipolla to do the same.

Cipolla's most apparent achievement of layering occurs in his sales pitch to the villagers. He saturates his sermon with witty bits of quick repartee for those whose ears and brains are fast enough to catch them. In this part of his sermon, Cipolla uses distractions as a layer. For example, when Cipolla begins his cover story to explain the coal which lies in place of his feather, an English translation approximates his story as "I found myself passing through Funland and Laughland, both of which are thickly populated, besides containing a lot of people" (Boccaccio 474). Cipolla continues with such subtle malapropisms shown by his mispronounced Italian words, and the village audience, so caught up in the wondrous traveler's tale Cipolla presents, buys into every word. Here, Cipolla conceals the metaphorical onion of what is essentially a mockery of a sermon with the traveler's tale motif he invokes to his audience.⁹ By selling his tale as a story of journeying to foreign and exotic places, Cipolla uses the lure of the unknown to blind his audience to what he actually says. In so doing, he plays upon the villagers' expectations for hearing a preacher preach, trusting that his audience will hear what it wants and expects to hear. He moves to more daring jests, recounting his meeting of a friar in Jerusalem

⁹ The traveler's tale as a genre did not gain widespread popularity among European audiences until the late 15th century, however, the term is apt to describe the type of narrative Cipolla tells, and accurately encompasses his audience's reactions to such a type of story.

who “showed me the finger of the Holy Ghost, as straight and firm as it ever was...and one of the side-bits of the Word-made-flash-in-the-pan, and an article or two of the Holy Catholic faith” (Boccaccio 475). Here, Cipolla demonstrates not just a love of witty word play, but a comic and carnivalesque sense of double entendre, well-doused in irreverence. Cipolla builds upon such irreverent relish in these jests only he understands with any certainty as he concludes his sermon. At the same time, Cipolla uses his jokes and double entendres to grant all the villagers the blessing of Saint Lawrence’s fraudulent coal and garner his profits. Here, the sermon Cipolla uses as a cover masks his jokes, double entendres, and puns. The sermon layer relies upon his village audience’s expectations, as none would attend a sermon expecting to hear irreverent jokes and bawdy references.

When Cipolla engages in his sermon to the village, he first follows a proscribed, preplanned agenda meant to emphasize the importance of the parrot’s feather he will pass off as a relic. Dioneo spends no time recounting what Cipolla says at this stage, instead conveying “Friar Cipolla began to preach his sermon, never suspecting...that any of his things had been tampered with. He harangued his audience at great length...recited the *Confiteor* and caused two torches to be lit” (Boccaccio 474). Only after he moves to open the casket containing his relic does Dioneo begin to relate the ingenious narrative Cipolla spins to maintain his deception. Cipolla’s rhetorical strategy relies on misdirection, of the sort that a stereotypical “fast talking salesman” might use. Cipolla immediately switches to this kind of rhetoric, beginning the story he will use to save himself with “Ladies and gentlemen, I must explain to you that when I was still very young, I was sent by my superior into those parts where the sun appears” (Boccaccio 474). Thompson defines Cipolla’s rhetorical strategy using just this example:

[Cipolla’s] words...play upon the scholastic distinction between supposition and appellation in the theory of the properties of terms, which developed from an

earlier distinction between what a noun generally signifies and what it appellates in a particular context. He says, for instance, that his superior has sent him to those lands... ‘where the sun appears’... We assume his unlearned audience take him to mean ‘where the sun rises’, i.e. the East.” (107)

Cipolla’s rhetoric relies upon his village audience’s belief, as I discussed earlier, in order to maintain the fiction that he will create. In order to build a case where the villagers will believe that he did not fool them with stories of a nonexistent feather in the first place, he must build an even more convincing narrative. The parrot’s feather he had planned to employ contained several benefits to his case that this coal does not possess. In addition to being almost entirely unknown to villagers in a small Italian town, the parrot’s feather is brightly colored, making it appear even more exotic. Cipolla builds a similar case for the coal. Objects that are exotic, beyond the understanding or common experience of his village audience, are more easily believed. To avoid the trap, Cipolla must make the coal as exotic as the parrot’s feather to successfully profit.

Cipolla begins this process in his invocation of the sun in the East, the nigh-mythological birthplace of Christ, and a place far beyond the comprehension of the villagers. With such a mythological status backing him up, Cipolla slowly builds on this kind of speech. He constructs his story so that the audience relies on a predetermined set of signifiers to fill in the details of what he says, when he actually does not say what the villagers assume he does. Often, Cipolla’s rhetorical slippages are as comic as they are necessary to his purposes. The subtlety of Cipolla’s Italian word-play is largely lost in translation, but this example of his comic but blasphemous rhetoric demonstrates the effect his rhetoric achieves for the discerning listener. Cipolla recounts

“I went on [in his journey to acquire the relics he shows to the village] to Liarland, where I found a large number of friars belonging to various religious orders including my own, all of whom were forsaking a life of discomfort for the love of God and paying little heed to the exertions of others so long as they led to their own profit.” (Boccaccio 474-5)

The key here is that none of Cipolla's listeners' are so discerning as to pick out the problems in his story of how he obtained the new relic he will show to the villagers. Cipolla sets up a skeleton of assumptions and tells his tale with so much emphasis on the exoticism of where he has travelled and the relics he has acquired that the small details slip past, entirely unnoticed. Rather than the morally correct idea that friars should be forsaking a life of comfort for the love of God and paying little heed to material gain so that they might instruct laypeople in the word of God, Cipolla inverts every step of the process. The friars he speaks of, including himself in a daring moment of self-definition, put profit ahead of everything else, and forsake discomfort for comfort. Cipolla's allusion may articulate a confession of greed, just as the Pardoner makes clear in his tale. However, Cipolla couches his potential confession in a very different context. Cipolla makes this reference in a moment of improvisatory rhetorical brilliance to be sure, but without the sense of clear, considered revelation the Pardoner invokes when he discusses his fake relics. The Pardoner tells the pilgrims "I moot thynke/Upon som honest thyng while that I drynke" before he begins his prologue and tale (ll. 326-7). The first idea that he reveals to the pilgrims after this moment of considered reflection is his confession of the fake relics he sells. This may be the only moment in the entire tale where the Pardoner attempts to be so freely, and simply, honest. Cipolla's fast-talking, on the other hand, comes across as exactly that—disingenuous rhetoric. Moreover, Cipolla's responses read as a hastily compiled rhetoric whose associations the context of his delivery may not allow him to fully consider. That said, the comparison between the two men and their possible honest evaluation of their own sins demonstrates another layer of rhetorical strategy that Chaucer's Pardoner may borrow from Boccaccio. Chaucer's emphasis on the Pardoner's honesty as the cause and concept behind his tale opposes Cipolla's. The Pardoner works to emphasize his rhetoric, not to conceal it like Cipolla.

Cipolla concludes with his lists of comically ridiculous relics, such as “the Word-made-flash-in-the-pan” rather than the Word of God made flesh, by discussing the ashes of the martyr Saint Lawrence (Boccaccio 475). Conveniently, the day Cipolla preaches also happens to be the feast day of Saint Lawrence. Cipolla tells his crowd that those crossed with the coals of Saint Lawrence “may rest assured that for a whole year they will never be touched by fire without getting burnt” (Boccaccio 476). When Cipolla preaches the phrase “never touched by fire” and “without getting burnt” the audience latches on to the expectation for miraculous occurrences Cipolla has established with his preaching thus far. The lens of miraculous expectation that shapes the villagers’ responses causes them to elide Cipolla’s phrase “never touched by fire” and “without getting burnt” without registering the second negative. Cipolla also plays on the phrase of “touched by fire” which hearkens Saint Lawrence and his sensational martyrdom, being roasted alive on a gridiron (McWilliam 845).¹⁰ Cipolla’s fiery rhetoric invokes long-held, pre-established associations between the conceptions of martyrdom and the interceding functions saints provided to the living. By invoking martyrs, providing a context of exotic relics, and finally emphasizing the divine providence of Saint Lawrence’s feast day, Cipolla all but guarantees that his audience will believe him when he presents the coal as one of the coals used to martyr the saint. Effectively, Cipolla relies on his village audience’s expectations to conceal the truth of what he says to all but the most attentive of his audience members. Thompson writes, “it might be truer to say that [Cipolla] phrases his words in such an ambiguous manner that the audience will take them to mean whatever they wish...if readers wish to be seduced by words, then that is their responsibility not the author’s” (108). Thompson’s point here is central to the dangers of Cipolla’s rhetorical layering. Cipolla’s rhetorical invention succeeds as much because

¹⁰ Information taken from a discursive endnote in McWilliam’s translation of the Decameron, note 22 to Dioneo’s *novella*, entitled “The Feast of Saint Lawrence.”

his audience allows him to do so because of his skills at manipulating his listeners. The involvement, action, and potential culpability exists on both sides of the rhetorical divide between speaker and listener. Cipolla can provoke his audience so easily to accept what he says for a variety of reasons. Most importantly, his village audience is composed of genuinely faithful individuals who trust the words of a church appointed official with a license to preach.

Cipolla's rhetoric raises questions about the legitimacy and effectiveness of his piety and that of the villagers he visits. Cipolla, as a friar, should be well received not because of the humorous coincidence of his name that Dioneo provides, but because of the quality of his preaching. Once again, Dioneo disguises with humour an observation that should raise questions of the good-natured, well-intentioned demeanor Cipolla presents. Dioneo begins this misdirection by telling a tale which begins pleasantly and establishes a likeable, friendly character. He begins, "...one of the friars of Saint Anthony used to visit the town once every year to collect the alms which people were foolish enough to give to his Order...Friar Cipolla was a little man, with red hair and a merry face, and he was the most sociable fellow in the world" (Boccaccio 469). Dioneo's juxtaposed image of village foolishness and Cipolla's red hair invokes imagery of the fox in medieval beast fables, a character noted for its cunning and subtle manipulation of less clever animals. Helen Cooper writes "The beast fable was an ambivalent genre...Its simplicity made it a vehicle for elementary instruction, but it could also be used as a vehicle for sophisticated rhetoric" (341).¹¹ Cooper's note of the juxtaposed simple and highly rhetorical meanings with which beast fables were invested emphasizes the type of concealment such a comparison of Cipolla draws out. Cipolla's similarity with the fox of beast fables symbolizes seemingly simple language that conceals rhetorically meaningful ideas. Dioneo's

¹¹ Renard the Fox best represents the popularity of foxes in this genre, spawning "various...beast epics" which detail Renard's numerous adventures in satirical renditions of epic romances and tragedies (Cooper 341-2).

description of Cipolla presents a rhetorical picture that contains far more than meets the eye. Cipolla, the friendly and likeable friar, transforms into a cunning, deceitful, and dangerously fox-like character with a little scrutiny. While foxes in beast fables usually hang themselves by their own excessively clever machinations, Cipolla's manipulations carry him through the day successfully, and substantially increase his profit as the villagers give him "larger offerings than usual...and...the feather...proved the following year to be no less lucrative to him than the coals had been on this occasion" (Boccaccio 477).¹² This comparison emphasizes Cipolla's role as an accomplished and clever rhetorical speaker, whose rhetorical skill Dioneo, the narrator of Cipolla's *novella*, also demonstrates. Cipolla's acts of concealment, other than hiding the fact that the relics he uses to gain his alms are fake, have little to do with relics. In turn, Dioneo conceals Cipolla's acts of concealment by providing hints to Cipolla's motivations through his description of his manservant, Guccio, rather than through the event of central importance to the *novella*, Cipolla's witty rhetoric.

Dioneo introduces Guccio to his noble audience by having Cipolla insult him. Dioneo shares "Friar Cipolla had a servant...who was such a coarse fellow that he could have given lessons in vulgarity to Lippo Topo himself, and whom Friar Cipolla frequently used to make fun" (Boccaccio 471). Guccio, Cipolla describes, "has nine failings, any one of which, had it been found in Solomon, Aristotle, or Seneca, would have sufficed to vitiate all the ingenuity, all the wisdom, all the saintliness they ever possessed. So you can imagine what this fellow must be like, considering that he hasn't a scrap of ingenuity, wisdom, or saintliness, and possesses all nine" (Boccaccio 471). Carol Heffernan analyzes Cipolla's relationship with Guccio, concluding "Fra Cipolla's delight in language is displayed in the way he is said to present his servant of

¹² A more developed comparison of the shared aspects of beast fables and Frate Cipolla, while relevant to this argument, extends beyond the scope of this essay.

three names—‘Guccio Balena’ (Whale), ‘Guccio Imbratta’ (Befoul), ‘Guccio Porco’ (Pig) to his friends” (116). While such jests demonstrate Cipolla’s love of language, and his adept improvisatory wit, they also conceal the dangers Cipolla poses to his audiences—the village, Dioneo’s fellow nobles, and us. Cipolla’s preoccupation with wit and rhetoric conflicts with what should be his primary concerns, the spiritual health of the villagers he visits. A preoccupation with rhetoric demonstrates Cipolla’s interests, which, like the Pardoner’s, have nothing to do with bettering the lives or souls of the villagers in his region. Instead, Cipolla devotes himself to a frame of mind that valorizes both the self and the material, at the expense of the spiritual. Heffernan convincingly argues that “Cipolla’s sermon is less directed towards the religious education of the illiterate Certaldo rustics than it is intended to demonstrate to his fellow Florentine pranksters that he is cunning enough to preach his way out of their trap” (117). Cipolla’s witty epithets for his servant reveal a deeper and more pervasive tendency, hidden under layers of distractions and rhetorical flourishes. Cipolla seems not only to relish opportunities to exercise his wit, but also, fox-like, to seek out such opportunities. Dioneo supplies that Cipolla’s prankster friends decided, “though they were [Cipolla’s] good friends...to have a little fun with the feather at the Friar’s expense” (Boccaccio 470). Their decision could not have come about without Cipolla’s provocation, just as the fox in beast fables creates his own pitfalls. However, just as the Pardoner’s revelation of honesty conceivably benefitted him no matter the response, so too does Cipolla’s announced possession of Gabriel’s feather. By making his announcement, by trying this particular ploy in a town where he knew intelligent friends resided with the full knowledge that his two companions could see through such a ruse would be present, Cipolla begs for the challenge to his wits they provide. In either case Cipolla

benefits. Either he gains an easy monetary acquisition, or he gets a challenge to his rhetorical abilities.

The villagers' faith provides a key component of an additional layer suggesting their complicity in Cipolla's sin. The villagers respond as much to their trust in Cipolla's words as to their own desires for salvation. The argument Cipolla presents to them, complete with being blessed by the coal speaks directly to these desires. Cipolla provides an enormous incentive to the villagers, perhaps without their knowing it, by giving them the opportunity to keep a small piece of the relic with them. Proximity to relics, as Paul Binski argues, was important "for reasons of protection in death or because the bodies were able to transmit the miraculous healing powers of God to the sick" (14). Binski's art historical analysis of this historical relic practice gains traction here by providing a necessary lens to interpret why and how Cipolla's rhetoric implicates his village audience. In order to see what Cipolla says to garner responses from them, we must understand what they knew, and how they understood relics to possess power.¹³ Cipolla emphasizes the power of proximity to relics and awards his listeners with the greatest of all possible gifts: the chance to keep a relic close to them for the rest of their lives. At least, this is what his audience could believe he has done. The lure of a chance at a guaranteed salvation overpowers even the likely doubt that some of the villagers would have after hearing his speech and noticing even one of the many comic blasphemies Cipolla includes in his sermon. In this way, Cipolla uses the sin the Pardoner knows best to ensure he earns a profit: greed. The villagers ignore the indications they could have noticed in his rhetoric, driven by the instinctive desire for self-preservation that Cipolla allows to reign in his glass-cannon sermon. By falling into the allure of a salvation that can be purchased, the buyers of the Cipolla's relics, just as with

¹³ For the moment, this basic relationship between worshippers and relics is enough to supply the key to Cipolla's rhetorical power. Binski's arguments will come to bear subsequently in this study when I investigate the Pardoner's relics and how he uses them.

the Pardoner's, confirm that they see monetary wealth and spiritual salvation as equitable. The villagers will pay Cipolla, who will bless them with relics, and so the villagers will buy their salvation. Cipolla plays on this deep-seated belief, and in so doing exposes the *cupiditas*, the sinful greed and lust for reward, that his audience may be culpable of possessing. As much as Cipolla's desires for wealth are foregrounded in the text, his rhetoric focuses attention away from the willingness of the audience to believe what he says in a striking move of rhetorical concealment. The elision between material wealth and spiritual purity in the relics of Chaucer's England will form a major section of analysis further in this essay. For now, Cipolla's actions demonstrate a relationship between relics, money, and faith that Chaucer treats extensively in his "Pardoner's Tale." At the moment, it will suffice that the purchasers of these relics participate in creating a relationship that will prove problematic in Chaucer's hands.

In as many ways as Chaucer's Pardoner and Boccaccio's Cipolla use layering of meaning in their speech both authors also use frame tales to layer. Direct comparisons between Cipolla and the Pardoner need some specification and clarification. The Pardoner tells the tale he figures in. As a result, the Pardoner simultaneously occupies the same positions in narrative framing as both Dioneo and Cipolla. The Pardoner's tale interacts with each of its different layers, while Boccaccio's novella keeps these narrative layers separate. Dioneo does not interact with Cipolla's actions in the same ways that the Pardoner as speaker and the Pardoner as character do. Putting these two structures into conversation with one another, I am for the moment concerned with the structure of the *Tales*, with the equivalent of the Pardoner as character in the tale, not the Pardoner who sits in the tavern with the pilgrims. The Pardoner's role as simultaneous speaker and character changes how his speech needs to be treated. Dioneo's banter with the other nobles before he begins to speak cannot influence his tale in the same ways that the interrelated

narrative frames of “The Pardoner’s Tale” do. As such, the challenges Boccaccio presents converge with those of Chaucer, but with only broad structural similarities in the ways each author presents those challenges. Both Cipolla and the Pardoner use relics and rhetoric to manipulate villagers so that the clerics can profit. However, Cipolla keeps his manipulations secret from his audience, just as the Pardoner keeps the falsity of his relics and his profit-driven motives from his village audiences. Moving out one narrative layer, the Pardoner as speaker admits his dishonesty to his pilgrim companions. The Pardoner’s choice to share this with his pilgrim audience creates further complications.

Chaucer notes his interest in the ability of narrative frames to create layers of meaning by inserting himself into his tale as one of the pilgrims. E. Talbot Donaldson’s formative work in contemporary Chaucerian studies discusses the relationship between historical author, fictional author, and fictional character in Chaucer’s *Tales*. He notes, “Chaucer the pilgrim...is not really Chaucer the poet—nor, for that matter, is either the poet, or the poem’s protagonist, that Geoffrey Chaucer frequently mentioned in contemporary historical records as a distinguished civil servant, but never as a poet” (Donaldson 928).¹⁴ That said, Chaucer investigates the ability of a narrative to manipulate as much as does Boccaccio, and the Pardoner’s Tale demonstrates that Chaucer did not shy away from the implications of manipulative rhetoric. Rather, unlike Boccaccio, Chaucer explored those implications wholesale, in many cases extending the arguments Boccaccio’s text treats. Following Donaldson’s line of argument that each narrative frame level must be accorded its own level of considerations clarifies the structure of Boccaccio’s novella but complicates Chaucer’s “Pardoner’s Tale.” On two levels, Chaucer the

¹⁴ Donaldson’s argument certainly bears fruit if pursued similarly structured to Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, but such an argument lies beyond the scope of this paper. My invocation of Donaldson instead directs this essay to issues of the fictional characters’ words rather than Geoffrey Chaucer’s historical investment in his texts.

poet places storytellers inside their tales. Chaucer the poet writes the story Chaucer the pilgrim recounts, while the Pardoner tells a story in which he himself stars, whose subject matter is the recounting of yet another story his character self tells. Boccaccio, on the other hand, makes no such deliberate parallels between himself and the nobles who tell the stories he records. Chaucer gives the Pardoner a story frame that mirrors his own role in the *Tales*. Chaucer the pilgrim is implicated and blended with the intentions of Chaucer the poet, while the Pardoner the storyteller is implicated in the story his narrative self tells. These layers bleed into each other. Chaucer's understanding of rhetoric, implication, and levels of inference is much more structured than Boccaccio's but much less neatly resolved.

Boccaccio structures a story where an unnamed narrator recounts the stories a group of nobles tells to one another. Chaucer the poet complicates this structure further by writing a story that Chaucer the pilgrim tells which is itself a recounting of several other pilgrims' stories. Cipolla conceals from the villagers as much as Dioneo seeks to conceal the questions Cipolla's motivations raise from his audience of noble compatriots. The rhetorical concealment Cipolla enacts on his narrative level mirrors the acts of concealment Dioneo performs on his. At the same time, Dioneo and the Pardoner share similar functions, as do Chaucer the poet and Boccaccio. Dioneo tells his audience that Cipolla concludes the novella "At considerable profit to himself...Cipolla neatly turned the tables on the people who had sought to make a fool of him by taking away his feather" (Boccaccio 477). Cipolla, like the Pardoner, easily manipulates his village audiences into providing him with considerable profits. Unlike the Pardoner, Cipolla never honestly reveals his manipulations to any of his audiences, and also unlike the Pardoner, Dioneo's noble audience lauds him for it. The Pardoner's audience of pilgrims, given voice by the Host, condemns him for revealing the deceptions he practices. Boccaccio writes "The whole

company was vastly pleased and entertained by Dioneo's tale, and they all laughed heartily over Friar Cipolla, especially at his pilgrimage and at the relics, both the ones he had seen and the ones he had brought back with him" (477). Heffernan argues from the conclusion to Dioneo's novella that "Boccaccio is more comfortable than is Chaucer with the implicit parallel between the verbal artistry of his corrupt preacher and his own" (109). While I will challenge the implications of Heffernan's conclusion shortly, she draws important attention to the relationship between author and tale on several levels. In the *Decameron*, Boccaccio, Dioneo, and Cipolla all share the ability to rhetorically manipulate an audience, and do so concurrently, on each narrative level.

Chaucer's text challenges its audiences to garner some "moral thyng" from a self-proclaimed sinner who freely and honestly admits that he lies, cheats, and steals (l. 329). Cipolla, though he keeps his deceptions a secret, uses his rhetoric to conceal his intentions. However, Cipolla is just as dangerous as the Pardoner. He also raises the question of his audience's complicity in the sins he commits. By offering a fake relic for veneration to the villagers, Cipolla promotes the worship of false idols, just as the Pardoner does. Cipolla's reception also raises these same questions of audience reception in the two pranksters who try to trick him. These two men understand the game Cipolla plays, and they are not fooled by his rhetoric. For the rest of Cipolla's audience, his rhetoric invites the villagers to involve themselves actively in their own sin. This moment in Boccaccio brings out the dangers for a readily accepting audience, and further questions the value of such a faithful outlook. The majority of Cipolla's audience believes in the salvation his fake relics will bring wholeheartedly. Such a belief raises questions about the importance of belief in the face of rhetorical manipulations. The villagers who accept Cipolla's blessings and venerate the fake relics will believe that they have followed the dictates

of their faith, even though they have not. The issue Cipolla raises demonstrates, just as the Pardoner does, that an easy, stable relationship between faithfulness and sin is difficult to come by. Faith creates an ambiguity here that the truth of the relics' legitimacy may not resolve. The Pardoner sharpens this same idea and brings it to the forefront of his pilgrim audience's considerations. In fact, the Host's threats to the Pardoner at the conclusion of his tale come close to erupting in violence rather than resolving in a kiss of forgiveness. The Host's violent response to the Pardoner results in large part from the threats to the stability of language the Pardoner poses. Violence becomes the only recourse the Host sees in order to combat the Pardoner's destabilization of language, as words no longer mean what the Host would intend them to in the Pardoner's rhetorical world.

--The Pardoner's *Exemplum* and Further Layers--

In order to understand the Host's responses to the Pardoner's provocations, we must first examine the tale the Pardoner tells, and then focus on the Pardoner's conclusion. The Pardoner tells the pilgrims the same tale he tells to his village audiences as part of his sermons to them. For now, I will concern myself chiefly with this second layer of tale telling: the tale within the larger tale that is the Pardoner's overall performance of self-presentation. The Pardoner comes to represent the rhetorical language of destabilization he advocates, just as the Host's violence sets him up as an opposing symbol of stability, whether or not he actively seeks this role. The Knight's ability to resolve the debate between a language that stabilizes meanings and a language that unmakes stability also emphasizes his importance in Chaucer's investigation of language's ability to express stable meanings. I will examine the Knight's responses following an investigation of the stakes that underlie the Host's confrontation with the Pardoner. The Pardoner tells an *exemplum*, a story akin to a parable that is often used to illustrate a moral. John Lyons

provides a useful definition of an *exemplum* and its functions in his study of rhetorical technique in Early Modern France and Italy. *Exempla*, Lyons argues, differ from other sorts of examples because they refer specifically to the rhetorical narration clergy used while preaching sermons (Lyons 11). *Exempla* were stories of individual actions that served an explicitly didactic or moralizing purpose. The Pardoner tells the *exemplum* of three men who find death in a search for treasure.¹⁵ As I will draw out in analysis of his tale, the Pardoner's *exemplum* enacts precisely the effect Lyons records—the *exemplum* will teach an edifying moral lesson to each audience that hears it. Despite the greed that motivates his discourse, the Pardoner's tale will complicate an analysis of the Pardoner and the rest of his rhetoric by demonstrating that whatever *else* his rhetoric may do, and whatever *other* ideas his story may complicate, it does provide a moral that presents itself here as unassailable—*radix malorum est cupiditas*.

The Pardoner preaches a transcription of the speech he knows “by rote” (l. 332). The pilgrims hear this same rhetoric, recited to them from memory by the Pardoner. However, recall that the pilgrims know the Pardoner's act for what it is—a well-rehearsed, persuasive bit of theatre. Moreover the pilgrims already know that the story they are about to hear is a sales pitch, a rhetorically constructed sermon with the explicit purpose of making the Pardoner money. He has already revealed to the pilgrims that his sermon is nothing more than a “gaude,” his preaching a font of “avarice and of swich cursednesse” (l. 389, 400). The Pardoner's honest revelation of his dishonest motives opens up multiple possible meanings in the stories he tells. His honesty provides the pilgrims with the knowledge necessary to see the deception in the persuasive words he employs. However, some facet of the Pardoner's *exemplum* drives home the pilgrims' understanding of their own potential greedy motivations, as both he and Cipolla

¹⁵ The Pardoner's *exemplum* is a common story in medieval Europe with analogues in Latin, Italian, and German manuscript sources (Cooper 264).

demonstrate for their village audiences. In this layer of interpretation, Pardoner's tale of the perils of greed reads to the pilgrims as a manipulation of the villagers' fears for profit. At the same time, the villagers do not turn from the Pardoner once he begins preaching. While some villagers may simply "not get it," others are duped by the Pardoner's manipulations. As much as the Pardoner plays on the villagers' motivating fear of sin and the association between monetary values, spiritual self-preservation, and greed, he also provides them with a spurious hope in the relics he sells. The villagers may even see through the Pardoner's rhetoric, but the possibility that the relics he sells might be real is a powerful motivator for belief in the Pardoner's words, even to a listener skeptical of the Pardoner himself. As a result, the villagers buy the relics as much from a fear of appearing miserly as from a desire for self-preservation vested in the material magic of the relics. This desire implicates the village audience in its own damnation. By purchasing a relic, the buyer puts his faith in a material object. The buyer's hope for salvation blinds him to the dangers the Pardoner's sale of that same salvation presents, just as Cipolla demonstrated. Chaucer's text reflects a detailed concern with the relationship between material objects and faithful practice, of which the Pardoner's sale of relics is only the most memorable example.

Chaucer the poet interrogates the ability of objects like the Pardoner's relics to be spiritually meaningful throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. When Chaucer wrote, the foundational position relics and saints came to hold in Catholic theology had yet to encounter the challenges Protestantism would pose to the materialism inherent in the belief system. Nonetheless, Chaucer's tales question the value of the incorporeal compared to the material, and usually side with the incorporeal. Chaucer the poet begins the *Canterbury Tales* with this idea. In the "General Prologue" to the *Tales* Chaucer the pilgrim introduces all of the pilgrims who will tell

tales on this journey. Following each “portrait,” or description of the pilgrim tale-tellers, Chaucer the pilgrim describes the tavern where he meets them and how he meets the Host, who becomes the leader of their party. In this transitional section, Chaucer the poet introduces one of the motivating concerns of the *Tales*: accurately telling the difference between the value of material and immaterial things. He begins with a concern for the immateriality of speech and the materiality of physical experience. Chaucer the pilgrim relates “first I pray yow, of youre curteisye/That ye n’arete it nat my vileynye/Thogh that pleynty speke in this mateere/To telle yow hir wordes nad hire cheere/Ne thogh I speke hir wordes proprely” (ll. 725-9). Chaucer the pilgrim begs his listeners not to blame him for stories he relates which may be villainous. By prefacing his account of events with a news-reporter stance of conveying exactly what occurred, and no more, Chaucer the poet frees himself and his character Chaucer the pilgrim from potential censure for some of his bawdier tales. At the same time, he demonstrates a concern with words, rhetoric, and deeds that motivate my investigation of the Pardoner’s tale.

Delving one layer deeper into the text’s concern with recounting and accuracy, Chaucer, as both poet and pilgrim, invests this idea with a lengthy treatment. Chaucer the pilgrim follows with a description of what it means to recount events accurately,

Whoso shal telle a tale after a man
 He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
 Everich a word, if it be in his charge
 Al speke he never so rudeliche and large
 Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe
 Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.
 He may nat spare, although he were his brother
 He moot as well seye o word as another
 Crist spak himself ful brode in hooly write
 And wel ye woot no vileynye is it.
 Eek Plato seith, whoso kan hyme rede
 The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede. (ll. 731-42)

Chaucer the pilgrim spends an extensive amount of time reinforcing the importance of an exact recounting of another's words to ensure accuracy. He finds it unacceptable to "feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe" for someone else's story. He rejects the ideas of rhetorical flourish and improvisation that mark the speech of the Pardoner and Frate Cipolla. The conclusion of this speech addresses Chaucer's concern with materialism in a broader sense, as applied to the Pardoner's tale and the complicity of the Pardoner's village audience in sin. The idea that "wordes moote be cosyn to the dede" motivates many of the tales recounted in Chaucer's story. The concept itself, however, remains an elusive one. A word, for Chaucer, is not supposed to mimic the deed it represents exactly, nor is it to represent an artistic improvisation upon the real object itself. The word must be cousin to the deed. Related, but generally so, with some distance. The deeds that must be "cosyn" to words expresses the relationship the Pardoner interrogates and attempts to break down across Chaucer's *Tales*. For the Pardoner, language cannot relate to the material reality it seeks to describe, and so cannot accurately describe the events or objects that occur in the world. As a result of the problems Chaucer the pilgrim lays out here, the Pardoner's rhetoric can encapsulate meanings in language that contradict one another.

Chaucer's conclusion seems at odds with the painstaking detail he requires of accurate factual reporting. The word "cosyn" in Middle English sheds some light on the complicated premise Chaucer, as both poet and pilgrim, expounds. "Cosin" in Middle English translates to a fraud, or trickery, while the context in which Chaucer uses it requires a definition similar to the "cousin" of Present Day English, a word expressing a relationship of some kind (*Middle English Dictionary* "cosin"). The Middle English "cosyn" also has this connotation, but Chaucer complicates the relationship between the word and its meaning. Chaucer the pilgrim's concluding premise also invests the entirety of the *Tales* from its outset with the idea of layers

and rhetorical interpretation. Here, Chaucer gives his readers a stable frame of reference for “cosyn” as a word expressing a relationship, but the phrase in which “cosyn” appears does not proceed logically from the frame Chaucer establishes. This moment of slippage in the logical relationship between a desire for accurate storytelling and the actions a teller must take to speak accurately allows the “cosin” as “fraud” to have just as much play as the Present Day English counterpart “cousin.” Chaucer the pilgrim articulates the same instability words demonstrate when the Pardoner speaks. The only moment of the *Tales* where Chaucer discusses storytelling as an art is one where he presents a rhetorical layer. He allows the conclusion of his argument to have two contradictory meanings simultaneously, such that words must either bear an approximate relationship with deeds, or they must serve as fraudulent deeds. Neither allows an idea to be expressed without contradiction or complication. As a result, both meanings become valid despite the failure of either to express the full problem, just as the Pardoner shows in his tale to the pilgrims.

The Pardoner begins his *exemplum*, the story of the three treasure hunters whose greed murders them, following his prologue and confession. He begins this tale with an account of so-called “tavern sins,” as he provides the background from whence these three greedy treasure hunters come. He begins, “yonge folk haunteden folye/As riot, hasard, stywes, and tavernes...and pleyen at dees both day and nyght, and eten...and drynken over hir might/Through which they doon the devel sacrificise” (ll. 464-9). In addition to the greed with which the Pardoner’s tale will concern itself, the youths he describes gamble, waste money at taverns, overeate, overdrink, and in so doing honor the devil. The tavern of sins where the Pardoner prefaces his story of greed sets the tone of the tale he will tell. This tale calls to account the sins of each of its audiences, and warns against continued practice of those sins. As much as the

Pardoner calls out the villagers, here he may also be looking over his glass of beer at the Host, an innkeeper, as he speaks. The Pardoner's jibes at the Host in his account of the sins of the tavern may help explain the Host's later violent outburst directed at the Pardoner. At the same time, the Pardoner might be smirking to himself as he delivers these lines while he also sits in the midst of a busy tavern, eating and drinking. The beginning of his sermon against tavern sins reflects this additional irony layered over top the Pardoner's greedy manipulation of the Christian commandments against greed and avarice so that he can profit. This irony works as a layer just like other rhetorical layers. An ironic comment about his own sins seems as much in keeping with his attitude as does an ironic comment about a villager or a fellow pilgrim. In this case, the Pardoner's ironic condemnation of drinking as he drinks both undercuts the moral lesson he teaches and educates his pilgrim audience in proper moral behavior. Irony allows the Pardoner's condemnation that tavern sins are sins to be simultaneously true and false. Since the Pardoner has already confessed the irony of preaching against greed to fatten his wallet to the pilgrims, he seems comfortable emphasizing other ironies that he can draw out of his rhetoric. The Pardoner will continue this trend in his *exemplum*.

The "riotours thre," the main characters of the *exemplum*, inhabit just such a tavern as the Pardoner first describes (l. 661). While the rioters engage in the various tavern sins, they hear the knell of a funeral service. One of them asks who died, and another responds "He was, pardee, an old felawe of yours/And...he was yslayn to-nyght/Fordronke..." (ll. 672-4). While the first rioter thinks on his friend's alcohol induced death, the second continues, "Ther cam a privee theef men clepeth Deeth/That in this contree al the peple sleeth...Me thynketh...to be war of swich an adversarie" (ll. 675-83). After relating to the first rioter that a thief by the name of Death killed his friend, the second stops talking after warning the first not to go near this thief.

Not to be dissuaded, the first rioter vows “we wol sleen this false traytour Deeth” (l. 699). After the three rioters vow to kill Death, they journey into the country to search for him. They find only an old man, who tells them that a great treasure lies buried under a tree not far away. The men, overtaken by greed, each plot to kill the others, and one by one each dies due to the others’ machinations. The rioters’ search for Death not only teaches a moralizing lesson about greed to the pilgrims, their quest also embodies the Pardoner’s rhetoric and the problems associated with it. While the direct cause of their deaths stems from the treasure they find, that prize only comes to them during their quest to find Death, personified as a thief. The rioters treat Death as if he were a literal thief, operating on the earth using earthly methods and subject to the same rules as they are. They remain unaware that they chase an abstraction that has been personified for the entire *exemplum*. In pursuing this materialized version of Death, the rioters’ own deaths enact the abstraction they seek in those same material terms. Here, the Pardoner’s *exemplum* demonstrates the simultaneous existence of two opposite ideas at the same time embodied in the same concept. In this tale, Death becomes a literal “walking” contradiction, insofar as the concept of Death behaves in many ways as if it were a physical entity. This same concern with immaterial and material ideas will motivate the Pardoner’s discussion of his relics that I will discuss in section three. The relics’ embodiment of opposite ideas will prove as problematic for the Pardoner’s audiences as his old man does for the rioters.

The Pardoner concludes his *exemplum* in an often-analyzed bit of seeming confusion. After the Pardoner relates the demise of the three rioters, he expounds at some length about the “cursed synne of alle cursednesse...traytours homicide, O wikkednesse/O glotonye, luxurie, and hasardry” (ll. 895-7). The lamentation of sins prefaces the Pardoner’s sales pitch: “Now, goode men, God foryeve you youre trespass/And ware you fro the synne of avarice!” (ll. 904-5). He

continues to crescendo his rhetoric, emphasizing the aversion to materialism, money, and the fear of a sinful death his *exemplum* invokes. He draws the impact and force for his next move from the implied perils of greed, and warns that those who seek material wealth alone will die with nothing left to merit acceptance into heaven. Next, he channels the agitation, fear, and shame the villagers now endure into the outlet he provides: “I yow assoille, by myn heigh power/Yow that wol offre” donations (ll. 913-4). Finally, he offers to provide a constant reminder of the relief that would accompany such an offering. The Pardoner adds, now speaking directly to the pilgrims, “o word forgat I in my tale/I have relikes and pardon in my male...If any of yow wole, of devocion/Offren and han myn absolucion” (ll. 919-24). The Pardoner complicates the construction, delivery, and reception of rhetorical acts in his blending invocation of greedy, fearful, and pious affects in his audiences. The Pardoner’s rhetoric inspires a variety of motivations for his audiences to purchase his relics that invest his speech with different meanings. Rhetoric that invokes fear operates on different registers than rhetoric that invokes faith. As such, the reactions of the Pardoner’s audiences serve as indications of the different rhetorical layers he simultaneously invokes. In particular, the Pardoner’s invocation of faith seems to stand at odds with the fear and greed he also invokes in his audiences. Here, the surface layer of the Pardoner’s rhetoric uses the *exemplum* to play upon his village audience’s desires to gain safe entry into heaven in order to extract maximum profit from the complex of contradictory motives that activate them. He describes his list of relics to his pilgrim audience in order to begin the same process with them.

The Pardoner’s summary of his miraculous glass cases of relics echoes Frate Cipolla’s comical list in Boccaccio. Cipolla lists among his relics “the finger of the Holy Ghost, as straight and firm as it ever was...a cherub’s fingernail...an article or two of the Holy Catholic faith; and

a few of the rays of the star that appeared to the three magi” (Boccaccio 475). The Pardoner shares that he possesses “cloutes and...bones” specifying “a sholder-boon/Of an hooly Jewes sheep” and “a mitayn” (l. 350, 372). The Pardoner treats his sheep’s shoulder-bone and his mitten with as much rhetorical salesmanship as Cipolla invests in St. Lawrence’s fraudulent coals. He shares that the shoulder-bone can heal “cow, or calf, or sheep, or oxe” from disease, and even “multiplie...his beestes and his stoore” (l. 365). The “mitayn” also performs a list of miracles, “multiplying his grayn/Whan he hath sowen be it whete or otes” (l. 375). Just as Cipolla spins his relics to the season of Pentecost when he visits, playing on the association between Pentecost and fire and St. Lawrence’s coals, the Pardoner shows his relics to be uniquely suited to the farming needs of his village listeners. However, at the conclusion of this relic summary, he refers to the entire premise, summary of relics included, as his “gaude.” Here he emphasizes that the relics he sells are just as fraudulent as the rhetoric he uses to sell them. At this point, the Pardoner seems to lose track of his audiences by offering to sell these fake relics to the pilgrims. This may occur for several reasons. The Pardoner acts if he has forgotten that he has already revealed to the pilgrims his motives for selling relics, and the deceptions implicit in his rhetoric. The Pardoner may have deliberately invested his speech with so many rhetorical layers that he loses track of which audience he addresses, and which meanings apply to whom. The Pardoner’s rhetoric might indicate a plan to rely upon the pilgrims’ hope against hope that the Pardoner’s relics actually are legitimate, just as his village audiences do. The Pardoner would then play on this hope in his village audiences by confronting them with a paradox. By preaching about greed to the audience, he encourages them not to hoard money. By selling them relics at the conclusion of this speech, designed to instill in them an aversion to money, the villagers simply trade their coins for the equivalent of more material wealth. The villagers now possess

bones that are not holy, and only symbolize the money the villagers have paid for them. The themes of money and salvation the Pardoner's *exemplum* joins equate for the villagers the relic as both spiritual salvation and economic expenditure.

Here, the Pardoner's confluence of these themes emphasizes Chaucer's concerns with material and immaterial wealth. The relics, as material objects, seem not to help the villagers at all. Instead, they allow the Pardoner to convince his audience that they have escaped the sins of greed by exchanging one sign of material wealth, money, for another, the relics they have purchased. Moving out one narrative layer, the Pardoner's honesty to the pilgrims provokes questions of believability. If the Pardoner confesses to being a liar, then believing his confession casts doubt on its legitimacy. Paradoxically, the Pardoner's supposedly honest confession makes it almost impossible to believe him. If he is a liar, then an analysis of his rhetoric by any knowledgeable audience member would provoke the consideration that he might be lying about *lying about* selling fake relics. At the same time, such a rhetorical scheme sets up the Pardoner to feed his pilgrim audience false information, and perhaps net him a sale. If the Pardoner prefaces his speech with the knowledge that his relics are fake, and that he lies, planning to end with a sales pitch, this same reverse psychology works to the Pardoner's benefit. If a liar tells his audience that the things he sells to other people are fake, the knowledge that the liar is consistently dishonest opens up the possibility that he might be lying about the provenance of the relics in question. The Pardoner has also revealed to the pilgrims that his first sin is greed. If his relics are real, then the Pardoner also keeps objects of nigh-priceless value to himself by lying about their authenticity. All of these complications foreground the motivating issues of faith in the Pardoner's audiences. The faith and belief in the relics the Pardoner sells keeps most of these considerations at bay for even the members of his audiences clever enough to see the layers of

meanings the Pardoner's rhetoric summons. The Pardoner's village audiences buy his relics primarily because they seek salvation, albeit a salvation complicated by monetary desires and potential greed. However, the Pardoner's rhetoric problematizes that faith, drawing out the range of possibilities for corruption belief systems that rely on physical objects create.

As a result, the Pardoner consigns the pilgrims to the same role as the village audiences when he presses his proffered metaphorical carrot. He turns to the Host, and concludes

“Looke what a seuretee it is to yow alle
That I am in youre felaweshipe yfalle
That I may assoile you...
I rede that our Hoost heere shal bigynne
For he is moost envoluped in synne.
Com forth, sire Hoost, and offre first anon
And thou shalt kisse the relikes everychon
Ye, for a grote! Unbockle anon thy purs.” (ll. 938-45)

Critics debate the exact reason for the Pardoner's offers to pardon the Host, and to sell him relics that the Host knows are fake. Marijane Osborn argues that the Pardoner's inconsistent rhetorical logic reflects a subtext of puns between the Host and Pardoner that began in the Introduction to the “Pardoner's Tale.” The Host, overtaken by emotion, swears “by Seint Ronyan,” to which, some lines later, the Pardoner rejoins “It shal be doon...by Seint Ronyon” (l. 310, 320). This transition from the “a” in Ronyan to the “o” in Ronyon “shows the Pardoner playing on the word *runnion*, a word meaning ‘kidney,’ and serving here as a surrogate for ‘testicle’” (Osborn 367). For Osborn, “the Pardoner has twisted the intended meaning of the Host's word *Ronyan* to *runnion*, so when the Pardoner invites Harry to ‘kiss his relics,’ Harry, in turn, seizes the opportunity to violate the intended meaning” (368). While Osborn notices and delivers a compelling argument for the Pardoner's ability to twist language, her focus neglects the seriousness of the response he provokes. Examining the interaction between Host and Pardoner as a jest reduces the stakes of the Pardoner's position. Even if reading the Pardoner's exchange

as jest did not compromise the depth of its import to the pilgrims, Osborn fails to identify what differentiates the Pardoner's jests from any other pilgrim who gains the joking advantage over any other. Her argument never addresses why *this* joke sends Harry Bailey over the edge rather than any other. In Chaucer's text, I would add to Osborn's argument that the Pardoner's punning *runnion* serves as a jesting stand-in for testicles. "Ronyon," or, *runnion*, the Pardoner's pun on the Host's invoked "by Seint Ronyan" cleanly echoes the "onion" of Frate Cipolla's namesake. This punning reference emphasizes once again the idea of layers in a rhetorical, spiritual, and physical sense.

Such a train of thought returns us to Dioneo's clean valediction of Cipolla, and the Host's violent response to the Pardoner, which ultimately ends in forgiveness. The authors take opposing stances for their corrupt preachers in many respects. A comparison of these differences will help us understand why the Host and Pardoner forgive each other so quickly after such a violent eruption. Heffernan analyzes one such oppositional difference in Cipolla and the Pardoner: Cipolla's deceitful rhetoric demonstrates his improvisational abilities, while the Pardoner's practiced delivery of his sermon shows the adeptness with which he can hone a routine (106). For Heffernan, the Pardoner's memorization ultimately accounts for the violent reaction he garners from the Host, while Cipolla's improvisatory wit allows him to escape with profit and person unharmed. The Pardoner's routine follows a preplanned path, and always ends in the same way. So, the Pardoner, for Heffernan, gets caught up in his routine, and in essence forgets the one bit of improvisation he offers at the beginning of his tale—his honest accounting of his dishonest actions. However, such an analysis neglects the layering motif that pervades both tales. Cipolla, after his namesake the onion, layers his rhetoric so that words conceal their meanings. Cipolla's layers hide his corruption under layers of jest, conviviality, and religious

sermonizing to his village audience, but not to the readers of Boccaccio's text. Boccaccio here makes his layer of concealment as transparent as he makes the truth that layer conceals by recording Cipolla's fast-talking speech in print, where a careful eye cannot miss the incorrectly used words, and can revisit the puns. While in the narrative frame, Cipolla escapes punishment, Boccaccio's audience still sees his deceptions. The Pardoner, on the other hand, paradoxically uses his layering to reveal as much as to conceal inside his narrative frame. The Pardoner shares once he arrives in a village "I assoile him by the auctoritee/Which that by bulle ygraunted was to me/By this gaude have I wonne, yeer by yeer/An hundred mark sith I was pardoner" (ll. 387-90). By adding his revelation that his pardoning of villagers is an act, the Pardoner splits open the onion and shows his pilgrim audience that the layers of the onion exist, and must be interpreted as such. Chaucer's interpretation of rhetorical concealment and layers also invokes a more realistic response than Boccaccio's treatment. The Pardoner's honest confession of his deceits and corruption inside his story earns him disdain and the possibility of physical harm. Chaucer shows here that rhetorical layering, if used for purposes with as many multivalent readings as the Pardoner's, can be dangerous to the speaker. Boccaccio does not invest his storytelling with such realism. Yet, the act of honesty that so complicates the Pardoner's rhetoric provides the ammunition by which the Pardoner provokes the wrath of the Host, nearly getting himself emasculated in the process. The Pardoner, as a result, dances between complete control of the effects of his rhetoric and complete powerlessness to resolve the conflicts that arise from it. He demonstrates that the layered qualities of his rhetoric provoke oppositions that affect him as well as his audience. For the most part, the Pardoner can anticipate and manipulate his audiences no matter how they respond to him. He can provide his village audiences with choices that all result in their downfall, and in which he always benefits. He attempts to do the same here, but the

Host's response is a new one for the Pardoner. The Pardoner can answer words, but the Host's physical violence rejects the destabilization the Pardoner demonstrates.

The Pardoner is the only pilgrim who provokes the Host this near to actual violence, but other pilgrims also make Harry the butt of their jokes and insults. The Host comes to odds with the Cook earlier in the *Tales* when the Cook proposes to tell a tale of an innkeeper whose wife makes her living as a whore unbeknownst to him. The Host, in the Cook's Prologue, jests "of many a pilgrim hastow Christes curs/For of they percely yet they fare the worse," suggesting that the Cook's meals damn souls as well as stomachs (ll. 4349-50). The Cook counters "Herry Bailey, by thy faith/Be thou not wroth, er we departen heer/Though that my tale be of an hostileer" (ll. 4357-60). Given that the tales immediately preceding the Cooks' account, those of the Miller and Reeve, attacked each opposing profession in as many comedic forms as possible, the Cook establishes his insult on well-laid ground. Aside from the series of arguments that suggest the Host and Pardoner engage in some sort of rhetorical wordplay, critics have spilled a great deal of ink considering how the Pardoner's character bears on this interaction. Osborn argues from one of two common trends in critical thought concerning the Pardoner's conclusion to his tale, emphasizing an analysis centered on the Pardoner's sexuality. Emily Allen provides a useful review of the critical responses in this vein of study: the Pardoner as a symbol of despair, as a homosexual, as a grotesque social outcast, or as an example of involuntary self-exposure resulting from any of the above (117). Critics have also considered him as a poetic/figurative symbol rather than as a character with a personality, concluding that the Pardoner reveals the ability of *exempla* to instruct despite faults in their presentation (Allen 117). In other words, this last critical school places the text in a class of its own, arguing that even a sinner such as the Pardoner cannot stop a moral tale from improving the morals of its hearers. This last argument

entirely ignores the extensive detail Chaucer has invested in the circumstances of the Pardoner's telling. I align with Allen's conclusions, that "the Pardoner constitutes a response to a particular *audience* whose needs and desires he manipulates" (Allen 117). I diverge from her analysis in the evidence I investigate. Allen turns to fifteenth-century manuscripts to interrogate a contemporary audience's reaction to the Pardoner, while for the moment I will concentrate on Chaucer's text in order to understand the reactions of the Host and pilgrims, his immediate audience within that text.

I locate the Pardoner's rationale for his illogical sales pitch in his description of the Host as someone "moost envoluped in synne" (l. 942). I pair the Pardoner's description of the Host with an earlier description he provides of himself, "For though myself be a ful vicious man/A moral tale yet I tellen kan" (ll. 459-60). Both of these phrases refer ostensibly to the character of the Host and Pardoner, respectively, both comment simultaneously on the Pardoner's rhetoric and his relics, and both invoke the idea of layers. The Pardoner's description of the Host as one "moost envoluped in synne" conjures the image of sin as a layer on top of an object that, presumably, was formerly clean and good. This kind of layering invokes both physical and spiritual ideas of layers. Physically, the Pardoner's comment calls to mind a physical layer of grime about the Host's person. This rhetorical reference to a physical condition works as a metaphor to describe the Host's spiritual state. At the same time, the Pardoner's characterization of himself as a "ful vicious man" who still "a moral tale...tellen kan" presents his own person as contradictory, or as I will analyze, layered. The Pardoner's statement becomes a self-fashioning that asserts the complexity of the Pardoner's rationale and rhetorical intentions.

The Pardoner's lines describe a connection the Pardoner sees between himself and the Host. The Pardoner's first line where he characterizes himself as "a ful vicious man" refers to his

own sinful behavior, but he argues that his sins do not prevent him from sharing a moral with his audience. The moral he shares in his *exemplum* complicates this premise. His tale invokes layers of irony by warning against greed, the sin of which the Pardoner is most guilty. In this way, the Pardoner is also enveloped in sin, just as he accuses Harry Bailey of being. In so doing, the tale also draws our attention as readers, and the pilgrims' attention as an educated audience, to the simultaneous existence of two contradictory facts. The Pardoner can sin by manipulating members of his audience to steal from them, and at the same time, he can teach them a moral lesson. Here, the Pardoner shows himself to be just as enveloped in sin as he charges the Host to be. This line of argument returns to the idea of Frate Cipolla's namesake, the onion. The Pardoner's message, the moral he delivers, functions as the onion buried in the earth of Cipolla's novella. The lies, deceptions, and rhetorical trickery the Pardoner uses surround the moral of the *exemplum*, but do not corrupt its meaning. The Pardoner shows again that he can deliver a message that both accomplishes good while serving an immoral purpose. Sinning, in the Pardoner's case, seems to do good. The Pardoner's ability to sin while doing good occurs on two levels. First, the Pardoner lies to his village audiences in order to profit by his sale of relics. At the same time, the Pardoner's choice of subject also implicates the villagers in their own damnation by manipulating fears of judgment and the instincts of self-preservation, as has been discussed. In his rhetorical manipulations, the Pardoner escapes culpability by giving the audience the motivation and opportunity to damn themselves. He does so by sharing an *exemplum* that accomplishes good on its own, surrounded by temptations exactly opposite the moral he preaches. Again, the Pardoner uses the same rhetorical model as Cipolla's onion: a core of good surrounded by evil. The ability of the Pardoner's *exemplum* to do good despite him deserves some attention here. The story of the *exemplum*, in all of the Pardoner's rhetorical

layering and compounding of meanings, remains the core of his speech, as a story whose purpose is moral instruction. The Pardoner's story functions as a central premise over which he piles a series of rhetorical layers in order to justify his own rhetorical corruption. The *exemplum*, surrounded by the layers of dirt the Pardoner places on it to profit from his village audiences, functions as one of the Pardoner's centers of purity. As a morally edifying tale, the Pardoner's *exemplum* also approximates the stabilizing and singular results the Word of God invokes, rather than the chaos of earthly speech. In all of the Pardoner's rhetorical manipulations, he never challenges the single meaning his *exemplum* offers: greed results in death. The Pardoner does not challenge this moral because he cannot. He knows that he would stand as a counterexample to any argument he might make to contradict his *exemplum*. His greedy impulses have driven other villagers to spiritual death by undercutting the moral he preaches, and in the process, helping them choose to ignore that moral. He himself is encased in the sin of his actions, and he cannot break out of the same trap in which he tries to ensnare others, regardless of the good he might perform as the vehicle of his moral story. As much as the Pardoner can do good, he cannot erase the evil that he has committed and intends to continue committing. The *exemplum* he tells has no such contradictions or layers invested in it. The Pardoner piles his rhetorical layers on top of this moral tale, but he cannot draw out any layers or rhetorical contradictions in the tale itself. He can only use it to complicate the layers he adds.

Following the invocation of the Word of God, the Pardoner proves that sinful behavior resolves in justice as he himself receives a sort of punishment for the sins he commits. While Harry Bailey does not physically assault the Pardoner, he does reduce the Pardoner to sputtering silence, rendering the master rhetorician at a complete loss for words. The Pardoner "answerede nat a word/So wroth he was, no word ne wolde he seye" after Harry threatens him (ll. 954-6).

Here, the Pardoner demonstrates that sinning does accomplish good, when the pilgrim audience sees the fruits of the Pardoner's sinful labor. The Pardoner sins by his tongue and his words. His punishment provides another moral lesson to the pilgrims, in the same fashion as his *exemplum*. The Pardoner's forced silence punishes him in the same manner in which he sinned. In so doing, the pilgrim audience experiences firsthand what happens when sinners sin: they are punished. Both of these layers are active in the Pardoner's speech and actions. He both escapes some sin in his address to his village audience, and receives punishment for his manipulations when he speaks to the pilgrim audience. The Pardoner's ideas of sin describe both his own conception of himself and the flaws he sees in others. In the same way that the Pardoner's rhetoric punishes him to an extent, and justifies him to an extent, so too do his rhetorical uses of the idea of sin. By targeting the Host as a person enveloped in sin, the Pardoner suggests that the two are alike.

By telling the Host that he is "enveloped in synne," the Pardoner does not call the Host a sinful man. Rather, he invokes the same idea of contradictory premises that he applies to himself. I return here to the Pardoner's preface to his *exemplum*, his small sermon against tavern sins. In effect, the Pardoner argues that sin can accomplish good things, and justifies his argument by suggesting that the Host is also surrounded by sin. Just as the Pardoner can sin and still tell a moral tale, so too can the Host profit from a tavern where sins are encouraged and not be a sinful man himself. The Pardoner's argument follows the same rhetorical premises he applies in his preaching to village audiences. He creates rhetorical problems with no easy solution, and sets himself up to damn his listeners no matter what choice they make. If the villagers accept his relics, then Chaucer's concerns with material values in other parts of the *Tales* seems to indicate that material values are not as significant, or as far reaching, as more spiritual values. As a result, the villagers give in to lures of materialism. If, on the other hand, the villagers see this anti-

materialistic tendency that seems to motivate the *Tales* as a whole, they give the Pardoner leave to make them doubt the truth of their beliefs. He can argue that his relics are legitimate, and that the villagers' doubt of his relics will damn them, not the reverse. Here with the Host, instead of instilling fear as he does with his village audiences, the Pardoner opts for a rhetorical strategy of companionship. The Pardoner argues that he and the Host are cut from the same cloth. It is to this premise that the Host reacts so violently, denying his associations with the Pardoner who stands as a walking valediction of sin and greed.

The Host's conversations with other pilgrims and Chaucer the pilgrim's first impressions of him also suggest similarities between Host and Pardoner that have been given especial attention by critics in recent studies of the Pardoner's sexuality. The Pardoner as a representative of a homosexual or deviant medieval perspective corresponds with medieval understandings of sexuality in loose terms at best. However, the critical body of investigation of the Pardoner's sexuality itself provides a useful layer to contextualize the Host's responses to the Pardoner as one more possible layer on which Chaucer's text operates for an audience. While the language used to discuss the Pardoner's sexuality now has little in common with any medieval terminology, the relationships between the characters may still have registered with Chaucer's audiences. When Chaucer provides a portrait of the Host in the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer the pilgrim notices that the Host "of manhod hym lakkeded right naught" (l. 756). This preoccupation with masculinity motivates the Host throughout his asides with the pilgrims as they travel towards Canterbury Cathedral. In the remainder of his portrait, the Host sets himself up as the pilgrims' "governour/And of oure tales juge and reportour...and we wol reuled been ad his devys/In heigh and lough," as Chaucer recounts (ll. 813-7). Harry wastes no time in asserting himself as a judge, governor, and master of ceremonies. Each of these roles implies

authority, centralized power, and reinforces Chaucer the pilgrim's early comment about the Host's strong masculine presence. As soon as the Knight, the first teller of tales in the collection, finished his story, Harry chimes in, again asserting his role as commander, "unbokeled is the male" which translates literally into "the game has begun" (l. 3115). At the same time, the word "male" can also mean male, as it does today, and the particular phrase "unbokeled" translates to "unbuckled." Reading one layer deeper into Harry's language reveals another reference to a hyper masculine perception of phallogentrism. In the same way that the Pardoner's epithet, enveloped in sin, can apply just as much to the Pardoner as the Host, Chaucer the pilgrim hints at another similarity between both men. Chaucer the poet's portrait of the Pardoner contains a single line that has garnered almost universal critical acclaim as evidence that the Pardoner is a homosexual, or at the least has some sexual disorder.¹⁶ Chaucer the pilgrim's portrait of the Pardoner reveals "No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have; As smothe it was as it were late shave/ I trowe he were a gelding or a mare" (ll. 689-91). Elspeth Whitney summarizes

"This physical anomaly...points the reader toward a disjunction between the Pardoner's self-proclaimed gender identity as a young man planning on marriage who wishes to 'enjoy a wench in every town' and his emasculated bodily condition...the Pardoner has been categorized as a 'normal' male, a congenital eunuch, a man who has been castrated, a man impotent but physically intact, a hermaphrodite, 'a testicular pseudo-hermaphrodite of the feminine type,' an

¹⁶ In 1980, Monica E. McAlpine takes one of the earliest detailed looks at the Pardoner's homosexuality. McAlpine refocuses the studies of the Pardoner's sexuality to focus as much on Chaucer the pilgrim's description of him as a "mare" as had been devoted to "geldyng." While McAlpine focuses on a useful but neglected aspect of the Pardoner's characterization, the thrust of her argument leaves many facets unexplored. McAlpine argues that the Pardoner's vernicle, a symbol of pilgrimage to Rome, links the Pardoner to Christ, and his sexuality to a symbol of Christ's suffering. Steven Kruger's 1990 argument examines the Pardoner's modern reception, arguing that the Pardoner has been claimed as "a certain kind of 'ancestor' ... in...a history of gay subversion and resistance" (119). In 2007, Gabriele Cocco took the iconographic line "I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare" and traced it to Norse mythological stories of Loki, aligning the Pardoner with the same characteristics of the trickster god, including homosexuality. Will Stockton's 2008 analysis of the Pardoner's homosexuality analyzes the Pardoner in light of modern psychoanalytic tendencies for homosexuals. Stockton applies Lacanian psychology to the Pardoner's psyche, arguing for an isolated, antiheroic queer Pardoner who the pilgrims emblemize as a representation of all homosexuality.

oversexed womanizer, an alcoholic, a ‘drag queen,’ a cross-dressed woman, and, most resonantly, a homosexual.” (357-8).¹⁷

The Host’s hyper masculine choice of words may constitute a sort of homosexual defense by excessive denial. On more than one level, then, the Pardoner may have indicated that he and Harry Bailey are similar, and the Host may violently respond as much to this potential charge of homosexuality as he does to the Pardoner’s valediction of sin.

The Pardoner’s portrait in the General Prologue links the Pardoner’s sexuality with the conception of layers he employs in his rhetoric. Chaucer the pilgrim notes that the Pardoner rides with his hood “trussed up in his wallet... biforn hym in his lappe” (ll. 681-6). The Pardoner’s wallet “Bretful of pardoun comen from Rome al hoot” (l. 687). As a symbol of the Pardoner’s profession, his wallet, full of pardons from Rome, is physically layered, with his hood laid on top of it and the wallet itself a layer on top of his lap. Placing the wallet here links the Pardoner’s presumably fraudulent pardons with whatever mars his sexuality, making him “a geldyng or a mare” (l. 691). As a result, the Pardoner’s wallet can symbolically link his profession, noted in the pardons he carries, with his physical ailments. At the same time, the lead seals that his “pardoun..from Rome al hoot” also physically suggest this same sort of association, linking the Pardoner’s potential deviancy to institutional corruption in the Church. So here, if the symbolic relationship holds, Chaucer the pilgrim’s keen eye for physical characteristics concludes that the Pardoner’s abuses of his position have corrupted his spirit as well as his body, or vice versa. The two corruptions are linked by the layers of concealment shown in the hood that covers the wallet and the wallet that covers the lap.

¹⁷ While I am not arguing for a homosexual Pardoner, the past three decades have seen a more extensive investigation of the Pardoner from theorists oriented to issues of gender, psychology, and sexuality than any other critical school. As a result, I find it pertinent and relevant to lay out the foundations by which this body of criticism may relate to the work I undertake in unpacking the Pardoner’s rhetorical strategies and what he gains from employing them.

The Host develops the idea of layers that the Pardoner uses to great rhetorical effect by turning the concept against him. Harry, we can envision, stands up, glowering down at the Pardoner with his mug of ale in the tavern where the pilgrims might sit, and spits

Lat be...it shal not be, so theeche!
 Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech
 And swere it were a relyk of a seint
 Though 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 help hem carie
 They shul be shryned in an hogges toord! (ll. 947-55)

Harry's violence, given the implications of the Pardoner's rhetorical move here, becomes much more understandable. While the Host does refer to Osborn's concepts of jest in his line "Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech," presumably in response to the "kiss my relics" line delivered a few moments ago, the bulk of what he says here reads of a deep anger. No joke draws the response of a threatened emasculation and testicles encrusted with a hog's feces without serious provocation. Given this context for Harry's response, the choice of his metaphors now requires some investigation. The Host focuses his retort on the description the Pardoner painted of him, as one "enveloped in synne." The Host uses the concept of someone covered in vile matter to characterize the relics the Pardoner has offered to sell him: "Thou woldest..swere it were the relyk of a seint/Though it were with thy fundement depeint!" (ll. 948-50). This idea of objects covered in fecal matter recurs once more further on in the Host's diatribe. He has threatened to emasculate the Pardoner, and feed his testicles to a hog, so that they might be "shryned in an hogges toord" (l. 955). The Host's choice of words here draws emphasizes this issue of layered objects. Harry joins this violent defense to the world of relics by *shrining* the Pardoner's testicles. Shrines are the locations where the remains of saints lie. The Pardoner's

punishment thus transforms into a carnivalesque caricature of an actual shrine where pilgrims come to worship and visit relics. The idea of goodness, in this case Harry's lowbrow relics, being covered in something filthy or sinful lies at the heart of the matter.

As I have argued above, the Pardoner has suggested that sin can in fact be used to accomplish good, and should not be faulted. At the same time, the use to which the Pardoner puts his *exemplum* demonstrates that concepts or objects which are inherently good, as the *exemplum* seems to be, can also be used to sin. The Pardoner's rhetoric leaves uncertain which interpretation gains the most support. At the same time, this may be the point. The Pardoner's use of his *exemplum* presents two potential sets of layers, bad layered on top of good, or good layered on top of bad. The idea that these layers may exist simultaneously, good/bad on top of good/bad, emphasizes the heretofore-absent presence of some guidance with which to sort out the Pardoner's rhetoric. The tightly interwoven quality of the Pardoner's ideas suggests a more complex view of both *exempla* and sin than he has been credited with espousing. *Exempla* can be used to sin, and sinful actions can foster morally good results. The Host may understand the complex ideas the Pardoner presents. Chaucer the poet does for certain, and the Host's reply represents an inversion of the Pardoner's own to demonstrate that understanding. Underneath the threats of violence the Host prepares to inflict upon the Pardoner, Harry answers the Pardoner's rhetorical argument with one of his own. The Host turns the same metaphorical relationship the Pardoner used on its head. The Pardoner has proposed in his rhetoric that good can be bad, bad can be good, and both can be both. Harry uses the same concept of inversion, but applies it to the Pardoner's relic sale speech. Harry presents an example in which faux relics being encrusted in vile matter would be an experience of significant torment to the Pardoner, rather than the Pardoner's only spoken conclusions of monetary profit with some possible spiritual expense.

For now then, let us assume that the argument the Pardoner represents, that a sinful man can accomplish good, and therefore should be allowed to sin, is incorrect, as does Harry Bailey, our Host. Such a position leaves us, fittingly, with a new series of layers to explore that complicate the agreement with the Host from which we proceeded. We last left Harry standing over the seated Pardoner with a dangerous glint in his eye, delivering his final salvo of threats to the Pardoner's masculinity. He challenges, "Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie/They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!" to which the Pardoner "answerede nat a word/So wroth he was, no word ne wolde he seye" (ll. 954-6). Now, with the Pardoner reduced to spluttering silence, the Knight steps in and defuses the situation before actual violence can occur. Chaucer the pilgrim, our narrator, records

But right anon the worthy Knyght bigan
 Whan that he saugh that al the peple lough
 'Namorre of this, fir it is right ynough!
 Sire Pardoner be glad and of myrie of cheere
 And ye Sire Hooste, that been to me so deere
 I prey yow that ye kisse the Pardoner.
 And Pardoner, I pryde thee, drawe thee neer
 And as we diden lat us laughth and playe.'
 An on they kiste, and ryden forth hir weye. (ll. 960-8)

The Knight's intervention, and the quick obedience of the Pardoner and the Host, could be explained as merely a matter of station and rank. In the "General Prologue," Chaucer the pilgrim provides a portrait of the Knight first, and Host asks the Knight to tell the first tale, each in honor of his status as one of, if not the, highest ranked among the pilgrims. The Knight serves a placatory function at several points during the *Tales*, diffusing arguments before they can devolve into serious disputes. In addition, the Knight's own tale features a prince, Theseus, whose driving motivation to establish an organized, ordered kingdom at the tale's resolution confirms and enhances the Knight's concern with dispelling chaos. Here, however, the Knight's

initial command “Namore of this, fir it is right ynough!” bespeaks a sternness, if not anger of his own, at either the Pardoner, the Host’s violent threat, or both.

However, let us look more closely at the exchange that occurs here. In order to do so, we must once again return to the concept of layering, this time in the Host’s final threat to the Pardoner. The Host’s line “They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!” draws out a central issue at hand in the Tale, which brings us back to the Pardoner’s relics. The Host wishes that the Pardoner’s testicles would be *shrined* in the feces of a hog. As I mentioned earlier, the shrine is the place where relics, the bones or objects of saints, and reliquaries, their containers, are stored. Binski treats the subject of relics and reliquaries at length, and discussing relics and pilgrimage he writes:

...the origins of medieval pilgrimage to the saints lie in the visits made by the faithful to special burial sites without the walls in the Early Christian civic world...much as Chaucer’s pilgrims cantering to St. Thomas were able to identify and narrate the shortcomings of their own society while on holiday. Shrines both outside the city and within its churches became the principle focus of a new order. Within the shrine was the presence of a special dead person. That person was linked, usually, to the place of burial; saints came to symbolize, emblemize, places as effectively as household gods: at first these were the closed spaces of churches and the institutions linked to them, then cities, and finally, with the Middle Ages, nations. (14)

The Host’s remark elevates Binski’s brief description of shrines and their medieval relationship to relics, bringing these objects to bear on the Pardoner’s complex rhetorical invocations and relationships with different narrative frame levels. Binski’s elision between the saints as the focus both of a new order and of a special dead person directly links the Pardoner’s tale of the rioters who seek a personified Death to the relics he sells. Just as Death symbolizes the chaotic and dire consequences of the simultaneous existence of the material and abstract in the same idea, so too does Binski draw out the relics’ ability to represent both a special individual dead person and medieval society as a whole. The Pardoner seizes on this quality in relics and

capitalizes on it to fuel his own collapse of linguistic stability, as an investigation of these objects will bear out.

--Relics as Objects of Destabilized Discourse--

The Host's response to the Pardoner is provoked by his invocation of relics. The Pardoner challenges the Host, "Com forth, sire Hoost, and offre first anon/And thou shalt kisse the relikes everychon/Ye, for a grote! Unbockle anon thy purs" (ll. 938-45). The Pardoner's language here invokes several medieval concepts about relics, their uses, and the language used to describe them that bear some explication and analysis. The Pardoner invokes the object of a relic, the practice of worshipping them in his instructions to kiss one, and establishes that this practice was vested in a commercial enterprise in his demands for "a grote" in exchange. Peter Brown's *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* and Paul Binski's *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* both analyze medieval cultural understandings of relics, their functions, and the construction of their magical power. Patrick Geary's study *Furta Sacra: Theft of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* better establishes the commercial enterprise of relic thefts, trades, and sales that grew from the immensely popular and formative influences of the cults of saints and their relics. Each of these authors' studies explores a broad argument about the uses and symbolic values relics possessed. I draw from each a small portion of their arguments that relates directly to the Pardoner's speech about his relics. Brown primarily discusses the Christian understanding of the newly developing role relics would play in late antiquity. Brown characterizes relics as a brand new symbol that represents Christianity's ability to "join Heaven and Earth at the grave of a dead human being" (1). More explicitly, the process Brown addresses revolves around an understanding of the role of saints. Relics are the remains of holy Christian martyr saints. A saint was a figure "in Heaven...[and also]believed to be 'present'

at his tomb on Earth” (Brown 2). This dual existence shows that saints were attached peripherally to the material world they had left behind as much as to the spiritual world they now occupied in death. They could accomplish this process “precisely because they had died as human beings, [and] enjoyed close intimacy with God. Their intimacy with God was the *sine qua non* of their ability to intercede for, and, so, to protect their fellow mortals” (Brown 6). The relationship Brown establishes determines the basis of the power medieval relics were granted in the fourteenth century when Chaucer’s Pardoner is able to sell them for substantial profit. Relics symbolized earthly connections to heaven, rooted in the bodies of the dead, which allowed the living to work towards salvation on earth. The relics functioned as symbols that could help the living if they were properly worshipped, and if their magical powers could be used. The success or failure of the relics depended upon the veneration of the living whose responsibility it was to care for, honor, and protect these saintly remains.

Paul Binksi helps to explain the role of saints as intercessors in the realm of the dead on behalf of the living. Binksi argues that “the saints were not entirely dead...saints owed their peculiar power to their ambivalent identity, on the one hand physically present on earth through their bodies, yet already received in Heaven. The saints were...the main transgressors between the realms of the quick and the dead” (12). The bodies of especially holy human beings symbolized these individuals’ power to intercede on behalf of the living in the afterlife. With proper veneration of their relics, saintly ghosts could, in essence, put in a good word for a pious individual’s soul both after his death and at the Last Judgment. Binksi’s characterization of the saints as “transgressors” between the living and the dead demonstrates the same principles of logical erosion that the Pardoner’s rhetoric illuminates. The concept of transgression implies crossing boundaries. In Binksi’s argument, he discusses the boundaries that separate the living

from the dead. Brown spends much of his book discussing the same principle. When the cults of relics were first established, as Brown argues, this idea of transgressing the boundaries between the living and the dead was radical in ways the fourteenth century pilgrim no longer felt. In the late antiquity of the fourth and fifth centuries, the relic radically re-established the relationships between the living and the dead through this process of transgression. Relics retain this ability when Chaucer would have encountered them and the conventions of their use in worship. The invocation of crossing boundaries makes the relic, as a symbol of this transgression, immediately relevant to the Pardoner's rhetoric. The idea of transgressing boundaries expresses the same relationship the Pardoner's layered rhetoric demonstrates with different language. Boundaries serve as markers to separate either ideas or physical objects, implying that without those boundaries the items separated would coalesce. The Pardoner's complexly layered series of meanings in his rhetoric also functions in a manner similar to relics. The Pardoner's layered meanings transgress the layers, or boundaries, that separate them from one another, enabling different members of the Pardoner's audience to access different layers by progressing through different meanings. At the same time, the Pardoner could intend only to deceive and profit from his audiences' ignorance. If so, then the moralizing elements of the Pardoner's speech begin to develop a sustained interest in the Word of God as an always good, always moralizing force no matter how the Pardoner intends to use it. The Pardoner achieves this multiplicity of interpretive potential in his words as much as his motivations by expanding upon the type of relationship that his relics emblemize. The relics can also demonstrate these layers of meaning to their audiences, but as will be shown, the development of these interrelationships requires historical contextualization.

Before I move to historical relics, I want to briefly treat one more figure in the “Pardoner’s Tale” who bears a distinct relationship to the Pardoner, his relics, and Chaucer’s understanding of actual relics. In his *exemplum*, the Pardoner’s three rioters find the material wealth that causes them to kill one another after meeting a figure as difficult to accurately place as the Pardoner himself. An “oold man and a povre with hem mette...al forwrapped save [his] face” greets them and initiates a dialogue with no immediate bearing on the straightforward moral against greed in the Pardoner’s *exemplum* (ll. 713-4). The old man shares with the rioters that he has been seeking Death for ages, just as the rioters are now, but that Death will not come for him. He tells them

Ne Deeth, allas, ne wol nat han my lyf
 Thus walke I, lyk a resteles kaityf
 And on the ground, which is my moodres gate
 I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late
 And sey, ‘Leeve mooder, leet me in!
 Lo how I vanysse, flesh, and blood, and skyn!
 Allas, whan shul my bones been at reste?’ (ll. 727-33)

The old man here problematizes the same issues of transgression between heaven and earth that Brown investigates in his account of early relics. This property in Chaucer’s relics was not, as I have noted, a radical concept. However, Chaucer’s old man here presents a new consideration of relics in light of the Pardoner’s challenges to stable relationships. The old man’s lament, “Lo how I vanysse, flesh, and blood, and skyn! Allas, whan shul my bones been atte reste?” relates his inability to die specifically to the walking pile of bones he has become (ll. 732-3). His rhetorically placed imploration, that intimates that he has “vanysshed” to nothing but an animate pile of bones, casts the role of saints’ relics in an entirely different light than the holy objects of pious veneration. If anything, this ancient man who cannot die seems to represent a “living” relic, full of the problems of transgressing the boundaries between life and death. This walking

pile of bones, prevented from truly dying, stands as a lonely, tired, and miserable old man whose lament gives an active voice to these inanimate relics. Moreover, the persona he embodies speaks nothing of the power and purity of the saints whose remains Chaucer's pilgrims travel to worship. The Pardoner's old man shows the Pardoner's representation of the actual worth of relics, which in this case proves to be nothing. His old man seems to indicate to the pilgrims on yet another layer that not only the Pardoner's relics, but all relics, are worn, tired and pathetic objects that should be allowed the death they seek. At the same time, just as the Pardoner's rhetoric may embody his own greed and divine providence as simultaneous and oppositional elements, so too might the old man of his *exemplum* achieve this effect in an additional layer of meanings. Just as the old man symbolizes the tiredness of relics, he also directs the rioters to the tale's resolution and the entrance to the afterlife he so desperately seeks for himself. The old man demonstrates the same opposed ideas of problematic and tired wear that critics applied to relics in Chaucer's England. At the same time he shows the opposite, that relics do still have the power to contact heaven and thus fulfill the magical role for which they were worshipped.

The language the Pardoner uses to treat his relics gains additional clarity when considered in the context in which rhetoric about relics like the Pardoner's could have been delivered in Chaucer's England. William McClellan provides an important key in his investigation of rhetorical technique in Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale." He argues that the art of rhetoric as fourteenth-century pilgrims would have understood it rested on "Cicero's *De inventione*... and] the importance of Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana*...in appropriating rhetorical theory for Christian ideological purposes can hardly be overestimated" (487). In particular, Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana* serves as a rhetorical textbook for religious language that also contains a discussion of rhetorically layered language. In the course of

Augustine's guide to an intellectual interpretation of the Bible, he lays out several premises on language, rhetoric, and allegories that directly relate to the Pardoner's own rhetorical choices. These same ideas that appear in the Pardoner's rhetoric about relics influenced the language used to discuss historical relics as well.

Augustine discusses layers in relation to the meanings certain audiences can gain from scripture. He argues "we must understand that some instructions are given to all people alike, but others to particular classes of people, so that the medicine may confront not only the general pathology of the disease but also the particular weakness of each part of the body. What cannot be raised to a higher level must be healed at its own level" (3.59).¹⁸ The medicine to which Augustine refers functions as a useful lens to examine two important parallels in my discussion of the Pardoner's rhetoric by emphasizing the language Chaucer could have used to describe actual relics. In the first part of his argument, Augustine addresses the issue of separate audiences, each of whom read a different meaning from a given text, in this case scripture. The process he describes as medicinal reflects the ability of each level of audience to garner an individual meaning from the words heard or read. The audience reactions Augustine describes parallel the differences between the Pardoner's village and pilgrim audiences, with one important distinction. In Chaucer's tale, the Pardoner very clearly distinguishes between the texts his two audiences have access to by revealing to the pilgrims that his relics are fake, while keeping this fact from the villagers. Nonetheless, the pilgrims still gather different layers of meaning from the Pardoner's rhetoric. At the same time, Augustine's medical metaphor speaks to a multivalent text that contains multiple meanings simultaneously for multiple "levels" of people who read it.

¹⁸ Translated by R. P. H. Green from the Latin, which reads as follows: *Erit igitur etiam hoc in observationibus intellegendarum scripturarum, ut sciamus alia omnibus communiter praecipere, alia singulis quibusque generibus personarum, ut non solum ad universum statum valetudinis, sed etiam ad suam cuiusque membri propriam infirmitatem medicina perveniat. In suo quippe genere curandum est quod ad melius genus non potest erigi.* (pg 158, 3.59).

Augustine invokes the idea of levels, or layers, specifically in relationship to the audiences who comprehend a text, but the meanings those audiences comprehend reflect layers within the text as well as within the audience that interprets it.

Relics also represented an early Christian understanding of layered and multivalent interactions between ideas of space, power, and unity. Binski argues that “a fragment of a saintly body represented the saint in his or her entirety, and...bodily division represented triumph over death itself” (14). Here, the process of bodily division counteracts another Augustinian premise that symbolically associates unity with goodness, purity, and Heaven while associating death with a breaking apart and dissolution of the body merited by man’s sinful nature. Augustine writes in *The City of God* “the heavenly city...makes use of earthly peace... when this peace is reached, man will no longer be haunted by death, but plainly and perpetually endowed with life, nor will his body, which now wastes away and weighs down the soul, be any longer animal, but spiritual” (465).¹⁹ Augustine establishes here that salvation and death are the respective destinations of the soul and body, dividing the human, who is comprised of these two parts, into two halves. Each part of a human represents the conflicted result of a creation of God in his image, perfection that has been corrupted by the sins of Adam and Eve. As a result of their sins, man suffers death and the decay of the body represents that sin. The saints denied Augustine’s association, demonstrating the ability of God’s special dead to conquer the sinful consequences death and decay represented. For the saints, Brown writes, “were exempt from the facts of death” (76). Their bodies did not decay and rot as normal corpses did. Instead, holy corpses remained composed. The dead and scattered body of a saint does not typify decay, but the spread of a vibrant, spiritually living power to multiple locations. The division of a saint’s body became a

¹⁹ This edition of Augustine’s *City of God* is translated by Gerald G. Walsh, Demetrius B. Zema, Grace Monahan, and Daniel J. Honan.

kind of genesis of God's workings on earth, a source of creation rather than death. For each part of a saint's body that becomes a relic at an individual location, the saint can respond with full force to venerating pilgrims and devout worshippers. As a result, the division of the saint's body, rather than symbolizing the animal-body association that Augustine opposes to the purity of the spirit, allows the saint to spread his influence to more places than he could have traveled while alive. The power of the relic as a representation of the saint's intermediate status, able to float between heaven and earth, unmakes the division between the living and the dead. The dead become one more layer of interaction within the living world, able to act and react to the supplication of the devout.

In the same way that the early Christians used relics as symbols of transgression, fourteenth-century theological practice invested the relic with the power to transgress a new set of concerns that the Pardoner directly addresses: the justification for a relationship between material wealth and spiritual prosperity. The fourteenth-century relic embodied this problem in layers, just as the Pardoner's rhetoric does. The outermost layer of the relic began with its shrine, which often doubled as the tomb of the saint in question. Inside the tomb, often richly decorated, lay the bones of the saint, which were sometimes contained in even more opulent reliquaries, special containers for specific remains so that they might be removed from the tomb for the purpose of worship. Binski writes of such worshipping, "Within the shrine was a presence, that of a special dead person...saints came to symbolize, emblemize places as effectively as household gods" (14). Shrines, as the physical location of these remains, became places of power, where the saints could exercise their spiritual power on the living who came to pray for their help. The physical spaces of these shrines and the relics they contained became paramount in the processes of venerating the saints so that they could and would assist the living. Tombs

and reliquaries reflected the magnitude of the saints' intercessory powers in ornamentation. The more lavish the houses in which these bones resided, the more apparent the power of the saint inside would be. Tombs and reliquaries did not, of course, only serve to accent and metaphorically ornament the saint. These containers kept the bones protected throughout the centuries of use to which they were put. However, the economic value of the fine metals and gemstones used to protect the bones calls into question the true purpose not only of venerating the saint, but of the institutional practices that came to be associated with that veneration.

The practices of saintly veneration in the fourteenth century problematize the value and importance afforded to material wealth compared to that of spiritual purity. Earlier in this essay I analyzed Chaucer's vested concern with spirituality at the expense of and in opposition to material objects and actions. Eugene Vance traces a similar set of concerns in the "Pardoner's Tale," and locates Chaucer's concern with the problems material objects of religious worship pose in his knowledge of the theologian, John Wyclif. I also want to recall that in Chaucer's latter years, the period when he would have composed the *Tales*, he had developed a strong network of connections at Oxford, particularly at Merton College. As a result, Chaucer would probably have gained an even deeper understanding of Wyclif's work and writings than any other setting afforded. Wyclif's teachings shed some additional light on the status of relics in Chaucer's day in England. Specifically, relics symbolized the vested institutionalism of the Catholic Church and the Pope, with whom the English Crown did not always agree. Thomas Beckett, Archbishop of Canterbury, and the saint who Chaucer's pilgrims journey to visit, symbolized just this conflict in the twelfth century. Beckett was martyred as a result of arguments over rights of authority split between the English Crown and the Archbishop as the

highest representative of the papacy in England (Freeman 5-6).²⁰ Two centuries later, Wyclif again attacks the Catholic Church and the corruption rampant in the institutions of the church body, symbolized by the lavish ornamentation of relics and reliquaries. Wyclif served as “an official spokesman...of the autonomy of the secular from the ecclesiastic” (Vance 732). Wyclif attacks not only the dominating presence clerical institutions established, but argues that the clergy in effect ruled the people, blending concerns with the earthly world into the spiritual focus which should, but is not, be the focus of the clergy. As Vance records, “Wyclif is therefore vigorously opposed to the civil dominion by the clergy...Indeed, Wyclif says that the whole meaning of Thomas of Canterbury’s martyrdom was precisely to rebuke kings for placing clergy in secular offices” (Vance 732). To return to the relics, these objects stood as symbols of the “civil dominion” that Wyclif argues the clergy held. Wyclif’s argument that Thomas Beckett’s martyrdom stood as a symbol of the Church’s obsession with material affairs closely parallels the concerns that the treatment of relics like Thomas’s invoked in other critiques of the objects.

Charles Freeman describes the relics of St. Thomas that Chaucer’s pilgrims would have seen: “On the altar...is the rusty sword that killed Thomas...Thomas’s skull, encased in silver with an exposed patch at the top for kissing, is in the crypt together with the hair shirt, girdle, and drawers he was wearing when martyred” (225). Freeman records that the skull was “encased in silver,” a common mode of preservation known as a reliquary (225). Reliquaries in Chaucer’s

²⁰ Freeman begins his study *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe*, with an account of Beckett’s martyrdom. Beckett had served Henry II as Archbishop of Canterbury, the highest clerical post in England, and as a trusted advisor before ascending to the bishopric of Canterbury. When Beckett became archbishop, his loyalties changed. He no longer put the interests of the state above those of the Church, instead working to assert the rights of the clerical institutions in face of growing weight and pressure for conformity from the Crown. The story goes that Beckett, in self-imposed exile in France as a form of protest against Henry II’s governmental authority over the Church in England, declared the coronation of Henry’s heir invalidate because he, Beckett, had not been in attendance. Henry II, enraged, wished that someone would avenge the wrongs Beckett had done him, and four of his nobles immediately set out for Canterbury Cathedral, where Beckett had only days before returned. They entered, ostensibly to arrest Beckett and bring him to Henry for justice. Beckett refused, and the ensuing argument resulted in his blood flowing over the floor of his cathedral (Freeman 1-8).

period provoked debates that the Pardoner's rhetoric embodies. The Pardoner demands that the Host offer money in exchange for the chance to kiss the relics he sells to his village audiences. The Pardoner's request invokes another layer of relationships at the fulcrum of which sat the relic: the relics as an object of commerce, material value, and the reliquary as an embodiment of that material value. The Host's reaction to the Pardoner's request for money calls into question the regularity with which money and relics were associated. The Pardoner draws explicit attention to this particular confluence of oppositional meanings by prefacing his tale with his confession of financial motivations. He explicitly emphasizes the importance of this particular set of layers that relics invoke in the moral of his tale, *radix malorum est cupiditas*, the *exemplum* he tells of the three rioters whose greed causes them to kill one another, and the conclusion of his tale with a request for money that nearly gets him castrated. In the fourteenth century, as Wyclif notes, relics and monetary values were inextricably intertwined. Patrick Geary's *Furta Sacra* examines one particular avenue of the prominent medieval commerce in relics: their theft and illegal sale. Geary primarily examines the ninth-eleventh centuries in his study of the height of the relic trade, but the relationships he discusses still bear on the environment the Pardoner's monetary concerns address. The tenth-century English king Aethelstan was England's first avid collector of relics, garnering relics through "numerous marriage alliances and...diplomatic negotiations" (Geary 60). Aethelstan's means to secure relics vest them with the power of monetary value and political authority. Binski's fourteenth-century study comments on the same features of relics in Chaucer's day, arguing "relics were a material as well as a spiritual resource...they could be acquired either by gift as a sign of favor or by theft. The circulation and donation of relics was a means of securing loyalty and power; relics were instruments of patronage" (15). Geary notes the practical economic power the relics

brought to the merchants who stole or embezzled these objects from one location to another: “these transactions benefitted everyone involved. From the merchants’ point of view, relics were excellent articles of trade. They were small and easily transported...highly desirable luxury items, they brought excellent prices in return for little capital investment” (63). The valuable silver reliquary that houses Thomas’s skull denotes this same material worth that benefitted the successful merchants who bought and sold relics.

The reliquary functions as a miniature, portable shrine for the relic. Coverings like the silver skull that houses Thomas’s own skull articulate in economic terms the spiritual power and value of the objects they contain. The material value of the silver reliquary represents the spiritual value of the relic. At the same time, however, the material value supposed to function only as a representation of value begins to replace the spiritual value with purely earthly value. At the same time, this process works in layers. The reliquary represents a material, earthly layer that is physically placed around the outside of the relic, which in turn contains symbolic spiritual value and magical power. The process by which reliquaries became increasingly ornamented invokes the underbelly of the relic trade Geary analyzes. In effect, the silver reliquary as its own layer around the relic also contains layers of representation: the silver betokens the spiritual value of the object it encases even as it provides the motivation for relic thieves, concerned only with economic gain, to steal it. While the exchange benefitted the merchants and buyers of these relics, the men who transported and reinstalled these relics elsewhere were thieves. In order to make money, these relic thieves regularly ransacked graves and shrines to obtain relics from populaces that venerated those relics. The Pardoner copies these relic merchants, with the significant difference being that he impersonates them by selling fake relics rather than stolen ones. The Pardoner and these merchants reflect an economically based confluence of meanings

that relics embodied: the interrelated ideas of earthliness, materialism, and the sinful desires for money opposed by ideals of spirituality and charity.

At the same time, the Pardoner's papal bulls that he shows at the beginning of his tale to his village audiences place him within the same structure of institutionalized Church authority these relic thieves robbed. The Pardoner reflects problems with the structure of relic worship in the Church that were already present. Geary records that the primary buyers of relics from the thieves who stole them were members of the clergy, looking to strengthen the economic allure of their own parishes (Geary 65). The clerics who bought relics reveal another layer of blending between spiritual and material concerns that the Church's institutional structure upheld. Freeman demonstrates the Church's fusion of monetary and spiritual concerns in his description of pilgrimage to Rome in the fourteenth century. He writes "Like the great monetary inflations of later history, devaluation simply brought more devaluation. It was as if the decay of the city during the papal exile, and later the Great Schism, could only be compensated for by massive rewards for pilgrims...A walk across Rome, from the Lateran to the Vatican, would earn more indulgences than a pilgrimage to Jerusalem" (212). Freeman's description of the practice of selling indulgences, and their close association with pilgrimage, shows that by this period the language of salvation had become the language of commerce. The material value of money became equivalent with the spiritual values of goodness, purity, and became the papal institution's key to salvation for its flock. Just as pilgrimage to Rome contained an excessive financial profit for the Church, so too did pilgrimage to any other shrine. The clergy of those shrines knew full well the massive economic profits that could be gained from a flood of pilgrims into their cathedral, and into the town where that cathedral or smaller parish church was located. Pilgrims brought profits in lodging, food, souvenirs, and offerings to the clergy who

guarded relics and to the towns in which those clergy lived. The finances of pilgrimage as a medieval comparison to contemporary tourist traps motivated the clergy who bought additional relics from relic thieves. The more attractions one locale possessed, the more money would flow into the clerical coffers and the surrounding area.

However, Binski records that Wyclif was not alone in criticizing this confluence of spirituality and economy. Binski discusses the material value of the tombs specifically, but Freeman's analysis of the economy of pilgrimage demonstrates that the art of faith had become an art of money in every aspect. Binski's analysis of tomb ornaments sees broader application than just to the tombs that housed these relics. He writes "Display is always paradoxical...as the tomb rose in prominence, so too did its critique as a sign of *vanitas* and *superbia*...Once the elevated tomb had risen to full prominence by the fourteenth century its standards were plain to see. Rich ornament and color were distractions (88). By the fourteenth century, as Binski records, the lavish ornamentation and highly wrought craftsmanship of reliquaries like that of Thomas's skull raised questions about the relationship between material values and spiritual values, which critics of richly decorated reliquaries set up as contradictory positions.

Concerns with the presentation of material objects, such as Thomas's skull reliquary, provoked concerns that earthly values could be equivalent or superior to spiritual values, as Binski examines. Elaborate presentations focused the pilgrims' and clergy's attentions on the relic as a material object, rather than the spiritual enlightenment that it represented and which contemplation of the relic's symbolic meanings could teach. The ceremonies of veneration that helped to balance the totalizing effect of monetary values themselves became infused with economic essence, as Freeman's description of pilgrimage demonstrates. While the elaborateness of the presentation was argued to be a means of demonstrating the spiritual qualities the relic

could reveal, those same qualities heightened the economic value of the relics. As Binski argues, supporters and critics alike were aware of the economic values with which relics were invested, such that separating commercial value from spiritual value in a relic with or without the presence of a reliquary became impossible by the fourteenth century. The entanglement between the spiritual ramifications of a relic and its economic worth blends the principles of spiritual and material wealth. In effect, the relics of the fourteenth century demonstrated that spiritual and material wealth could be equivalent, making these two principles, opposed in the religious rhetorical sources of Chaucer's England, part of the same concept embedded in the relic.

This acceptance of the relic's shift in value from a primarily spiritual to a primarily economic, and therefore material, symbol sparks Wyclif's commentary about St. Thomas's relic that Vance cites. The Pardoner does not criticize the practice as Wyclif does, but capitalizes on the shifting values of the relics and profits from those values as best as he can. In particular, the Pardoner's rhetoric likens the silver that covers Beckett's skull with the feces in which the Host shrines the Pardoner's testicles, and in so doing, his rhetoric destabilizes even the Host's criticism for an attentive pilgrim or reader. This context demonstrates, most importantly, that Chaucer's Pardoner expresses values that existed temporally prior to and external to the text in which he appears. Not only the relics themselves, but also the clerical context of the rhetoric used to discuss them was saturated with the ideas of rhetorical layers, as Augustine's comments in *De doctrina Christiana* demonstrate. Chaucer develops the Pardoner as his own symbol of these issues, among others, in order to examine the effect that the shifting value judgments of relics provokes in the Pardoner as a clerical representative of the institution he embodies. The Pardoner, recall, comes to his villages invested with the power of "bulles," certificates of papal authority, so that "no man be so boold, ne preest ne clerk/Me to destourbe of Christes holy werk"

(ll. 339-40). Moving outward rather than inward, as the Pardoner's rhetorical layers of his metaphorical onion have done thus far, the Pardoner's body of rhetoric centers itself around relics which themselves represent the same layered and multidimensional relationships between different meanings that his words give primacy.

I turn once again, in this investigation of the multidimensional meanings relics represented in the Pardoner's rhetoric and in Chaucer's England, to the Host's response to the Pardoner's invocation of the collapse between material and spiritual worth. The Host rages,

Lat be...it shal not be, so theeche!
 Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech
 And swere it were a relyk of a seint
 Though 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 help hem carie
 They shul be shryned in an hogges toord! (ll. 947-55)

The Host responds to the Pardoner's invocation of this problematic conflation between money and spiritual salvation with a list of his own relics. The first relic he invokes, "thyn olde breech...a relyk of a seint" parodies the bloodstained and presumably filth-stained breeches of St. Thomas of Canterbury, which were kept and worshipped at his shrine along with his bones. The Host here tries to show the Pardoner the ridiculousness of what he has suggested in his conflation of money and faith by angrily mocking the Pardoner's own offer. The Host pushes beyond mockery into the threat of violence and castration, but maintains the same relationship between relics and material values. Specifically, the mockingly sanctified Pardoner's breeches are "with thy fundement depeint," covered in the Pardoner's feces. Here, the Host reveals a meaning in the Pardoner's multidimensional rhetoric that he opposes with vehemence: the premise of layering materialism and greed on top of objects that are supposed to save souls.

While the Pardoner understands that these objects can and do contain multiple sets of relationships that when considered together, unmake one another, the Host's responses reject the layering that the Pardoner has spent his "Prologue" and "Tale" demonstrating. He qualifies the layered rhetoric invested in the Pardoner's speech and the relics he sells alike as the filth that covers the outside of the Pardoner's faux-relic breeches.

Here, Chaucer may insert another layer of considerations through the Host's equally layered responses to the Pardoner. Throughout the *Tales*, the Host has proven himself much less perceptive than his rhetorically poised responses suggest here. This instance of the Host's paralleling the Pardoner's fake relics with St. Thomas's breeches offers Chaucer the chance to use his intelligence through the unwitting vehicle of the Host. In so doing, Chaucer calls attention to a realm of meanings that have probably been imposed from several narrative layers above the Host's abilities to comprehend. The Pardoner's rhetoric collapses stable relationships between language and its meanings, so that if the Pardoner can sell his rhetorical ideas as effectively as he can sell his relics, then good and evil lose their meanings. In a world where the symbol of salvation undercuts itself as an effective symbol of material wealth, the path to salvation becomes impassable. As Derrida would argue, the language the Pardoner uses to discuss his relics, and the language used to discuss historical relics, creates these layered meanings by failing to describe the truth of the objects that language attempts to represent. This failure forms the center of the Pardoner's rhetoric, and the core of the onion of meanings he creates.

The Host's mockery ascends to violence as he concludes his denial of linguistic destabilization. The Host makes the same criticism of layers and the Pardoner's relics, this time

substituting the Pardoner's own testicles for the formerly mocking breeches of Saint Thomas.

The Host, as we have seen before, threatens

I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond
 In stide of relikes or of seintuarie
 Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee help hem carie
 They shul be shryned in an hogges toord! (ll. 952-5)

The Host again, as I have discussed earlier, focuses on the concept of shrining the Pardoner's testicles in hog feces. Here, however, we have moved to a layer of meaning where the full impact of the Host's responses might better be characterized. The Host's two comments about fecal layers on top of objects begs the question of what unites the two objects that he so covers. The Pardoner's testicles and his pants each serve as a referent to one of the Pardoner's rhetorical layers that the Host has inverted in order to falsify the Pardoner's linguistic demonstration. The Pardoner's breeches, as a mockery of a legitimate relic, demonstrate first that the probable reliquary in which they are housed at Canterbury represents material wealth, which represents the spiritual equivalent of the feces that surrounds the Pardoner's testicles. This reference falls in step with Chaucer's concerns with spirituality and materiality, as well as Wyclif's comments pertaining directly to Thomas's relics at Canterbury to the same effect. On the layer that relates directly to the Pardoner, the feces-covered breeches comment on the relics the Pardoner sells, demonstrating that they may as well be covered in filth for all the spiritual good they afford to anyone who pays the Pardoner for them. The Host realizes that the Pardoner metaphorically sells filth to the village audiences he dupes. At the same time, the Host's comment directly addresses the connections to Wyclif's arguments against the blending of spirituality and materialism that Host's choice of relic to parody invokes. Chaucer, however, takes a more nuanced viewpoint. Just as the Pardoner's rhetoric demonstrates the simultaneous existence of moral and problematic elements, Chaucer's collection of tales ranges across the spectrum of morals the Pardoner's tale

encompasses. As the Pardoner demonstrates, this range of meanings engages the Host, even if aggressively, with the Pardoner's rhetoric. Chaucer's range of tales performs the same effect, in essence providing a "Miller's Tale" as a lure to an audience who otherwise would not hear a "Parson's Tale" willingly. The Host's anger results from hearing the equivalent of a low tale that displeases him, but he demonstrates in his response that he has heard the moral the Pardoner's tale also contains. The Host's parodied relics demonstrate the effectiveness of the range of characters to whom Chaucer's collection gives voice, as they engage the Host with a serious and moral issue he might otherwise ignore.

The second "relic" that the Host uses, the Pardoner's testicles, also operates on multiple levels. The Host's choice of relic to shrine in feces embodies all of the connotations of the first by virtue of the shared filth over both relics, while also directly attacking the Pardoner's person. The image the Host creates of the Pardoner's testicles in filth also summons a parody of another Augustinian verse from *De doctrina Christiana*. Given that in his first parodic use of relics, the Host invoked Wyclif, here Chaucer, again working through the unknowing Host, summons authorities who argued against the convergence of spiritualism with material wealth in discussions of religiously affiliated rhetorical principles. In so doing, the Host can turn what fourteenth-century readers would have conceived of as the Pardoner's primary sources in his rhetorical manipulations against him. To the point, Augustine quotes from scripture that "'the letter kills but the spirit gives life.' For when something meant figuratively is interpreted as if it were meant literally, it is understood in a carnal way" (3.20). D. W. Robertson, reading the *Tales* as a religious allegory, also recounts a common scriptural metaphor for the same idea.²¹

²¹ Larry D. Benson's notes to *The Riverside Chaucer* include this idea of layering as a primary subject of the "Man of Law's Tale" as well. Benson's note contributes to establishing Chaucer's broader concern with the issue of layered principles of rhetoric and meaning across the whole of the *Tales*, though a detailed investigation of the "Man of Law's Tale" extends beyond the scope of this essay (Benson 461, note to line 3443).

Robertson records, ““He who uses human reason, therefore, will cast aside the chaff and hasten to eat the grain of the spirit”” (317). Robertson’s study provides two quotations that discuss the spirit of the word of God and how the word should be interpreted. Robertson links Augustine’s invocation of the spirit and the letter to the conception of layers, while Augustine’s own scriptural quotation directly addresses the explicit carnality of the Host’s comments. The Host dares the Pardoner to avoid the implicit threat in interpreting the Host’s words figuratively by choosing the Pardoner’s testicles as the relic in his second parody. Here, the Host argues more specifically against the Pardoner’s rhetoric than against the symbolic values of relics he promulgates. In this parody the Host requires the Pardoner to interpret his words literally, and, as Augustine would say, carnally. Such a conception fits the subject of the Host’s discourse, the Pardoner’s testicles, which, taken by themselves, would represent earthly virility, perhaps to the extent of lust, and so suggest the carnality Augustine invokes when layers are incorrectly read. Here, the Host’s demand that the Pardoner acknowledge the single, stable relationship between the Host’s words and the consequences for the Pardoner works to counteract the Pardoner’s own rhetorical destabilization of linguistic meaning. If the Pardoner sees any other meaning in the Host’s language that could, as the Pardoner’s words do, change the meaning of Host’s threat, the Pardoner will lose his testicles. He will have denied the stable relationship between the Host’s violent words and the consequences to the Pardoner’s body that the Host will force into existence.

Chaucer’s choice to use the Host as his mouthpiece for several invoked layers of meaning also contributes to an argument against the institutional structure of the Church in which relics, historical and literary, functioned. The relic as the Pardoner demonstrates it works from within the institutional structure of the Church to destabilize and render meaningless the structured,

stable meanings with which the relic is invested. Upon examination of the sort the Pardoner demonstrates, those relationships break down. Binski best articulates the foundational principle that unifies this discussion of relics with the Pardoner and the layers of his speech. He argues, concerning the appearance of shrines and tombs, “The dead person was thus framed by a new and occasionally grandiloquent rhetorical language of gesture and equipment; the tomb was a piece of theatre, a proscenium” (99). The elision Binski draws out between visual appearance and rhetorical significance defines the function of all visual art, but gains particular significance when examined in the light of the Pardoner and the uses to which he puts his relics. The Pardoner’s relics, more so than any historical relic Binski, Freeman, or Brown treats, assist the Pardoner in demonstrating that any language used as a marker of stability will, upon closer inspection, break down.

The Pardoner’s relics also motivate and enable the rhetorical messages he sends to his pilgrim audience. The Pardoner’s rhetoric ranges far beyond just the relics he sells to the villagers and those with which he insults the Host. However, the more meanings the Pardoner constructs as layered and therefore rooted in the same central principle, the more that rhetoric relies on relics. In turn, the Host’s relic parodies would cause the tale to end in violence. Chaucer’s characters avoid this conflict only through the agency of the Knight, who represents a contradictory reception among the pilgrim audience compared to the Host’s violent outburst. The Knight’s role here adds yet another layer to this process of multidimensional rhetoric, this one perhaps beyond the bounds of even the Pardoner’s conceptions. When the Knight steps in to defend the Pardoner, he divides the pilgrim audience into two opposed factions. The Knight’s response completes the layering process by acknowledging a narrative frame beyond the Pardoner’s conversation with his pilgrim companions. At the Host’s threats, the Pardoner is

reduced to silence. He “answerede nat a word/So wroth he was, no word ne wolde he seye” (ll. 954-6). Until this point, the Pardoner alone has spoken. Only when he invites someone else to speak do the rhetorical constructs that he creates begin to fray at the edges. Here, Chaucer the poet again takes over and moves the level of discourse concerning layers over even the Pardoner’s head. Vance comments on Chaucer’s necessary intervention at points like this one in the “Pardoner’s Tale” by drawing on the parallels between Chaucer’s Pardoner and the practices Wyclif criticized. He argues “Like Wyclif, Chaucer does not imagine ontological continuity between the order of human discourse and the Word. Rather...Chaucer makes it clear that speech has no center, but is labyrinthine, self-referential, and inflationary” (731-2). Rather, the Pardoner’s silence demonstrates that his language is not the Word of God, and that speech and the Word do not share these same problems of unstable centers. The Pardoner’s silence provokes the Knight’s interceding response on the Pardoner’s behalf, a response the Pardoner cannot control. The Knight’s actions divide what had been a unified audience, creating a layer of those who support a peaceful resolution and those who favor the Host’s violent response to the Pardoner. The Knight advises the group “Sire Pardoner be glad and of myrie of cheere/And ye Sire Hooste, that been to me so deere/I prey yow that ye kisse the Pardoner. /And Pardoner, I pryee thee, drawe thee neer/And as we diden lat us laugh and pleye” (ll. 993-7). The Knight draws his solution out of the relics that the Pardoner asks the Host to kiss, arguing for a kiss of his own to end the argument and move to another tale. By the conclusion of the tale, the Host and his faction grudgingly follow the Knight’s proposed course of action, returning the divided group to a more or less unified disposition. The Pardoner does not control this response, nor could he anticipate being silenced by the member of the pilgrimage party he singles out for a rhetorical joust. Given the complexities of meanings that the Pardoner has demonstrated, with

the clear purpose of rendering any stable meaning controvertible, he expects to be able to counteract any verbal argument by drawing out another layer that negates the power of the prior meaning. The Pardoner cannot rhetorically disarm a physical threat.

Vance's comparison between Chaucer's uses of language and Wyclif's theological argument opens another layer of meaning Chaucer's treatment of the Pardoner's rhetoric indicates. Operating on another layer, earthly language cannot accurately capture the truth of any object it seeks to describe. Considered in an additional layer, earthly language fails because, as Vance points out, for Chaucer there is no "ontological continuity between the order of human discourse and the Word (732). Here, Vance distinguishes between the human capacity to use language to describe the world accurately, and that ability as demonstrated by the divine Word of God. The Host's threats reduce the Pardoner to silence as much because of the challenges to the Pardoner's person his violence poses as because the Pardoner's language cannot destabilize the Host's threat to action. The Pardoner's tale presents the problem of language rather than the solution to unstable meanings that God's Word presents, but Chaucer does treat the idea at the end of the "Parson's Tale," the final tale in Chaucer's collection. The Parson delivers a true sermon on the avoidance of all the sins, and concludes by discussing the value of prayer and its rewards. He shares, "Thanne shal men understonde what is the fruyt of penaunce; and after the word of Jhesu Christ, it is the endeless blisse of hevene/ther joye hath no contrariouste of wo ne grevaunce" (ll. 1076-7). The Parson's sermon ends with the idea that the Word of Christ embodies endless bliss by containing no contrariness of woe, nor grievances. The Parson's choice to explicitly link language with contrariness and grief recollects the Pardoner's demonstration that earthly language contains nothing but contrary meanings and causes nothing but woe to the pilgrim attempting to make sense of using earthly language. By concluding with

the Parson, Chaucer balances the destabilization the Pardoner creates with a stable relationship in heavenly language between Word and meaning. As the Word of God does not contain contrariness, it instead accurately describes the multifaceted relationships earthly words fail to describe. In the “Pardoner’s Tale,” the Knight comes closest to embodying this clean resolution the Parson proposes to the dilemma of language.

The Knight involves himself in the tale only after Harry’s violent outburst. The Host’s anger receives another layer of possible meanings in William Kamowski’s argument concerning shrines and pilgrimages. Kamowski’s argument also enables my terminology of the Knight as an interceding figure to reveal another layer of meanings that also occurs one narrative frame above the Pardoner and pilgrims. Kamowski argues that the Knight reacts this way because of the Pardoner’s “cavalier honesty about bogus relics...[that] raises an issue of faith and skepticism that is best left unexplored, especially on a pilgrimage” (2). The skepticism that Kamowski identifies suggests that the Pardoner “does not allow the pilgrims to overlook their doubt and suspicions [about relics]; rather, his too-honest salespitch makes them painfully aware of their skepticism at the very moment when they are supposed to perform an act of faith precisely contrary to that skepticism” (6). The Pardoner has, after all, just asked the pilgrims through the synecdochic Host to offer money and worship the relics the Pardoner has confessed are fake. This issue of the relics’ legitimacy causes the Host much consternation, according to Kamowski. The Pardoner’s request for money economizes the relics and draws painful attention to the monetary motivation the Host himself has added to the pilgrimage, by offering to the pilgrims “a soper at oure aller cost,” a free meal, to the pilgrim who tells the best tales by journey’s end (l. 799). The Knight’s reaction to this implication remains the only non-confrontational answer that can be mustered in face of language’s demonstrated powerlessness to enforce stability: he can

turn away from the matter. The Host represents the only other possible answer to the Pardoner's challenges—to combat the rhetorical breakdown of stable relationships between oppositional ideas and ideological motivations directly, with violence. The Host's threat to "shryne" the Pardoner's testicles "in an hogges toord" re-legitimizes the relics the Pardoner has called into question, making their provenance once again central (l. 955). By threatening to "shryne" them, Chaucer through the Host adds another layer of meaning to Harry's response. Chaucer gives the Host language that reads as an argument supporting the power and legitimacy of the relics the Pardoner sells, giving the harm the Host threatens to inflict on the Pardoner a place of proper worship and veneration. In so doing, the Host displaces the threat to the legitimacy of *all* relics the Pardoner poses by re-verifying that legitimacy in practice. The Knight displaces the Pardoner's rhetorical destabilization of linguistic relationships by ignoring the deconstruction altogether.

--Conclusion--

The relics the Pardoner uses to set off this fight prefigure the stakes of the Host's and Knight's respective positions. The Pardoner's relics participate in destabilizing the linguistic relationships that organize the pilgrims' world as much as the language he uses about them expands the range of destabilization. The advent of relic cults has already changed the stable relationships that characterized the world, as Binski and Brown identify. The Pardoner uses the concerns with material and spiritual gains engendered by the increasing opulence of reliquaries to motivate many of his attacks on linguistic stability. By asking the Host to kiss his relics for a grote, the Pardoner reminds the pilgrim audience of the destabilization of ideas held in necessary opposition in order to support the structure of saintly veneration, and the role of relics in that breakdown. The Pardoner casts his relics as objects of material, economic worth by selling them,

a basic premise of the relic trade that Geary investigates. In so doing, he also reminds the pilgrims of the same destabilization that clerical practices instituted as the primary purchasers of relics. The opulence of reliquaries, like the silver-ensconced skull of St. Thomas the pilgrims travel to worship, increases the economic value of the relics they protect, adding to the material value of the relics without adding to the range of spiritual activities the relics represent. Instead, the material values the relics represent conflate economic and spiritual values, allowing the Pardoner to expand the breakdown. The breakdown of the opposition between material and spiritual value grows from the original breakdown, the boundary between life and death, which the worship of relics attacked to destabilize pre-Christian systems of authority. More significantly for the purposes of this argument, the Pardoner's relic reinscribe the divide between cause and effect. The Pardoner's rhetorical stratagems allow his sheep bones to act as destabilizers even as the relics his bones parody enable his rhetoric.

Transferring the type of relationship between language and meaning that the Pardoner's rhetoric represents to Chaucer's England points from the objects and the speech used to describe them, which also conform to these principles, to the institutional structure of the Church. Binski, Vance, and Freeman each provided pieces to the developing image of the Church and its relationship to multivalent layers at this time. From Binski we learned that the lavish ornamentation and expensive materials used to honor the saints came under fire for an excess of materialist emphasis. From Vance, we learned that in England John Wyclif, a contemporary of Chaucer, criticized the English clerical establishment for the same confluences of materialism and spirituality when, according to him, the Church should only concern itself with spiritual matters. From Freeman, we learned that the relic of Thomas of Canterbury, the same that Chaucer's pilgrims travel to see, stands at the center of these three discourses. Thomas's relic

symbolizes the Church institutionalism and corruption that Wyclif directly attacks while exemplifying the arguments Binski and Freeman make concerning the growing equivalence between material and spiritual values that relics came to exemplify. Chaucer elevates the relic from a symbol of Church institutionalism to a powerful figure for relationships between language, theology, mercantilism, and the power of storytelling. The Pardoner's relics embody the root of his many layers of rhetorical complications. The relic's historical status as an object that collapses boundaries, denies oppositions, and destabilizes structures in an institutionally supported context demonstrates both the depths and the heights that such powerful force can produce. The relic enables and in many ways causes the Pardoner's rhetoric to have the strength and potentially terrifying consequences that it does. Relics represented a symbolically brand new idea when the early Christians created an object that undermined a fundamental division in the antique worldview by arguing that two contradictory ideas can exist together in the same object. This process created a brand new force, the radical consequences of which were only fully realized in figures such as Chaucer's Pardoner in the fourteenth century.

The Pardoner similarly invokes a broad spectrum of relationships between speaker and audience, words and their multidimensional, contradictory, and layered meanings, and the power of language to extend, dramatize, and fully explore the rhetoric of ornamentation vested in physical objects. The Pardoner grows from Chaucer's keen understanding of the issues Boccaccio's *Decameron* raises that first joined relics symbolically to multilayered and deceptive speech. Chaucer moves far beyond Boccaccio's comparatively simple set of deceptive relationships that use rhetoric as a literal vehicle of layering, to conceal one set of meanings with another. From the premise Boccaccio establishes, Chaucer undertakes in the "Pardoner's Tale" to explore the full range of meanings achieved when an object, or, in Chaucer's innovative case, a

word, represents a range of meanings, the breadth of which can contradict one another, or relate differently to one another to produce yet more meanings. While such a result seems entirely chaotic, Chaucer grounds the ranges of meanings he explores in a series of referents whose specific subjects are complicated in a variety of layered references. Chaucer's Pardoner questions what it means to be a member of an audience, what it means to speak to a variety of individuals with different understandings at the same time, and what it means to complicate an identity understood to be stable. The Pardoner begins his tale, rightly, with a confession of honesty about a dishonest practice. From the beginning he demonstrates the problematic consequences that the Church's institutionalized embodiment of opposites in relics permits. When the living and the dead can interact, a clerk can honestly speak about dishonestly, and find himself positioned somewhere between either stable identity. When a figure such as the Pardoner finds himself able to stand with one foot in each of two opposing arenas at the same time, he turns to the objects that created his opportunity in the first place, relics. Seeing these objects as once again breaking down stable relationships established by institutionalized Church ideas vested in Augustine, or in critics deeply rooted in the logical structures of philosophy and theology like John Wyclif, Chaucer, through his Pardoner, turns to the fourteenth-century theological and philosophical version of the debate that relics caused in the fourth and fifth.

Now, for Chaucer and his Pardoner, relics embody the vested materialistic influences of monetary value, and were beginning to be used as currency for political power on behalf of the rulers whose wealth and power enabled them to amass quantities of these objects. Once again, the relic, a paradoxically simple material of common bone, upsets institutionalized Church balances by valorizing material wealth. The economic concerns of the relic in the fourteenth century allow the Pardoner to construct layers of rhetoric over and above this fundamental

dichotomous relationship that relics as a whole embodied. While the Pardoner's relics themselves contain no opulent reliquaries, the Pardoner demonstrates that by this time the reliquaries are no longer needed. His successful sale of relics to his village audiences demonstrate that with or without the materially valuable reliquaries that originally vested the relic with material worth, the bones themselves are now easily understood as economic signs of material opulence that can be bought and sold.

The relationship between the relic's spiritual and material values enables the Pardoner's rhetoric to ripple outward to the depths and heights of the rhetorical layers he creates. The Pardoner's rhetoric takes the model offered by the relic and demonstrates that if an object exists that can collapse opposing relationships, and rhetoric about these objects can achieve the same ends, then no relationship between objects, ideas, or a combination of the two can remain stable. Both word and object contain within them more layers of meaning than the single meaning the speaker of those words, or the crafters of those objects invested into the object in question. When the full ramifications of those meanings are explored according to the Pardoner's rhetorical premises, language ceases to support a stable relationship between any idea, singular or multiple. Such a conclusion renders language an even more difficult vehicle to use to express a given meaning. The conclusion of Chaucer's tale demonstrates that such a linguistic collapse can be beaten, however. The Host silences the Pardoner by changing the realm of discourse from object and word to word and action. By changing the realm of discourse, the Host's language forces a stable relationship to exist between a word and an action, and in so doing preserve at least one avenue in which language can demonstrate a momentarily stable set of references and meanings. The Pardoner, at the end of his tale, relies on the Knight to intercede for him, as a representative of a strangely appropriate secular saint. The Knight offers another path, that of simple, silent

acceptance of differing realms of action. The Knight's saintly action does not silence the relics he momentarily embodies, nor does he disable the Pardoner. Like the saints, the Knight bridges the two opposing figures of Host and Pardoner, offering a path to the continued salvation that awaits at Canterbury Cathedral.

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