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What's Wrong with the Pardoner? Complexion Theory, the Phlegmatic Man, and Effeminacy

ELSPETH WHITNEY

Chaucer's Pardoner poses, above all, a puzzle. Introduced in the *General Prologue* as a "gentil Pardoner" and invited to tell a moral tale, he both shows and names himself to be a "ful vicious man." On the one hand, the Pardoner deliberately calls attention to the contrast between his admitted vices and his role as a preacher who can bring souls to salvation; as Alastair Minnis has recently argued, the Pardoner's "self-exhibition" of the utterly corrupt nature of his professional practice threatens to disrupt the pilgrimage's entire spiritual purpose.¹ On the other hand, the Prologue's detailed but inconclusive description of the Pardoner's physical characteristics suggests some form of more hidden deviancy, one unacknowledged by the Pardoner himself and not clearly identified by his fellow pilgrims. This physical anomaly, signaled most directly by the much-discussed line "I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare" (I 691)² 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 complexities of Chaucer's portrait of the Pardoner have resulted in a proliferation of diagnoses, none of which has gained universal acceptance. Since Walter Curry's introduction of the topic in 1919, when he named the Pardoner as a eunuch *ex navitate*, the Pardoner has been categorized as a "normal"

I wish to thank John M. Bowers, Charles R. Smith, Susanna Fein, David Raybin, and the anonymous reviewers for *The Chaucer Review* for their most helpful suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay.

1. Alastair Minnis, *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath* (Philadelphia, 2008), 165.

2. This and subsequent citations from *CT* are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987).



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 oversexed womanizer, an alcoholic, a “drag queen,” a cross-dressed woman, and, most resonantly, a homosexual.³

In response to this lack of consensus, a recent trend among critics has been to retreat from a definitive naming of the Pardoner’s physical condition, emphasizing instead what Robert Sturges has called the “impossibly incoherent,” fractured, and (merely) performative identity for the Pardoner, emblematic of the Pardoner’s role as a reminder of the disrupting power of gender ambiguity.⁴ Carolyn Dinshaw, for example, in situating the Pardoner within Chaucer’s patriarchal and heterosexual hermeneutics, declines to pin down the Pardoner’s body, suggesting that “no one really knows what the Pardoner is,” his being defined by absence and fragmentation, best described as “not a man” but also “not a woman.”⁵ Similarly, Glenn Burger characterizes attempts to “stabilize the meaning of the Pardoner in terms of the biological ‘facts’ of his body” as a “red herring” and, like Sturges, rejects attempts to “fix” the Pardoner’s body in favor of emphasizing the Pardoner’s fundamental lack

3. Walter Clyde Curry, “The Secret of Chaucer’s Pardoner,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 18 (1919): 593–606; and Walter Clyde Curry, *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences*, 2nd edn. (New York, 1960), 54–70. On the Pardoner as a “normally” sexed man, see C. D. Benson, “Chaucer’s Pardoner: His Sexuality and Modern Critics,” *Mediaevalia* 8 (1982): 337–49; and Richard Firth Green, “The Sexual Normality of Chaucer’s Pardoner,” *Mediaevalia* 8 (1982): 351–58. Robert P. Miller, “Chaucer’s Pardoner, the Scriptural Eunuch, and the *Pardoner’s Tale*,” *Speculum* 30 (1955): 180–99, argues that the Pardoner is not a literal eunuch but rather is spiritually sterile. Beryl Rowland has several times made the argument that the Pardoner is a hermaphrodite: “Animal Imagery and the Pardoner’s Abnormality,” *Neophilologus* 48 (1964): 56–60; and “Chaucer’s Idea of the Pardoner,” *Chaucer Review* 14 (1979): 140–54. Monica E. McAlpine, “The Pardoner’s Homosexuality and How It Matters,” *PMLA* 95 (1980): 8–22, argues that the Pardoner is homosexual, as do John M. Bowers, “Queering the Summoner: Same-Sex Union in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*,” in R. F. Yeager and Charlotte C. Morse, eds., *Speaking Images: Essays in Honor of V. A. Kolve* (Asheville, N.C., 2001), 301–24; and Stephen R. Kruger, “Claiming the Pardoner: Toward a Gay Reading of Chaucer’s Pardoner’s Tale,” *Exemplaria* 6 (1994): 115–39. Henry Ansgar Kelly, “The Pardoner’s Voice, Disjunctive Narrative, and Modes of Effemination,” in *Speaking Images*, 411–44, esp. 426, 428, labels the Pardoner a “woman-oriented effeminate.” For the Pardoner as an alcoholic, see John M. Bowers, “‘Dronkenesse is ful of stryvyng’: Alcoholism and Ritual Violence in Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale*,” *English Literary History* 57 (1990): 757–84. Jeffrey Rayner Myers, “Chaucer’s Pardoner as Female Eunuch,” *Studia Neophilologica* 72 (2000): 54–62, suggests that the Pardoner is a female transvestite. For particularly useful overviews of the literature on the Pardoner’s sexuality, evidence for and against different readings of the Pardoner’s body, and additional bibliography, see Minnis, *Fallible Authors*, 147–61; Gregory W. Gross, “Trade Secrets: Chaucer, the Pardoner, the Critics,” *Modern Language Studies* 25 (1995): 1–36; Robert S. Sturges, *Chaucer’s Pardoner and Gender Theory: Bodies of Discourse* (New York, 2000), 35–59; and Vern L. Bullough with Gwen Whitehead Brewer, “Medieval Masculinities and Modern Interpretations: The Problem of the Pardoner,” in Jacqueline Murray, ed., *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities* (New York, 1999), 93–110.

4. Sturges, *Chaucer’s Pardoner*, 78.

5. Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Madison, Wisc., 1989), 157, 158; compare Dinshaw, “Chaucer’s Queer Touches/A Queer Touches Chaucer,” *Exemplaria* 7 (1995): 75–92.



of coherence.⁶ This line of thought threatens to erase the Pardoner's body altogether. After insightfully rehearsing the possibilities, Minnis in *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath* concludes that the Pardoner's sexual proclivities, whatever they are, matter only in the most general way as reflecting an association between licentiousness and the immoral preacher.⁷ Thus, while critical reading of the Pardoner once perhaps reduced his deviancy to an overly determined physical condition, the pendulum has now swung toward the opposite extreme, threatening to make the particulars of the Pardoner's body irrelevant.

The very multiplicity of the verdicts rendered on the Pardoner's condition suggests, however, that attempts to pin down the Pardoner's body and sexuality too neatly according to modern sex/gender categories are in some sense off the mark or, to put it differently, the apparent incoherence of the Pardoner's sexual and gendered identity can be resolved if we attend more closely to medieval rather than modern categories. Ruth Mazo Karras, for example, has suggested that "medieval people did not draw the line between gay and straight, but between reproductive and non-reproductive sex," while also asserting that the deliberate renunciation of sexuality by individuals in the Middle Ages constituted the self-conscious creation of "an identity of chastity."⁸ She concludes that even as aspects of modern sexuality have their roots in the Middle Ages, "the ways in which medieval people constructed sexual identities are quite different from those of the modern and post-modern world."⁹ Similarly, the relationship between anatomical sex characteristics and constructed notions of femininity and masculinity was sometimes different in the Middle Ages compared to the modern world. Complexion theory defined a male body as much in terms of its constitutional makeup as by its anatomy, as when medieval writers conflated the possession of complexionally "weak" testicles with the condition of being a eunuch.¹⁰ Value judgments about what was appropriately masculine sometimes also overrode purely anatomical considerations; the generation of female children, for instance, was sometimes equated with impotence.¹¹ Sexual behavior might also be

6. Glenn Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation* (Minneapolis, 2003), 146; and Sturges, *Chaucer's Pardoner*, 36, 41.

7. Minnis, *Fallible Authors*, 161.

8. Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (New York, 2005), 8, 40.

9. Karras, *Sexuality*, 155.

10. Joseph Ziegler, "Sexuality and the Sexual Organs in Latin Physiognomy 1200–1500," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, 3rd ser., 2 (2005): 83–109, at 90–91.

11. Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus*, ed. Herman Stadler, 2 vols. (Münster, 1920), 2:1203 (Bk. 18, tr. 1, ch. 3); *On Animals: A Medieval Summa Zoologica*, trans. Kenneth F. Kitchell, Jr., and Irven Michael Resnick, 2 vols. (Baltimore, 1999), 2:1293.



construed differently: hypersexuality or an *excess* of attraction to women, for example, was identified as effeminate because femininity was aligned with lack of restraint and masculinity with self-control.¹²

The complexity of Chaucer's portrait of the Pardoner need not lead to the conclusion that the Pardoner's body is unknowable or unnamable, I suggest, if we focus on medieval rather than modern categories of sexual difference, as found in complexion theory. Although the Pardoner is not named as a phlegmatic in the *General Prologue*, within the context of contemporary descriptions of the complexions, his fine, lank, yellowish hair and his beardlessness are strong indications of a cold and moist complexion. Chaucer's awareness of contemporary humoral theory, demonstrated elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales*, points to some aspect of humoral physiology and psychology being operative in his description of the Pardoner. This essay proposes that the description of the Pardoner strongly suggests that Chaucer represented him as a male phlegmatic, that is, a man with a range of "effeminate" or feminized characteristics, including various forms of nonreproductive sexuality. In addition, although the Pardoner is not fat, slow, or lazy in an obvious way (three conventional characteristics of phlegmatics), he does exhibit drunkenness, often associated with phlegmatics, and a condition of *acedia* or moral slothfulness reflected in his unwillingness or inability to move away from the sins he so acutely analyzes in the prologue to his tale. The Pardoner's failings are both physical and moral, and reading his portrait in complexional terms reveals an underlying logic connecting his physical appearance to his character, even as it underscores the ambiguities of his condition. Rather than closing down possible ways of understanding the Pardoner, understanding him as a phlegmatic opens up the possibility of a number of different yet overlapping and fluid diagnoses of the Pardoner's sexual and personal identity.

Both Chaucer and his audience would have understood a phlegmatic complexion to indicate a degree of sexual ambiguity. Medieval medicine associated male phlegmatics with sexual dysfunction, including lack of potency, nocturnal emissions, same-sex desire, and infertility, and with identifiable physical characteristics marked as effeminate, including soft flesh; lank, light-colored hair; the inability to grow a beard; and small, hairless testicles. Naming the Pardoner as a phlegmatic is not intended to erase the category of the "sodomite" and "sodomy," as analyzed by Mark D. Jordan, or the powerful and persuasive arguments, forwarded by Monica E. McAlpine, John M. Bowers, and Stephen R. Kruger, that an acknowledgment of the Pardoner's possible

12. David M. Halperin, *How To Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago, 2002), 111–13.



or actual homosexuality illuminates the text.¹³ Rather, I intend to provide an additional context that reinforces the case for the relevance of the Pardoner's sexuality, including homosexuality, without necessarily excluding other forms of effeminacy as understood in the Middle Ages.

Complexion theory also linked body to soul and provided an explanatory device for human behavior and character. Minnis has argued that there is no need to posit a secret "screen sin" such as homosexuality for the Pardoner; his offensiveness as a vainglorious, greedy, and fraudulent preacher is quite horrifying enough without recourse to some hidden sin of a sexual nature.¹⁴ Yet one would expect that the physical description of the Pardoner in the *General Prologue*, one of the most detailed of any of the pilgrims, would serve a function beyond, as Minnis argues, simply indicating a general licentiousness associated with sinful preachers.¹⁵ In Chaucer's intellectual milieu, masculinity and a "hot" complexion were linked with moderation, self-control, and self-discipline, while "cold," feminized complexions were thought to produce incontinence, excess, deceitfulness, cowardice, and negligence. Clerical writing drew upon well-established philosophical traditions that attributed female susceptibility to vice to women's greater coldness and moisture in order to paint women as inherently more sinful than men.¹⁶ "Moderation" and moral discipline, on the other hand, were linked to men's more balanced complexional makeup, conceived of as hotter and drier than women's. This confluence of complexional theory and moral judgment spilled over

13. Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago, 1997); see also John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago, 1981); and Mathew Kuefler, ed., *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago, 2006). For interpretations of the Pardoner as a homosexual, see n. 3 above.

14. Minnis, *Fallible Authors*, 162–69.

15. Minnis, *Fallible Authors*, 167.

16. The literature on the biological justifications of women's alleged inferiority to men in ancient and medieval science and philosophy is now voluminous. Particularly important is Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution 750 BC–AD 1250* (Montreal, 1985). For the ancient world, see Ann Ellis Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," in David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin, eds., *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton, 1990), 309–38; Anne Carson, "Putting Her in Her Place; Woman, Dirt, and Desire," in *Before Sexuality*, 135–70; Helen King, "Once upon a Text: Hysteria from Hippocrates," in Sander L. Gilman, Helen King, Roy Porter, G. S. Rousseau, and Elaine Showalter, eds., *Hysteria beyond Freud* (Berkeley, 1993), 3–90; and Helen King, *Hippocrates' Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (London, 1998). For the Middle Ages, see Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Differences in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science and Culture* (Cambridge, U.K., 1993); and Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993), 129–75. For an example of clerical attitudes toward women in late medieval England, see Ruth Mazo Karras, "Gendered Sin and Misogyny in John of Bromyard's '*Summa Predicantium*,'" *Traditio* 47 (1992): 233–57.



from the pointed devaluation of women in the scientific and philosophical traditions to also taint the phlegmatic man as excessive, duplicitous, cowardly, and morally unstable. As has been often pointed out, the Pardoner's sins go beyond and above (merely) sexual sins to the debasement of his religious role; the Pardoner fleeces the poor and ignorant for personal gain while rubbing his audience's noses in his own hypocrisy and avarice: "For myn entente is nat but for to wynne,/And nothyng for correccioun of synne" (VI 403–4). We need not, therefore, dismiss the Pardoner's body and sexuality in order to recognize the depth of his corruption; rather, I would argue, understanding the Pardoner as a phlegmatic reveals the corrupting influences of excess phlegm—the cold, moist humor—on his body as an integral part of the corruption of his soul.

Chaucer was clearly knowledgeable about contemporary science, including medieval medicine, complexion theory, and physiognomy, as well as theoretical and practical astronomy, cosmology, and astrology, reflecting the high level of interest in astronomy and astrological medicine generally in England at the time and at the court of Richard II.¹⁷ Scientific and medical writing flourished in late medieval England, reaching an increasingly wide audience in both Latin and the vernacular.¹⁸ Complexion theory, medical astrology, and alchemy were very much a part of English court culture and political thought in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹⁹ Although Chaucer

17. For overviews of Chaucer's scientific references, see Curry, *Mediaeval Sciences*, passim; M. Manzalaoui, "Chaucer and Science," in Derek Brewer, ed., *Writers and Their Background: Geoffrey Chaucer* (London, 1974; repr. 1990), 224–61; and J. A. Tasioulis, "Science," in Steve Ellis, ed., *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide* (Oxford, 2005), 174–89. J. D. North, *Chaucer's Universe* (Oxford, 1988), examines Chaucer's knowledge of astronomy and astrology in detail. On knowledge of astrological medicine among Chaucer's contemporaries, see Laurel Braswell, "The Moon and Medicine in Chaucer's Time," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 8 (1986): 145–56. Timothy D. O'Brien explores Chaucer's linking of mechanical devices, scientific method, and demonic activities in "Ars-Metrik': Science, Satire, and Chaucer's Summoner," in Valerie Allen and Ares Axiotis, eds., *New Casebooks: Chaucer* (New York, 1996), 15–29. Chaucer's knowledge of alchemy in relation to CYT is addressed in detail in Michael Kensak, "What Ails Chaucer's Cook? Spiritual Alchemy and the Ending of *The Canterbury Tales*," *Philological Quarterly* 80 (2001): 213–31. Also useful are Linda Ehrsam Voights, "Bodies," and Irma Taavitsainen, "Science," both in Peter Brown, ed., *A Companion to Chaucer* (Oxford, 2000), 40–57, 378–96, respectively.

18. Irma Taavitsainen and Päivi Pahta, "Vernacularisation of Scientific and Medical Writing in Its Sociohistorical Context," and Irma Taavitsainen, "Transferring Classical Discourse Conventions into the Vernacular," both in Irma Taavitsainen and Päivi Pahta, eds., *Medieval and Scientific Writing in Late Medieval English* (Cambridge, U.K., 2004), 1–22, 37–72, respectively. Much of this literature is unprinted. For a catalogue of manuscripts, see Linda Voights and Patricia Kurtz, *Scientific and Medical Writing in Old and Middle English Writings: An Electronic Reference*.

19. Hilary M. Carey, "Astrology at the English Court in the Later Middle Ages," in Patrick Curry, ed., *Astrology, Science and Society: Historical Essays* (Woodbridge, 1987), 41–56; Michael W. Twomey, "Towards a Reception History of Western Medieval Encyclopaedias in England before 1500," in Peter Binkley, ed., *Pre-Modern Encyclopaedic Texts: Proceedings of the*



rarely acknowledged his sources, he read widely and most likely made use of compilations and encyclopedias of contemporary scientific and other knowledge. John North has argued that although Chaucer, himself the translator of a work on the astrolabe, probably did not formally study at a university, his knowledge of astronomy “eventually far surpassed that of an ordinary university graduate.”²⁰

Chaucer’s list of the Physician’s credentials and his references to important medical works and authors elsewhere, including in the *Pardoner’s Tale*, demonstrate his awareness of the standard learned medical texts of his time.²¹ Among the scientific texts whose influence has been detected in the *Canterbury Tales* are John Trevisa’s Middle English translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, Constantinus Africanus’s *De coitu*, the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum Secretorum*, Vincent of Beauvais’s *Speculum Majus*, Alkabucius’s work on astrology, and a version of John of Sacrobosco’s *De Sphaera*; to these, one must add the sections on science in literary works such as the *Roman de la Rose*, Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.²² The description of the “Doctour of Phisik,” who knew “the cause of everich maladye,/Were it of hoot, or coold, or moyste, or drye,/And where they engendred, and of what humour” (*GP*, I 419–21), and the plot of the *Merchant’s Tale*, which revolves in part around the detrimental effects of sexual intercourse on old men according to Galenic physiology, both depend heavily on humoral theory.²³ The account of melancholy and the physiology of internal injuries in the *Knight’s Tale*, and the references to alchemy in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* and to astronomy and medicine in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, are further examples.²⁴ Humoral theory also dominates Pertelote’s diagnosis of Chauntecleer as suffering from excessive “coleryk” (*NPT*, VII 2955) as well as her misguided herbal remedies: dreams merely reflect excess humors and can

Second COMERS Congress, Groningen, 1–4 July 1996 (Leiden, 1997), 329–63; and Christopher Fletcher, “Manhood and Politics in the Reign of Richard II,” *Past and Present* 189 (2005): 3–39.

20. North, *Chaucer’s Universe*, 7.

21. Huling E. Ussery, *Chaucer’s Physician: Medicine and Literature in Fourteenth-Century England* (New Orleans, 1971), 102–14; and Robert R. Raymo, “The General Prologue,” in Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel, eds., *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, U.K., 2002, 2005), 2:1–85, at 49–53.

22. Manzalaoui, “Chaucer and Science,” 229–34.

23. Carol A. Everest, “Sight and Sexual Performance in the *Merchant’s Tale*,” in Peter G. Beidler, ed., *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde* (Cambridge, U.K., 1998), 91–103.

24. Tasioulis, “Science,” 181–85; North, *Chaucer’s Universe*, 456–66; and Chauncey Wood, *Chaucer and the Country of the Stars* (Princeton, 1970). Kensak reviews the scholarly literature on Chaucer’s familiarity with alchemy (“What Ails Chaucer’s Cook,” 215–18).



be dealt with by purging “bynethe and eek above” (VII 2953).²⁵ The Wife of Bath herself employs astral complexional theory, providing her horoscope to explain her sexual desires: “I folwed ay myn inclinacioun/By vertu of my constellacioun” (*WBPro*, III 615–16).²⁶

Many of the details of the portraits in the *General Prologue* reflect the influence of physiognomic works, especially the Middle English versions of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum Secretorum*, as do, similarly, Chaucer’s use of changes in facial hues and eye movements to indicate emotion in *Troilus and Criseyde* and elsewhere.²⁷ The *General Prologue* explicitly identifies two of the pilgrims by their complexion (the Franklin as sanguine and the Reeve as choleric), while others are given facial and other attributes closely following complexional and physiognomic types as delineated in contemporary scientific texts.²⁸ One previously unappreciated example of Chaucer’s use of complexional references is the description of the Cook in the *Prologue* to the *Manciple’s Tale*, which draws on conventional descriptions of the phlegmatic as fat and sleepy, as I discuss below.

Chaucer’s audience would also have been aware of the broad outlines of complexion theory and physiognomy. Late medieval England experienced a proliferation of vernacular medical texts and encyclopedias containing scientific material.²⁹ Chaucer’s use of physiognomy and complexional types to delineate the character of individual pilgrims depended in part on a widespread awareness among his audience of conventional complexional types. Beyond the efforts of Walter Clyde Curry and others to apply late ancient physiognomical texts to Chaucer’s pilgrims, Jill Mann has drawn attention to the ways in which the use of rhetorical traditions drawn from humoral and physiognomical literature worked in the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* to produce complex portraits not easily reducible to simple black-and-white types.

25. North, *Chaucer’s Universe*, 458–59; North also explicates *NPT* as built on an astronomical allegory (461–68).

26. On Chaucer’s use of astrology in his portrait of the Wife of Bath, see John B. Friedman, “Alice of Bath’s Astral Destiny: A Re-Appraisal,” *Chaucer Review* 35 (2000): 166–81.

27. Raymo, “General Prologue,” 38, 44, 65–66, 69, 71, 78; John Block Friedman, “Another Look at Chaucer and the Physiognomists,” *Studies in Philology* 78 (1981): 138–52; Laurel Braswell-Means, “A New Look at an Old Patient: Chaucer’s Summoner and Medieval Physiognomia,” *Chaucer Review* 25 (1991): 266–75; and Douglas Wurtele, “Another Look at an Old ‘Science’: Chaucer’s Pilgrims and Physiognomy,” in A. E. Christa Canitz and Gernot R. Wieland, eds., *From Arabye to Engelond; Medieval Studies in Honour of Mahmoud Mansalaoui on his 75th Birthday* (Ottawa, 1999), 93–111.

28. Wurtele, “Chaucer’s Pilgrims and Physiognomy,” 95.

29. Pahta and Taavitsainen, “Vernacularisation,” 11; and Taavitsainen, “Transferring Classical Discourse,” 40.



In particular, Mann groups the Pardoner, Franklin, Miller, and Reeve together as the pilgrims in whom physical appearance based on what she calls the “scientific tradition” serves most conspicuously to influence the reader’s response.³⁰

By 1300, moreover, medical ideas and natural philosophy had been widely incorporated into theology in what Joseph Zeigler has called the “‘medicalization’ of religious language.”³¹ In England, which experienced a flood of medical and scientific writing in the vernacular in the late fourteenth century, medical metaphors and terminology became a presence in English literature. *Piers Plowman* and *Cleanness* are two examples; Chaucer’s incorporation of medical principles into his writing is another.³² Medicine provided a prolific source of analogies and allusions for religious and secular literature. The metaphors of priest as healer and disease as the physical manifestation of sin were commonplaces in medieval writing.³³ The belief that body and soul were closely intertwined, however, meant that this penetration of medicine into the moral and religious domain was more than merely metaphorical. Bodily conditions directly influenced propensity to sin. Preaching manuals, for example, warned that “as seynt Gregori seiþ, þe deuel seiþ wel sliliche þe staat of a man and his manere and his complexion and to what vise he is most enclyne to, or bi kynde, or bi wone, and on þat side he saileþ hym most.”³⁴ If, ultimately, free will prevailed, complexion determined susceptibility to particular sins: the sanguine to lechery, the choleric to wrath, the melancholy to envy, and the phlegmatic to gluttony and sloth.

Complexional theory, in conjunction with physiognomy and medical astrology, therefore, provided a materialist explanation for human behavior, including sin, and a way to “read” character through an examination

30. Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge, U.K., 1973), 145–67. Mann does not discuss the Pardoner’s complexion but accepts his homosexuality as obvious (145–48).

31. For an overview and extensive bibliography, see Joseph Zeigler, “Ut Dicunt Medici: Medical Knowledge and Theological Debates in the Second Half of the Thirteenth Century,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 73 (1999): 208–37. See also Joseph Zeigler, *Medicine and Religion c. 1300: The Case of Arnau de Vilanova* (Oxford, 1998), esp. 1–21, 274–76.

32. Roseanne Gasse, “The Practice of Medicine in *Piers Plowman*,” *Chaucer Review* 39 (2004): 178–97; and Jeremy J. Citrome, “Medicine as Metaphor in the Middle English *Cleanness*,” *Chaucer Review* 35 (2001): 260–80.

33. For an overview, see Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment during the High Middle Ages, c. 1100–1400* (London, 2006), 38–64.

34. *The Book of Vices and Virtues: A Fourteenth-Century English Translation of the Somme Le Roi of Lorens d’Orléans*, ed. W. Nelson Francis, EETS o.s. 217 (London, 1942), 156. For the influence of complexion theory on practical theology, see Irven M. Resnick, “Ps.-Albert the Great on the Physiognomy of Jesus and Mary,” *Mediaeval Studies* 64 (2002): 217–40, at 226–29.



of the body. Complexion functioned, in the words of Nancy Siraisi, as “a fundamental organizing principle of each individual human organism considered as a whole,” encompassing psychological and behavioral tendencies as well as physical health.³⁵ Every individual had a characteristic physiology or an innate temperament that persisted through secondary modifications caused by natural processes, such as aging, changes in environment, or habit (although these too affected humoral balance in the shorter term). This characteristic physiology could be identified through external signs such as body type, hair and skin color and texture, and degrees of hairiness. Like physiognomy and astrology, complexion theory sought to uncover the scientific principles governing the relationship between body and soul. Complexion theory also functioned as a general guide to human nature and a vehicle for cultural expectations of social behavior. As Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl have shown, by the fifteenth century, the complexional types combined with personifications of the virtues and vices to provide a framework for increasingly subtle and rich psychological characterizations in vernacular writing.³⁶

Short, popularized descriptions of the complexions appeared in a variety of contexts. Although conventional vernacular descriptions of the complexions rarely alluded directly to the sexual abilities (or lack thereof) associated with each type in Latin scientific texts, these descriptions did attribute varying degrees of “manliness” to the four types. A late Middle English didactic

35. Nancy G. Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice* (Chicago, 1990), 102. The definitive study of the complexions is still Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art* (New York, 1964), which, however, does not consider the gendered aspects of the complexional types. The interest in the complexions in the later Middle Ages is noted by Lynn Thorndike, “De Complexionibus,” *Isis* 49 (1958): 398–408, who finds more than seventeen tracts by minor authors on the temperaments in manuscripts dating from the late thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. For a study of how theologians attempted to integrate complexion theory into theology and Christian history, see Joseph Ziegler, “Medicine and Immortality in Terrestrial Paradise,” in Peter Biller and Joseph Ziegler, eds. *Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages* (York, 2001), 201–42.

36. Klibansky et al., *Saturn and Melancholy*, 106, 303. Each complexion was also linked to an appropriate element, season, planet, and time of life; the phlegmatic was associated with water, winter, the moon (and sometimes Venus), and old age (and sometimes infancy or childhood). Many of these associations are summarized in “The Wise Book of Philosophy and Astronomy,” in Jeanne Krochalis and Edward Peters, eds. and trans., *The World of Piers Plowman* (Philadelphia, 1975), 3–17, at 11–17. In addition to the four inborn complexions, medieval complexion theory also posited that different humors predominated at different stages of life. See J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1988), 5–54; and Elizabeth Sears, *The Ages of Man: Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle* (Princeton, 1986), 47–53. For a review of some of the inconsistencies in medieval associations with the humors, see Theresa Tinkle, *Medieval Venuses and Cupids: Sexuality, Hermeneutics, and English Poetry* (Stanford, 1996), 247n30.



poem, for example, described the sanguine man in terms resonant of chivalric virtues:

Off yiftes large, in love hath grete delite,
Iocunde and gladde, ay of laughyng chiere,
Of ruddy colour meynt somdel with white:
Disposed by kynde to be a champioun,
Hardy I-nough, manly, and bold of chiere.
Of the sangwyne also it is a signe,
To be demure, righ curteys, and benynge.³⁷

Poems of this type tabbed the slender, thin choleric as crafty but easily angered, and the melancholic as envious and timid. Like the phlegmatic, the melancholic was unmanly, cowardly “whan he shuld be a man.”³⁸ The phlegmatic’s lack of manliness was emphasized in his sluggishness and lack of vigor, induced by an excess of phlegm, in contrast to the energy of the sanguine man. Trevisa’s translation of Bartholomaeus’s *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, following Constantinus, describes the man dominated by the phlegmatic humor as:

in þe body lustles, heuy, and slow; dul of wit and of þouȝt, forȝeteful;
neissche of fleissche and quauy, b[l]oo of colour, whitliche in face,
ferdeful of herte; ful of spittinge, snyuel, and rokeinge; ful of slouthe
and of slepinge; of a litel appetite . . . ; neische, ȝelowh and streit [of
here]; neische, grete and slouȝ of puls. . . . He is fat and greet and
short; and his skin is pleyn and smethe, bare withouten eer.³⁹

37. “The Complexions, II,” in Rossell Hope Robbins, ed., *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1955; repr. 1964), 72.

38. In schema of the complexions, the sleepiness or passivity of the phlegmatic was sometimes attributed to the other cold complexion—the melancholic—and *acedia* sometimes said to proceed from the melancholic humor as well as from the phlegmatic (Klibansky et al., *Saturn and Melancholy*, 63–64, 82–95, 118n151, 292n40, 193–95, 299–300; and Siegfried Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature* [Chapel Hill, 1967], 191–95). On melancholy in Chaucer’s writing, see Carol Falvo Heffernan, *The Melancholy Muse: Chaucer, Shakespeare and Early Medicine* (Pittsburgh, 1995). For masculinity and the gendered meanings of melancholy in a later period, see Mark Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, U.K., 1996).

39. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *John Trevisa’s Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s De Proprietatibus Rerum: A Critical Text*, ed. M. C. Seymour and colleagues, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1975), 1:157 (Bk. 4, ch. 9). The original Latin text has been edited in Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *On the Properties of Soul and Body: De Proprietatibus Rerum Libri III et IV*, ed. R. James Long (Toronto, 1979). For Bartholomaeus’s sources, see M. C. Seymour et al., *Bartholomaeus Anglicus and His Encyclopedia* (Aldershot, 1992).



The male phlegmatic type was identified most obviously by excessive fluids in the head, nose, and throat (full of “spitting”), and by physical markers that reproduced the characteristic whiteness, viscosity, and coldness of the phlegmatic humor in the body generally: such men had pale, hairless skin; limp, light-colored hair; soft, abundant, plump flesh, and an overall mental and physical sluggishness.⁴⁰ Late medieval didactic poetry on the complexions summed up the phlegmatic as “sluggish & slow, in spetynge muiche . . . dull of wit, & fatt” and “sompnelent and slowe, with humours grosse, replete, . . . by dulle conceyte,” “fatt of kynde,” best known “by whitnes of his face.”⁴¹

Although the Pardoner does not at first appear to have much in common with the phlegmatic man, he is linked by his ambiguous gender, his hairless face, his long, limp, yellowish hair, and an internal, if not external, slothfulness. The *Canterbury Tales* does, however, offer a pilgrim who embodied the popularized understanding of the phlegmatic: Roger the Cook.

The Cook’s pallor, weight, sleepiness, and even his liking for drink all indicate that the Cook has a phlegmatic complexion. The Cook’s *mormal*, a running, pus-filled sore on his leg, juxtaposed in the *General Prologue* with his expertise in *blankmanger*, a white pottage, presents a disquieting picture of contaminated, white, phlegm-like substances, reinforced by the Host’s accusations that the Cook serves tainted food (*CkPro*, I 4346–52) and the Manciple’s vivid remarks on the Cook’s stinking breath, “Thy cursed breeth infecte wole us alle” (*MancPro*, IX 39). The description of the Cook in the *Manciple’s Prologue* explicitly establishes, moreover, that he has a cold: “he speketh in his nose,/And fneseth faste, and eek he hath the pose” (IX 61–62). Michael Kensak has demonstrated the relevance of alchemy to the Cook, linking the Cook’s pallor, heaviness, earthiness, and muteness to his spiritual leadenness, occasioned by “a kind of alchemical lead poisoning.”⁴² Yet alchemical, astrological, and complexional associations overlapped. “Leadenness” was also associated with sloth, and Saturn—the cold planet that influenced melancholics—also occasionally

40. “The Governauce of Prynces translated by James Yonge (1422),” 229, 231 (ch. 58), in Robert Steele, ed., *Three Prose Versions of the Secreta Secretorum*, EETS e.s. 74 (London, 1898), 121–249, at 219–20, 225, 229, 231; and “The Isagoge,” in H. P. Cholmeley, *John of Gaddesden and the Rosa Medicinæ* (Oxford, 1912), 142–43.

41. “The Complexions, I” (Lambeth Palace MS 523) and “The Complexions, II” (Harley MS 2251), in Robbins, ed., *Secular Lyrics*, 71–73. See also the miniatures in *John de Foxton’s Liber Cosmographiae* (1408): *An Edition and Codicological Study*, ed. John B. Friedman (Leiden, 1988), liii, lix–lxi, and figs. 11, 14.

42. Kensak, “What Ails Chaucer’s Cook,” 221.



produced phlegmatics.⁴³ As Kensak has argued, the Cook's drunkenness, unlike that of other pilgrims at various points in the *Tales*, cannot be taken fully for granted; instead, whether or not he has a hangover, the Cook is twice described as asleep. "See how he nappeth!" the Host exclaims. "What eyleth thee to slepe by the morwe?" (IX 9, 16). Roger, "ful pale" (IX 20), denies that he is drunk, saying he does not know why "swich hevynesse" (IX 22) has fallen on him, and that, on the contrary, he would rather sleep than drink wine. Indeed, the Cook is so inert, feeble, "unweeldy" (IX 55), and heavy that, having demonstrated his lack of horsemanship by falling off his mare, "this sory palled goost" (IX 55) can be remounted only with "greet showvyng bothe to and fro" (IX 53). The ironic use of chivalric imagery—"This was a fair chyvachee of a cook!" (IX 50)—in the description of the Cook recalls, moreover, the contrast between the energy of the chivalric sanguine in the Middle English poem cited above and the passivity of the phlegmatic. Slothful in his professional duties, asleep or in a drunken stupor on his horse, and possessed of a virtually immobile body graced with a suppurating sore, the Cook embodies a disturbing picture of a man who has become so inert as to be virtually dead.⁴⁴

Understanding the Cook as a phlegmatic provides a new context for the Pardoner. By giving a portrait of a phlegmatic who conformed to conventional descriptions, Chaucer suggests the Pardoner's more subtle links to the complexion. Although the Cook's sexuality is never called into question in the way the Pardoner's is, both men share a moral laxity and passivity that complexion theory gendered as feminine and set under the rubric of sloth, which (along with gluttony) particularly afflicted phlegmatics. Several parallels that emphasize moral failures exist between the Pardoner and the Cook. Both are bad servants and traffic in damaged goods—the Cook in rotten foodstuffs, the Pardoner in invalid relics and pardons. Both are drunks, subjected to attacks on their professional and personal integrity—the Cook by the Host

43. John Gower, *Mirour de l'Omme*, in *The Complete Works of John Gower, Edited from the Manuscripts with Introduction, Notes, and Glossaries*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1899–1902; repr. 1968), 1:1–334, at 13, for example, describes Accidie as accompanied by her bed made of lead. North points out that the astrologer Alkabucius, referred to by Chaucer in his work on the astrolabe, describes Saturn as producing not only melancholics but also phlegmatics, "colde and moyste, as the water of a dyche, hevvy of stynkinge odour" (*Chaucer's Universe*, 204). Gower's *Mirour* is translated in John Gower, *Mirour de l'Omme (The Mirror of Mankind)*, trans. William Burton Wilson, rev. Nancy Wilson Van Baak (East Lansing, Mich., 1992).

44. The phrase used to describe the Cook's skin color ("ful pale and no thyng reed" [IX 20]) is designed, I suggest, to emphasize the Cook's phlegmatic complexion, as the sanguine skin color was often defined as white with some red (for example, in the stanza on the sanguine man quoted above).



(*Cook's Prologue*) and the Manciple (*Manciple's Prologue*), the Pardoner by the Host at the conclusion of the *Pardoner's Tale*—to which they are unable to mount an effective defense. Both are putatively reconciled by an appropriate device—the Cook by his acceptance of a drink from the Manciple after being reproved by the Host, the Pardoner by a kiss from the Host at the urging of the Knight.⁴⁵ Both ultimately threaten the physical or spiritual health of their fellow pilgrims, and both can be seen as suffering inwardly from the inert despair to which phlegmatics were particularly vulnerable, preventing them from any move toward amelioration of their sins—the Pardoner's moral inertness manifested subtly and indirectly, the Cook's torpor becoming literal as well as metaphorical.⁴⁶

Although many conventional descriptions of the complexions, such as those cited above, described only the male versions of each complexion, complexion theory was necessarily gendered. As Jacqueline Murray has put it, medieval thought developed “what may be termed a gendered soul; a soul that while perhaps not explicitly sexed female nevertheless carried with it the implications of being gendered female because it was housed in a female body.”⁴⁷ Complexion theory also provided an explanation for mixed-gender persons. As Joan Cadden has shown, medieval scientific texts “provided naturalistic theories for the existence of hermaphrodites, masculine females, and feminine males” while, at the same time, expressing “a profound discomfort with displaced gender attributes.”⁴⁸ One such text was Constantinus's *De coitu*, to which Chaucer refers by name in the *Merchant's Tale* (IV 1811).⁴⁹ According to Constantinus,

If [in conception] the warm semen falls in the cervix and reaches the left side, it will engender a girl, and if it reaches the right side, a boy. . . . Some doctors say that if the semen which comes from the right side of the man falls in the left side of the womb it produces

45. On the performance of masculinity in these encounters, see Tison Pugh, “Queering Harry Bailly: Gendered Carnival, Social Ideologies, and Masculinity under Duress in the *Canterbury Tales*,” *Chaucer Review* 41 (2006): 39–69.

46. We can also note the Pardoner's diatribe against cooks in his sermon against gluttony (VI 538–48). Kathryn L. Lynch develops the metaphor of the feast as a motif for the character of the Pardoner in which the Pardoner is himself a (flawed) “cook” (“The Pardoner's Digestion: Eating Images in the *Canterbury Tales*,” in Yeager and Morse, eds., *Speaking Images*, 393–409, at 401).

47. Jacqueline Murray, “Gendered Souls in Sexed Bodies: The Male Construction of Female Sexuality in Some Medieval Confessors' Manuals,” in Peter Biller and A. J. Minnis, eds., *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 1998), 79–94, at 80.

48. Cadden, *Sex Differences*, 212.

49. Paul Delaney, “Constantinus Africanus and Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*,” *Philological Quarterly* 46 (1967): 560–66. For the importance of Constantinus Africanus, see Cadden, *Sex Differences*, 57–67, 198.



a boy, but an effeminate one; whereas if the semen from the left side falls on the right, it makes a masculine girl.⁵⁰

Here a combination of influences from both male semen and the female womb produce a continuum of gendered characteristics according to the degree of heat: semen from the right and warmer testicle deposited in the right and warmer part of the womb produces a fully masculine child, but if deposited in the left and colder part of the womb, produces an effeminate male. On the other hand, semen from the left and colder testicle deposited in the cold, left side of the womb results in a girl, but if deposited on the warm, right side, produces a masculinized girl. Other texts further stipulated that sperm deposited in the exact middle of the womb produced a hermaphrodite.⁵¹

The intertwining of physiology and psychology assumed in the doctrine of the complexions meant that sexual differences, including differences between men of a colder, moister complexion and those of an appropriately hotter, drier one, would be expressed in propensity toward sin in general, or in susceptibility to particular forms of sin. The Pardoner was not a woman; indeed, the particular disquiet his physical appearance was intended to induce lay precisely in the fact that he was a man who lacked masculine physical attributes. Yet, as a phlegmatic, he shared in feminine physical and moral disabilities because he possessed a womanish, if not a truly female, body.⁵²

The rhetoric that connected a cold and moist, hence soft, body (for moisture “by kynde . . . makeþ pinges neissche”)⁵³ with the lack of moral discipline was far more explicit with respect to women than to phlegmatic men

50. “Si enim semen calidum ceciderit in os matricis et accesserit ad sinistram partem, generabit feminam, et si accesserit ad dextram, efficiet masculum. . . . Quidam enim medicorum dixerunt: si semen quod processerit de dextra parte ceciderit in sinistram partem matricis, efficiet masculum effeminatum, et, si illud quod processerit ex sinistra parte ceciderit in dextram, efficiet feminam masculinam”; Constantinus Africanus, *Liber de coitu: El tratado de andrología de Constantino el Africano*, ed. and trans. Enrique Montero Cartelle (Santiago de Compostela, 1983), 108; the translation is from Paul Delaney, “Constantinus Africanus’ *De coitu*: A Translation,” *Chaucer Review* 4 (1969): 55–65, at 59. *The Prose Salernitan Questions*, ed. Brian Lawn (London, 1979), 103 (B193), gives a similar explanation for the generation of a “femina virago,” a “vir effeminatus,” and a “hermofroditus,” as does de Foxton, *Liber Cosmographiae*, ed. Friedman, 270–71 (ch. 92).

51. Cadden, *Sex Differences*, 198–99, 201; *Prose Salernitan Questions*, ed. Lawn, 103 (B193); and Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum naturale* (Graz, 1964), 2320 (Bk. 31, ch. 36).

52. Cadden concludes that “A person with a mixture of [masculine and feminine] traits was treated neither as an entity outside the duality nor as a synthesis in which the distinctness of the properties was submerged. . . . On the contrary, such a person was labeled with combinations of two distinct sets of terms (‘feminine male’ or ‘virile woman’)” (*Sex Differences*, 281).

53. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *Trevisa’s Translation*, 1:142 (Bk. 4, ch. 4). On women and medicine, see Monica Green, ed. and trans., *The Trotula: An English Translation of the Medieval Compendium of Women’s Medicine* (Philadelphia, 2002); and Monica Green, *Making Women’s Medicine Masculine: The Rise of Male Authority in Pre-Modern Gynaecology* (Oxford, 2008).



in medieval encyclopedic, scientific, and scholastic traditions. Discussion of women's moral unreliability in complexional terms, therefore, provides a guide to the less often acknowledged failings of male phlegmatics. Isidore of Seville posited that "woman gets her name from 'softness,' or as it were 'softer,' with a letter taken away or changed."⁵⁴ Women's flesh was wetter and looser than men's because women, more so than men, retained moisture.⁵⁵ Given that heat was believed to enable the active and lively exercise of reason, which in turn, enabled the control and moderation of the passions, women's and the male phlegmatic's relative lack of heat rendered them less able to control their emotions and actions. Physiologically, the effects of the relative lack of heat were exacerbated by excessive complexional moisture. Accompanied by heat, moisture was beneficial to the organism, but with less heat, as with the case of women and phlegmatic men, excessive moisture generated through the nutritive process slowed and dragged down bodily and psychic processes, while rendering the person labile and unstable.

Character followed physiology. Bartholomaeus, whose *De Proprietatibus Rerum* was translated into English in the 1390s and known to Chaucer, cited, for example, Isidore and Aristotle in his humoral explanation of male strength and virtue:

The male passip þe femel in parfite complexion . . . for in comparisoun to þe femel þe male is hoot and drie, and þe femel azenward. In the male beþ vertues formal and of schapinge and werchinge, and in þe femel material, suffringe, and passiue. . . . Þanne men beþ more hote and drye þan wymmen, more strong and myȝti, more bolde and hardy, more wise and witty, more stedefast and stable.⁵⁶

Similarly, the English version of Giles of Rome's *De regimine principum*, which circulated widely in England in the late fourteenth century, attributes women's instability of passions and will to their feeble complexion and soft body:

wymmen ben vnstedefast and vnstable, and oon caas þat cometh of feble complexioun. For as it is iseid tofore comynliche þe soule

54. "Mulier vero a mollitie, tamquam mollier, detracta littera vel mutata, appellata est mulier" (translation mine); Isidore of Seville, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum libri XX*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1911), 2:23. (Bk. 11, ch. 2).

55. King, "Mathematics of Sex?," 50–51; and King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, 225–46.

56. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *Trevisa's Translation*, 1:306–7 (Bk. 6, ch. 12).



folweþ þe complexioun of þe body. Perfore as wymmen hauen nesche bodi and unstable, so þei ben nesche and unstable in desire and in wil.⁵⁷

The phlegmatic complexion increasingly became the default complexion for women in the later Middle Ages. The *Tractatus de complexionibus*, an influential fourteenth-century scholastic text attributed to one Johann von Neuhaus, for example, declared “omnes pisces sunt phlegmaticae complexionis, sicut sunt mulieres” (All fish are of a phlegmatic complexion, as are women).⁵⁸ Similarly, two commentators on the *De Secretis Mulierum* attributed to Albertus Magnus find all, or almost all, women to be “of phlegmatic complexion.”⁵⁹ This bodily nature writ large defined woman as impressionable and more easily affected by emotions and impulse, and therefore as irrational, morally unreliable, and undisciplined, as well as more vulnerable to demonic possession.⁶⁰ Albertus Magnus summed up the scholastic explanation for the alleged inconstancy and fickleness of women:

For a female’s complexion is moister than a male’s, but it belongs to a moist complexion to receive [impressions] easily but to retain them poorly. For moisture is easily mobile and this is why women are inconstant and always seeking after new things. Therefore when

57. *The Governance of Kings and Princes: John Trevisa’s Middle English Translation of the De Regimine Principum of Aegidius Romanus*, ed. David C. Fowler, Charles F. Briggs, and Paul G. Remley (New York, 1997), 199 (Bk. 2, pt. 1, ch. 18). On the influence of the *De regimine principum*, see Charles F. Briggs, *Giles of Rome’s De Regimine Principum: Reading and Writing Politics at Court and University, c. 1275–c. 1525* (Cambridge, U.K., 1999); and Fletcher, “Manhood and Politics,” 24–25.

58. Werner Seyfert, “Eine Komplexionentext einer Leipziger Inkunabel (angeblich eines Johann von Neuhaus) und seine handschriftliche Herleitung aus der Zeit nach 1300,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin* 20 (1928): 272–99, at 286, 293 (“Ideo phlegmaticus est frigidus et humidus, sicut sunt omnes mulieres naturaliter”). On the importance of this text, see Klibansky et al., *Saturn and Melancholy*, 115. For other examples of women seen as naturally possessing a phlegmatic complexion, see William of Conches, *Dragmaticon Philosophiae*, ed. I. Ronca (Turnhout, 1997), 206 (Bk. 6, ch. 8, sect. 3), 211 (Bk. 6, ch. 8, sect. 13); and Albertus Magnus, *On Animals*, ed. Kitchell and Resnick, 831, 835 (Bk. 10, tr. 1, ch. 1; Bk. 10, tr. 1, ch. 2). Burrow cites the fourteenth-century *Le Roman de Fauvel* by Gervais du Bus: “Fleume est aus enfans et aus famez” (*Ages of Man*, 26).

59. Helen Rodnite Lemay, *Women’s Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus’s De Secretis Mulierum with Commentaries* (Albany, N.Y., 1992), 69, 70. Resnick, “Ps.-Albert the Great,” 234–37, analyzes how the *Mariale*, also attributed to Albertus, develops the argument that the Virgin Mary’s complexion was warmer than that of other women, befitting her more noble nature.

60. Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2003), 129–75.



she is engaged in the act under one man, at that very moment she would wish, were it possible, to lie under another. Therefore, there is no faithfulness in a woman.⁶¹

Women's complexional deficiencies also had implications for men. Male anxiety about the body has generally been displaced in western culture onto the "feminine."⁶² We can then read this negative construction of the female body as reflecting fears about the potential of the male body to degenerate from its idealized strength, rigor, heat, and dryness. Such degeneration further implied a lapse from the moral ideal of virtue, self-discipline, and moderation, according to a moral system (gendered both explicitly and implicitly) that developed from Aristotelian and Stoic roots and continued to influence European thought into the modern era.⁶³

The accusation of "softness" as a synonym for "unmanliness," a well-known device in late classical writing for separating the manly from the unmanly man for political and moralizing purposes, was absorbed into medieval writing from classical antecedents.⁶⁴ Mathew Kuefler, for example, has traced the equation of moral and anatomical difference and its reflection in the parallel equation of women and morally vicious men in late Roman culture:

The term *mollitia*, used to describe the "softness" of women, was equally used to refer to men who were believed to possess the moral qualities of women . . . [further] moral vice in men must [also] leave its physiological traces.⁶⁵

Lynda C. Coons locates the same set of contrasts in early medieval clerical discourse; aristocratic laymen who rejected celibacy, as well as clerics who were subject to nocturnal emissions, were represented as having wet, soft,

61. "Complexio enim feminae magis est humida quam maris, sed humidi est de facili recipere et male retinere. Humidum est enim de facili mobile, et ideo mulieres sunt inconstantes et nova semper petentes. Unde cum est in acut sub uno viro, si esset possibile, in eodem tempore vellet esse sub alio. Unde nulla fides est in muliere"; Albertus Magnus, *Quaestiones super de animalibus* 15.11, ed. Ephrem Filthaut, vol. 12 of *Opera omnia*, ed. Bernhard Geyer (Münster, 1955), 265 (Bk. 15, qu. 11); the translation is from Albert the Great, *Questions Concerning Aristotle's "On Animals"*, trans. Irven M. Resnick and Kenneth F. Kitchell, Jr. (Washington, D.C., 2008), 454.

62. Calvin Thomas, *Male Matters: Masculinity, Anxiety, and the Male Body on the Line* (Urbana, 1996), 2.

63. Todd W. Reeser, *Moderating Masculinity in Early Modern Culture* (Chapel Hill, 2006), 11–48.

64. Erik Gunderson, *Staging Masculinity: The Rhetoric of Performance in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor, 2000), 59–69, 80–86, 157; Allen J. Frantzen, *Before the Closet: Same-Sex Love from "Beowulf" to "Angels in America"* (Chicago, 1998), 163–67, 202.

65. Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, 2001), 24–25.



and slippery bodies, unlike the hard and impenetrable bodies of virtuous clergymen.⁶⁶ As Kuefler and John H. Arnold have shown, Christian writers reconfigured masculine self-control to include the preservation of virginity and the pursuit of celibacy, constructing, in Arnold's phrase, the "labor of continence" as the active overcoming of male potency.⁶⁷ In the thirteenth century, the association between men with a "soft" body and women with a perceived lack of sexual self-restraint was explicit; Thomas Aquinas, for example, groups women and phlegmatic men together as sexually incontinent, "on account of their soft complexion."⁶⁸ By the fourteenth century, political accusations against Richard II as unmanly and subject to luxurious vices, timidity, and "inconstant mores" would be grounded in complexional language: Richard had been corrupted by phlegmatic humors or, at the very least, suffered from the overabundance of moisture typical of the young and immature.⁶⁹

Chaucer's thought, as Alcuin Blamires has shown, was engaged with the Stoic ideals of self-sufficiency, moderation, and self-governance, a system of thought that itself gendered "excess" as "softness," and the failure to discipline oneself as feminine.⁷⁰ In complexional terms, this meant that both "excess"—sexual and otherwise, associated with excess of "moisture"—and "lack"—of moral discipline, associated with lack of "heat"—were construed as feminine, whether performed by men or by women. Both excess and lack implied a divergence from the moderation associated with masculinity. Unlike some modern notions of masculinity that emphasize male control over others, classical and medieval ideas of masculinity included power over oneself.

66. Lynda C. Coon, "Somatic Styles of the Early Middle Ages," *Gender and History* 20 (2008): 463–86. On the vocabulary distinguishing the manly from the unmanly man in early medieval England, see Frantzen, *Before the Closet*, esp. 138–83.

67. John H. Arnold, "The Labour of Continence: Masculinity and Clerical Virginity," in Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih, eds., *Medieval Virginites* (Toronto, 2003), 103–18.

68. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Latin Text and English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices and Glossaries*, 60 vols. (London, 1963), 44:20–22 (2a2ae.q.156.art.1): "ex eo quod debiliter inhaeret propter mollitiem complexionis, ut de mulieribus dictum est, quod etiam videtur in phlegmaticis."

69. Fletcher, "Manhood and Politics," 7; Jonathan Hughes finds that Henry IV was diagnosed as a phlegmatic (here linked to senility) by court physicians to explain his timidity, impotence, and lack of manly vigor, "Alchemy and the Exploration of Late Medieval Sexuality," in Bernau et al., eds., *Medieval Virginites*, 140–66, at 152–55.

70. Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*, 16; Blamires argues that Chaucer modifies the Stoic identification of moderation as applicable only to men, 14–17. On Stoic gendering of moderation as masculine, see Margaret Graver, "The Manhandling of Maecenas: Senecan Abstractions of Masculinity," *American Journal of Philology* 119 (1998): 607–32; and Maude W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, 1995). The Stoic tradition also linked the alleged "excesses" of rhetoric with the effeminate male body, a tradition brilliantly tied to the portrait of the Pardoner by Rita Copeland, "The Pardoner's Body and the Disciplining of Rhetoric," in Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin, eds., *Framing Medieval Bodies* (Manchester, 1994), 138–59.



“Excessive” heterosexual behavior, as well as desire for other men, and even overly close association with women or a desire for physical comfort could be construed as effeminate.⁷¹ The materialist character of medieval medicine also meant that the category of the colder, moister phlegmatic man could serve as a placeholder for the “womanish” or effeminate man. The qualities of the phlegmatic were not necessarily narrowly or rigidly delineated but mirrored the overlapping, fungible types of the unmanly man, the effeminate man, the hypersexual man, and the man who desired other men. Like other potentially disturbing groups, the phlegmatic male was an unstable category. Depending upon genre and venue, the phlegmatic might appear as an inert sluggard lacking in the vigor and strength identified with true manliness, or might invoke the disturbing specter of more direct challenges to normative masculinity.

In this light, the Pardoner’s seemingly mismatched physical attributes—his “smal” voice and “glaringe” eyes, his smooth and beardless face, his “yelow” hair thinly spread over his shoulders, and the false relics carried in his lap—might represent different aspects of a “catch-all” effeminacy whose underlying meaning was less about the object of sexual desire (although this remained important) and more about moral instability, of which both same-sex desire and excessive womanizing could be symptoms. In the same way, the Pardoner’s apparently intimate relationship with the Summoner, on the one hand, and his stated desires to “have a joly wenche in every toun” (*PardPro*, VI 453) and “wedde a wyf” (*WBPro*, III 166), on the other, need not seem inconsistent. They reflect the complementary poles of an undisciplined and unstable will.

Two physical characteristics tie the Pardoner literally to the phlegmatic complexion: his utter lack of a beard and his lank, scraggly, yellowish hair, both of which are signs of a phlegmatic complexion in scientific and physiognomic literature. In Chaucer’s world beardlessness was a marker for both effeminacy and moral and sexual deviance. Chaucer’s contemporary and correspondent, Eustache Deschamps, writes in his ballad “Contre les hermaphrodites”:

Femme d’omme, qui doit estre barbus,
Homme sanz poil, c’est a chascun laidure.

71. The charge of “effeminacy” might include an accusation of taking the passive role in male same-sex sex but more broadly referred to weakness or moral defect (see Frantzen, *Before the Closet*, 90); Gary Sper, “Shakespeare’s ‘Manly’ Parts: Masculinity and Effeminacy in *Troilus and Cressida*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44 (1993): 409–22, at 410–12, provides a useful overview of the unstable meanings of “effeminacy” in the Middle Ages. I am indebted to Reeser, *Moderating Masculinity*, for the concept of “excess” and “lack” as extreme points defining a supposedly “moderate” masculinity.



Eulx encontre n'est que male adventure,
 Et leur regart ne doit plaie a nulluy,
 Car nature double a aucuns sur luy,
 Aucune aussi, incestes en leurs fais
 Usans des deux; de mon temps en congnyu,
 Infeables, desloyaulx et mauvais.

A woman out of a man, who should be bearded,
 Man without hair, this is an insult to everyone.
 To meet them is nothing but misfortune,
 And their gaze can be pleasing to no one.
 Each possesses a double nature,
 Incestuous in their acts,
 Using both kinds (sexually); in my time I have known them:
 Untrustworthy, disloyal, evil.⁷²

Although shaving was common among the aristocracy in late medieval England and had become required for monks in the early Middle Ages, the ability to produce a beard, such as that sported by the sanguine Franklin, remained a key marker of manliness.⁷³ Pertelote's chiding remark to Chanticleer, "Have ye no mannes herte, and han a berd?" (*NPT*, VII 2920), reflects this traditional association. Chaucer makes it clear that the Pardoner has not depilated himself ("No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;/As smothe it was as it were late shave" [*GP*, I 689–90]), and he directly connects the Pardoner's lack of facial hair with his physical effeminacy in the next line: "I trowe he were a geldying or a mare" (I 691).

But we need not account for the Pardoner's beardlessness by postulating the complete absence of testicles, as have Curry and those who accept the

72. "Contre les hermaphrodites," in *Oeuvres complètes d'Eustache Deschamps*, ed. Gaston Reynaud and le Marquis de Queux de Saint-Hilaire, 11 vols. (Paris: 1889; repr. 1966), 6:50 (Ballad 1129). I am indebted to Miri Rubin, "The Person in the Form: Medieval Challenges to Bodily 'Order,'" in Kay and Rubin, eds., *Framing Medieval Bodies*, 100–22, at 105, for this reference and to her and Margaret Harp for the English translation. For Chaucer's interactions with Deschamps, see J. I. Wimsatt, "Chaucer and French Poetry," in *Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Brewer, 109–36, at 109–10, 133–34. On hermaphrodites in the Middle Ages, see Cary J. Nederman and Jacqui True, "The Third Sex: The Idea of the Hermaphrodite in Twelfth-Century Europe," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6 (1996): 497–517.

73. Robert Bartlett, "Symbolic Meanings of Hair in the Middle Ages," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 4 (1994): 43–60; for the beard as a marker of masculinity in contrast to boys, eunuchs, and women in a later period, see Will Fisher, "The Renaissance Beard: Masculinity in Early Modern England," *Renaissance Quarterly* 54 (2001): 155–87; and Will Fisher, *Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Cambridge, U.K., 2006), 83–128.



thesis that the Pardoner was a eunuch from birth or by castration. The inability to grow facial hair in an adult male was also attributed in the medieval scientific tradition to a congenitally cold complexion. Bartholomaeus, as we have seen, makes the lack of a beard in an adult male a key indicator of a phlegmatic complexion.⁷⁴ Physiologically, the production of facial hair was ascribed to the greater heat of men, which forced bodily residues or vapors out through the pores on the face around the jaw, and also provided for the concoction of blood into semen.⁷⁵ A phlegmatic man would not grow body hair or a beard, while men of a melancholic complexion would typically have a scanty beard. As Bartholomeus explains,

þe berd is the hiȝtnes and þe ornament of mannes face. . . . And heerfor a man haþ a berd and nouȝt a womman, for a man is kyn-deliche more hotte þan a womman. And þerfore in a man þe smoke þat is mater of heer encresib more þan in a womman. And for kynde suffiseþ nouȝt waast þat smooke, he puttib and dryueþ it out by tweye places, in þe heed and in þe beard; and þerfore somtyme wymmen of hote and moist complexioun hauen berdes. And aȝenwardis, men of colde and drye complexioun hauen litil berdes. Þerfore in men þat ben igelded growib no berd, for þey hauen ilost þe hattest membre þat schulde brede þe hote humour and smoke þat is þe matere of heer. And so it folewib þat picnes of berde is signe and tokene of hete and of substanceal humour and of strengþe, and a certeyn assay to knowe differens bytwene men and wymmen.⁷⁶

The root cause of the beardlessness of the eunuch, as the passage makes clear, is not the loss of the testicles per se, but primarily the cold constitution produced by that loss, which prevented the transformation of residues into hair and closed the pores of the face. Moreover, testicles lacking in vital heat, even if intact, produced the same result. Joseph Ziegler has shown that the physiognomical literature correlated the condition of the testicles with complexion: small, hairless testicles indicated a cold, female-like temperament; large testicles (and a large penis), stupidity; low-hanging testicles, impotence;

74. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *Trevisa's Translation*, 1:157 (Bk. 4, ch. 9); Bartholomaeus does not include the inability to grow a beard as a sign of the other cold complexion, the melancholic, 1:161 (Bk. 4, ch. 11).

75. William of Conches, *Dragmaticon*, ed. Ronca, 236 (Bk. 6, ch. 17, sect. 5); *A Dialogue on Natural Philosophy (Dragmaticon Philosophiae): Translation of the New Latin Critical Text with a Short Introduction and Explanatory Notes*, trans. Italo Ronca and Matthew Curr (Notre Dame, 1997), 152; and Cadden, *Sex Differences*, 171, 181.

76. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *Trevisa's Translation*, 1:196 (Bk. 5.15).



and a left testicle noticeably larger than the right, a “cold and feminine” complexion.⁷⁷ The coldness of the phlegmatic or melancholic man correlated with a lack of both hairiness and virility. As Constantinus said in his *De coitu*, “men with cold testicles are effeminate and without desire,” and their hair will be sparse around the pubis and elsewhere because the nature of the testicles affects the whole body.⁷⁸

Scientific texts, therefore, tended to conflate eunuchs with men possessing complexionally deficient, but anatomically present, testicles. Peter of Abano in his commentary on Aristotle's *Problems*, for example, refers to “eunuchs who lack testicles or who have only small and weak ones,” and physiognomical treatises, which focused on the testicles as an index of masculinity, categorized men with very small, hairless testicles as eunuchs.⁷⁹ The Host's assumption that the Pardoner had “coillons” did not necessarily imply, therefore, that he considered the Pardoner to be a fully potent male; indeed, the Host's wish to hold the Pardoner's testicles “in myn hond/In stide of relikes or of seintuarie” (*PardT*, VI 952–53) suggests a wish to inspect the Pardoner's testicles for their testimony to his suspect masculinity, just as his relics begged examination for their ambiguous efficacy.

The Pardoner's long, yellowish hair, given by Bartholomaeus as one of the signs of a phlegmatic complexion, is equally problematic. Yellow hair, especially on women, indicated beauty in the Middle Ages, but it also implied excess, especially sexual excess and lack of reliability.⁸⁰ Long hair worn by aristocratic men had a history in Norman England of bringing on accusations of effeminacy, frivolity, and “softness.”⁸¹ Light-colored hair and pale skin were commonly seen as indicative in classical medical literature of a phlegmatic temperament. Constantinus Africanus in his *Pantegni*, a compendium of humoral medicine, says that if the body is cold and moist, the hair will be smooth, yellow, and sparse.⁸² Similarly, he reports in *De coitu* that men with cold testicles will be effeminate and have scanty body hair, while men

77. Ziegler, “Sexuality and the Sexual Organs,” 90–91.

78. “Si vero fuerit frigida, effeminate erunt homines et appetitus deest”; Constantinus Africanus, *De coitu*, ed. Cartelle, 98; trans. Delaney, “Constantinus Africanus,” 58; William of Conches, *Dragmaticon*, ed. Ronca, 237 (Bk. 6, ch. 17, sect. 6); *Dialogue*, 153: “there are cold and womanly men who have not much beard.” See also Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum naturale*, 2018 (Bk. 28, ch. 38): “Barba in homine distinguit virilem sexum à foemina, & est magnis in viris calidis, parva in frigidis”; and Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus*, ed. Stadler, 2:1203 (Bk. 18, tr. 1, ch. 3); *On Animals*, trans. Kitchell and Resnick, 2:1293.

79. Ziegler, “Sexuality and the Sexual Organs,” 90.

80. Paul E. Beichner, “Absalon's Hair,” *Mediaeval Studies* 12 (1950): 222–33.

81. Bartlett, “Symbolic Meanings of Hair,” 50–52.

82. Constantinus Africanus, *L'arte universale della medicina (Pantegni)*, trans. Marco T. Malato and Umberto de Martini (Rome, 1961), 63 (Bk 1, ch. 17).



with moist testicles will have flat and soft hair. Treatises on the complexions in the later Middle Ages repeated the association of the phlegmatic with soft, straight hair.⁸³ In the physiognomical tradition, soft hair and a high or shrill voice (such as the Pardoner's) were often linked as indicators of effeminacy. For example, the pseudo-Aristotelian *Physiognomics*, well known in the Middle Ages, gives soft hair, a high, languid voice, and white or black skin as signs of cowardice.⁸⁴ Michael Scot similarly associates fine, soft, light-colored hair with timidity, feeble virility, and a cold or humid complexion.⁸⁵ The physiognomic literature popular in the later Middle Ages often reiterated this linkage and associated hairlessness and soft hair with effeminacy and a phlegmatic complexion, as well as cowardice, cunning, unreliability, and a tendency to lie.⁸⁶ The several English prose versions of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secreta Secretorum* make similar associations: the first sign of a cowardly, fearful, or effeminate man who is not to be trusted is his soft hair.⁸⁷ Similarly, John Metham in his Middle English physiognomy says that thin hair is a sign of a cold complexion and that soft, yellow hair betokens a "sofftnes off complexion," which, as we have seen, was associated with women and phlegmatics.⁸⁸

The scientific tradition provides a further context for the Pardoner's anomalous physical characteristics by offering a humoral explanation for various forms of male sexual dysfunction.⁸⁹ Sexual desire was believed to be regulated by the combined effects of heat and radical moisture that produced abundant semen. Blood (also warm and moist), semen, and Venus (the warm,

83. Johannes von Neuhaus, for example, says that the hair of the phlegmatic is "molles et rectos" (Seyfert, "Komplexionentext," 293).

84. Pseudo-Aristotle, *Physiognomonics*, 1 (806b6–28), 6 (812a12–26), in Aristotle, *Minor Works*, trans. W. W. Hett (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), 92–95, 126–27. For the gendered meanings of hair, and the lack of it, in late antiquity see Maud W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, 1995), 67–73.

85. Michael Scot, *De procreatione & hominis phisionomia* (sine loca, 1477), ch. 27 (fol. e8v), ch. 28 (fol. e8v-fir), and ch. 59 (fol. g7v).

86. Joseph Zeigler, "Skin and Character in Medieval and Early Renaissance Physiognomy," *Micrologus: Natura, scienze e società medievali; Nature, sciences, and medieval societies* 13 (2005): 525, 527. See also Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus*, ed. Stadler, 1:48.132 (Bk. 1, tr. 2, ch. 2); *On Animals*, trans. Kitchell and Resnick, 1:95; and Thomas B. Hansen, "Stylized Man: The Poetic Use of Physiognomy in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*," Ph.D. Diss. (University of Wisconsin, 1970), 153–60.

87. "The Gouvernaunce of Prynces (1422)," in Steele, ed., *Three Prose Versions*, 222; the text also says that men with high, small, and soft voices "haue lytill of manhode, and i-likenyd to women" (231).

88. John Metham, *Physiognomy*, in *The Works of John Metham*, ed. H. Craig, EETS o.s. 132 (London, 1916), 118–45, at 121.

89. Paul Delaney, "Constantinus Africanus and Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*," *Philological Quarterly* 46 (1967): 560–66. For an overview of medieval medical views on the relationship of complexion, gender, and sexual predispositions, see Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine*, 139–46.



moist planet) were inextricably linked with procreative sex in both scientific and poetic literature.⁹⁰ Hence, the sanguine complexion and youth—the period of man's life governed by the sanguine—were associated with sexual vigor and potency.⁹¹ Conversely, the cold and moist complexion, in which excess moisture produced by the digestive process was not tempered by an appropriate degree of heat, produced forms of nonfunctional or nonreproductive sexuality: impotence, lack of desire, nocturnal emissions, same-sex desire, or insatiability.⁹² Constantinus's *De coitu* explains that "Warmth increases desire and masculinity, whereas cold reduces desire and renders effeminate." If the testicles are both cold and moist, "the cold will reduce desire, hair will appear only around the pubis, and mostly daughters will be born." Moreover, in such men "semen will be abundant, because of the moisture, and nocturnal pollutions common—for excessive moisture hastens to an outlet and causes the effusion of semen though without very much pleasure."⁹³ Constantinus also says that hot, dry complexions will make men desirous, but since they produce little semen due to lack of moisture, they will cease quickly in the sexual act; men of a cold, dry complexion have both little desire and scanty semen.⁹⁴

The parsing out of sexual types according to complexion continued to be a theme in natural philosophy and medical texts. For example, the *Tractatus de complexionibus* as well as the *Prose Salernitan Questions* (ca. 1200; a compendium of medical lore based on both Latin and English sources) equate complexional differences with sexual ones: the sanguine "desire much and are capable of much"; the choleric "desire much and are capable of little";

90. Tinkle, *Medieval Venuses and Cupids*, 136–61.

91. Tinkle, *Medieval Venuses and Cupids*, 142–45.

92. As Joseph Zeigler has shown, scholastic philosophers took care to explain that whereas there is a superfluity of radical moisture in children, this moisture naturally dissipates over time, so that the mature man is more temperate and powerful than the child ("Ut Dicunt Medici," 226–27). Radical moisture was a positive, vital aspect of the life force separate from the nutritional moisture produced by the digestive process that promoted instability. Youths and women were both handicapped in the pursuit of virtue by their moistness, but the sanguine man would become more restrained and self-controlled as he aged (and dried) into maturity. Similarly, a choleric (such as the Reeve) would become increasingly vulnerable to wrath, avarice, and anger as he aged, and his increasing dryness and coldness made him more rigid and unyielding; see Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 22–50. Joan Cadden examines the paradoxical roles of moisture in human physiology according to medieval natural philosophy ("A Matter of Life and Death: Water in the Natural Philosophy of Albertus Magnus," *History and Philosophy of the Sciences* 2 [1980]: 241–52).

93. "Calor enim auget appetitum velut masculinum, frigiditas autem diminuit appetitum et femininum reddit. . . . Quod si fuerit frigida et humida, appetitus erit modicus ex frigidityte, et pili oriuntur tantum circa pectinem, filieque nascuntur quamplures, et semen erit copiosum ex humiditate, et polluciones frequentes in sompno, quia multa humiditas festinat ad exitum sine magna delectacione et movetur ad seminis effusionem"; Constantinus Africanus, *De coitu*, ed. Cartelle, 100; trans. Delany, "Constantinus Africanus," 58.

94. Constantinus Africanus, *De coitu*, ed. Cartelle, 98, 100; trans. Delaney, "Constantinus Africanus," 57–58; Pantegni, ed. Malato and Martini, 61 (Bk. 1, ch. 14), 65 (Bk. 1, ch. 17).



the melancholic “desire little and are capable of little”; and the phlegmatic “desire little and are capable of much.”⁹⁵ Similarly, a thirteenth-century text on the complexions describes the effects of cold and moisture on sexual drive: “From frigidity, little amorous; from humidity, much required.”⁹⁶ A Middle English compendia of natural philosophy similarly describes the phlegmatic as full of moisture and hence capable of much sexual activity but as lacking in desire: “The 3 complexcion is fflēmne, and it is in kynde colde and moiste acordynge to þe elemente of watir. Who so is of þis complexcion, Be cause of coldenesse him lust litill, and because of moysstnesse he may moche.”⁹⁷

Medical astrology reinforced the association of phlegmatics with forms of nonreproductive, therefore deviant sexuality. The Moon in Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos* (the founding text of astrological physiognomy) is a moist, cold, and therefore feminine planet, which influences men to be “softer of soul, and secretive.”⁹⁸ Venus could also be interpreted as a cold, moist planet, and in this aspect, when affected by the Moon (according to the *Mathesis* of Julius Firmicus Maternus, one of the most influential astrological treatises in the later Middle Ages), it made men sterile and produced “eunuchs, castrated priests, hermaphrodites, or [men] driven by desire to act the part of women.”⁹⁹ A particular case was the connection drawn between male cold, moist humors and male same-sex desire. Kenneth Borris has argued that

95. Vern L. Bullough, “On Being a Male in the Middle Ages,” in Clare A. Lees, ed., *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, 1994), 31–45, at 41; Seyfert, “Komplexionentext,” 289 (the sanguine “multum appetit mulieres et multum postet”), 290 (the melancholic “parum appetit quia frigidus, parum vel nihil potest ratione, sicci”), 292 (the choleric “multum appetit et parum postet”), 293 (the phlegmatic “multum potest operari cum mulieribus, sed parum appetit”); *Prose Salernitan Questions*, ed. Lawn, 6 (B. sect. 8). Other works on the complexions repeat this typology; see Lynn Thorndike, “De Complexionibus,” *Isis* 49 (1958): 398–408, at 407.

96. Thorndike, “De Complexionibus,” 407.

97. “The Wise Book of Philosophy and Astronomy,” in Krochalis and Peters, trans., *The World of Piers Plowman*, 12.

98. Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, ed. and trans. F. E. Robbins (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), 40–41 (Bk. 1, ch. 6), 124–27 (Bk. 2, ch. 2). On the moon as characterized in astrology as feminine, cold, and wet, and associated with women, instability, falsehood, water and other fluids, and the phlegmatic humor, see Ann W. Astell, *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1996), 209–13; and Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine*, 14, 71. Klibansky et al. note the association in astrological texts of the moon with the phlegmatic complexion (*Saturn and Melancholy*, 128–30).

99. Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis*, ed. and trans. P. Monat, 3 vols. (Paris, 1994), 2:155 (Bk. 4, ch. 13, sect. 5). See also 2:71 (Bk. 3, ch. 6, sect. 4), 3:78–79 (Bk. 6, ch. 30, sect. 16), 3:219–21 (Bk. 7, ch. 25, sects. 1–4, for planetary configurations, many of them involving Venus, which produce sterility, eunuchs, effeminate men, hermaphrodites, and men who cannot control their desires. Kenneth Borris, ed., *Same-Sex Desire in the English Renaissance: A Sourcebook of Texts, 1470–1650* (New York, 2004), 157–77, discusses the relevance of astrology to same-sex desire from antiquity through the Renaissance and provides translations of key texts. See S. J. Tester, *A History of Western Astrology* (Woodbridge, 1987), 210, for the influence of the *Mathesis*.



ancient Greek and Roman medicine and medical astrology as incorporated into medieval science postulated naturalized explanations for same-sex relations.¹⁰⁰ The *Mathesis*, for example, stipulated that Venus and the Moon in combination with other planets created men who were sexually receptive to other males.¹⁰¹ Although medieval medical and scientific texts rarely discuss same-sex sex, a few works explicitly linked the phlegmatic complexion to male desire for other men. One such text was Hildegard of Bingen's *Cause et cure*, which Chaucer was unlikely to have known but which may reflect a more generalized association between phlegmatics and nonreproductive sex. Much of Hildegard's description includes the conventional attributes of the phlegmatic man: he has soft flesh like that of women, is sterile, does not grow a beard or grows only a sparse one, and has little lust. She also says, however, that he cannot retain his foamy, unconcocted sperm until the right moment and likes to cohabit with both men and women (women only because they are weak and therefore resemble boys).¹⁰² A more clinical discussion occurs in Peter of Abano's commentary (ca. 1310) on the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problemata*, a text that has become a locus for scholarly discussion of medieval medical concepts of same-sex sex.¹⁰³ Peter, citing Aristotle, lumps together effeminate men, eunuchs who lack testicles or who have only small and weak ones, and cold, wet men who are reduced to the nature and habits of women because they are susceptible to a blockage of the pores in the penis that allow for the expulsion of sperm. In such men, sperm may instead flow to the anus, producing a desire for friction at that place rather than at the tip of the penis. The coldness of their body, moreover, impedes the expulsion of sperm, rendering such men, like women and girls, "insatiable."¹⁰⁴

100. Kenneth Borris, "Introduction," in *The Sciences of Homosexuality in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Kenneth Borris and George Rousseau (London, 2008), 1–40.

101. Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis*, ed. Monat, 3:222 (Bk. 7, ch. 25, sect. 5), 3:225–27 (Bk. 7, ch. 25, sects. 17–23).

102. Hildegard of Bingen, *Beate Hildegardis Cause et cure*, ed. Laurence Moulinier (Berlin, 2003), 112–14; Hildegard of Bingen, *On Natural Philosophy and Medicine: Selections from Cause et cure*, trans. Margret Berger (Woodbridge, 1999), 61; and Joan Cadden, "It Takes All Kinds: Sexuality and Gender Differences in Hildegard of Bingen's *Book of Compound Medicine*," *Traditio* 40 (1984): 149–74.

103. Joan Cadden, "Sciences/Silences: The Natures and Languages of 'Sodomy' in Peter of Abano's *Problemata* Commentary," in Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz, eds., *Constructing Medieval Sexuality* (Minneapolis, 1997), 40–57. Mark D. Jordan considers the reworking of pseudo-Aristotle's *Problemata*, 4.26, by Avicenna and Peter of Abano (*Invention of Sodomy*, 114–25), as does Kelly, "The Pardoner's Voice," 419–24. Excerpts from the relevant texts are translated, along with a useful commentary, in Borris, ed., *Same-Sex Desire*, 115–40.

104. Peter of Abano, *Problemata Aristotelis* (Venice, 1501), fol. 65r; and Borris, ed., *Same-Sex Desire*, 134, 138. According to Aristotle's oft-repeated tagline, "No female among animals is receptive to coitus after impregnation except the woman and the mare" (*Generation of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck [Cambridge, Mass., 1943], 448–49). On women's alleged lack of sexual restraint in medical writings, see Cadden, *Sex Differences*, 268–69.



These texts indicate the variety and instability of associations with biologically based effeminacy in the Middle Ages. Effeminacy might be suggested by both anatomical disabilities, including missing or defective testicles and blocked pores in the penis or facial skin, or physiological problems, including impotence, nocturnal emissions, the generation of female children, and the inability to grow a beard, or more generalized markers, such as soft, abundant flesh and pale skin and hair. Effeminacy was also related variously to the lack of sexual desire or pleasure, to same-sex desire, and to sexual “insatiability.” These seemingly inconsistent or arbitrary physical signs were linked, however, by a persistent underlying association with a colder, moister complexion than was expected in mature men.

Physiology in complexion theory spilled over, moreover, into psychology and moral judgments based on gendered assumptions, not only about the moral inferiority of women but also about a suspicion of people who failed to follow expected binary categories of gender. Although Constantinus treats effeminate men from a naturalistic perspective, hermaphrodites, masculine women, and feminine men were commonly associated in medicine and natural philosophy, as well as in other texts, with deceit, hypocrisy, and fraudulence.¹⁰⁵ Derek G. Neal has demonstrated how honesty, openness, and truthfulness were considered to be the hallmarks of the masculine man in late medieval England. Conversely, the nonmasculine man was associated with dishonesty.¹⁰⁶ The male phlegmatic, who had female-like flesh in a male body, not only exhibited the characteristic moral unreliability of women, but also blurred the boundaries of male and female. He could be seen as duplicitous because he quite literally sent mixed signals. If males take on female physical characteristics, Albertus Magnus remarks in his *De animalibus*, “or if a female takes on that of a male, it is a certain sign that he or she is a boaster and a liar, just as their parts have made a liar of their sex.”¹⁰⁷ Deschamps’ characterization quoted above of the beardless hermaphroditic bisexual man as “insulting . . . untrustworthy, disloyal, evil” encapsulates the medieval distrust provoked when bodily appearances failed to align themselves with expected sex differences. In presenting us with a male figure in the *General Prologue* who cannot grow a beard and whose overall appearance suggests

105. Cadden, *Sex Differences*, 212–13. Alan J. Fletcher draws attention to the use by Lollard partisans of the metaphor of the hermaphrodite for churchmen who “mixed spirituality with temporality” (“Chaucer the Heretic,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 25 [2003]: 53–122).

106. Derek G. Neal, *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England* (Chicago, 2008), 42–45.

107. “Si quis igitur mas proprietatem in hoc feminae accipiat aut femina proprietatem maris, pro certo signum est, quod iactator sit et mendax: sicut et ipsae partes mendosum sexum sibi assumpserunt”; Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus*, ed. Stadler, 1:48 (Bk. 1, tr. 2, ch. 2); *On Animals*, trans. Kitchell and Resnick, 1:95.



that he may be a “gelding or a mare,” Chaucer sets up his audience to distrust the Pardoner on sight.

Recognizing the Pardoner as a phlegmatic also points us toward his moral failings from another direction. Late medieval English preaching literature often linked the complexions directly to their characteristic deadly sin.¹⁰⁸ The sins were attached to particular complexions not in an arbitrary manner but as directly reflecting the physical and emotional qualities produced by the humors. The heat of the choleric, untempered by moisture, resulted in a tendency toward anger; the heat of the sanguine, accompanied by moisture, inclined men toward sexual pleasure. The cold complexions of melancholy and phlegm promoted the heaviness of envy in the first instance, gluttony and sloth in the second.

If we are meant to recognize the Pardoner as a phlegmatic, we can then expect the Pardoner to be guilty of both gluttony (whose first offspring was drunkenness) and sloth (whose “daughters” included laziness, negligence in the performance of religious duties, and *acedia* [spiritual despair]).¹⁰⁹ The Pardoner’s close association with drinking and drunkenness is well attested. Gluttony, as a sin of the flesh, was often paired with lust and sloth, but also with the “sins of the tongue”—lying, swearing, slander, and blasphemy—and all were associated with the tavern by Langland and others.¹¹⁰ As Bowers and Kathryn L. Lynch have pointed out, the Pardoner’s sermon against gluttony and his exemplum, delivered in a tavern while eating and drinking

108. According to John Gower, for example: “Si fleumatik soie attempree/Lors Gloutenie et Lacheté/Me font tempter en chascune hure” (*Mirour de l’Omme*, ed. Macaulay, 171 [lines 14, 707–9]). See also *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, ed. Francis, 156: “Pe flewmatike of glotonye and slowpe.” On sloth as caused by phlegm in other late medieval texts and the connection between the complexions and their characteristic sins, see Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth*, 192–94. For the interrelationships between sloth and overindulgence in food and sex, including sodomy, in medieval English monastic writings, see Michelle M. Sauer, “Uncovering Difference: Encoded Homoerotic Anxiety within the Christian Eremitic Tradition in Medieval England,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19 (2010): 133–52.

109. For Gower, drunkenness was the third daughter of Gluttony (*Mirour de l’Omme*, ed. Macaulay, 94 [line 813]); in *Pars T* drunkenness is the first species of gluttony (X 822). Gower gives the daughters of sloth as somnolence, laziness, slackness, idleness, and negligence, while Chaucer’s Parson divides Accidia into sloth, despair, negligence, idleness, *tarditas*, laziness, coldness, lack of devotion, and *tristicia* (X 677–727). *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, ed. Francis, gives the parts of sloth as “tenderesse,” “nessched of herte,” “ydelnesse,” “heuynesse,” ly[ing] in synne,” and “vnboldenesse” (26–27). For an analysis of the daughters of the vices and the corresponding virtues in Gower’s *Mirour*, see the “Introduction” in John Gower, *Mirour de l’Omme*, trans. Wilson, xx–xxi; for the subdivisions of sloth in other literature on the vices and virtues, see Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth*, 23, 79–83, 195–96.

110. William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The Prologue and Passus I–VII of the B Text*, ed. J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford, 1972), 16 (B.2.92–94), 46–49 (B.5.304–405); and G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England: A Neglected Chapter in the History of English Letters and of the English People* (New York, 1966), 434–41. On sloth as a tavern sin and on Langland’s treatment of sloth, see Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth*, 135–47.



and ending with his three protagonists dead (two from wine poisoned by the third), are replete with references to eating and drinking.¹¹¹ Moreover, the Pardoner in his prologue proclaims his ambition to “drynke licour of the vyne/And have a joly wenche in every toun” (VI 452–53) on the proceeds of his “tricks,” at whatever cost to his victims, while he himself does no work whatsoever (“I wol not do no labour with myne hondes” [VI 444]). His stated aims thus replicate the tavern sins of drunkenness, lechery, lying, and laziness.

The Pardoner’s slothfulness, however, goes beyond simple indolence, so understanding the Pardoner as a phlegmatic connects him to a deeper meaning. The phlegmatic suffered from overeating and drunkenness, and also from constipation both literal and spiritual. On account of his sluggish constitution, the phlegmatic, overloaded with “grosse humors,” had trouble dealing with bodily residues and “undigested excreta.”¹¹² This physical disability was allegorized by medieval preachers as “spiritual indigestion,” in which the sinner fails to properly think through the moral implications of his thoughts and behavior.¹¹³ The phlegmatic’s overindulgence in sleep was similarly allegorized as the “slumber of the soul,” an unawareness of God and spiritual good.¹¹⁴ Hence, in *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, a fourteenth-century Middle English translation of the *Somme le Roi* by Lorens d’Orléans, sloth is identified as the phlegmatic’s primary sin and defined as “a werynesse of goode deedes” occasioned by a too soft heart, a lackluster love of God, and a belief that he bears too feeble a complexion to do penance.¹¹⁵ Like the phlegmatic, the slothful are filled with “sompnolence, that is sloggy slombrynge, which maketh a man be hevy and dul in body and in soule, and this synne comth of Slouthe” (*ParsT*, X 706). Hence, the pictorial representation of both the phlegmatic and the slothful (and sometimes the melancholic) was typically a man or woman asleep.¹¹⁶

111. Bowers, “Dronkenesse”; and Lynch, “The Pardoner’s Digestion.”

112. Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus libri XXVI*, ed. Stadler, 1:1305 (Bk. 20, tr. 1, ch. 11); *On Animals*, ed. Kitchell and Resnick, 2:1392.

113. Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus*, ed. Stadler, 1:1305 (Bk. 20, tr. 1, ch. 11); *On Animals*, trans. Kitchell and Resnick, 2:1392; and Joseph Ziegler, *Medicine and Religion c. 1300: The Case of Arnau de Vilanova* (Oxford, 1998), 109, 281, 295.

114. Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth*, 17–18.

115. *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, ed. Francis, 156 and 26–27: “[slewþe] is a werynesse of goode deedes. . . . Þe first is tendernes, as whan a man loueþ litle and slakly oure lord, þat he scholde loue brennyngly; and þer-of comeþ þat he is feble and wery and tendre to do any good. Þat oþer is tenterhed or nessed of herte, þat is þe deueles feþere bed; þer-on he restep hym and seiþ to a man or womman, ‘þou hast be noresched to softly, and þou art of to feble complexioun; þou my3t not endure to do gret penaunce, for þou art to tendre; þou schuldest be deed a-swipe.”

116. Klibansky et al., *Saturn and Melancholy*, 298–302.



Sloth was originally a sin of monks assailed by boredom and demonic temptation, but by the fourteenth century the notion of sloth was also sometimes applied to a neglected performance of religious duties and worldly tasks.¹¹⁷ Hence, the slothful and the phlegmatic were often identified in physiognomical and other literature with the bad servant. The slothful man is negligent in his duties, forgetful, slow, soon weary, and therefore ultimately unfaithful to his master. Bartholomaeus, for example, in his chapters on good and bad servants describes the bad servant in terms strongly reminiscent of the phlegmatic and the slothful: the bad servant is “ofte drunkele” and is “slow3, slepy, and lustles and forgendreþ alle his lordus nedis and leueþ hem undo.” He follows this description with a recitation of numerous scriptural passages in which the bad servant is described as slow as well as covetous and deceitful.¹¹⁸ This aspect of sloth is clearly relevant to the Cook, a servant himself, who is careless with the food he prepares, selling twice-heated meat pies exposed to flies; as the Host chides him, “For in thy shoppe is many a flye loos” (*CkPro*, I 4352). Moreover, the Cook tells a tale featuring a spectacularly bad victualer’s apprentice, who, loving the tavern better than the shop, steals from his master and ends up supported by his friend’s wife’s prostitution.¹¹⁹

The Pardoner, of course, might also be considered a servant in his role as preacher. The primary meaning of sloth—the sin specifically of neglect of spiritual duties, including false confession—is particularly relevant to the Pardoner’s gross failure in this regard. Like some late medieval personifications of sloth, the Pardoner may eagerly pursue idle worldly pleasures while subverting his religious responsibilities. His self-congratulatory remark that “it is joye to se my bisynesse” (*PardProl*, VI 399), in reference to the quick movements of his hands and tongue while preaching, functions as an ironic comment on “busyness” as a common remedy for sloth in Middle English devotional literature.¹²⁰

Beyond dereliction of duty, however, sloth can proceed to *acedia* (despair), often compared in late medieval literature to putrid or stagnating water, the bilge water in the bottom of a ship, or “slow” water which

117. Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth*, 88–92, 174–81.

118. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *Trevisa’s Translation*, 1:312 (Bk. 6, ch. 16). See also Wenzel, for a discussion of examples of *acedia* in the New Testament (*The Sin of Sloth*, 102). *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, ed. Francis, also compares the slothful, who are “untrew, recheles, forzeteful, slow, soone wery, and to faile at the most need,” to the bad servant (28).

119. On the Cook as a businessman, see Craig E. Bertolet, “Wel Bet is Rotten Appul out of Hoord”: Chaucer’s Cook, Commerce, and Civic Order,” *Studies in Philology* 99 (2002): 229–46.

120. Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth*, 89. Work with the hands was also a traditional remedy for sloth (111).



can be crossed by serpents.¹²¹ The Pardoner's slothfulness, masked by his overly energetic pursuit of worldly comfort, is ultimately revealed not only in his false motives but also in his ultimate inability or unwillingness to turn away from sin toward God, despite his own acute diagnosis of his moral condition: "Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice/Which that I use, and that is avarice./ . . . though myself be a ful vicious man" (*PardPro*, VI 427–28, 459).¹²² This alienation, which Bowers identifies with the denial and compulsiveness of addiction, is also the final stage of sloth or wan-hope, likened by Chaucer's Parson to the pains of Hell. The man afflicted by Accidia

is lyk hem that been in the peyne of helle, by cause of hir slouthe and of hire hevynesse, for they that been dampned been so bounde that they ne may neither wel do ne wel thynke. (*ParT*, X 686)¹²³

Among the Scholastics, according to Wenzel, "*Acedia* is the negation of *caritas*, the greatest Christian virtue."¹²⁴ One cannot help but be reminded of the Pardoner's boast that he "wol noon of the apostles countrefete" (*PardPro*, VI 447) and do no physical work, but instead live off the proceeds of counterfeit preaching. Bowers has made a convincing case for the centrality of alcohol to both the Pardoner's portrait and the *Pardoner's Tale*. If the Pardoner fits the profile of what we would now call an alcoholic, a man who indulges in the "rhetoric of denial and deflection," he also embodies the despair of the man enslaved by his own weakness.¹²⁵

Complexional theory posited the intimate connection between physical constitution, emotional states, and sexual predispositions. The Pardoner's effeminate, sexually ambiguous appearance, a product of a phlegmatic complexion, was at one with the deceitfulness, greediness, and self-indulgence of his character. If the Pardoner refuses to be "pinned down," to take responsibility for his faults even as he declaims them, he is accurately acting out the slippery,

121. Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth*, 105, 122. Water is the element associated with the phlegmatic complexion.

122. Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth*, 120, provides examples of images of Sloth as restless and "killing time" in her pursuit of worldly things while neglecting her spiritual duties.

123. Bowers, "Dronkenesse," 763.

124. Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth*, 81, 85–87.

125. Bowers, "Dronkenesse," 762. Lee Patterson in quite a different context also characterizes the Pardoner as a man who does not believe that the religious practices available to him are efficacious and who is not "merely in danger of damnation but knows of his danger, indeed focuses upon it with obsessive anxiety" ("The Pardoner's Dilemma," in Lee Patterson, ed., *Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales: A Casebook* [Oxford, 2007], 161–81, at 169).



untrustworthy, and ultimately self-destructive nature attributed in complexion theory to the congenital phlegmatic.

Yet even as the application of complexion theory illuminates much about the Pardoner, it raises broader implications for medieval thought. While Chaucer leaves little doubt as to the Pardoner's moral guilt, complexion theory as a whole reveals an underlying tension in medieval culture between a Christian ethics that emphasized free will, on the one hand, and a materialist view embedded in medieval natural philosophy, on the other, that saw ethics, physical constitution, and gender as intertwined. Given that complexion theory constituted "personhood" in the body as well as in the soul, and that it also posited sexual difference, sexual orientation, and propensity to particular sins as at least to some extent products of an inherent physical condition, it implicitly raised the same profound questions about moral culpability and the dividing line between immorality and disease as does modern gene theory, if from a different perspective. Like astrology, complexion theory could be understood as suggesting that male same-sex desire was an atypical but natural phenomenon and that other disordered passions, including those induced by a feminizing, phlegmatic complexion, were less a matter of sin and autonomous personal responsibility than of embodied natural tendencies and predispositions. Complexion theory thus has the effect of expanding the purview of the "natural" to include variant forms of effeminacy while at the same time reinforcing the rhetoric labeling effeminate men as corrupt and corrupting. Men, like women, could therefore be vulnerable to a discourse that portrayed them simultaneously as by nature too weak to discipline themselves, yet strong enough to dangerously overwhelm the moral limits and controls of others. Complexion theory points us toward underlying fissures in the medieval moral system and in the binary understanding of sex differences on which it rested.

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