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Fleshly Things and Spiritual Matters:  
Studies on the Medieval Body  
in Honour of Margaret Bridges

Edited by

Nicole Nyffenegger and Katrin Rupp

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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KIT'S SNEEZE:  
BODILY COMMUNICATION, GENDER ROLES  
AND THE PERFORMATIVITY OF LITERATURE  
IN THE PROLOGUE TO THE *TALE OF BERYN*

GUILLEMETTE BOLENS

In an interesting article, Robert Sturges contextualizes *The Prologue to the Tale of Beryn* or *Canterbury Interlude* within the social history of fifteenth-century England. He explains that urbanization and the slow economic and demographic recovery from the Black Death “created new opportunities for women”<sup>1</sup> owing to a labor shortage that opened new pathways of social mobility—a situation that turned unmarried, economically independent women into “sources of anxiety within traditional patriarchal culture.”<sup>2</sup> A suggestive literary representation of such potentially disturbing women is Kit the tapster in the *Canterbury Interlude*; she is single, chooses her lover and earns her living as a barmaid in an inn. Sturges argues that Kit, in this context, corresponds to “the figure of the urban whore that embodies [...] anxieties about independent women and class, anxieties that Kit represents in literary form.”<sup>3</sup>

While acknowledging the evident relevance of the socio-historical information grounding Sturges’ argument, I wish to propose a different reading of Kit in the *Canterbury Interlude*, based on Jonathan Culler’s idea that literature is performative. Culler traces the evolution of the concept of performativity from J.L. Austin to Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man and Judith Butler, concluding that philosophy and literature ought to join forces “to reflect on the nature of literature as event.”<sup>4</sup> In Austin’s theory of the performative, performative utterances are those that, within

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<sup>1</sup> Robert S. Sturges, “The Pardoner in Canterbury: Class, Gender and Urban Space in the *Prologue to the Tale of Beryn*,” *College Literature* 33.3 (Summer 2006), 55.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Culler, “Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative,” *Poetics Today* 21.3 (Fall 2000), 517.

the framework of pre-existing socio-cultural and linguistic conventions, actually do something in the world (the canonical example is the "I do" of a wedding ceremony, an utterance that inaugurates a new reality).<sup>5</sup> Culler argues that, like Austinian performatives of the "I do" variety, "the literary utterance *creates* the state of affairs to which it refers,"<sup>6</sup> and literature in that sense may be conceived as speech act.<sup>7</sup> This claim raises a number of questions: What kind of act does literature perform? What are the conditions under which a literary speech act may be called "felicitous?" In the case of a literary text, what are the pre-existing socio-cultural and linguistic conventions that must exist for the literary speech act to unfold? In this essay I explore the way in which a literary text can perform subversive moves while reiterating norms it apparently serves to consolidate. For, a repetition "can have critical value, as it animates and alters forms that it repeats."<sup>8</sup> A case in point in the *Canterbury Interlude* is Kit's performance of her prescribed gender role. In order to address this issue, I will pursue Culler's claim that literature is performative in Austin's sense, in the light of Judith Butler's performative theory of gender. Gender is performative, in Butler's view, in the sense that gender is not what one is but what one does on the basis of social conventions and repeatedly reenacted norms.

In the *Canterbury Interlude*, the narration of kinesic and paralinguistic communication, through gestures, facial expressions and intonations, indicates that Kit performs her pre-set gender role in a fashion that is openly inauthentic: she is never shown to *be* the woman she nonetheless actively represents—whatever anxiety this "woman" is supposed to trigger.<sup>9</sup> Kit and her gender role refuse to coincide and the resulting difficulty of settling what she *is* draws our attention instead to what she *does*. This creates a hiatus worth exploring between ontology/nature and socio-cultural gender roles in a literary text. The inquiry I wish to pursue in this essay is whether it is possible for a fifteenth-century literary text to disturb and thereby rearticulate the scripted social drama of gender roles by staging characters whose enactment of their normative gender roles is explicitly portrayed as a performance—in the sense, this time, of staged

<sup>5</sup> J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> Culler, "Philosophy and Literature," 506.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 507.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 517.

<sup>9</sup> On kinesics in literature, see Guillemette Bolens, *Le Style des gestes: Corporalité et kinésie dans le récit littéraire*. Préface d'Alain Berthoz. Bibliothèque d'histoire de la médecine et de la santé (Lausanne: Éditions BHMS, 2008).

performance. On these grounds, I wish to argue that Sturges' point that, while she is nowhere called a whore and never has paid sex, Kit must be read as a whore because "she fits [the] 'whore' paradigm,"<sup>10</sup> runs the risk of overlooking the (Austinian) performative and transformative force of literature, forestalling the subversive propensity that is such an important component of *Beryn*.

Sturges' claim is certainly plausible that Kit would "be recognizable to the late medieval/early modern audience as an appropriate object of the cultural discourse surrounding whoredom."<sup>11</sup> However, we should not dispose too rapidly of the fact that, as Sturges recognizes, Kit "is never accused of prostitution, not even called a whore."<sup>12</sup> When Sturges writes, nonetheless, that "Kit is automatically suspect because of her trade and the associated space she occupies"—by which he means her job selling ale in an inn—he highlights the force of discursive and social stereotyping. Kit is suspect "automatically" on the basis of social discourses described by Barbara Hanawalt:

Every female role associated with taverns and inns turned the domestic nature of the association on end and implied tainted womanhood. The disparaging term "ale-wife" was not the only insult directed at women associated with brewing and drink. For a *materfamilias* of a tavern, the titles of "procurer" or "bawd" were ready to the tongue and, for the tapster, the association with prostitution was all too much of a stereotype.<sup>13</sup>

Notwithstanding the relevance of such historical data for a reading of the *Canterbury Interlude*, the figure of Kit in this text resists any straightforward, unproblematized application of such information. Wolfgang Iser rightly insists that a rift separates a literary narrative from historical facts, the latter including social discourses, group stigmatizations and stereotyping.<sup>14</sup> No matter how hard to detect this rift may be in certain cases and no matter how crucial it may be for the reader to be aware of historical facts and discourses in order to make sense of a literary text, a straightforward mimetic relationship cannot be assumed to exist between historical facts

<sup>10</sup> Sturges, "The Pardoner in Canterbury," 61.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Barbara A. Hanawalt, *Of Good and Ill Repute: Gender and Social Control in Medieval England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 108.

<sup>14</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

and literature.<sup>15</sup> In Sturges' case, an apparently uncritical reliance on normative stereotypes gleaned from historical records results in the assertion of an oddly hierarchical binary relationship between reality and literature, with literature aspiring to reflect reality:

Kit, as an amateur whore, falls outside all of these attempts at social control. Exemplifying the discourses of whoredom but never identified as a professional by either dress or place of employment and certainly unrepentant, Kit retains control of her own life and the lives of her actual and potential sex partners, as well as of the inn, to a remarkable (and, in real-life terms, unrealistic) degree. Kit thus also fails to conform to another conventional portrayal of the whore, that of innocent or exploited victim (57-64): precisely because she cannot be categorized so easily, she remains a disturbing source of anxiety throughout the *Prologue*.<sup>16</sup>

So, Kit is unrealistic. And it may well be unrealistic to assume that a late medieval woman could be sexually and economically independent. But what about the fact that *Beryn* elicits such an image and hampers Kit's categorization? Is it not of crucial interest that this text does not conform to the norms one might expect on the basis of its socio-historical context? I do not mean to minimize the generally overwhelming power of social discourses (medieval, modern and contemporary) linking feminine sexual independence to a degrading availability to all men. And I understand Sturges' point that Kit's ambiguity allows her to function as a potentially dangerous vector of social disturbances—whence the anxiety she supposedly triggers. But we also need to pay closer attention to the rhetoric by means of which a literary text such as *Beryn* grapples with socio-cultural discourses and roles and alters them. For, perhaps, literature can *do* things with words that socio-historical records cannot convey, as for instance to *make* new social configurations *conceivable*. After all, Kit is single, chooses her lover and earns her living throughout the *Interlude* without ever being called a whore for it, nor being castigated as one. On the contrary, she is shown to be smarter and more skilled at using social codes than the Pardoner, a fifteenth-century version of Chaucer's artful conman.

In Sturges' view, the *Canterbury Interlude* "contains [Kit ...] through humor and parody."<sup>17</sup> The primary target of the story's parody is the class

<sup>15</sup> See Ralph Hanna III, "Brewing Trouble: On Literature and History—and Alewives," in *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Sturges, "The Pardoner in Canterbury," 63.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

behavior that belongs to the aristocracy, namely courtly manners and sentiments associated with *fin'amors*.

The sighs, tears and "to-do" conventionally characterize those courtly ladies of romance who "loven so passyngly," not a woman like Kit, a barmaid who is shortly also to be revealed as a whore and thief. They are belied when her body rebels against this artificial performance with a more natural response to tears that is absent from the conventions of courtly love: a runny nose ("therwith she gan to fnese" [l. 43]).<sup>18</sup>

Now unambiguously denoted as whore by Sturges, Kit is bestowed a body that betrays what in her pertains to nature. Kit's sneeze is the way her body finds to "rebel against" her "artificial performance."

Sturges' argument raises important issues about gender, literature and interpretation and is compelling in many ways. Yet, the idea that Kit's artificial performance veils her underlying true nature, which resides in her body, *contains* Kit more radically than any kind of humor in the text. Rather than naturalize Kit by means of her body by discriminating between fake tears and authentic sneezes, I propose to read all corporeal data in the text (sighs, tears, sneezes, etc.) as signs inasmuch as they belong to the protagonists' semiotic system of exchange. In this perspective, it is noteworthy that kinesic and paralinguistic signals are numerous and that, wherever they occur, they highlight the parodic propensity of the protagonists' gender performances. With regard to these performances, the challenge is much less to name the roles Kit and the Pardoner perform, than to analyze *how* they perform these roles and thereby reiterate but also alter the norms they convey. It may be that the way in which the text exhibits a "failed copy" of courtly behavior operates as a subversive move, pointing towards the fact that "the original, the authentic and the real are themselves constituted as effects."<sup>19</sup>

### Acting Genuine

In her discussion of early modern conduct books, Ann Rosalind Jones explains that long-standing official discourses (medical, religious, legal) "represented female character and status as fixed—eternal givens founded

<sup>18</sup> Sturges, "The Pardoner in Canterbury," 64.

<sup>19</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990 [2006]), 200.

on nature, Scripture and precedent."<sup>20</sup> In contrast, conduct books "appear to be based on a different assumption: men and women can be produced. They are malleable, capable of being trained for changing roles."<sup>21</sup> Theresa Coletti writes that "[i]ncreasing social mobility, brought about by economic expansion in the fifteenth century [...] helped to install a conception of gentility—and the courtesy that was its behavioural manifestation—as a set of socially acquired characteristics."<sup>22</sup> Courtesy could be taught and, consequently, also counterfeited, which accounts for the way in which, in Kathleen Ashley's words, "the late Middle Ages was an era obsessed with codified and externalized behaviors."<sup>23</sup> The interplay between Kit and the Pardoner bespeaks such socio-historical preoccupations—in the parodic mode.

Kit's adventure with the Pardoner in the *Canterbury Interlude* belongs to what is a small group of extant English fabliaux. Fabliaux are usually associated with thirteenth-century French literature, which influenced Chaucer's fabliaux in the *Canterbury Tales*. The choice of this literary genre, in which deceit prevails, informs readers' expectations. Erik Hertog gives a useful definition of the genre:

[A] fabliau is a stylized short narrative in a predominantly materialist semantic register, involving mostly stock bourgeois, lower-class and clerical characters in rigidly programmed plots of far-fetched, humorous and often sexual deceptions and retaliations, governed by local space and clock-time and often concluded with a moral.<sup>24</sup>

The local space and clock-time in Hertog's definition are in the *Interlude* the pilgrims' mid-morning arrival at an inn called Checker of the Hoop,

<sup>20</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones, "Nets and Bridles: Early Modern Conduct Books and Sixteenth-Century Women's Lyrics," in *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on Literature and the History of Sexuality*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 40-41.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>22</sup> Theresa Coletti, "'Curtesy Doth It Yow Lere': The Sociology of Transgression in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*," *English Literary History* 71 (2004), 13.

<sup>23</sup> Kathleen M. Ashley, "Medieval Courtesy Literature and Dramatic Mirrors of Female Conduct," in *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on Literature and the History of Sexuality*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 25.

<sup>24</sup> Erik Hertog, *Chaucer's Fabliaux as Analogues* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1991), 2-3.

"that many a man doth knowe."<sup>25</sup> While "the inn and the profit motive" are, according to Andrew Cowell, "expressions of a larger medieval weakening of religious, class and finally textual communities in favor of an individual search for profit,"<sup>26</sup> Paul Strohm characterizes the alehouse or tavern as "a kind of neutral zone, a place where reconsideration and redefinition of social status might occur."<sup>27</sup>

The tavern would seem to operate on more than one front, as a fact of social life and a stimulus to the imagination. As one of the few places where social remobilization might be envisaged, the tavern occurs in these narratives as an emblem of potential social transformation.<sup>28</sup>

In the *Canterbury Interlude*, deception of the kind found in the "rigidly programmed plots" of fabliaux takes place within a space of fifteenth-century social mobility, where the citation of aristocratic behavior may serve other purposes than expressing a desire for genuine resemblance. As a tapster selling ale in an inn and "a stimulus to the imagination" in her own right, Kit cannot be limited to the narrative and social function of the whore paradigm for the very reason that she is a protagonist who *plays* with paradigms.

After a few introductory lines, the *Interlude* launches into the fabliau plot, as the Pardoner stands back, spots the barmaid of the inn and approaches her. At its outset, the social exchange between Kit and the Pardoner is marked by *transparent* and *reciprocal* pretense. *Beryn* thus appears to invite a Butlerian reading of gender as performative. At the same time, however, the staged and stagey performance by Kit and the Pardoner seems to suggest that gender is a role one may freely choose to enact or not. This runs counter to Butler's account of gender as neither a choice, nor a role, nor "a construction that one puts on, as one puts on

<sup>25</sup> *The Canterbury Interlude and Merchant's Tale of Beryn*, in *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions*, ed. John M. Bowers, TEAMS Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University), 14. All quotes from *Beryn* will be from this edition. Peter Brown explains that the inn was built for the pilgrimage trade between 1392 and 1395; its sign was a checkerboard enclosed in a metal or wooden hoop (Brown 1991, 151, quoted in Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude and Merchant's Tale of Beryn*, 165, note 14).

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Cowell, *At Play in the Tavern: Signs, Coins and Bodies in the Middle Ages* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 16.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 10.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

clothes in the morning."<sup>29</sup> Rather, I propose that the performativity of *Beryn* should, in fact, be assessed as literary. As a literary text, *Beryn* creates in the Austinian sense proposed by Culler (literature performs speech acts) the new perspective, unexpected in a medieval narrative, that gender is performative in the Butlerian sense (gender is what one does, not what one is) and it creates this perspective by showing us a discrepancy in the social performance of its protagonists, who emphatically and insistently play with the available stereotypes of what it means to act like a man or a woman.

Both Kit and the Pardoner perform roles and they do so with gestures and words that do not appear genuine and sincere and do not try to, either. In other words, the performance, carried out by both parties, does not fool anyone. This suggests that social roles are seen as participating in a play where gender rôles are based not only on pretense but also on mutual agreement and understanding.

He [the Pardoner] toke his staff to the tapstere.—“Welcom, myne owne brothere,”

Quod she with a frendly look, al redy for to kys.

And he, as a man i-learned of such kyndnes,

Braced hir by the myddill and made hir gladly chere,

As though he had i-knowe hir al the rather year.<sup>30</sup>

Learning and knowledge, usually evocative of clerical wisdom, is applied here to seduction skills and lore. This makes immediately plain that the specific forms of male-female relationships are seen as based on socially acquired rules. Interestingly, the first move performed by Kit and the Pardoner is to pretend that they *know* each other, which is conveyed by linguistic and kinesic signals. Kit is ready to kiss the Pardoner, calling him her own brother and he holds her by the waist as if (“As though”) he had known her all the previous year. The copula “as if” expresses the fact that these signals require an interpretation: these signals *mean that* the protagonists agree to pretend that they know each other. To behave “as if” is found in all sections of *Beryn*, functioning as the linguistic marker of simulators, epitomizing the *modus operandi* of the seduction game between Kit and the Pardoner. This points to the fact that body movements, just like discourses, require interpretations. Although movements and gestures may be ambiguously performed in order to deceive and convey misinterpretations, the initial instance of simulation between Kit and the

<sup>29</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 21.

<sup>30</sup> Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude and Merchant's Tale of Beryn*, 22-26.

Pardoner makes it clear that neither one nor the other is being deceived. Indeed, both Kit and the Pardoner necessarily *know* that they are meeting for the first time. Notwithstanding a persistent critical interpretation of the Pardoner as gullible victim, the text makes it clear that the seller of pardons is no more credulous than his prospective prey.

“The name of the fabliau-game is smartness and survival, outwitting your opponent.”<sup>31</sup> While the *Interlude* shares this quality with other fabliaux, it develops the theatricality of the action by emphasizing the protagonists’ awareness that they are strategically using codes and faking social norms. After the Pardoner’s positive response, Kit implicitly establishes the rules of the game. She and the Pardoner will each have to play according to specific roles. She will act the part of the female who is all the more attractive for the fact that she is not at the moment under the protection of another male and the Pardoner will play the role of the prospective protective male who possesses super powers in the form of clerkly knowledge—an aspect of the plot to be discussed more fully later. The cues and gestures Kit employs to establish these roles are emphatically exaggerated.

She haled hym into the tapstry, there hir bed was maked.  
 “Lo, here I ligg,” quod she, “myselff al nyght al naked,  
 Without mannes company, syn my love was dede—  
 Jenkyn Harpour, yf ye hym know. From fete to the hede,  
 Was nat a lustier persone to daunce ne to lepe  
 Then he was, thoughe I it sey.”—And therewith she to wepe  
 She made and with hir napron feir and white i-wassh,  
 She wyped sofft hir eyen, for teres that she out lassh  
 As grete as eny mylstone, upward gon they stert  
 For love of hir swetyng that sat so nyghe hir hert  
 She wept and wayled and wrong hir hondes and made much to done,  
 For they that loven so passyngly, such trowes they have echon.<sup>32</sup>  
 She snyffeth, sigheth and shooke hire hede and made rouful chere.  
 [...] and therewith she gan to fnese.<sup>33</sup>

As Sturges points out, Kit mimics courtly sentiments that do not befit her persona. Other passages will confirm this view. I propose that Kit’s overtly hyperbolic and distorted citation of courtly behaviors can be seen as a “failed copy” undermining the notion of an “original” template of

<sup>31</sup> Hertog, *Chaucer’s Fabliaux as Analogues*, 11.

<sup>32</sup> “For those who love so surpassingly, such fancies they each one have” (Bowers’ translation).

<sup>33</sup> Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude and Merchant’s Tale of Beryn*, 27-39 and 42.

courtly behavior. A central aspect of her performance is the way in which her "failed copy" impinges on the subsequent reception of the "original." In Kit's hands, the literary image of the aristocratic lady softly weeping for her forlorn paramour is contaminated by the picture of Kit's enormous tears spurting high, leading to sniffing and an unexpected sneeze. Rather than being the expression of Kit's true nature rebelling against her artificial performance, as Sturges would have it, Kit's running nose and sneeze may instead read as a literary deflation of the courtly expression of sorrow, with both the original and its parody ultimately coming off as performances. Similarly, after reading how Kit wrings her hands, the same gesture of anguished sorrow in a courtly narrative will more readily look like what it is, namely a corporeal encoded and performed signal.<sup>34</sup> In short, Kit's sneeze is a bodily supplement to profuse tears and wrung hands that exemplifies with economy and humor the way in which a text affords disruption and subversion in a social script via a repetition that alters the form it repeats.

What is more, this apparently ludicrous scene raises the complex problem of paralinguistic and kinesic interpretation. I elided four lines in the preceding quote; they run as follows:

She snyffeth, sigheth and shooke hire hede and made rouful chere.  
 "Benedicite!" quod the Pardonere and toke hir by the swere.  
 "Ye make sorowe inowgh," quod he, "yeur lyff thoughe ye shuld lese."  
 "It is no wonder," quod she than and therewith she gan to fnese.<sup>35</sup>

Adam Kendon, one of the best modern experts on non-verbal communication, as J.A. Burrow acknowledges,<sup>36</sup> advocates a "semiotic and communicative" perspective on gesture. He argues that "it is through the partnership between gesture and speech that we see so often in co-present conversation, that utterance meaning is achieved."<sup>37</sup> He explains that "gesture can be used to provide context for spoken expression, thus reducing the ambiguity of the meaning of what is expressed." But also, "gesture goes further than this. It can also add to the propositional content of the utterance."<sup>38</sup> I propose to read Kit's sneeze as a deliberate gesture rather

<sup>34</sup> On this gesture of grief in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, see J.A. Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>35</sup> Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude*, 39-42.

<sup>36</sup> Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Adam Kendon, "Language and Gesture: Unity or Duality?" in *Language and Gesture*, ed. David McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 50.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

than as the expression of some genuine and spontaneous inner nature rebelling against a barmaid's social fallacy—a gesture that adds to the propositional content of the utterance. Fernando Poyatos writes that “the possible paralinguistic and kinesic qualifiers of the whole act [of sneezing] give it enough audible-visual and socio-semantic complexity to deserve a detailed description of its features.”<sup>39</sup> *Beryn's* reader is spared the detailed physiological details of “the blast of air forced through the glottis (‘Atchoo!’),” but the socio-semantic complexity of Kit's somatic act ought to be assessed within the context of the exchange. For, rather than reduce the ambiguity of the utterance, the sneeze in this scene increases ambiguity by augmenting the communicative power and semiotic range of the utterance.

We cannot read Kit's sneeze accurately if we take it out of the context of the exchange. A sneeze in literature has no universal natural meaning. In the context of this passage, the sneeze may be read as a paralinguistic reply to the Pardoner's gesture, which just precedes it. Indeed, the Pardoner puts his hands on Kit's neck just before the blast, which implies that his face is rather close to hers when Kit begins to sneeze. This fact, which pertains to proxemics, is the noteworthy complexity added to the utterance meaning. It creates an interesting discrepancy between Kit's general linguistic-paralinguistic-kinesic behavior and her final sneeze. For her overall message sounds like a fake call for protection by an enticingly vulnerable female, while her final note seems to mean “In your face!” and more pragmatically, “Step back!”—a secondary discourse which will be carried through in the rest of the plot. Reading somatic signs is a matter of interpretation and this is precisely the point in this passage. What do we make of this sneeze and what does the Pardoner make of it? The latter opts for a reading in his favor: “Aha! Al hole!” quod the Pardoner. “Yeur penance is somewhat passed.”<sup>40</sup> Besides the possible pun on “whole/hole” (Kit is all holes), his response highlights the way in which bodily signals are routinely decoded and invested with meaning. Bodily co-presence in the course of verbal exchanges necessitates reading practices and semantic decisions regarding the other body's kinesic and paralinguistic utterances. This necessity to interpret, whatever one's level of experience or expertise, is epitomized by the semantic gulf between a sneeze and the Pardoner's

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<sup>39</sup> Fernando Poyatos, *Nonverbal Communication Across Disciplines. Paralanguage, Kinesics, Silence, Personal and Environmental Interaction*. Vol. 2 (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2002), 37.

<sup>40</sup> [“Aha! All whole (good health),” said the Pardoner. “Your penance (mourning for your dead lover) is just about over”], Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude*, 43.

conclusion that Kit is ready to turn the page on her supposedly dead lover and pick a new one.

Finally, in terms of communication, Kit manages to convey two contradictory messages at once: "Come to me" and "Step back." She is in this sense doubly successful, as the expression of the second message does not compromise the intelligibility and relational impact of the first: the Pardoner continues to be willing to play on. He then takes her by the chin, which implies again hand-to-face contact but at a slightly greater, safer distance. The Pardoner thus decides to give more credit to the linguistic message than to the paralinguistic one. This suggests that the body can be more readily de-semanticized, neutralized and naturalized than speech. It is easier to pretend that the corporeal is free from intentional significance. This point may be linked to the beginning of the scene under study. As she welcomes the Pardoner, Kit briefly depicts herself lying naked in bed before switching moods and acting as if painfully grieving for her allegedly trespassed lover. The nakedness of her body is here a linguistic fact that belongs to her discursive scheme (she *says* that she lies naked). But even if she were actually lying naked on her bed, her nakedness would not be bare of semiotic force. I shall return to this point in relation to *Beryn's* second seduction scene, which begins with Kit stretched across her bed, pretending to be asleep.

In the first seduction scene, Kit and the Pardoner, while obviously acting, keep referring to honesty and truth with unflagging zest.<sup>41</sup> The Pardoner repeatedly uses the adjective "trew(e)" in his response to Kit's unabashed sexual display. And the would-be new lover answers Kit's emotionality with equally exaggerated feelings when he pretends to envision with tremendous anxiety Kit's imminent death due to lovesickness. Whereas a fabliau character such as Jean Bodel's Bailleul peasant genuinely believes he is dead when told so, Kit and the Pardoner fake their parts throughout: both lie and know the other lies as well.<sup>42</sup> The deception is made obvious to readers and protagonists alike. Both Kit and the

<sup>41</sup> Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude*, 46-55.

<sup>42</sup> Puis le despoille, si le couche; / Les ieus li a clos et la bouche; / Puis se lest cheoir sor le cors: / "Frere, diste ele, tu es mors: / Dieu ait merci de la teue ame! / Que fera ta lasse de fame / Qui por toi s'ocirra de duel?" / Li vilains gist souz le linquel, / Qui entresait cuide mors estre. (Jean Bodel, *Le Paysan de Bailleul*, in *Fabliaux du Moyen Age*, ed. and trans. Jean Dufournet (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), 57-65).

[Then she undresses him and makes him lie down; she closes his eyes and mouth; and falls upon his body: "Brother, she says, you are dead: God have mercy on your soul! What will I, your unhappy wife, do, who will kill herself for sorrow for you?" The villain lies under the shroud and immediately believes that he is dead.]

Pardoner abuse religious and amorous codes and both continue to act *as if* they were not acting. The interplay consists in seeing who will stumble out of the game first, who will upset the rules of pretense by genuinely *reacting* to his/her partner's *acting*. Eventually, the Pardoner's anger constitutes such a reaction. At this point, the outwitted and frantic Pardoner objects "she made hir trew!"<sup>43</sup> (she acted as if she were true)—a beautifully ironic protestation, given his own abuse of the adjective "trew" in their former interplay.

When the Pardoner takes Kit by the chin, he exclaims: "Allas, that love ys syn!"<sup>44</sup> thus interconnecting the amorous code with the religious. Both he and Kit use a worn-out figure in the rhetoric of seduction: they cry that they must not, nay, cannot, yield to love's call. Kit's alleged reason is the painful loss of her prior lover, while the Pardoner invokes his status of pilgrim. He is engaged on a religious path and must maintain his abstinence and fast rather than submit to lustful temptations and sin.<sup>45</sup> The irony of such a passage is inescapable, unless read in isolation. Not one word can be taken at face value. Kit will soon be in bed with her actual and lively paramour. As for the Pardoner, he just had lunch with his fellow pilgrims and is about to arrange a late supper and *rendezvous gallant* that night with Kit. The tapster protests, however, that

"Brenned cat dredeth feir; it is mery to be aloon.  
For, by Our Lady Mary that bare Ihesu on hir arm,  
I coud never love yit, but it did me harm,  
For ever my maner hath be to love over-much."<sup>46</sup>

In short, she promises passionate love (her manner is to love "over-much"), pretending to fear her own excess, while invoking the Virgin with child, that is, a holy pregnancy with good effects (the birth of Christ).

Further, she bestows her former "unforgettable" lover's name, Jenken, onto the Pardoner and thus encourages him to think that he will benefit from her intense libido. Tauno Mustanoja's study of the use of names in Middle English poetry shows that the name Jankyn (or Jenken or Jenkyn) "came to symbolize light-hearted and light-headed young people."<sup>47</sup> Bradley Darjes and Thomas Rendall note<sup>48</sup> that this name fits the description

<sup>43</sup> Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude*, 492.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-59.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-81.

<sup>47</sup> See Bradley Darjes and Thomas Rendall, "A Fabliau in the *Prologue to The Tale of Beryn*," *Mediaeval Studies* 47 (1985), 425.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

Kit makes of her deceased lover, Jenkyn Harpou: "From fete to the hede / Was nat a lustier persone to daunce ne to lepe."<sup>49</sup> The lover's last name, Harpou, further suggests that Kit's lover is a type more than a real person, the type of the music- and love-making bachelor. In sum, Kit casts the Pardoner in the role of the virile and partying clerk with stamina. The Pardoner is more than willing to endorse this role: he confirms that Jenken is the name his foster parents gave him. Darjes and Rendall rightly argue that this only means that he is willing to play his part.

The unspoken object of communication is blatantly obvious and the Pardoner's body language further seals the agreement. Despite their being alone—no company is expected, Kit says—they continue to perform an act: the Pardoner furtively flutters his eyelids ("And pryvelich unlased his both eyen-liddes"), deeply gazes into her face ("And loked hir in the visage paramour amyddes"), while sighing a little, so that she might hear it ("And sighed therewith a litil tyme, that she it here myghte"), before he begins softly to croon a love song ("And gan to trown and feyn this song, 'Now love, thu do me righte!'"<sup>50</sup> Such an emphasis on paralinguistic and kinesic signals and communication conventions between social actors is remarkable.<sup>51</sup> Here we have two characters performing elaborate coded gestures with each other, both intent on producing specific readings of their expressive corporeal signals and each trying to outdo the other in deceit. The interlocutors recognize the other's signs as faked, but nevertheless agree to play along with the game: the Pardoner answers Kit's blandishing tears with fluttering eyelashes.

This reciprocal performance may be read as a distorted and subversive citation of the courtly allegory named *Doux Regard* in the *Roman de la Rose*. *Doux Regard*, Sweet Gaze, is an allegorical personification of the amorous looks exchanged between lovers. It plays an important part in the authoritative medieval reference in matters of courtly love, *Le Roman de la Rose*, written in the thirteenth-century by Guillaume de Lorris and continued by Jean de Meun. While both protagonists in *Beryn* behave *as if* they were courtly lovers, their exaggerated acting style is indicative of the semantic value of their gestures: they are engaged in a deliberate performance, Kit playing the vulnerable female struggling against her libido and the Pardoner playing the protective male full of stamina. Thus, the text stages characters *staging themselves* as actors of cultural roles.

<sup>49</sup> Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude*, 30-31.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-70.

<sup>51</sup> On this topic, see Jean-Charles Chabanne, "Verbal, paraverbal et non-verbal dans l'interaction verbale humoristique," in *Approches du discours comique*, ed. Laurence Rosier et Jean-Marc Defays (Dolembreux, Sprimont: Mardaga, 1999).

The Pardoner's fluttering eyelashes are a parodic iteration of a cultural sign of seduction. This sign in *Beryn* is disruptive because the text presents it as pseudo-felicitous: it operates because Kit acts *as if* it were felicitous. But the Austinian performative force of the exchange misfires as soon as one of the acting partners stops playing. This narrative consequence highlights the Butlerian performative quality of the exchange: Kit and the Pardoner behave *like* a male and a female in the cultural scenario of seduction and tryst-making and this gives them momentary credibility. Yet, the intelligibility of this scene is revealed as a fragile and eminently relative *effect*.

The humorous valence of the interplay between Kit and the Pardoner foreshadows the advent of the burlesque genre (i.e. slapstick), to be developed in full one century later. The burlesque effect is produced by the discrepancy between the acting style and the purpose of enunciation, an effect that is further enhanced by kinesic and paralinguistic exaggeration and a tendency to overact.<sup>52</sup> Discordance highlights the decoding process triggered by the exchange. For Jean-Marc Defays, the burlesque is a parody that openly displays its transgressive quality; it exhibits and projects its parodic nature.<sup>53</sup> The dialogues between Kit and the Pardoner evince such self-reflexive mimetic games.

Later, the performing partners strike a deal about their nocturnal rendezvous and the bargain is confirmed with money. The venal nature of the exchange is comically disguised with motifs that partake of nobility and courtesy.

And therewith he [the Pardoner] stert up smertly and cast down a grote.  
 "What shal this do, gentill sir? Nay, sir! For my cote,  
 I nold ye payde a peny here and so sone pas."  
 The Pardoner swore his gretter othe; he wold pay no las.  
 "Iwis, sir, it is over-do. But sith it is yeur will,  
 I woll put it in my purs, lest ye it take in ill  
 To refuse yeur curtesy!"—and therewith she gan to bowe.  
 "Now trewly," quod the Pardoner, "yeur maners been too alowe."<sup>54</sup>

The Pardoner accepts Kit's attribution of gentility and courtesy and swears his great oath—the performative act par excellence in Austin's system—

<sup>52</sup> Dominique Bertrand, "Burlesque et humour: Inversion, discordance et distance," in *Approches du discours comique*, ed. Laurence Rosier et Jean-Marc Defays (Dolembreux, Sprimont: Mardaga, 1999), 72.

<sup>53</sup> Jean-Marc Defays, "Le burlesque et la question des genres," in *Poétiques du Burlesque*, ed. Dominique Bertrand (Paris: Champion, 1998), 43.

<sup>54</sup> Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude*, 87-94.

warranting his good intention and generosity. But the object of his oath clashes with the register implied by swearing one's great oath: the Pardoner swears that he will not pay Kit less than a groat or coin. Kit's claim of excess, "it is over-do," produces, in turn, a comical discrepancy between her exclamation and the mediocrity of the sum and obvious stinginess of the Pardoner. Excess and exaggeration are recurring tropes in parodic and burlesque interplays. Kit claims to love "over-much" after shedding floods of tears for her supposedly deceased lover; she pretends that the Pardoner's gift is "over-do" when he casts down a single miserable coin onto the table; she will protest (in a passage to be discussed later) that the Pardoner is "over queynt,"<sup>55</sup> that is, he exaggerates his naiveté when wondering aloud who will spend the night with her. And the Pardoner participates in the game, commenting on Kit's manners and obviously fake humility with these words: "yeur maners been too alowe." Peter Brown argues that "[h]ere, appeals to 'curtesy' and 'gentilnes' are being used by Kitt [*sic*] as crude instruments of control, as a means of exploiting the Pardoner's vanity so that he becomes vulnerable to her manipulations."<sup>56</sup> Yet, it matters that the manipulation in *Beryn* is explicitly reciprocal: "For etheres thought and tent was other to begile."<sup>57</sup> Both Kit and the Pardoner exploit cultural and social conventions as means of outplaying the other. The other in this exchange is both a partner and an adversary in a game of social pretense.

It is often the case in fabliaux that the code of *fin'amors* is the system of reference used to bring forth parodic transgression. Darjes and Rendall stress this aspect in Chaucer's "Miller's Tale" and *The Canterbury Interlude*:

While Chaucer uses the courtly conception of love seriously in such works as *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight's Tale*, he also develops its comic possibilities to good effect and nowhere better than in the figure of Absolon. This parish clerk imagines himself a knight in pursuit of country-girl Alisoun and the *Beryn Prologue* shows the Pardoner adopting the same course with Tapster Kitt.<sup>58</sup>

As is well known, the "Miller's Tale" is a parodic "requiting" of the "Knight's Tale." Parody in the "Miller's Tale" and in the *Canterbury*

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 349.

<sup>56</sup> Peter Brown, "Journey's End: The Prologue to *The Tale of Beryn*," in *Chaucer and Fifteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. Julia Boffey and Janet Cowen. Medieval Studies, no. 5 (London: King's College London 1991), 154.

<sup>57</sup> Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude*, 126.

<sup>58</sup> Darjes and Rendall, "A Fabliau in the *Prologue to The Tale of Beryn*," 421.

*Interlude* must, however, be distinguished. Darjes and Rendall write that Absolon the clerk "imagines himself" a knight in love. Whether this is an accurate description of Absolon or not, it clearly cannot be said of the Pardoner who *uses* the code but never imagines himself a knightly *fin amant*. *Beryn* is explicit about it. The Pardoner fakes liberality and gives Kit money to purchase their late dinner, all the while intending to steal his money back after their night together: "And thoughe it have costed me, yit wol I do my peyn / For to pike hir purs tonyghte and wyn my cost ageyn."<sup>59</sup> Although Absolon also offers money to Alisoun, implicitly intent on buying her sexual favors, nothing similar is attributed to him before he brutally wakes up from his amorous fancies. This distinction helps to underscore the relevance of imitation in *Beryn*. It ultimately counteracts and punctures all sense of verisimilitude in the characters' performances via the burlesque propensity of their acting style.

The *Interlude* plays with fabliaux conventions when Kit bestows the role of the clerk-lover upon a pleased Pardoner.<sup>60</sup> In the *Interludium de clerico et puella* (ca. 1300, MS Harley 2253), the clerk's future prey protests: "Clerc of scole ne kep I non, / For many god wymman haf thai don scam [shame]."<sup>61</sup> In typical fabliaux roles, a clerk is often the sexual partner of the wife of a gullible or absent husband. She may be consenting, as in Jean Bodel's *Paysan de Bailleul* or abused, as in the *Interludium de clerico et puella*. Since the Pardoner is allotted the clerk's typical narrative function, it is understood that he is to enjoy the barmaid's sexual favors. But all expectations are thwarted when the Pardoner finds himself in the position of the cuckolded husband discovering his wife in the arms of another. The would-be clerk is duped by a woman faithful to her lover. The situation is similar in Chaucer's "Miller's Tale" as far as the basic plot is concerned, but *Beryn* develops the female protagonist and shows her *deliberately* using cultural and social conventions in the preliminary conversations with her victim. In the "Miller's Tale" Alisoun never reaches this level of agency.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude*, 375-76.

<sup>60</sup> On the figure of the "clerk-lover," see Sheila Delany, *Medieval Literary Politics: Shapes of Ideology* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 105 (chapter 7, "Clerks and Quitting in *The Reeve's Tale*: Social Structure as a Source of Irony").

<sup>61</sup> *Interludium de clerico et puella*, in *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, ed. J.A.W. Bennett and G.V. Smithers, xv (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), 28-29. [Clerks of schools have shamed many good women].

<sup>62</sup> Alisoun seems to instigate the arse-kissing joke, but she remains essentially a body and as such an object of male desire. "The extended *effictio* of Alison certainly reduces her to an animalized sex object" (James H. Morey, "The

Dream interpretation is used in *Beryn's* game of citation when Kit cunningly asks the Pardoner to interpret an apparently ominous dream in which a priest and a clerk drive her out of church. Although the plot of the dream is emphatically negative, the Pardoner reassuringly claims that Kit should be glad, "For comenly of these swevenes the contrary men shul fynde;"<sup>63</sup> the dream means that she will soon get married. The obvious hiatus between the dream's plot and the Pardoner's vested interpretation is a humorous comment on the abuse of signs. Dream interpretation is traditionally associated with clerical learning,<sup>64</sup> an important feature of the role Kit bestows on the Pardoner. In this context, it is understood that Kit never had such a dream. Rather, she provides it to give the Pardoner an opportunity to consolidate his role-playing. He is a clerk, he knows therefore how to interpret dreams. In the second seduction scene, Kit pretends to be in awe of clerical wisdom and power:

"I have i-fared the wers for yewe," quod Kit. "Do ye no drede  
 God that is above? And eke ye had no nede  
 For to conger me, God woot, with yeur nygromancy  
 That have no more to vaunce me but oonly my body;  
 And yf it were disteyned, then were I ondo.  
 Iwis I trowe, Jenken, ye be nat to trust to,  
 For evermore ye clerkes con so much in book,  
 Ye woll wyn a womman atte first look."  
 Thought the Pardoner, "This goth wele!" and made hir better cher  
 And axed of hir sofftly, "Lord! Who shall ligg here  
 This nyghte that is to comyng? I prey yewe tell me."  
 "Iwis, it is grete nede to tell yew," quod she;  
 "Make it nat over queynt, thoughe ye be a clerk.  
 Ye know wel inowgh iwis by loke, by word, by work."<sup>65</sup>

Kit's argument is simple but effective: "Clerks gain superpowers in books. They are powerful and can win a woman at first glance. You are a clerk; hence I cannot possibly resist your drive; I am at your mercy." To miss the irony in this claim—as Bashe does when he writes that "Kit, like most of

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'Cultour' in the *Miller's Tale*: Alison as Iseult," *Chaucer Review* 29.4 (1995), 378). In contrast, Kit is as much a social actor as the Pardoner. She wins the game because she is more skillful than her male, equally deceitful counterpart.

<sup>63</sup> Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude*, 108.

<sup>64</sup> Michel Stanesco, "Nigromance et Université: scolastique du merveilleux dans le roman français du Moyen Age," in *Milieus universitaires et mentalité urbaine au Moyen Age*, ed. Daniel Poirion (Paris: Presses Universitaires de la Sorbonne, 1987), 130.

<sup>65</sup> Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude*, 337-50.

the ignorant, is apparently impressed by his [the Pardoner's] assumption of learning<sup>66</sup>—seems odd. Social condescension induces a literal reading of an interchange based on pretense. By contrast, the Pardoner appropriately decodes the message and comically remarks to himself, "This goes well!" He then asks Kit the rhetorical question of who will sleep with her tonight. Her answer is delightful as she points out to him that his performance is getting clumsy: "Yes, I make you play the role of the seductive clerk, yes, clerks are supposed to sound smart, but don't overdo it." "Make it nat over queynt, thoughte ye be a clerk." The code is spelled out clearly enough as it is: "Ye know wel inowgh iwis by loke, by word, by work,"<sup>67</sup> "I invited *you* to sleep in my bed, paralinguistically, linguistically and kinesically."

Bashe's reading is all the more astonishing considering that the scene begins thus:

He [the Pardoner] stapped into the tapstry wonder pryvely,  
and fond hir liggynge liryng, with half slepeye—  
Poured fellich under hir hood and saw al his comyng,  
And lay ay still, as naught she knewe, but feyned hir sleping.  
He put his hond to hir brest. "Awake," quod he, "Awake!"  
"A, Benedicite! Sir, who wist yewe here? Out! Thus I myght be take  
Prisoner," quod the tapstere, "being al aloon!"—  
And therwith breyd up in a frighte and began to groon.<sup>68</sup>

Kit lies full-length, enticingly stretched across the bed, pretending to sleep while peering out slyly from under her hood. In this passage, a physical body is denied all self-evidence; physicality is on display, to be sure, but access to an objectified body is a lure: it makes a difference that Kit's half-closed eye is watching under the hood. After Kit's all too vehement protestations, the Pardoner follows her lead once again in his answer to her claim that she is his powerless prisoner. The Pardoner aptly plays his part: "Nowe sith ye be my prisoner, yeld [yield] yewe now;" and Kit starts to groan that she has no choice, no power to flee, that she is helpless like a mouse caught in a cage, that she will have indeed to surrender.<sup>69</sup> Mimicry and the citation of cultural codes are transparently staged in this scene. When earlier protesting against the Pardoner's alleged use of necromancy to possess her, Kit describes herself as a person who has nothing else but her body to advance her: "That have no more to vauce me but oonly my

<sup>66</sup> E.J. January Bashe, "The Prologue of *The Tale of Beryn*," *Philological Quarterly* 12.1 (1933), 14.

<sup>67</sup> Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude*, 349-50.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 309-16.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 317-21.

body."<sup>70</sup> What emerges from a semiotic and rhetorical analysis of Kit's body is the way in which her body, no matter how deployed and displayed it is on a bed, far exceeds its own "natural" flesh.

According to Sarah Cohen, "the particularities of how physical movement contributes to the socializing process have remained to a great extent unexplored in interdisciplinary critical studies."<sup>71</sup> She continues: "What does one do with one's body? The problem of how performance shapes social identity to craft effects of gender, age, race and status necessarily implicates the movement of the body itself."<sup>72</sup> The effect of Kit stretching her body on her bed is more complex than a sign of whorish accessibility, for this very reason that it is presented as an effect. Kit acts *as if* she were just a body. Meanwhile, the fact that she deliberately *displays* herself as just a body contradicts this pretense (she pretends to believe that she is just a body). Later, among the profusion of insults proffered by the angered Pardoner, one in particular is directed against Kit's "fals body."<sup>73</sup> She said she was controlled by her desire for the Pardoner but she was lying (verbally) although she was lying (on her bed). Her body is false, claims the Pardoner. Indeed, far from being reduced to the status of offered object, the body is what it performs on a multiplicity of possibly contradictory levels, including that of offering itself *as if* it were an object.

### The Trick with Courtesy

After the fight between the Pardoner, Kit's lover and the innkeeper, the Pardoner reckons that his mistake was to trust a barmaid.<sup>74</sup> *The Tale of Beryn* is a partial adaptation of the fourteenth-century French *Bérinus*, a subversive continuation of the *Seven Sages of Rome* tradition.<sup>75</sup> This tradition conveys the long-lasting idea that masculine intelligence is menaced by feminine wit. In its comical counterpart, the *Interlude* portrays a duped would-be clerk driven to distraction, who catches a cold after racing and sweating in the dark.<sup>76</sup> Women's wit is usually labeled as

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>71</sup> Sarah R. Cohen, "Performing Identity in *The Hard Nut*: Stereotype, Modeling and the Inventive Body," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 11.2 (1998), 485.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 485.

<sup>73</sup> Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude*, 514.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 653-55.

<sup>75</sup> I discuss the *Tale of Beryn* in "Narrative Use and the Practice of Fiction in *The Book of Sindibad* and *The Tale of Beryn*," *Poetics Today* 29.2 (2008): 309-51.

<sup>76</sup> Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude*, 628-31.

"wiles" and "trickery" and female protagonists are emphatically punished for it.<sup>77</sup> In *Beryn*, tapsters are said to be cunning and deceitful, a quality thought to be shared by womankind at large: "But who is that a womman coud nat make his berd / And she were thereabout and set hir wit thereto?"<sup>78</sup> Despite the misogynistic overtone of this question, which universalizes the supposedly deceitful predisposition of all women, *Beryn* disrupts any straightforward ideological condemnation of Kit. For one thing, the tapster is never punished for being witty. On the contrary, her sagacity clearly protects her and permits her to take action. Alisoun also escapes unscathed in the "Miller's Tale," but her cleverness is never invoked to ground this outcome. Furthermore, the misogynistic idea that there is such a thing as a feminine nature and that it is essentially deceptive occurs at a stage in the plot which strikingly ridicules such assumptions. Indeed, the Pardoner poses as victim of feminine wiles once he is outsmarted. His misogyny therefore sounds like the petulant protestation of a game's loser.

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<sup>77</sup> Witness the end of the Old Spanish *Book of the Wiles of Women*, which belongs, as the other titles below, to the *Seven Sages* tradition: "'And Sire, I gave you this tale for the sole reason that you might distrust women, who are evil; for the sage says that if the earth should change into paper and the sea into ink and its fish into pens, they would not be able to set down the wickedness of women.' And the king commanded her [his wife] to be roasted in a dry cauldron" (John Esten Keller, trans., *The Book of the Wiles of Women*, MLA Translation series n°2 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1956) (51). In a stark contrast, the Hebrew *Tales of Sendeban* explains that the prince, when finally allowed to speak, pleads that his father's wife not be sentenced to death. The wife gives a final exemplum and concludes, "One says this and one says that, but when you say, 'Let her die,' I am unable to suffer any longer. And now I will plead my case before the King and let the King judge me in his wisdom." And the Prince replied: 'Let her not be condemned to die, for every man fights for his life. And now I will ask of the King and his counselors to pardon her sin and not to execute her.' And the King and the officers that were with him and the whole nation, were happy to forgive her her sin" (*Tales of Sendeban. An Edition and Translation of the Hebrew Version of the Seven Sages, Based on Unpublished Manuscripts*, ed. Morris Epstein (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967), 293-95). To the best of my knowledge, this ending is unique. Epstein adds in a note: "In *Syntipas* she wanders through the city on an ass, head shaven and face dirtied, accompanied by two criers who proclaim her crimes. *Sindban*, the *Libro* and the *Seven Vezirs* are brief: in the first she is hanged; in the second, she is burned in a dry caldron; in the last, she is thrown into the sea with a stone tied to her foot" (Epstein, *Tales of Sendeban*, 295, note 2).

<sup>78</sup> Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude*, 436-37.

The Pardoner has been tricked by Kit into playing the role of the typical fabliaux clerk. After realizing his failure, the Pardoner complains: "She said I had i-congered hir."<sup>79</sup> This line alludes to the exchange during which Kit dubs the Pardoner a super-powered and irresistible clerk, protesting: "And eke ye had no nede / For to conger me [...] with your nygromancy."<sup>80</sup> Ironically, the Pardoner retrospectively pretends to give credence to the least credible of Kit's statements, i.e., that she is unable to resist his charms and clerkly sex appeal owing to a magical power which the Pardoner knows to be nonexistent. Kit cons Chaucer's infamous conman into *pretending to believe* that he could control her. This suggests that misogynists pretend to believe in *unbelievable* ideas. Interestingly, there is a positive masculine counterpart to witty Kit in the *Tale of Beryn*, namely Geoffrey, a simulating fool and law expert.<sup>81</sup> Both Kit and Geoffrey turn out to be smarter than their adversaries in a contest of wit. Kit "makes the beard"<sup>82</sup> of the Pardoner and Geoffrey, "shorn in the guise of a fool," metaphorically "shaves his audience bald." In *Beryn*, Kit, a woman, is neither the enemy nor a whore. She is a partner in a contest of wit, where the winner is he or she who conjures up the most effective social performance of himself or herself.

"Systems as referential fields of the text are highlighted by the subversion of their patterning."<sup>83</sup> The subversion of systems of reference in the *Interlude* liberates the representation of male and female relationships from the tremendous limitations of both misogyny and courtly adoration. To return to the question of bodily communication, Kit's conclusive reproach in the second seduction scene points towards the mechanisms of courtly parody: "Ye shuld have coughed when ye com. Where lern ye curtesy?"<sup>84</sup> J.A. Burrow traces the literary history of the *tussiculae simulatae*, the little feigned coughs.<sup>85</sup> This paralinguistic signal occurs in such eminent contexts as Ovid's *Heroides*, Dante's *Paradiso* and the French prose romance *Lancelot*. Simulation is a given of this vocal gesture

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 489.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 338-39.

<sup>81</sup> I discuss folly in the *Canterbury Interlude and the Tale of Beryn* in "Traditions of Simulated Folly in *The Canterbury Interlude and Tale of Beryn*," in *Behaving like Fools: Voice, Gesture, and Laughter in Texts, Manuscripts, and Early Books*, ed. Lucy Perry and Alexander Schwarz (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011), 15-46 and I discuss law and Geoffrey's use of legal fictions in *Beryn* in "Narrative Use and the Practice of Fiction."

<sup>82</sup> Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude*, 485.

<sup>83</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, 5.

<sup>84</sup> Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude*, 323.

<sup>85</sup> J.A. Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative*, 165-67.

that functions as signal: it serves to attract the interlocutor's attention discretely and nonverbally. The parodic humor in Kit's reference to courteous "tussiculae simulatae" is based on her chiding request for a more appropriate and hence effective simulation. In short, she facetiously requires a more authentic pretense.

The partners in the *Interlude* playfully reveal in their acting that they do not believe in codes but only use them.<sup>86</sup> They perform cultural effects that, in theory, are meant to deceive, but that are conveyed through a burlesque discrepancy between high and low registers which in fact precludes deception. If the reader does not detect and respond to this displacement, the interest and humor of the text are lost. "Some fabliaux do not make sense if they are not read as comments on courtly customs or on the effects of courtly literature."<sup>87</sup> Kit and the Pardoner parody courtly manners to such an extent that courtesy boils down to coughing to announce one's presence before entering a lover's chamber. This spoof of courtly manners is at no point corrected by other passages in the text. Even the Knight, among the pilgrims, is simply cruising the city for recreation; he is never praiseworthy. Finally, the Pardoner introduces his use of the rhetoric of courtly emotionality with the phrase "But nowe to our purpose,"<sup>88</sup> in other words, "Let's get down to business, courtesy and then sex!"

Strikingly, the narrator himself opts for a similar stance vis-à-vis courtly ladies. He claims that if a woman sets her wit to make someone's beard, there is nothing this man can do about it.<sup>89</sup> And the narrator adds:

Ye woot wele I ly nat and where I do or no,  
I woll nat here termyn it, lest ladies stond in plase,  
Or els gentil women, for lesing of my grace  
Of daliaunce and of sportes and of goodly chere.  
Therefor, anenst hir estates I woll in no manere  
Deme ne determyn, but of lewd Kittes  
As tapsters and other such that hath wyly wittes

<sup>86</sup> I discuss the use of cultural kinesic codes in "Arms Akimbo: Kinesic Analysis in Visual and Verbal Art," in *Visual Rhetoric and the Eloquence of Design*, ed. Leslie Atzmon (West Lafayette: Parlor Press, 2011), in press. The second part of the essay is an analysis of specific gestures in the *Tale of Beryn*.

<sup>87</sup> Per Nykrog, "Courtliness and the Townspeople: The Fabliaux as a Courtly Burlesque," in *The Humor of the Fabliaux. A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Thomas D. Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1974), 68.

<sup>88</sup> Bowers, *The Canterbury Interlude*, 333.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 436-37.

To pik mennes purses and eke to bler hir eye;  
So wele they make seme soth when they falssest ly.<sup>90</sup>

Who is lying to whom exactly? My aim in this essay was to explore to what extent a literary text may disturb the social drama of gender roles by staging characters deliberately enacting their normative gender roles *as* enacted gender roles. This question concerns *Beryn's* narrator as much as Kit and the Pardoner, since the former includes himself in the game of openly lying (verbally) about lying (in bed to have sex), as in the previous quotation. He explains to his audience that he is not willing to compromise potential openings with present ladies and gentlewomen by sounding misogynistic and that he therefore deliberately decides to blame it all on one portion of womanhood only, namely tapsters in general and "lewd Kit" in particular. Silly and low-class Kit has wily wits because she is a tapster: tapsters by nature sound true when they falsely lie. In sum, the narrator flourishes his own opportunism and inauthenticity, thus deflecting the meaning and worth of his statement. His selectively misogynistic assertion sounds fabricated and hence preposterous because of the lines that precede it, which clearly raise the Chaucerian question of the Wife of Bath: "Who painted the lion?" Who needs to lay blame on Kit and call her a manipulative ignorant, both lewd and witty? The narrator presents himself as transparently and openly manipulative just like his diegetic Tapster and Pardoner, playing in turn a narrative game with his audience's possible socio-cultural expectations, such as an "automatic" association of Kit the Tapster with whoredom.

Does *Beryn* make room for new, hitherto unscripted types of relationships between social and sexual partners? And can *Beryn* actually create such a space? The text certainly opens fissures and gaps for imagination to fill in with new configurations and this is perhaps as much as we can hope for. To disturb established modes of interaction by playing them wrong is the performative power literature can sometimes have. And it certainly matters. "All signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; 'agency,' then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition."<sup>91</sup> Butler refers here to socio-political agency. But, along the lines of Cohen's argument, any work of art that compromises the illusion of gender roles' ontological meaningfulness and permanence also performs a valuable act of resistance. A work of art can lead us "to stay at the edge of what we know, to put our own epistemological certainties into

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 438-46.

<sup>91</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 198.

question and through that risk and openness to another way of knowing and of living in the world to expand our capacity to imagine the human."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 228.

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