

THE ALCHEMY OF TRANSFORMATION: TURNING THE VIOLENCE OF  
TRANSPHOBIA INTO VOICE WITH GEOFFREY CHAUCER AND KAI CHENG THOM

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## Abstract

This essay compares issues of gender diversity in Geoffrey Chaucer's fourteenth-century *Pardoner's Tale* and Kai Cheng Thom's recent novel *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir*. This comparison expands on queer readings of *The Pardoner's Tale* and demonstrates possible links across time between authors dealing with the experiences of gender diverse people. It shows how gender diverse people in different historical contexts can confront hatred and expand limiting frames of cultural expression, by drawing on their own embodied experiences as sources of knowing and converting that knowledge into forms of expressive culture.

Keywords: gender diversity, transgender, transhistoricity, queer medieval, Canadian fiction, embodiment

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This project is dedicated to all the gender diverse people who struggle for survival in transphobic modern societies, and especially to the transgender children, who deserve full and complete love and acceptance, yet continue to be marginalised.

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The Alchemy of Transformation: Turning the Violence of Transphobia into Voice with Geoffrey Chaucer and Kai Cheng Thom

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* and Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* both shed light on how cultural gendering processes marginalise those who cannot conform to them, and how those marginalised push back and provoke change in different yet related cultural historical contexts. In each work the gender-conforming world bears a level of fear and uneasiness about the existence of the gender-diverse person, who represents that which they are excluding from their own selves and communities. This fear rests upon the primacy of linguistic authority and translates into both narrative and social conventions. While the heteronormativity of such conventions has been identified through queer readings of medieval literature, a transgender perspective troubles discursive theories which attempt to ground all knowing in language. Each protagonist offers their own sense of identity, developed at the intersection of embodied knowing and cultural framing, to expose the culture's limitations and expand its possibilities.

Chaucer's collection of *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Pardoner's Tale* within it have been celebrated for their earthy humour, biting criticism of fourteenth-century English institutions and norms, and penchant for getting into those middle spaces where meaning is double-edged. Many critics have argued about the importance of the Pardoner's sexuality and gender, but the Pardoner's ability to inspire gay and transgender writers has gained less attention. Steven Kruger discusses the Pardoner's impact on gay writers as "the first angry homosexual," as someone who speaks for the pain of those who are marginalised and sexualised as diseased and sick (Kruger 150-172).<sup>1</sup> Thom's novel echoes the energy of *The Pardoner's Tale* by telling of hunger and desire, violence and rage, suffering, death and love. Placing these two works in conversation suggests that transgender writers can reclaim their own embodied voices while reclaiming transgender history, that identity and history are inseparable. These transgender approaches illuminate ways of speaking and reading that have been obscured and erased, and enable access to sources of knowledge embedded in the living senses.

*The Pardoner's Tale* is one of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written between 1387 and 1400, an assortment of tales told by a variety of pilgrims who have fallen in with each other on the way to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket at the Canterbury Cathedral, as part of a storytelling contest organised by the Host. Of the pilgrims the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath stand out for their intense physicality, for the provocative kinds of embodied knowing that they represent. While both challenge conventional narratives, Chaucer's characterisation of The Pardoner in *The Pardoner's Tale*, with his ambiguous gender identity, serves to critique Church hypocrisy as well as phobias toward gender- and sexually-diverse people in fourteenth-century England. The Pardoner becomes a kind of lightning rod, able to transmit and channel the charge connected with big social issues of the day, the formative power of the Church, climate catastrophe, plagues, ongoing war, and social unrest. The Pardoner resonates with the protagonist of Thom's novel, whom I call Sister, because, though unnamed, she signs off as "*Your sister*" in letters to her younger sister (33, 78, 130, 174, 188). As a Chinese-Canadian transgender woman, she channels Canadian social anxieties at a time of increasingly porous borders, expanding world

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<sup>1</sup> Kruger cites Allen Barnett, whose character Preston in the story "Philostorgy, Now Obscure" fiercely cleans his apartment upon learning that he has contracted an AIDS-related disease, only to find an old college essay that he wrote about *The Pardoner's Tale*. Of all of his possessions it is one of the few things he wants to save because the Pardoner speaks to him about pain, disease, death, and survival (Barnett 34-61).

trade, concentrations of wealth and power, ongoing wars, climate emergency, migrations and epidemics.

Uncanny parallels between Chaucer's England and Thom's Canada reveal similar historical contexts of stress and change. In these social climates of violence -- of physical and verbal control, of silences and silencing, of shame and abjection -- the need to speak, through body and voice, is urgent. The gender-marginalised character, cast as monstrous, returns the gaze and demonstrates society's institutions and norms to be monstrous instead. Both protagonists respond to the secrecy and shame imposed on them with a brooding silence that festers and haunts their worlds, bursting forth as pain and taking shape in art and voice.

The settings for both stories are remarkably similar in terms of the narratives and the language used against the marginalised. Current headlines convey the idea that transgender people are dangerous, devilish and sinful: "There's 'diabolical intelligence' behind global LGBT revolution," "Former trans clinic workers demand end to 'experiment' on kids," and "Senior Vatican Cardinal warns 'demonic' transgender rights are causing the 'death of God'" (LifeSite News Staff; McClean; Duffy). The speech of nationalistic groups mirrors the same kinds of language as that used during the fourteenth century by those targeting Jewish, Muslim, and gay people (Chiasson and Nicholson). Mixed with antisemitism it reveals a demonisation of the "other" and fear of feminisation: "fuck you faggots," "Jews will not replace us," and [transgender people should be forced] "to wear some kind of symbol on their clothing so that people can tell them apart" (Miller). Thom and Chaucer both respond to this kind of violence by shifting the senses, by drawing on deeply embodied ways of knowing to reveal the victimisers, not the victims, to be grotesque, as they target, marginalise, and project damaging ideas onto others. Both use literary art to challenge and break frames of normality, to enter the abjected body, and find the language arising from the body's pain to spring cracks in the edifice of oppression.

Chaucer taps into the energy rising out of the earth, out of the body, and out of the self through the opening lines of *The General Prologue*, touching the roots of sensuality and body-based insight. They begin with the sense of fertility that comes with spring, as the source of life and community and the wellspring of goodness and renewal:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote  
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,  
And bathed every veyne in swich licour  
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;<sup>2</sup> (*The General Prologue*, lines 1-4)

By opening with the power of the flower, or of fertility, Chaucer emphasises its importance in ways most scholars have read as heteronormative (Dinshaw 117). But gender- and sexually-normative people do not have a monopoly on procreative power. Chaucer's opening lines deal with all forms of fertility, not just ones that happen to lead to the birth of children. They touch on the kind of sensuality that strikes to the root, carried on the breath of the West Wind and the impulsive courageous energy of Aries, along with the animal wisdom of small birds that make melody and "slepen al the nyght with open ye"<sup>3</sup> (*The General Prologue*, lines 5-10). When

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<sup>2</sup> When April with its sweet-smelling showers  
Has pierced the drought of March to the root,  
And bathed every vein (of the plants) in such liquid  
By which power the flower is created;

<sup>3</sup> "sleep all the night with open eyes"

people feel the sap rising, the energy of spring, then they feel the inspiration to go on pilgrimages, to seek truth and the sources of life. These opening lines frame the Pardoner within a larger quest to seek the font of sensuality and knowing.

The opening lines of Thom's *Fierce Femmes* share the celebration of rising energy that Chaucer expresses in the opening lines of *The General Prologue*, the sense of some inexpressible urge, sending people out of their houses and into the world. Out of the secrets and shaming of her childhood Sister rides on the building energy of an irrepressible rage to confront oppression and find a way to speak with the power of her own voice and story:

I don't believe in safe spaces. They don't exist. I do, however, believe in dangerous stories: The kind that swirl up from inside you when you least expect it, like the voice of a mad angel whispering of the revolution you are about to unleash. Stories that bend and twist the air as they crackle off your tongue, making you shimmer with glamour, so that everyone around you hangs on to your every intoxicating word. The kind of stories that quiet mad girls dream of to bring themselves comfort after crying themselves to sleep at night . . .

The kind of story that doesn't wait for you to invite it to enter, but bursts through the doors of your rat-infested house like a glittering wind, hungry, hungry, to snatch up the carpet and scatter your papers and smash every single plate in the kitchen. That surges, howling, up the battered stairs to blast the stained sheets off your filthy bed and sweep your secrets out of the closet and send them shrieking outside, overjoyed to be finally set free. (Thom 1)

While Chaucer's rising sap is the sensual power of spring, of embodied knowing, to spill out of institutionalised frames, Thom's rising urge is full of fierce danger, the pain of secrets kept far too long, the wrenching pain of the normative gaze which requires secrecy to fix and contain queer people. In both texts this energy locates the body as the source of narratives that identify and confront the oppressive conventions of shame and secrecy which constrain and demonise gender-diverse people.

### **Demonising the Pardoner**

Chaucer shapes the Pardoner of Rouncivale, the last pilgrim to be introduced in his *Canterbury Tales*, to represent the intertwined issues of sexuality and the Church, and to illustrate and critique cultural projections onto queer bodies. In contrast to the open and liberal late-twelfth and early-thirteenth centuries, when gay life flourished in Europe, during the increasingly intolerant fourteenth century the Church cast the violation of gender roles, which prescribed passivity for women and activity for men in joyless sex leading to pregnancy, as threatening to the stability of life itself, dangerous to the very foundation of all civil and sacred order (Boswell 243-266; Lochrie 56). Yet while condemning sodomy the Church also increasingly abused its own power. Since Rouncivale was an institution known for fraud, the Pardoner is associated with exploitation (Moore 65). Written at a time when John Wycliffe's Lollard Movement was critiquing entrenched corruption in the Roman Catholic Church the Pardoner represents everything the Lollards were opposed to, the veneration and sale of magical relics and pardons, immorality, religion as temporal power, rampant sexual activity, and sodomy (Lochrie 48).

Sodomy was not opposed to heterosexuality in fourteenth-century theological discourse (Lochrie xv). It had much wider associations and was linked with nonprocreative sex, including

fellatio, masturbation, bestiality, anal sex, and same-sex relations between women. Actual accusations of sodomy were tied to charges of heresy and political treason (Camille 62). Sodomy was linked with the racialised “other” in a disease context, where the perceived socially contagious was feared to infect and triumph (Hutcheson 100). It was linked with the destabilising of the crown and society, the abuse of power, and secret and indecent excesses (Hutcheson 110).

In keeping with his associations with sodomy and corruption, many critics cast the Pardoner as slimy and deceitful, totally empty of morals, and preying on the hopes of others for release from sin, in order to accrue wealth for himself. Walter Clyde Curry thinks the Pardoner, with “his long fair hair, his glaring eyes, his thin, high-pitched voice, his beardlessness -- and the hint in line 691, ‘I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare,’ [which reveals] ‘the Pardoner's secret,’” is “born a eunuch and in consequence provided by nature with a warped mind and soul [and] compelled to follow the urge of his unholy impulses into debauchery, vice and crime. From this perspective the Pardoner is an outcast from human society, isolated both physically and morally, and satisfies his depraved instincts by preying upon it” (Pearsall 359; Curry 70, in Pearsall 359). According to Derek Pearsall the Pardoner bears a “sense of menace, of some stirring of unspeakable evil, the sense of death” connected with innate depravity (Pearsall 360). George Lyman Kittredge sees the Pardoner as “a thorough-paced scoundrel,” whose “relics are counterfeit” and who “has no illusions about the holiness of his mission” (Kittredge 830). In his view the Pardoner “preaches for money, and has no concern for the reformation of morals or for genuineness of repentance,” like the Church which sucks from the people their livelihood, wealth, health, and spiritual integrity (Kittredge 830). In such readings, the Pardoner is a deliberate representation of both Church and a kind of lewd and crude rampant sexual behaviour, out of control and out of place. These scholars go along with Chaucer’s smooth characterisation without seeming to realise that Chaucer critiques the objectification of gender-diverse people through the Pardoner, as well as the institutions, like the Church, which are helping to drive that objectification. Chaucer reveals the cultural anxieties surrounding gender diversity in order to understand the complex web of associations upon which they are based. By failing to understand the complexity of Chaucer’s design these scholars demonstrate their own transphobia and homophobia.

In fourteenth-century England, like the more recent modern period out of which these scholars are writing, gender-diverse people could be used politically in battles of power and influence because they represented profound cultural anxieties. The Lollards thought that the celibacy of the clergy led to sodomy, which came to represent the whole corrupt enterprise of the Church and interconnect with the dominant Christian sense that sin resided in the body and the body’s sexual urges. The Pardoner is cast as either a eunuch (“geldyng”) or a homosexual (“mare”) (*The General Prologue*, line 691). Either way he is considered to be unnatural, breaking the bounds of respectful human behaviour, connected with sterility and death. Gender and desire were mutually defined so that the ambiguously-gendered body represented devilish desires (McCracken 133). Harking back to Aristotelian physiognomics the ambiguously-gendered male body was portrayed with strange peering eyes, while both anal and oral openings were linked with sins of the flesh (Camille 17, 75). This helps to explain Chaucer’s Pardoner, with his bulging eyes, concern with sins of digestion and sex, and verbal play between “cod” and scrotum, “O wombe! O bely! O stynkyng cod,”<sup>4</sup> as a representation of profound cultural anxieties (*The Pardoner’s Tale*, line 534; Dinshaw 133). In the Pardoner’s medieval world people believed that differently sexed bodies contained different kinds of moisture and heat. Women were seen as wet and cold, while men were seen as hot and dry, in accord with the

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<sup>4</sup> “O gut! O belly! O stinking bag”

ancient Greek Hippocratic humoral theory (Cadden 17). Based on Plato's one-sex model, females were seen as failed males, and possibilities for fluidity between the sexes were evident (Lavezzo 179; Lochrie 43; Cadden 14, 202). This fluidity itself could be a source of anxiety in an anxious time because gender roles required a sharp distinction between "men" and "women." In a similar way current-day medical theories recognise the fluidity of sex and gender while social norms require rigid conformity to a binary model (McCredie; Fine).

Indeed, both medieval and modern anxieties about the potential fluidity of sex and gender centre on the possibility that men can be feminine, thereby losing their cultural privilege. As a eunuch the Pardoner would be seen as a feminised man and, like women, "carnal, irrational, voluptuous, fickle, manipulative, and deceitful" (Kuefler, in Tougher 94). He would be seen, like a woman, as a passive sexual partner (Tougher 94). Eunuch and homosexual blend as categories because both represent a man's failure to maintain his culturally prescribed dominance over women. The Pardoner's uncertain gender identity highlights the way in which the dominant cultural promotion of sexual desire relied on oppression of all people with feminine behaviours and attributes, regardless of gender identity. While early scholars of Chaucer go along with Chaucer's characterisation of the Pardoner without understanding its complexity, feminist and queer scholars point out and explain Chaucer's critique, through the Pardoner, of the cultural tensions, anxieties, and resulting narrative conventions, which lead to the Pardoner's demonisation.

## Experience Woot Wel

As the work of Karma Lochrie and others indicates, Chaucer emphasises these oppressive narrative and cultural conventions regarding the body in order to turn their meaning. Chaucer takes the disparaged feminine and casts it as a source of power by creating dynamic and vibrant female characters, while also sourcing authentic knowing in the body. Chaucer's female characters stand out for the raw physical agency with which they confront the institutions that attempt to limit and define them. The Wife of Bath, like the Pardoner, fractures the normative frame of both gender and sexuality. She draws on experience when explaining that genitals are meant for pleasure, as "experience woot wel,"<sup>5</sup> confronting the Church's proclaimed priority on joyless procreative sex with the reality of the body's sexual knowing and "sheer clitoral capacities" (*The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, line 124; Lochrie 91). Like the Pardoner she blends sexual transgression with gender transgression, combining masculine and feminine, Mars and Venus, in an androgynous way: "Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse, / And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardynesse"<sup>6</sup> (*The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, lines 611-12). In so doing, she is following her own innate nature, her own "inclinacioun / By vertu of [her] constellacioun,"<sup>7</sup> like all gender- and sexually-diverse people (*The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, lines 615-16). In line with medieval "medical theories -- with masculine anxieties in tow -- about transgendering [and] female masculinity" both Pardoner and the Wife of Bath are transgressively queer in ways that assertively identify and reveal the normative to be fundamentally unnatural (Lochrie 90). As she recounts her many marriages in her prologue, the Wife of Bath also champions experience over institutionalised authority by claiming that "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me"<sup>8</sup> (*The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, lines 1-2). She undermines

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<sup>5</sup> "experience knows well"

<sup>6</sup> "Venus me gave my lust, my amorousness, / And Mars gave me my sturdy boldness"

<sup>7</sup> "inclination / By virtue of the state of the heavens at [her] birth"

<sup>8</sup> "Experience, though no written authority / Were in this world, is good enough for me"

traditional assumptions about women in marriage, that “God bad us for to wexe and multiplye,”<sup>9</sup> by showing herself as an active agent seeking power, control and sexual satisfaction (*The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, line 28). By speaking authentically about their embodied knowing, desire and gluttony, sensuality and self, both the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath reveal cultural authority to be weak, uninspired, and downright false.

Two other tales also question traditional assumptions about gender and sexuality and highlight the body as a source of joy, power and knowledge. *The Merchant’s Tale* features an old husband gone blind, cuckolded by his young wife when she likens her lover’s testicles to fruit hanging in a tree and climbs the tree to enjoy them (*The Merchant’s Tale*, lines 2067, 2331-2353). In *The Miller’s Tale* the healthy young wife of a carpenter humiliates him by engaging in sex with the clerk who rents a room in their home. She and her lover also humiliate another admirer when in the dark of night first she and then her lover stick their bottoms out of the window for that admirer to kiss, thinking them to be lips. He kisses first the wife’s ass, feeling confused about her pubic hair, “For wel he wiste a womman hath no berd”<sup>10</sup> (*The Miller’s Tale*, line 3737). Enraged he returns with a hot brand. This time the clerk, not wanting to miss out on the fun, sticks his asshole out of the window, only to get a hot brand up his ass (*The Miller’s Tale*, line 3810).

These three tales celebrate women who are rewarded for being assertive, who are sexually satisfied, socially and economically successful, have some control over their bodies and lives and strategies for dealing with aggressive, violent, or simply ignorant men. They do so in ways that operate to question traditional assumptions about male dominance in marriage. However, Chaucer also expresses latent anxieties about the gap between practised and expected forms of gender and sexuality, like the contrast between the “sheer variety and volume of sexual acts attributed to women” and expectations of restraint (Lochrie 55). That the balls of the young lover in *The Merchant’s Tale* are likened to fruit reminds of masculine expectations of potency and virility, the pressure to be fruitful and produce children, which does not always accord with the body’s capacities. The humour about a bearded vagina or anus in “The Miller’s Tale” plays on fears of female masculinity. The hot poker violently thrust into the anus of the young lover calls to mind accounts of the murder of King Edward II, King from 1307-1327. His loving and enduring relationship with Piers Gaveston was perceived, unlike gay relationships that were celebrated a mere two hundred years prior, to destabilise the British Monarchy, and “authors charged with explaining the Lancastrian usurpation of the throne” circulated stories that he ended up dying from a hot brand thrust in the same way<sup>11</sup> (Boswell 299-300; citation Federico 25). While Chaucer suggests that women are enterprising, clever, resourceful, and physically and sexually active in ways that can be admired even as they disrupt the status quo, he casts men who engage in same-sex love as deserving of the hot brand, and taps into growing cultural anxieties about sodomy. It is not surprising, then, that the Host’s angry response to the Pardoner and the

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<sup>9</sup> “God commanded us to grow fruitful and multiply”

<sup>10</sup> “For well he knew a woman has no beard”

<sup>11</sup> “. . . lurid stories about the manner in which the king had been murdered began to circulate. The so-called ‘anal rape narrative’ first appears in writing in a *Brut* continuation, composed sometime after 1333; the story then also surfaces in the second redaction of Higden’s *Polychronicon*, which ended in 1340. These two accounts, in which Edward II was said to have been killed by the insertion of a ‘red-hot copper rod’ (‘Bruì) or ‘red-hot iron’ (Higden) into his anus, the entrails thus being destroyed without any apparent external wounds, formed the basis for later versions of the story that were repeated in chronicles throughout the fourteenth century” (Federico 31-32).

corruptions he represents focusses on his “coillons”<sup>12</sup> and on the threat of castration that further marginalises this queer figure (*The Pardoner’s Tale*, line 952).

### Entering the Monstrous Body

The Pardoner is silenced by the Host, who responds to his story in a transphobic way, while Sister is silenced by parents who reject her nature and self-expression. Though reduced to aching silence, both the Pardoner and Sister find a way to speak again out of the body’s pain, reclaiming voice in the face of violence. Even as the Pardoner represents the corruption of the Church, lechery, sodomy, and the dangerous violation of society’s gender categories, he also represents the possibility of talking back to entrenched rejection. As the Host’s violent reaction to the Pardoner indicates, “The queer empties out the natural, the essential (those conventional foundations of representation and identity), shakes the heterocultural edifice . . . and the Pardoner’s very person remains an unwelcome but insistent reminder of normative heterosexual unnaturalness” (Dinshaw 135). His body becomes the site of a profound reversal of meaning as he binds “himself again to a marginal expression of the church’s life, the veneration of relics [and expresses] both his fear, nearing conviction, that his own body, like the tavern in his tale, is the devil’s temple (1. 470) and his faint but continuing hope that this same body may yet prove to be the holy temple of God” (McAlpine 16). In this he parallels the protagonist of Thom’s novel, who also rides on the hope of rendering disparaged transgender bodies holy.

Both protagonists take the shit that is thrown their way and turn it into something beautiful. Both works deal with bodies which have been culturally gendered as “monstrous” since the “monstrous is constitutive, producing the contours of both bodies that matter (humans, Christians, saints, historical figures, gendered subjects and Christ) and, ostensibly, bodies that do not (animals, non-Christians, demons, fantastical creatures and portentous freaks)” (Bildhauer and Mills 2). Monstrous gender is that which breaks culturally constructed binary categories. As Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills note, “In the later Middle Ages . . . hermaphroditism was interpreted as a form of homosexuality . . . hermaphroditic identity was perceived both as a ‘real’ body and as a potent symbol for thinking through issues commonly occupying late medieval thinkers: questions of language, subjectivity and desire” (Bildhauer and Mills 12). Gender diverse people were and, as in Thom’s text, are perceived as “other” and excluded even as their bodies were and are used as symbols for discussion.

For Chaucer and Thom, the cultural gendering of some bodies as deviant is driven by forces of Church and state power and issues of personal and communal identity, all channeled through language. The Church in *The Pardoner’s Tale* and the police in *Fierce Femmes* both serve to enforce conformity to society’s constructed needs and to gender some bodies as “monstrous.” Since in the medieval world Christ’s body represented spiritual healing and authenticity, the Pardoner is especially transformational by demonstrating that he represents Christ, while Sister represents the transformational power of a pagan goddess in the face of virulent masculine authority. In this sense, *The Pardoner’s Tale* and *Fierce Femmes* work to subvert cultural hierarchies and reconnect “monstrous” bodies with the sacred. They do this by exploring the body, getting into its messy openings and urges, hungers and fears, shame and secret places, and breaking them open to release the body’s power as voice.

The messiness of the body is foregrounded in a shared focus on hunger, where the Pardoner’s and Sister’s experiences of desire, consumption, and digestion ultimately lead to regeneration. The Pardoner describes eating and digestion as foul actions in a stomach “Fulfilled

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<sup>12</sup> “testicles”

of dong and of corrupcioun!”<sup>13</sup> (*The Pardoner’s Tale*, line 535). His heavy focus on the sins of the body connects his own body with social shame and then reclaims it as a source of strength. Sister describes “the crooked starving house you grew up in that wanted to devour you and digest you whole” (21). These images of eating and being eaten connect the individual’s body with social forces that devour, digest and destroy. Eating, like sex, comes to stand for both the human need to consume food and societies’ needs to consume, disparage and reject bodies and lives.

However, Chaucer and Thom turn society’s tendency to devour “monstrous” bodies back on itself. Chaucer casts the whole Church as a hog’s turd while Thom has the dead body of the vicious police officer consumed by the plants surrounding the magic fountain of the First Femme Goddess (*The Pardoner’s Tale*, line 955; Thom 116). Those who represent all-consuming institutionalised power are consumed or become shit. Yet these texts recognise how shit can be used as compost, and not just as a way to disparage others or as a source of shame. Thus the cop’s body magically brings the First Femme goddess to life and causes the fountain’s water to flow:

As we watch, transfixed, the vines continue to recoil, drawing the policeman’s body deeper and deeper into the well of the fountain --- so deep that we can no longer see it.

The statue’s eyes open. Lucretia and I scream and grab each other, but the First Femme doesn’t move. Her expression remains serene and understanding. Water begins to run down her cheeks, in a trickle at first, then in rivulets, then steady streams. It gushes over the curves and valleys of her body, and into the well, which fills up impossibly quickly. (116)

The vegetative digestion of the dead cop revives the stone goddess, who is able to cry and fill the fountain with water and life. That which oppresses can be recast as something new.

Not only can consumed bodies regenerate and stimulate change, but the body also comes to speak for secret sources of knowing. The body is like an instrument that has its own song. The Pardoner has a voice that rings out smooth speech like a bell, and he sings “muriely and loude”<sup>14</sup> (*The Pardoner’s Prologue*, line 331; *The General Prologue*, line 714). Sister has hair that is “long enough . . . to race back through time and find the ancestors singing, to bind us once more to words flowing in their arteries and veins, to bring back their blood into our hollow haunted hearts and make us all whole at last” (146-147). The body has sound and song and ways of “dreaming” that resonate in the blood (Thom 142). Through the body as instrument the Pardoner and Sister touch base with their own deeply-felt and experienced gender, and connect with ancestors, in the face of near constant resistance and harassment from society, in order to become whole.

What the Pardoner and Sister experience recalls a depth of feeling which Apache and Scotch-Irish gay transman Gary Bowen describes as “a sacred calling given to me by Spirit, not a neurosis discovered by white medicine” (Feinberg, *Trans Liberation*, 63). Trans woman Julia Serano describes these trusted body feelings as “subconscious sex” (221). The body has ways of knowing that precede and coexist with conscious knowing. Using Heidegger’s ideas about Dasein as Being-in-the-World Ephraim Das Janssen explains that occasionally Dasein’s easy comfort and familiarity with the world is disrupted. When Dasein’s Being is disrupted it becomes available for reflection (Janssen 22). For a transgender child who has not yet been exposed to transgender language, embodiment screams silently as pure wordless knowing. Such

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<sup>13</sup> “Filled with dung and with corruption!”

<sup>14</sup> “the more merrily and loud”

a child is living in a constant raging state of disruption, a constant sharp knowledge that the world does not make sense, in a way that reveals the limitations of Judith Butler's claim that "one cannot get outside of language in order to grasp materiality," and proves that there is a level of signification that is beyond language (37). While Butler focuses on "regulatory norms" through which "sex [is] materialized" the transgender child's experience demonstrates that the body operates of its own accord to convey a sense of self that continues to impact a person even once language becomes available (xix).

Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger theorises this nonlinguistic experience as a kind of womb-like matrix which "transgresses and precedes the phallic / Oedipal notion of subjectivity, and of femininity and masculinity (indeed, of gender identifications)" and where "we unravel *an-other*, a *beside* non-conscious dimension, and thereby enlarge our understanding of the creative process" (126). Ettinger characterises this matrix as "an unconscious space of the simultaneous co-emergence and co-fading of the I and the uncognized *non-I* which is neither fused, nor rejected" (125). Yet Ettinger is unable to imagine a space that is ungendered, and casts the matrix as feminine, since "In the unconscious mind, the dimension of matrixial borderline is linked to feminine desire," even though it is supposed to precede femininity (125). A truly prelinguistic matrix of embodied experience would involve feelings, urges and unspoken needs, to express that which comes into being through the flesh, feelings which are determinative and convey a strong, distinct, original and independent sense of knowing. Only after being offered culture's outlets for expression would a person name these feelings as "masculine" or "feminine," but the naming of them does not create them. It gives expression to what is already there and allows for it to be channelled socially. This is why the erasure of linguistic terms to express the diversity of physical experience is so devastating. It leaves those unnamed brewing with the trauma of inexpressible knowledge. Therefore the matrix arises out of transgender, not feminine or masculine, knowing: a basic and deep body sense that will find its own way to express in the world. As a transgender child, Sister, like the Pardoner, draws on embodied knowing, prior to language, as a source of language. This nonverbal kind of knowing is more powerful and more capable of shaping body, mind, and identity than society's regulatory norms, and can operate against, rather than with, those regulatory norms if necessary.

The Pardoner and Sister share in the trauma of finding their bodies invaded by the outside world, by cultural projections that are toxic and persistent, and struggle to deal with this toxicity and the anger that results by getting to the body's source of knowing as a vital reservoir. While the Pardoner expresses this resonant pain through silence which he counters with song, Sister experiences the rejection and ache of her childhood as an invasion of bees, which she counters by knowing that the bees have found her own nectar and that they will always be inside of her sustained by that sweet source:

Sometimes all you can do is stay perfectly still and surrender to something that is greater than you. I learned this from the bees . . .

Into the house they swirled, a boiling cloud of rage and desire, searching for the sweetest, softest thing they could find. I lay, six years old, in my bed in my tiny room, and they flooded inside through the crack under the door.

They landed on me, covered me with their vibrating bodies, crawled inside my lips and up my nostrils, into every orifice, and they drank up all the nectar they could hold. I did not move, did not scream, because I knew that if I did, I would be stung into oblivion.

Instead I lay there, clutching the sheets in my fists, and waited for it to be over. I prayed to the ravenous swarm, *forgive me*. And at last, they were finished. They lifted themselves up on their wings and flew off into the night.

Except. Some of them stayed. Addicted to my sweet blood, they crawled up inside my body and built their nests there. They are still inside me. They will always be. (16-18)

This powerful image communicates the way the toxic transphobic outside world, mixed with her own boiling desire and rage, sucks away the trans girl's "nectar" or sweetness and transforms to a crucial register for understanding. These social influences cannot be blocked out. No door is strong enough. There are always cracks. Instead of fighting them, she has to make peace by learning to live with the invasion. The mixture of transphobia and her own rage, imaged as a swarm of bees, once lodged inside of her, becomes a foundational awareness. After the failure of the trans girl gang, The Lipstick Lacerators, to change their living conditions through violence, and just before Sister decides to bake a magical forgiveness cake, she asks Alzena the Witch,

"How do you catch a swarm of bees?" . . .

Alzena the Witch's face lights up. She laughs again, but this time she sounds truly joyful. She leans in as well, pushing her forehead against mine to scrutinize my face.

"With sweetness, of course," she says. "The same way you catch anything else." (155)

The embodied experience of toxic invasion becomes a source of knowing, leading Sister to reclaim her inner sweetness as a foundation for language.

Sister also tries to deal with the childhood experience of bodily invasion, resulting from the abuse she experienced out of the frustrated desires of others, by cutting into her own body with a knife. Her immigrant Chinese-Canadian parents placed all their hungry starving dreams for the financial stability they never had on her because they thought she was a boy. They "spanked [her] with a wooden spoon and shouted that [she] was bad and ungrateful, and . . . put locks on the doors and windows of the crooked house" when she "put [her] mother's black stockings over [her] head and pretended they were a princess's long, long hair" (9). This violence towards her leads to the feeling that she needs to dig into her own body with a knife, to try to let out all the pain. In her notebook she writes a "song of the pocket knife" about

a small silver friend  
that . . .  
. . . always tells the truth.  
and sometimes,  
when there are too many insects -  
angry - alive - wriggling - under my skin,  
i take my pocket knife and  
open up mouths in my skin  
to try  
and let them  
out. (19)

The body becomes multiply-mouthed in an attempt to "open sealed doors . . . [and] interact with the world on your own terms," to release rage and desire and figure out the "difference between hunger and love," to take the body's silent knowing and find a way to speak (9, 177). Both Chaucer and Thom demonstrate how hungry unloved bodies targeted with violence can speak back to that violence and, through song and through a return to the sacred, claim love.

## Reclaiming the Body's Voice Through Sensuality, Story, Art and Magic

Though *The Canterbury Tales* is full of tales of opposite-sex love The Pardoner and Summoner also make melody together in a way that is suggestive of same-sex love. Their love is described in a celebratory way which matches the sensual season of spring, as “Ful loude he soong ‘Com hider, love, to me!’ / This Somonour bar to hym a stif burdoun; / Was nevere trompe of half so greet a soun”<sup>15</sup> (*The General Prologue*, lines 672-674). The image of the trumpet connects their combined song with the glorious energy of springtime.

The Pardoner's sensuality also blends with the image of Christ that he wears on his cap, “a representation of Christ's face as it appeared on Veronica's veil, . . . commonly worn by Christians who had made pilgrimage to Rome,” which “ asserts the dignity of the Pardoner, whatever his sexual status, as part of Christ and reminds us that through his sexual sufferings the Pardoner participates in the crucifixion” (McAlpine 18-19). The Pardoner thus connects Christ's love with the overpowering sensuality of the season. In addition the Pardoner channels the sensual power of language. More than any of the other pilgrims he has the verbal and narrative power to seduce and convince.

The Pardoner's linguistic sensuality comes through his bell-like voice and his versatility as a storyteller. His voice, like his song, extends out with power and beauty into the world with “an hauteyn speche, / [which] ryng[e] . . . out as round as gooth a belle”<sup>16</sup> (*The Pardoner's Prologue*, lines 330-331). The power of this voice, coming from within, offsets the uncomfortable physical description that Chaucer gives us of the Pardoner, with his limp yellow hair, glaring hare-like eyes, goat-like voice, beardless smooth face, and the ongoing suspicion about the state of his genitals (675-691). Since the hare and goat are associated with excessive sexuality Chaucer's description of the Pardoner evokes the kinds of phobia toward gender- and sexually-diverse people which pervade social media today (Miller 182). Discomfort surrounding the Pardoner's genitals mirrors current cisgender panic about the states of trans people's genitals and their access to public spaces (Schilt and Westbrook). In spite of this sinister outer description Chaucer gives the Pardoner a beautiful voice, suggesting a critique of the very same cultural phobias that Chaucer is placing on display. The beautiful voice matches the sense of inner beauty and wholeness which so many transgender people express today, and which they seek to bring to the surface and make visible to counter the severity of the transphobia coming toward them (Rae).

The Pardoner not only has a beautiful voice, but is also a versatile and gifted storyteller, in a way that mirrors Sister's ability to tell “Stories that bend and twist the air as they crackle off your tongue, making you shimmer with glamour, so that everyone around you hangs on to your every intoxicating word” (1). He wins gold and silver by telling “ensamples many oon / Of olde stories longe tyme agoon. / For lewed peple loven tales olde”<sup>17</sup> (*The Pardoner's Prologue*, lines 435-437). The Pardoner tells these tales because “Swiche thynges kan they wel reporte and holde”<sup>18</sup> (*The Pardoner's Prologue*, line 438). So while the Pardoner recognises his audience as ignorant, he still knows that this audience, in spite of its ignorance, can pass along vital cultural information through tales.

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<sup>15</sup> “Very loud he sang ‘Come hither, love, to me!’ / This Summoner harmonized with him in a strong bass; / There was never a trumpet of half so great a sound”

<sup>16</sup> “a loud voice / [which] ring[s] . . . out as round as goes a belle”

<sup>17</sup> “illustrative tales many a one / Of old stories from long time ago. / For ignorant people love old tales”

<sup>18</sup> “Such things they can well repeat and hold in memory”

In addition to his beautiful voice and storytelling gift the Pardoner also has the skill to create relics, to retain and spread magic spiritual power from the past. He has a pillowcase which he claims to be “Our Lady’s veil,” a piece of Saint Peter’s sail, and a cross covered with stones (*The General Prologue*, lines 694-699). Even though his relics are presented as dubious like his physical body, and involve the generation of spiritual power from discarded seemingly-worthless materials, nevertheless they are spiritually-effective, because people believe in them. The Pardoner’s ability to create magically-real relics which generate religious fervour out of bones and rags, which is presented by so many scholars as the sign of his deviance, is also the essence of religious power. This is the power of Christ who was able to turn water into wine and bread into body. This is the power of belief to see and feel the spirit in simple things. This is also the power of the transgender person who claims and preserves the sacredness of their own body, which others would like to throw away as so much garbage. Thus the Pardoner metaphorically offers his own broken and disparaged body as a relic for others to hold sacred:

And for to stire hem to devocioun.  
 Thanne shewe I forth my longe cristal stones,  
 Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones --  
 Relikes been they, as wenen they echoon.<sup>19</sup> (*The Pardoner’s Prologue*, lines 346-349)

Crystal stones full of rags and bones are like beautiful transgender bodies which others see as trash. Here, they contain relics because people suppose them so. The power to perceive renders them real, as the Pardoner suggests that everyone has the power to perceive the real in things. The Pardoner invites the travelers to recognise the ragged as royal, the bones of the disparaged and downtrodden as crystal. He also reminds them that in doing so he is doing the work of Christ:

Oure lige lordes seel on my patente,  
 That shewe I first, my body to warente,  
 That no man be so boold, ne preest ne clerk,  
 Me to destourbe of Cristes hooly werk.<sup>20</sup> (337-340)

By telling them that Christ protects his body, he reminds them that his androgynous body is holy in the eyes of Christ.

### **Out of Secrecy, Shame, and Silence**

Out of the silence of transphobic oppression, of secrets and shame leaching into bodies like poison, both Sister and Pardoner respond with rage which they learn to transform into an attempt at healing. This effort to heal is compromised by the resistance of the gender-normative

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<sup>19</sup> And to stir them to devotion.

Then I show forth my long crystal stones,  
 Crammed full of rags and of bones --  
 Relics they are, as suppose they each one.

<sup>20</sup> Our liege lord's seal on my letter of authorization,  
 I show that first, to protect my body,  
 So that no man be so bold, neither priest nor clerk,  
 To hinder me from (doing) Christ's holy work.

oppressor to fully acknowledge their role, which leaves those victimised wearing “blood-red shoes [and] dancing with the devil till the end of time,” unable to fully escape the cycle of destruction and despair (Thom 188). The unresolved nature of this conflict is evident in the Host’s transphobic slapdown after the Pardoner finishes his tale about death. The Host tries to put the Pardoner back into place as shit, as refuse, as that which is cast out and downtrodden. The Pardoner offers his relics first to the Host to kiss, with the sexual suggestion that he “Unbokele anon [his] purs”<sup>21</sup> (*The Pardoner’s Tale*, line 945). The Pardoner makes this offer to the Host first because he sees him as most enveloped in sin. The Host responds with characteristic violence, sputtering that he would rather have Christ’s curse than accept the Pardoner as worthy and beautiful. He refuses to kiss the Pardoner’s relic, which he likens to the Pardoner’s dirty old underpants, and to pretend that it is the relic of a saint:

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 helpe hem carie;  
 They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!"<sup>22</sup> (946-955)

The only way he is willing to accept the Pardoner is through violence and as shit, and “In the Host’s revulsion, in what we might read as a moment of homosexual panic, the Host is drawn strongly away from the spiritual and strongly into the circle of the Pardoner’s body” (Kruger 164). The Pardoner’s resulting silence resounds across centuries to blend with the excruciating pain and anger of transgender people who struggle to maintain a sense of sanity in the face of societies which view them as shit:

This Pardoner answerde nat a word;  
 So wrooth he was, no word ne wolde he seye.<sup>23</sup> (*The Pardoner’s Tale*, lines 956-957)

The Pardoner’s silence represents the limits of language, the inexpressibility of embodiment for which culture offers no adequate frame. It represents the way gender diverse people have been silenced, excluded and erased.

Even though an uneasy truce is established between the pilgrims as they travel on together, the outcome is unresolved. As Steven Kruger observes, “the Pardoner’s ‘victory’ is in part a (darker) reaffirmation of homophobia” (165). In trying to reestablish control of his own gender-normative culture the Host reveals the hatred toward gender- and sexually-diverse people upon which it is based. He reveals himself and by association his culture as cruel, violent and cursed. The Church itself in its corruption is represented as the mutilated body of a gender-

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<sup>21</sup> “Unbuckle [his] purse right now”

<sup>22</sup> Though it were stained by thy fundament!

But, by the cross that Saint Helen found,

I would I had thy testicles in my hand

Instead of relics or a container for relics.

Have them cut off, I will help thee carry them;

They shall be enshrined in a hog's turd!"

<sup>23</sup> This Pardoner answered not a word;

So angry he was, no word would he say.

diverse person wrapped up in a hog's turd. Society and Church are equally compromised as hateful, corrupt and cruel. However, while the Host's response displays society's oppressive nature it also "testifies to the Pardoner's continuing power" (Kruger 164). Though language is silenced, obscured, and erased, the body continues to speak. As the travelers resume their journey, the very presence of the Pardoner echoes with the hollowness of a culture that needs to include and marginalise a rejected other to maintain itself.

The encounter between Pardoner and Host indicates that both are inseparable from each other because the Host depends on the Pardoner's devalued body to enact his masculine integrity and the Pardoner derives his abjected status from the Host's rejection. The encounter shows two characters, one representing dominant masculinity and the other representing the disparaged excluded feminised male or androgynous person, both dependent on each other for cultural identity, and shows the culturally unresolved nature of that situation. The other pilgrims and the reader experience "a point of metaphoric dissonance that forces the Pardoner and his audience together in unauthorized yet meaningful ways," so that they feel the act of shaming and its consequences at the same time (Burger 1145). While participating in the rejection of the Pardoner the travelers also feel the pain of that rejection. The result is an excruciating pressure of awareness of their own complicity in a rejection of some part of themselves.

While the Pardoner forces the pilgrims to acknowledge their own complicity in his abjection, he also maintains his ability to use voice, story, and craft to shape beautiful relics out of old bones and historical refuse. He answers "hate speech and threats of his differently gendered body by pointing to other bodies that have been dismembered and discarded. Then, by framing them with the force and meaning of relics, he tells those who view them as trash to kiss and value them" (Bychowski). By doing so he reveals normative contradictions and undermines the force and relevance of those disparaging him.

Sister also turns tossed away things into things of value, and reclaims her own body and self from the forces of secrecy and shame wielded against her. Just as transgender children recoil when they realise that their identities have been cast as too secret and shameful to talk about openly, both Pardoner and Sister endure cultural operations of secrecy, directed at them, labelling their experiences as "other." The Host's act of characterising the Pardoner's identity as a "dirty secret" and Sister's parents' actions, which force her to flee to the City of Miracles and engage in a battle of identity and will with doctors and police, actually serve the gender-normative need for power by capturing and containing the queer in a gaze of containment. These operations of secrecy fuel and carry on the nineteenth-century "medicalisation of the sexually peculiar . . . Imbedded in bodies" (Foucault 44). This "pornography of the morbid" claims to "ensure the physical vigor and the moral cleanliness of the social body [by eliminating] defective individuals, degenerate and bastardized populations," but actually serves erotic pleasure by discovering and exposing (Foucault 54). While the Pardoner is contained by the medieval erotic control of sexuality through confession and Church law, Sister is contained by the erotic control of sexuality through medical exposure and analysis. Both systems work to identify, expose, and control the culturally marginalised, to channel and relieve cultural anxieties flowing from the subconscious knowledge that what is within oneself cannot actually be expelled (Dinshaw 198; Foucault 71).

These parallels make Sister seem like the Pardoner reincarnated, after centuries of abuse and despair, come back not just to wrap abused bodies up as palatable objects, but to break the whole filthy system right open. This "voice of a mad angel" brings the "dangerous stories" of crushed and battered trans people to life (1). While Sister and the Pardoner share the sheer power of a daring and eloquent voice, and the capacity to provoke and reveal a diseased social system, they also share the ability to channel energy and magic, to give voice to the silenced.

The Pardoner wraps his magic up in relics. Sister bakes her magic into a forgiveness cake because “anything might be possible” when “the crushing weight of hopelessness . . . actually breaks you through to the other side” (158, 157-158). When the battle for the streets has been won and lost, lovers have been separated, the girl gang has been victorious and defeated, Sister decides “to bake a cake . . . to release the alchemy of transformation” (158). This is the cake that changes the world: “Beneath my wet, sticky hands are the dust and liquid that come together to form the primordial ooze, the raw goop from which life is made. I am She, the wretched Goddess with sweat-soaked hair, stirring the universe with a wooden spoon” (158-59). When finished “the scent of hot sugar diffuses in a thick cloud to fill up Kimaya’s apartment, oozing into the cracks in the doors to spread lazily throughout the rest of the building, the block, the Street” (159-60). The power of the cake goes out into the world and makes things happen, magical things. Separated lovers reunite, people find inspiration, laughter, self-appreciation, acceptance and forgiveness. The vengeful spirit of the dead policemen is finally released up to the next life (161-162). Sister’s power to use food to shape and sustain bodies and lives mirrors the Pardoner’s concern with turning the urges of eating and excess into productive material art forms with magical power, to give the suppressed and silenced body a voice. Both Pardoner and Sister work to regenerate their worlds, to bring forth healing and wholeness out of destruction, death and despair.

### **Literary Art to Challenge and Break the Frame**

While the protagonists of each work enter into embodied experience to reframe and challenge social expectations about bodies, the authors use literary art in a similar way, employing familiar narrative techniques and then rendering them strange. In this way the narratives themselves mirror the bodies being discussed. By turning expectations the authors create, for their readers, moments like that between the Pardoner and the Host. Unquestioned internalised views shift, creating the kinds of cognitive dissonance and uneasiness that lead to cultural critique and self-examination. Thom specifically leaves Sister unnamed, so that her story can speak metonymically for trans women everywhere. Chaucer carefully crafts the Pardoner as a recognisable type, as a specifically- and meaningfully-disparaged and marginalised person, in order to comment on and critique that very marginalisation. Both protagonists employ the power of memoir, the way a life story is organised and framed to make meaning, to confront their audiences with renewed perspectives. *The Pardoner’s Tale* is written in the third person, but the Pardoner’s voice comes across in the first person through quoted speech. The Pardoner tells his life story as a confession, which resonates with the way church confession was used to reveal and control sexual behaviours. The authenticity of the Pardoner’s confession is designed to disarm his audience, which would tend to disavow his lies and dishonesties, but might instead be charmed by the directness with which he reports his behaviours. Sister speaks in a first person narrative, reporting on her coming-of-age experiences of leaving home and establishing her own life. The way she lies in letters to her sister to cover up the gruesome details of her experiences adds to the raw authenticity of the narrative. Thom calls her novel “A Dangerous Trans Girl’s Confabulous Memoir,” in a play of real versus fabulous that critiques the whole stereotypical trans-memoir tradition, involving a trans person being “trapped in the wrong body” and “transitioning” to the cisnormative gender through medical procedures, to satisfy the expectations of a cisgender audience (Heinz 88): “Looking at the ivory face of the trans lady on the TV, I decided then and there that someone had to write us girls a dangerous story: a transgender memoir, but not like most of the 11,378 transgender memoirs out there, which are just regurgitations of the same old story that makes us boring and dead and *safe* to read about”

(Thom 3). Concluding that “hot sex and gang violence . . . and lots of magic” are “pretty much my life” Sister sets out for a fabulous world in order to discover real and authentic transgender lives (3).

If memoir can be used to reinforce distorted cisgender ideas about trans people it can also be used to confront and confound those distortions. Thom takes the stereotyped norms of the transgender memoir and stretches them until they break, so to speak. Sister runs away from home to a wild and wonderful, dangerous and fabulous place. She submits to a deadly doctor who fetishises trans women, playing to the common cisgender idea that transgender people can become who they are only with the “artificial” help of cisgender medical practice. Sister’s account of their first meeting undermines this assumption by providing a critique of the doctor-hero who becomes instead a predator: “Dr. Crocodile is wearing a toothy grin when he reaches out to shake my hand. His palm is hot and moist, like a swamp. The grin never leaves his face, not once, the whole time we are talking” (57). She flirts with cisgender ideas that trans people buy their identities through medical procedures by creating a place where “time is slow and memory is fluid . . . where it is always night. Here, anything at all can be lost, found, and purchased for the right price” (37). But then she reveals that the actual source of transgender power and identity is not medicalised procedure but community:

Kimaya’s smile is a key: it opens doors to places that I desperately want and am afraid to go. It is a map, guiding the way. It is warm butter, melting on toast. It feels like sisterhood. It feels like open arms. It feels like home. (41)

In the face of the trans memoir’s typical pattern, where the trans person conforms to cisnormativity through “transition” and then fades into safe anonymity and never “threatens” the cisgender world again, the trans girl gang, The Lipstick Lacerators, tests the limits of their physical power by fighting against the violence directed at them. They seek out and attack the transphobic men who are responsible for murdering and trashing the bodies of trans women. But Thom resists the alternative cliched plotline, of the underdog as hero or revenge tragedy. With relentless authenticity she refuses the easy outs of traditional closure. Instead she shows these transgender fighters exhausting themselves. Their valiant efforts just reverberate back to destroy them in another sign that victims and victimisers are bound together. They cannot destroy the other without destroying themselves. After winning many battles and becoming increasingly bruised and battered they learn that the real source of change is not in violence, but in forgiveness, in the magical power to evoke change in artistically subversive ways. Violence results when language fails, but when violence fails the only way is to find new language. Like their authors both Pardoner and Sister birth language out of sensuality, magic and art. Reduced to nothing by social hatred they find ways to speak out of authentic experience rooted in the senses and the body’s knowing. Both experience a kind of living death and find ways to survive.

### **Finding Out Where Death Lives**

In both works of literature death stands for the despair that results from hatred toward gender- and sexually-diverse people, and for the complicated psychological ways in which haters and hated are bound together. Both protagonists tell tales that revolve around the search for Death. By finding Death Sister and Pardoner discover how to resist and heal from the hatred that works to destroy those gripped in its embrace. The Pardoner’s Tale is about three sinful revelers who go out in search of death after seeing the dead body of one of their comrades. It also features death as an old man who is not able to die. It resonates with medieval associations that connect

male same-sex love with homosocial excess, the exclusion of women, and bodily debasement (Kruger, in Dinshaw 133). Sister's tale resonates with current-day associations between gender diversity and sexual excess and violence. It is about "girls who run away to find out where Death lives and come back holding skulls full of fire" (188). Sister confronts death in the form of a policeman whom she kills during the most brutal of the battles between the Lipstick Lacerators and the transphobic men and police officers who roam and control The Street of Miracles (111). Later in a dream he morphs back into a living healthy masculine young man and rapes her, entering and claiming her, by naming her excruciating fear and longing for control, in a moment of horrifying fusion (126).

Since the Pardoner makes it clear that people who lie, cheat, and sin, who engage in excesses of sex and eating, are already dead, the Pardoner himself is in a sense dead. He is dead because of his cheating and lying behaviours and his perceived sexual excess, but he is also dead because society has rendered him culturally dead as an androgynous person. In casting their protagonists as dead in life, or dealing with death, the Pardoner and his tale, as well as Sister of *Fierce Femmes*, struggle with the question of what kind of continuity remains after death-bringing betrayals. In *The Pardoner's Tale* only the gold treasure remains while the revelers die. In Sister's Tale the trans women survive and heal from the fear and horror of murder, while the transphobic policeman dies and is transformed into healing power to bring tears and water to the stone goddess. Both tales operate as tales of regeneration and renewal. They show how the dead haunt the living, like the ghost who caresses Sister in love and brings her to orgasm (25). By connecting metaphors of sexual and sensual excess with living death and showing what kinds of hope can still remain in the shadow of that death, they allow the marginalised to reclaim voice and power.

In both tales death stands for the suffering brought on by societies bent on persecuting queer people. In *Fierce Femmes* Sister ends up killing a policeman who is about to kill her comrade in arms and transgender sister Lucretia. During the final battle between the Lipstick Lacerators and the cops Sister takes refuge in a courtyard with an empty fountain, which turns out to be a sacred space belonging to the First Femme Goddess, on whose original murder the power of The Street of Miracles is based. Soon she hears a cop chasing Lucretia:

I hear footsteps on the mazelike path behind me.

A high-pitched voice that can only belong to a femme cuts through the air. "Let go of me, you fucking pig!" yells Lucretia.

"SHUT UP FAGGOT," the cop yells back, and there is a bone-crunching sound, followed by Lucretia's scream as she is dragged into the courtyard by an arm that hangs at an impossible angle from her torso. The cop is hitting her across the face with a baton, pausing only to glance up at the fountain, the courtyard, the bizarre copper moon. I am hidden by the statue, and neither of them sees me there.

Lucretia starts laughing then, long and loud and high-pitched hysterical laughter. "The First Femme will curse you," she snarls, and spits into the cop's face. "Don't you know where you are?" And I can tell that the cop is unnerved---by the moon, by the fountain, by Lucretia's demonic bravado . . .

"What the fuck is this place?" he says, and I can hear the nervousness creeping into his voice . . .

Lucretia keeps laughing, blood rattling in her throat. "This is the Street of Miracles, asshole," she rasps. "This place belongs to faggots and trannies, and after tonight, it's never going to let you go."

The cop roars and hurls Lucretia on the ground . . . He is going for the gun, pulling it out, to shoot Lucretia shoot Lucretia shoot Lucretia, and why shouldn't he? No one will care about another dead tranny killed on the Street of Miracles.

And then my body is moving, moving, faster than I can understand or control and I feel myself dive forward. Roll over the ground and snatch up the baton. Come up silent and ferocious and hit the cop from behind, right across the back of the head, just as he is bringing out his gun.

It sounds like an eggshell breaking. (109-11)

The dead cop haunts Sister's nightmares, finally emerging in dream as a zombie who rapes her as the two fuse into one being. She becomes him and he becomes her:

His body starts out rotting and horrible---full of pits and gaping holes, exposed organs the colour of raw, putrid meat. His bones make squelching and popping sounds as he propels them into motion through the stiffness of desiccated cartilage. His head is caved in from where I hit it . . .

As he gets closer and closer, he starts to heal. The ragged edges of the holes smooth and close, his flesh reknits itself and blooms into living colour. His neck rights itself and his skull mends, covered by glinting golden hair. His eyes shine bright blue . . .

By the time he reaches me, his body is fresh and perfectly formed in the image of blond, muscled, porn-star masculinity. Like a fascist angel. His tattered uniform falls away and crumbles to dust, and then his underwear. His dick juts out from his abdomen, like a stabbing weapon. He looms naked in front of me, huge and menacing.

I do not move do not breathe do not say do not speak. Bees buzz bees buzz bees buzz bees buzz all through my dream body up and down up and down . . .

"You were the real monster all along," he says, and then he is kissing me, kissing me, with his hot invader's tongue . . .

. . . then I am him and he is me, and it's his razor-angled Asian body I am holding in my muscled, blond-haired arms; it's his longish black hair that I am caressing in my heavy-knuckled hands, his slender hips that I am grinding my larger ones against, and my killer cop cop killer body that is stirring blazing devouring devouring devouring devouring swallowing him/her/me whole. (124-26)

The two bodies become one body because transphobia destroys not only its victims. It devours the humanity and heart of those who victimise, like the Host in *The Pardoner's Tale*, who loses his humanity when he chooses to curse the Pardoner, even as the Pardoner has had his humanity taken away from him. Both cop and Sister are destroyed in this dream. The all-consuming erotically-charged dead body of the transphobic killer cop represents the all-consuming killer qualities of transphobic hatred and reveal their genesis in suppressed desires, Sister's own suppressed desires for wholeness, love, control and power over her life, and the cop's presumed suppressed feminine urges and fetishistic objectification of a trans woman, all thrown together in a toxic mix.

The walking dead in *The Pardoner's Tale* represents the consequences of killer gender- and sexually-normative hatred, fear of that which does not conform, the dead and dying bodies of people like the Pardoner, people cast out as monsters, destroyed spiritually and emotionally, and left to walk like the dead. The old man parallels the Pardoner in being cast out and excluded from the communities of the living: "the director on the 'croked wey' [is] the old man, who thus assumes a position in the tale suggestively analogous to that of the teller" (R. Miller 197). Not

only does the old man parallel the Pardoner but he also represents the suffering that results from human sin, especially sexual sin: “The term ‘Old Man’ is Paul’s (cf. Col. iii, 1-10; Eph. iv, 17-24; Rom. vi, 1 ff.), who also calls him the ‘body of sin.’ As an aspect of the nature of man, the *vetus homo* represents the flesh and its manifold lusts, opposed to the *novus homo*: that is, the spirit and reason by which these are subdued” (R. Miller 188). The old man represents sin like the Pardoner, whose body represents both sexual desire and the feminine. The revelers are rude to the old man, whom they suspect him of being in league with the death they seek and find. The old man is unable to die, however, because the earth will not take him in, though he knocks with his staff on the ground of his mother’s gate: “Ne Deeth, allas, ne wol nat han my lyf. / . . . Lo how I vanysse, flessch, and blood, and skyn! / Allas, whan shul my bones been at reste?”<sup>24</sup> (*The Pardoner’s Tale*, 727-733). This walking living death is like the life of the Pardoner and the lives of all gender-diverse people living in binary gender-normative societies, who are dead in life because they are not truly allowed to live, and living in death because their lives haunt us across the centuries.

## Conclusion

Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale* and Thom’s novel *Fierce Femmes* both show how hatred toward gender-diverse people silences and destroys the victimisers as well as the victims. Both the Pardoner and Sister work at “reclaiming bodies from the trash heap of history” (Bychowski). Like Sister’s sensuous ghost “the past may not *be* the present, but it is sometimes *in* the present, haunting, even if only through our uncertain knowledges of it” since “modernity and premodernity are mutually constructed” (Fradenburg and Freccero xxi). Chaucer teaches us through *The Pardoner’s Tale* that “To fynde Deeth, turne up this croked wey”<sup>25</sup> (*The Pardoner’s Tale* 761). Beyond the threat of mortality, “the Power of the Pardoner’s words is that he is able to re-narrate fragmented, scarred, and discarded bodies to become holy bodies that produce a sense of re-claimed wholeness” (Bychowski). Thom reminds us, through Sister, that “the stories we get, these days [are] ones where we’re dead” (3). She is able to face death and rewrite these stories of death through an “alchemy of transformation” (158). By baking a forgiveness cake and by shaping relics out of old stories, both Sister and Pardoner engage in the magical transformation of social and narrative constraints. By hearing and moving to the body’s own song, they reclaim the broken bodies and unwritten lives of our gender-diverse ancestors, and old ways of speaking that have been lost and obscured, as new grounds for living.

Though silenced and suffering from internalised rage they find a way to reclaim self. The Pardoner is silenced just as Sister as a transgender child is silenced when surrounded by people who deny her embodied experiences of self and identity. The Pardoner’s silence represents the kind of wordless knowing that transgender people draw from when confronting society’s need to project gender onto them, because of the utter impossibility of conforming to cultural assumptions that make no embodied sense. The Pardoner’s forced kiss with the Host provides no resolution, and only highlights the hypocrisy of a society that needs to include and reject certain members in order to maintain itself.

By fully living in the body’s experiences of disgust and pleasure, of belly and digestion, of suffering, rage, and pain both protagonists experience the way their societies try to abuse, grind up, and toss away gender-diverse bodies as trash. They connect the body’s voice with

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<sup>24</sup> “Nor Death, alas, will not have my life. / . . . Lo how I waste away, flesh, and blood, and skin! / Alas, when shall my bones be at rest?”

<sup>25</sup> “To find Death, turn up this crooked way”

spirit, by sourcing their power in the body through Christ and through the First Femme Goddess, to demonstrate the inadequacy of institutionalised knowledge systems. They offer hope that “dangerous, violent people [might learn] to find love in the dark at last” (Thom 188). Both Chaucer and Thom reveal the power of the feminine, even in the hearts of those schooled in toxic manhood who, like the killer cop or the Host, destroy themselves by trying to destroy the feminine when it rises up like spring sap in male-assigned bodies. Gender- and sexually-diverse people represent deep internal feelings and potential experiences which the gender- and sexually-conforming often need to deny, yet with which they are fused, like the killer cop with Sister in a terrifying embrace.

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