

CHAPTER 6

THE DISMEMBERMENT OF THE PARDONER

Oure blissed Lordes body they totere (VI, 474)

I would next like to investigate another component of the constellations that include gender and song (or the materiality of the voice more generally), one I touched on only briefly earlier: the fragmented or dismembered body, which is of considerable interest to both the Pardoner and the Prioress. An investigation of this concern might be initiated with Chaucer's various treatments of the Orpheus myth—the myth that links dismemberment to poetry and to the feminine—as it was understood in the Middle Ages, an exploration I will undertake in this chapter. (The relevance of the related myth of Dionysus has already been discussed in chapter 1.)

Medieval Orpheus: Song, Dismemberment, and Gender

The myth of Orpheus, we should remember, brings together, especially in medieval readings of the tenth and eleventh books of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the same nexus of concerns that we observed in the portraits and tales of the Prioress and the Pardoner. Like them, Orpheus is a singer, indeed the mythic forerunner of all singers and poets. He is also centrally involved in myths of gender and eroticism: Orpheus pursues his wife Eurydice, emblem of the female, into the underworld and tries to win her back by means of his song. Failing in this attempt because he could not resist turning back to gaze at her, Orpheus rejects the feminine as embodied in all women, and turns to an exclusively male-male eroticism. Finally, Orpheus is dismembered: he is, most tellingly, decapitated by his former audience, the Bacchantes, who are infuriated at his rejection of women.

Ovid's is the most influential version of this myth for the Middle Ages in general, and for Chaucer in particular, whether in the form of the Latin *Metamorphoses* itself or of the numerous medieval commentaries on classical

authors. A few passages from Ovid's work and that of his medieval interpreters will help illustrate the particular emphasis on the relationships among poetry, gender, and dismemberment that Chaucer would have found in the story of Orpheus. First, Ovid himself.

Orpheus, primarily, is the poet/singer par excellence, and for Ovid his songs are exclusively concerned with erotic pursuit. Perhaps surprisingly, they are also associated with death. Orpheus' famous song does not appear in Ovid's account until he follows Eurydice to the underworld, where he sings to its gods in an attempt to win her back:

supera deus hic bene notus in ora est:
 an sit et hic, dubito. sed et hic tamen auguror esse,
 fama que si veteris non est mentita rapinae,
 vos quoque iunxit Amor.
 . . . pro munere poscimus usum.
 quod si fata negant veniam pro coniuge, certum est
 nolle redire mihi: leto gaudete duorum!

{Love} is a god well-known in the world above; whether he may be so here too, I do not know, but I imagine he is familiar to you also and, if there is any truth in the story of that rape of long ago, then you yourselves were brought together by Love. . . . I ask as a gift from you only the enjoyment of her; but if the fates refuse her a reprieve, I have made up my mind that I do not wish to return either. You may exult in my death as well as in hers!¹

No distinction is drawn between the rape of Proserpine and Orpheus' own desire for the "enjoyment" (*usum*) of his wife. Once this odd parallel has been drawn it leads almost inevitably to a reunion imagined as having to take place in the underworld: if Pluto and Proserpine are the model of desire, no other outcome is imaginable. The pursuit of the feminine is death.

It should be recalled here that in Book Five, Proserpine, like Eurydice, was abducted from a world of female companions (dominated, in Proserpine's case, by her mother) in order to enter a heterosexual union. The comparison between the two marriages is uncomfortably clear: they are based on male enjoyment of the female regardless of her own desires, which in both cases are depicted as homosocial rather than heterosexual. Proserpine's mother Ceres calls this abduction a crime; her father Jupiter calls it love: "sed si modo nomina rebus / addere vera placet, non hoc iniuria factum, / verum amor est." [" . . . if you will only call things by their proper names, this deed was no crime, but an act of love"].² A passage to conjure with! God the Father lays down the masculine law of language—calling things by their proper names—which is also the law of gender: if maternal speech labels rape a crime, it is improper naming; only the pater-

nal name (rape is an act of love) is proper, because it is God the Father who declares it so.

In invoking this earlier passage in Ovid's text, Orpheus thus aligns himself with paternal logic and with rape: what counts is his "enjoyment" of Eurydice. Orpheus' song here is not the semiotic, maternal music of *The Prioress's Tale*; it is the language of patriarchy, the masculine logic of God the Father, as well as the language of heterosexual desire as death. No wonder Pluto, king of the underworld, is convinced. "nec regia coniunx / sustinet oranti nec, qui regit ima, negare: / Eurydicenque vocant. umbras erat illa recentes / inter et incessit passu de vulnere tardo." [The king and queen of the underworld could not bear to refuse his pleas. They called Eurydice. She was among the ghosts who had but newly come, and walked slowly because of her injury].³ Pointedly, however, Ovid makes no mention of Eurydice's response—other than supplying an explanation of why she doesn't hurry (a detail that nevertheless, by its very inclusion, emphasizes a certain lack of enthusiasm).

Orpheus famously fails the test of not looking back. His desiring gaze literally kills Eurydice again: "iamque iterum moriens non est de coniuge quidquam / quæta suo—quid enim nisi se quereretur amatam?—/ supremumque, 'Vale,' quad iam vix auribus ille / acciperet, dixit revolutaque rursus eodem est." [Eurydice, dying now a second time, uttered no complaint against her husband. What was there to complain of, but that she had been loved? With a last farewell which scarcely reached his ears, she fell back again into the same place from which she had come].⁴ If Orpheus sings the paternal language of God the Father, Eurydice's only utterance is a faint farewell, the sign of her own death. (And note that Ovid himself, unlike the translator Mary M. Innes, does not even refer to her by name in this passage.) Given Orpheus' alignment of his own love with that of Pluto, and his language with that of Jupiter, the only possible reunion for these two is in death, which is what Apollo has planned for them: "hic modo coniunctis spatiantur passibus ambo: / nunc præcedentem sequitur, nunc prævius anteit / Eurydicenque suam iam tutus respicit Orpheus." [There they stroll together, side by side: or sometimes Orpheus follows, while his wife goes before, sometimes he leads the way and looks back, as he can do safely now, at his Eurydice].⁵

Before granting Orpheus this eternal scopophilic "enjoyment" of Eurydice in their shared death, however, Ovid has more in store for him and his lyre. After his loving gaze sends her back to the underworld, Orpheus reacts by refusing erotic contact with any other woman; he does not, however, remain celibate:

. . . omnemque refugerat Orpheus
femineam Venerem, seu quod male cesserat illi,

sive fidem dederat: multas tamen ardor habebat
 iungere se vati: multae doluere repulsae.
 ille etiam Thracum populis fuit auctor amorem
 in teneros transferre mares citraque iuventam
 aetatis breve ver et primos carpere flores.

[Throughout this time Orpheus had shrunk from loving any woman, either because of his unhappy experience, or because he had pledged himself not to do so. In spite of this there were many who were fired with a desire to marry the poet, many were indignant to find themselves repulsed. However, Orpheus preferred to center his affections on boys of tender years, and to enjoy the brief spring and early flowering of their youth; he was the first to introduce this custom among the people of Thrace.]⁶

The reason for Orpheus' rejection of women at this point is unclear: that given in many versions of the myth (including Virgil's)—that he is in mourning for Eurydice—is not stated here, though it might be inferred. But it is in keeping with Ovid's general lack of interest in Eurydice that this passage does not name her, focusing instead on the detail of Orpheus' homoeroticism. This custom is imported to Thrace from elsewhere; it is a dangerously alien practice (as Orpheus shortly finds out). But where Orpheus gets it from, apparently, is Mount Olympus: his songs at this point focus on the love of gods for young men; as he puts it, he sings "*puerosque canamus / dilectos superis, inconcessisque puellas / ignibus attonitas meruisse libidine poenam*" [of boys whom the gods have loved, and of girls who, seized with unlawful passion, have paid the penalty for their amorous desires].⁷ One might wonder how these two topics are related, but all the stories Orpheus tells here celebrate the power of the gods in human erotics; and it is male-male desire that is celebrated in particular. If the story of Orpheus imagines heterosexual union as the patriarchal law imposed on women, and as death, it finds in male-male desire what at first appears to be a more productive aspect of that law. Heterosexual desire can be consummated only in the underworld, but homosexual desire is of the heavens. Nevertheless, even the tales of same-sex desire partake of an unmistakable patriarchal authority, like the story of Zeus' rape of Ganymede: "*nec mora, percusso mendacibus aëre pennis / abripit Iliaden, qui nunc quoque pocula miscet / invitaque Iovi nectar Iunone ministrat*" [Then without delay, beating the air on borrowed pinions, he snatched away the shepherd of Ilium, who even now mixes the winecups, and supplies Jove with nectar, to the annoyance of Juno].⁸ "Love" here ("amor," l. 155), as in the cases of Pluto and of Orpheus, is entirely a question of the stronger party's "enjoyment" of the weaker—not just male enjoyment of female, but the equally patriarchal enjoyment of weaker by stronger (in a

close parallel to the classical citizen's rights over women, boys, foreigners, and slaves): only the eagle—the hunter, not the prey—can embody Jupiter. Ganymede winds up a servant, and Juno is annoyed. Heavenly immortality rather than death in the underworld may be the reward, but the process of getting there is quite similar: we learn no more of Ganymede's feelings than of Eurydice's.

The next song, of Hyacinthus, provides an even closer parallel to the story of Orpheus. Having accidentally killed the human boy in an athletic competition, Apollo mourns him in terms reminiscent of those in which Orpheus mourned Eurydice:

. . . ego sum tibi funeris auctor.
 quae mea culpa tamen? nisi si lusisse vocari
 culpa potest, nisi culpa potest et amasse vocari!
 atque utinam merito vitam tecumve liceret
 reddere! . . .
 semper eris mecum memorique haerebis in ore.
 te lyra pulsa manu, te carmina nostra sonabunt.

[I am responsible for killing you. Yet how was I at fault, unless taking part in a game can be called a fault, unless I can be blamed for loving you? I wish that I might give my life in exchange for yours, as you so well deserve, or die along with you! . . . Still you will always be with me, your name constantly upon my lips, never forgotten. When I strike the chords of my lyre, and when I sing, my songs and music will tell of you.]⁹

As in the case of Eurydice, being loved soon turns to death, while the lover/killer lives on to mourn the beloved in the poetry of patriarchal authority. It should be added that these songs of Orpheus celebrating the gods' powerful interference in human erotic affairs are the famous ones that enchant the forest trees, wild creatures, etc.: if his earlier song spoke to the world of the dead, these songs speak to the living world of nature, thus serving to naturalize this discursive hegemony of God the Father.

In the case of Orpheus, at least, the feminine gets something of its own back at last: even if the language in which Ovid tells this portion of the story diminishes its threat to his discursive power, the eruption of the feminine into this discourse remains a troubling aspect of Orpheus' myth:

Carmine dum tali silvas animosque ferarum
 Threicius vates et saxa sequentia ducit,
 ecce nurus Ciconum tectae lymphata ferinis
 pectora velleribus tumuli de vertice cernunt
 Orphea percussis sociantem carmina nrevis.

e quibus una leves iactato crine per auras
 "En," ait "en, hic est nostri contemptor!" . . .
 cunctaque tela forent cantu mollita, sed ingens
 clamor et infracto Berecynthia tibia cornu
 tympanaque et plausus et Bacchei ululatus
 obstrepuere sono citharae. tum denique saxa
 non exauditi rubuerunt sanguine vatis.

[By such songs as these the Thracian poet was drawing the woods and rocks to follow him, charming the creatures of the wild, when suddenly the Ciconian women caught sight of him. Looking down from the crest of a hill, these maddened creatures, with animal skins slung across their breasts, saw Orpheus as he was singing and accompanying himself on the lyre. One of them, tossing her hair till it streamed in the light breeze, cried out: "See! Look here! Here is the man who scorns us!" . . . All their weapons would have been rendered harmless by the charm of Orpheus' songs, but clamorous shouting, Phrygian flutes with curving horns, tambourines, the beating of breasts, and Bacchic howlings, drowned the music of the lyre. Then at last the stones grew crimson with the blood of the poet, whose voice they did not hear.]¹⁰

Once again, this constellation of effects should be familiar: the feminine is here associated with the irrational and with a sound-world entirely different from that of Orpheus. Their musical instruments produce a music that can easily be assimilated to mere clamor, and drowns out the measured, rational—and patriarchal—music of Orpheus and his lyre. Sound here is material and physical, literally beaten out on the female body as on tambourines: the repressed maternal semiotic (in Kristeva's terms) returns with a vengeance, usurping Orpheus' male gaze ("See! Look here!").

It is maternal not only in contrast to the masculine paternalism of God the Father, whose praise the music of Orpheus sings, but more particularly in its similarity to the death of Pentheus, also at the hands of Bacchants, which is narrated earlier in the *Metamorphoses*; recall that Pentheus is dismembered, indeed decapitated, specifically by his mother Agave in Book Three. A similar fate—dismemberment and decapitation at the hands of women—awaits Orpheus. And if the Pardoner has been associated with Bacchus and his female followers by means of gender transgression, he is also associated with their victim by means of dismemberment.

tendentemque manus atque illo tempore primum
 inrita dicentem nec quicquam voce moventem
 sacrilgae perimunt, perque os, pro Iuppiter!, illud
 auditum saxis intellectumque ferarum
 sensibus in ventos anima exhalata recessit. . . .

membra iacent diversa locis, caput, Hebre, lyramque
 excipis, et—mirum!—, medio dum labitur amne,
 flebile nescio quid queritur lyra, flebile lingua
 murmurat exanimis, respondent flebile ripae.

[He stretched out his hands toward his assailants, but now, for the first time, his words had no effect, and he failed to move them in any way by his voice. Dead to all reverence, they tore him apart and, through those lips to which rocks had listened, which wild beasts had understood, his last breath slipped away and vanished in the wind. . . . The poet's limbs were scattered in different places, but the waters of Hebrus received his head and lyre. Wonderful to relate, as they floated down in midstream, the lyre uttered a plaintive melody and the lifeless tongue made a piteous murmur, while the river banks lamented in reply.]¹¹

Washed ashore at Lesbos, Orpheus is finally released into death by Apollo. The women are punished by Bacchus, who surprisingly appears here on Apollo's side, abandoning Thrace along with some of his "choro meliore" [more seemly revellers].¹² The denaturalized women—opposed to rocks, wild beasts, and river banks—have no reverence for Orpheus' patriarchal song, and are duly punished by another aspect of God the Father—Bacchus this time, in his oddly rational role as Apollo's ally and avenger of Apollo's poet, Orpheus (recall Evanthius' and Donatus' references to "Liber pater" [Father Bacchus]). Orpheus himself, however, can magically continue to sing his naturalized song; and those sympathetic rocks, beasts, and banks, endowed with the very symbolic linguistic skills that the women give up in favor of their irrational clamor, are more "human" than the human women; that is, they participate in the dominant or hegemonic discourse that the women seek to disrupt because Orpheus scorned them.

It is instructive to compare Ovid's version of the myth with Virgil's earlier one in *Georgics* 4, which was also known in the Middle Ages. Although one must agree with Emmet Robbins' assessment of the evidence that the Orpheus myth was profoundly misogynous from its earliest origins,¹³ Virgil's text may seem to a modern reader distinctly less so than Ovid's. In *Georgics* 4, for example, rape is rape, not love: Eurydice is bitten by the snake and dies while trying to escape from the erotic assault of a character not present in Ovid, the shepherd Aristaeus. Virgil thus at least hints at a point of view other than the violently patriarchal in Eurydice's rejection of heterosexual eroticism, whereas Ovid, though he may displace the scene of rape from Eurydice's story to Proserpine's, also identifies Orpheus' love with that of Pluto, thereby aligning the poet with the rapist, and justifying both in Jupiter's judgment.

Virgil also gives Eurydice her own voice, and what she has to say is not particularly sympathetic to Orpheus:

illa 'quis et me' iniquit 'miseram et te perdidit, Orpheu,
 quis tantis furor? en iterum crudelia retro
 fata vocant, conditque natantia lumina somnus.
 iamque vale: feror ingenti circumdata nocte
 invalidasque tibi tendens, heu non tua, palmas.'

[‘What is this, what great madness,’ she said, ‘has destroyed both poor me and you, Orpheus? Now again the cruel fates summon me back, and sleep (of death) drowns my swimming eyes. Goodbye: I am carried off, surrounded by massive darkness, holding out powerless hands to you, alas not yours to have.}]¹⁴

It is Orpheus’ “*furor*” that Eurydice directly blames for her second death: her dying breath is not a faint farewell, but a complaint lodged against Orpheus himself. If Virgil allows Eurydice a voice, Ovid takes it away again, not only essentially silencing her, but glossing the one final word he does allow her as an acknowledgment of the power of Orpheus’ love. When Eurydice speaks, the scene is necessarily less scopophilic than Ovid’s: if for Virgil Eurydice can be the subject of her own language, Ovid turns her into a pure object of Orpheus’ vision.

The conclusion of Virgil’s version of the story also fails to prepare the reader for Ovid’s more misogynous one. Virgil’s Orpheus does not embrace pederasty, nor does he sing of the divine patriarchal “love” of boys and the erotic misdeeds of women; instead, he rejects other women because he is mourning Eurydice, and on that basis alone the Thracian women dismember him, in a scene more succinct and less sensationalistic than the one in Ovid. Virgil’s Orpheus continues to sing of Eurydice as his dismembered head floats down the river (“*Euridicen vox ipsa et frigida lingua, / a miseram Eurydicen! anima fugiente vocabat: / Eurydicen toto referebant flumine ripae*” [‘Eurydice’ the voice and cold tongue called out, ‘poor Eurydice’ with its failing breath; and the banks along the river echoed back: ‘Eurydice’]);¹⁵ Ovid’s utters only a generalized lament, which Anderson translates less sympathetically than Innes as “something or other tearful.”¹⁶

As Anderson has suggested, “Ovid expects his audience to know Virgil’s poem and to relish the changes that he the later poet has made.”¹⁷ The greater misogyny of Ovid’s version, then, is a deliberate choice, and one that has its effect on medieval readings not only of Ovid’s own text, but of Virgil’s version of the story as well: medieval commentators were well aware of both versions, as is demonstrated, for instance, by the constant ref-

erences to Virgil's in the "Vulgate" commentary on Ovid's,¹⁸ but medieval Christian allegorizations more often follow Ovid's than Virgil's interpretation of the story.

In Ovid's Orpheus we have the myth of symbolic, paternal discourse, the rational poetry that praises, and participates in, the patriarchal ideology, which is naturalized as the hegemonic discourse. It is also, however, the myth of the return of the repressed to trouble, though not to defeat or destroy, the dominant. Like Julia Kristeva's maternal "heterogeneous," the repressed feminine exists within the paternal symbolic even as it tends to undermine it. Ovid returns these power relations to their normal, that is, ideologically untroubled, state. He can do so only through death, however: the particular nexus of stories revolving around the figure of Orpheus (those of Eurydice, Hyacinthus, Pentheus, Proserpine, even Ganymede) imagines desire as a power relation not to be fulfilled in life.

Medieval readings of the Orpheus myth also find in it issues of gender and rationality. The most influential reading after Ovid (and one heavily indebted to him) is that of Boethius in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, which Chaucer translated into English as *Boece* some time before embarking on *The Canterbury Tales*. The story of Orpheus appears in Book Three, metrum Twelve, and is exclusively concerned with the quality of Orpheus' song and with his trip to the underworld. The lesson to be drawn from his story, in Chaucer's version, is as follows: "This fable apertenith to yow alle, whosoevere desireth or seketh to lede his thought into the sovereyn day, that is to seyn, to cleernesse of sovereyn good. For whoso that evere be so overcomen that he ficche his eien into the put of helle, that is to seyn, whoso sette his thoughtes in erthly thinges, al that evere he hath drawnen of the noble good celestial he lesith it, whanne he looketh the helles, that is to seyn, into lowe thinges of the erthe" (ll. 60–69). The allegorical interpretation of the Orpheus story that Chaucer chose to translate follows Ovid's misogynous version of the myth: Boethius, and his translator, here accept the familiar patriarchal view of the feminine as low, physical, and earthbound, and of the masculine as lofty and intellectual. Orpheus, not Eurydice, in this tradition is capable of looking to the "cleernesse of sovereyn good"; feminine Eurydice represents the "lowe thinges of the erthe" that tempt masculine Orpheus from his proper spiritual goal.

Similar readings are not unusual in the medieval commentators on the different versions of Orpheus' myth. Commentators on Boethius (including Remigius of Auxerre, Notker Labeo, Guillaume de Conches, and Nicholas Trivet), as might be expected, tend to elaborate on his reading of the story, associating Orpheus with wisdom and Eurydice with perverse desire for earthly things; one such commentator in Chaucer's own century, Peter of Paris, even blames Eurydice for nagging Orpheus until he killed

her, making the most explicit case for reading Orpheus as his wife's killer but at the same time excusing him and blaming her.¹⁹ But even commentators on other classical texts often follow this tradition. Bernardus Silvestris is clear and representative in this respect: even though his twelfth-century commentary is on Virgil's *Aeneid*, his first mention of Orpheus and Eurydice reflects Ovid's (and Boethius') misogynous view. After explaining that the mythological descent into the underworld has a fourfold meaning (natural, virtuous, sinful, and artificial), Bernardus applies his system to the story of Orpheus: Hell, as in Boethius, represents the things of this world, and Orpheus descends to the physical only in order to transcend it, finding in it, in his function as representative wise man, an opportunity to exercise his intellectual faculties through meditation on a higher, spiritual reality. Eurydice, on the other hand, representing the vicious rather than the wise, is unable to rise above the physical *temporalia*. Bernardus' separation of the two is even more clear-cut than that of Boethius: his masculine Orpheus is not even tempted by the feminine Eurydice.²⁰

Bernardus' second mention of the Orpheus myth refers directly to Virgil's *Georgics* 4, which he summarizes, including the character of Aristaeus. Eurydice here initially appears more neutral: not immediately associated with vice, she merely represents natural concupiscence ("naturalis concupiscentia"), or appetite for the good ("boni appetitus"). Oddly enough, however, even this initial positive reading of Eurydice quickly gives way to another: Aristaeus' attempted rape is glossed as divine virtue ("virtus divina"), which attempts to unite itself with this appetite for the good. In fleeing from rape, Eurydice thus flees from virtue, and the serpent's bite infects her with the desire for temporal, rather than eternal, good ("delectatione temporalis boni"). Orpheus, representing wisdom and eloquence ("Per Orpheum sapientem et eloquentem accipimus"), wins her back from the underworld (i.e., wisdom retrieves desire from improper, earthly objects), but only if he does not look back to these tempting *temporalia*.²¹ Virgil's relatively positive view of Eurydice in *Georgics* 4 is replaced with an allegory more reminiscent of Ovid's misogynous version in the *Metamorphoses*: once again Eurydice winds up a symbol of perverted desire for earthly things, while Orpheus is glossed as wisdom; and, as in Ovid, rape is glossed as a kind of virtue.

As one might expect, commentaries on the *Metamorphoses* itself follow a similar pattern: for Arnulf of Orléans in the twelfth century, the story is again moralized as one of virtue (Orpheus) and vice (Eurydice). This tradition is more explicitly misogynous than the Boethius commentaries:

mulieres i. muliebritur viventes et viciosos vilipendit, sed amorem suum ad mares i. viriliter agentes transtulit. Unde mulieres eum quia de suo non erant

consortio lapidantes occiderunt s. luxuriose. Mulieres siquidem pronores sunt in libidinem et vicia quam viri.

[{H}e shunned women, that is, those acting in a womanlike manner, drunkards and vicious men, but transferred his love to men, that is, to those acting in a manly way. Whence, the women, because he shunned them, killed him by stoning him, that is, they killed him from lust. Women indeed are more prone to lust and vice than men.]²²

John of Garland's thirteenth-century *Integumenta Ovidii* sums up succinctly: "Pratum, delicie; coniunx, caro; vipera, virus / vir, ratio; Stix est terra; loquela, lira" [Field is Pleasure, Wife is Flesh, Viper is Poison, / Man is Reason, Styx is Earth, Lyre is Speech].²³ Fourteenth-century accounts by Giovanni del Virgilio and Pierre Bersuire and in the *Ovide moralisé* follow suit, the latter two identifying Eurydice with Eve and Orpheus with Christ, who redeemed mankind from Eve's sin. Eurydice in this view is Eve accepting the forbidden fruit, as well as the soul and human nature; all must be redeemed by "orpheus Christus."²⁴ Mainstream medieval commentators, in short, whether following Ovid directly or Boethius' reading of Ovid, consistently accept and elaborate the patriarchal and misogynous tendencies evident in Ovid's retelling of Virgil's story, ultimately in Chaucer's period identifying the feminine not only with human desire but with sin, and the masculine not only with wisdom but with redemption.

Interestingly, this reading of Orpheus is not the only one possible in the Middle Ages: late antique and early medieval commentators such as Fulgentius and Martianus Capella, and their followers, posed an alternate interpretation in which Orpheus is identified simply with poetry or music and eloquence. In this tradition, it is Orpheus who is ultimately identified with the physical, material qualities of the voice, while Eurydice comes to represent the mental or theoretical aspects of music, as in Remigius' commentary on Martianus, which gives quite a different view of the pair than that found in the same author's Boethius commentary:

Euridice interpretatur profunda inventio. Ipsa ars musica in suis profundissimis rationibus Euridice dicitur, cuius quasi maritus Orpheus dicitur, id est $\Omega\Pi\text{O}\Sigma \Phi\Omega\text{N}\text{H}$ id est pulchra vox. Qui maritus si aliqua neglegentia artis virtutem perdiderit velut in quendam infernum profundae disciplinae descendit, de qua iterum artis, regulas iuxta quas musicae voces disponuntur reducit. Sed dum voces corporeas et transitorias profundae artis inventioni comparat, fugit iterum in profunditatem disciplinae ipsa inventio quoniam in vocibus apparere non potest, ac per hoc tristis remanet Orpheus, vocem musicam absque ratione retinens.

[Eurydice is called profound thought. She is said to be the very art of music in its most profound principles, whose husband is said to be Orpheus, that is orios phone or beautiful voice. The husband, if he loses his singing power through any neglect of his art, thus descends into the lower world of deep study, from which he returns again, the notes of music being arranged according to the rules of art. But when {Eurydice} compares the corporeal and transitory notes to the profound theory of the art of music, she—that is, thought itself—flees again into her deep knowledge because she cannot appear in notes; and because of this Orpheus remains sad, having the mere sound of music without possessing the underlying principles.]²⁵

The existence of this tradition, in which feminine Eurydice takes on the attributes of incorporeal mental processes while masculine Orpheus represents the “corporeal and transitory notes” of “mere sound,” is a surprising alternative in medieval thought to the usual association of woman with body and man with spirit. As John Block Friedman argues, this is a less influential tradition than the mainstream one derived from Ovid and Boethius.²⁶ Yet it does demonstrate that medieval thinkers and writers had an alternative to the more patriarchal versions of the myth available to them. Where, then, does Chaucer position himself with regard to the story of Orpheus?

Chaucer and Orpheus

References to this myth can be found throughout Chaucer's works, and suggest a familiarity with both traditions. In *The House of Fame*, for example, the reference to Orpheus seems clearly derived from Martianus Capella, whose description of the allegorical wedding of Philology and Mercury included entertainment provided by the mythical musicians Orpheus, Arion, and Amphion: “uerum sequens heroum praecluis enituit admiratione conuentus. nam Orpheus Amphion Arionque doctissimi aurata omnes testudine consonantes flexanimum pariter edidere concentum” [A company of heroes that followed after, attracted great wonder and surprise; for Orpheus, Amphion, and Arion, most skillful musicians, were harmoniously playing a moving melody on their golden lyres].²⁷ Elsewhere, Martianus Capella presents Orpheus singing in praise of marriage generally,²⁸ and the medieval commentaries on Martianus just discussed also tend to value Eurydice more highly than the mainstream ones.

Chaucer's text also aligns Orpheus with Arion, placing them in the *House of Fame*: “Ther herde I pleyen on an harpe, / That sowned bothe wel and sharpe, / Orpheus ful craftely, / And on his syde, faste by, / Sat the harper Orion . . .” (*HF*, 1200–05). Similarly, the entertainment at the

wedding of Januarie and May in *The Merchant's Tale* is compared with that described by Martianus Capella, this time linking Orpheus with Amphion: "Biforn hem stooode instrumentz of swich soun / That Orpheus, ne of Thebes Amphioun, / Ne maden nevere swich a melodye" (IV, 1715–17). The Merchant immediately makes an explicit connection between the two weddings, and hence between his own and Martianus' texts: "Hoold thou thy pees, thou poete Marcian, / That writest us that ilke weddyng murie / Of hire Philologie and hym Mercurie, / And of the songes that the Muses songe! / To smal is bothe thy penne, and eek thy tonge, / For to descryven of this mariage" (IV, 1732–37). In both *The House of Fame* and *The Merchant's Tale*, then, Chaucer refers directly to Martianus Capella and thus implicitly to the alternate tradition for reading the myth of Orpheus.²⁹

In both cases, however, the context renders such references highly ambiguous. Clearly the Merchant in particular does not really intend to praise marriage or women, and May hardly turns out to be comparable to either Martianus' Philology or the intellectual Eurydice we encounter in the Martianus commentaries. If Remigius associated Eurydice with mental and spiritual processes, the Merchant invokes that interpretation of the myth only ironically, in order to discredit its relatively sympathetic view of women. The reference to the god Hymen (ll. 1729–31) may refer instead to Ovid's gloomier view of marriage and more misogynous view of women in his version of the myth: recall that in the *Metamorphoses*, Hymen refuses to bless the marriage of Orpheus and Eurydice at the beginning of Book Ten.

The reference to Orpheus and Arion in *The House of Fame* can also be read ironically, especially in view of the cynical understanding of speech and sound investigated in the previous chapter. As noted there, language in this poem tends to be reduced to material sound, that is, to that which Orpheus represents without Eurydice in the commentaries on Martianus Capella. Eurydice herself, representative of the higher poetic faculties, does not appear in *The House of Fame*. And though he invokes Martianus Capella in these texts by pairing Orpheus with either Arion or Amphion, Chaucer could also have known Ovidian versions of the latter two poets' stories: Arion appears in Ovid's *Fasti* 2, ll. 79–118, while Amphion appears in the *Metamorphoses* 6, ll. 178–79. To invoke Martianus Capella and his medieval commentators *ironically*, in short, is to resituate the Orpheus myth in the misogynous Ovidian tradition.

Ovid is invoked more directly in other Chaucerian references to Orpheus. In *The Book of the Duchess*, the Black Knight explains to the Dreamer that he is inconsolable: "May nougt make my sorwes slyde, / Nought al the remedyes of Ovyde, / Ne Orpheus, god of melodye, / Ne

Dedalus, with his playes slye . . ." (*BD*, 568–71). The Ovidian text cited explicitly here is the *Remedia amoris*, but the context of the Black Knight's story—his need to stop his unnatural grieving and return to the natural order of things—recalls the *Metamorphoses*, in which Orphean song is explicitly linked to the natural world. This reference is thus an approving citation of Ovid's reading of Orpheus. Similarly, Criseyde refers to Orpheus and Eurydice in Book IV of *Troilus and Criseyde*: "Myn herte and ek the woful goost therinne / Byquethe I with youre spirit to compleyne / Eternaly, for they shal nevere twynne; / For though in erthe ytwynned be we tweyne, / Yet in the feld of pite, out of peyne, / That highte Elisos, shal we ben yfeere, / As Orpheus and Erudice, his feere . . ." (*T&C*, IV, 785–91). Though this passage is another example of Chaucerian irony, the irony here is directed against Criseyde, who will not remain eternally faithful to Troilus. Orpheus' and Eurydice's eternal reunion in the underworld in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 11 is here understood (by Criseyde if not by Chaucer) as a genuine ideal, but it is one that Criseyde will fail to attain.³⁰

Chaucer's direct citations of the Orpheus myth would thus seem to place him in the mainstream, patriarchal Ovidian tradition, even when he invokes the alternative one. Bearing this in mind, let us turn to the more indirect uses of this myth in *The Canterbury Tales*.

In their constant concatenation of song, gender, and bodily fragmentation, both of the pilgrims considered in chapter 5 subtly invoke the myth of Orpheus, whose song, like those of the Pardoner and the Prioress' child here, is inextricably linked to the singer's dismemberment. The Prioress provides the more overt comparison: her singing hero, like Orpheus, descends into the underworld of the Jewry (and, more literally, of the latrine into which his body is cast) in his pursuit of the feminine—not Eurydice but the Virgin Mary—and is subsequently dismembered by a frenzied religious cult because of his song (Orpheus is dismembered because of his homoerotic refusal to remarry, which is expressed in song). It should be recalled that the child, too, whose virginity is emphasized, represents a rejection of heterosexual desire; and one of Chaucer's favorite authors, Jean de Meun, presents chastity and male-male desire as two equivalent refusals of the procreative function in his own reference to Orpheus, when Genius condemns those who

Ne ja n'i tendront droite rue,
Ains vont bestornant la charrue,
Et conferment les regles males
Par excepcions anormales,
Quant Orfeüs vuelent ensivre,
Qui ne sot arer ne escrivre
Ne forgier en la droite forge

(Pendus soit il par la gorge,
 Qui tex regles lor controuva,
 Vers Nature mal se prouva!)

[. . . will never keep to the straight track, but instead go overturning the plow, who confirm their evil rules by abnormal exceptions when they want to follow Orpheus (he did not know how to plow or write or forge in the true forge—may he be hanged by the throat!—when he showed himself so evil toward Nature by contriving such rules for them).]³¹

As Charles Dahlberg points out, Jean de Meun here follows Alan of Lille's *Complaint of Nature*, in which the music of Orpheus, far from being naturalized as in Ovid's version of the story, is used as an image of Alan's *bête noir*, the "unnatural" erotic coupling of men with men, and is opposed to the music of Nature herself: Natura says that "[s]olus homo, mee modulationis citharam aspernatus, sub delirantis Orphei lira delirat" [Man alone turns with scorn from the modulated strains of my cithern and runs deranged to the note of mad Orpheus' lyre]. But whereas Alan "sees Orpheus as unnatural because of his pederasty, Genius sees 'those who follow Orpheus' as including those who follow a life of chastity."³²

The Prioress presents her hero's chastity as heroic, whereas Jean de Meun's Genius condemns the chaste to a punishment of dismemberment:

O tout l'escommeniement
 Qui touz les met a dampnement,
 Puis que la se vuelent aerdre,
 Ains qu'il muirent, puissent il perdre
 Et l'aumoniere et les estales
 Dont il ont signe d'estre males!
 Perte lor viengne des pendans
 A quoi l'aumoniere est pendans!
 Les martiaus dedens atachiés
 Puissent il avoir errachiés!
 Li grefe lor soient tolu,
 Quant escrire n'en ont volu
 Dedens les precieuses tables
 Qui lor estoient convenables!
 Et des charrues et des sos,
 S'il n'en arent a droit, les os
 Puissent il avoir depeciés
 Sans estre jamés redreciés!

[. . . may they, in addition to the excommunication that sends them all to damnation, suffer, before their death, the loss of their purse and testicles, the

signs that they are male! May they lose the pendants on which the purse hangs! May they have the hammers that are attached within torn out! May their styluses be taken away from them when they have not wished to write within the precious tablets that were suitable for them! And if they don't plow straight with their plows and shares, may they have their bones broken without their ever being mended!]³³

This vision of dismemberment immediately follows the reference to Orpheus, suggesting that for Jean de Meun all those who refuse procreative sexual behavior, the chaste included, deserve Orpheus' fate. The Prioress' hero is also dismembered, but receives a heavenly reward more reminiscent of Orpheus' eventual reconstitution and reunion with Eurydice after death: both are reunited with the female figures they have been pursuing throughout their stories.

The Prioress' child hero, then, is a Christian improvement over the classical Orpheus, who is glossed in one medieval mythographic tradition as a figure for the gaze of wisdom "misdirected toward the dark underworld of *temporalia*. Those earthly delights have misled concupiscence [Eurydice] . . . away from the light of the *summum bonum*."³⁴ The child's innocent visit to the underworld is instead precisely a quest for the *summum bonum* represented by Mary; his concupiscence is directed rightly. *The Prioress's Tale* thus also corrects the misogyny of Ovid's and most medieval commentators' versions of the Orpheus story, in a manner reminiscent of the alternative tradition proposed by Martianus Capella and his followers. Song, the feminine, and eternal life are conflated in a new form of spirituality rather than separated as in the mainstream Orpheus tradition.

The Pardoner in Parts

The Pardoner, on the other hand, is—as always—a more ambiguous figure in his relation to the Orpheus myth. He lives a life dominated by improper concupiscence (normally represented by Orpheus' desire for Eurydice), but his identification with the Old Man and the three rioters points to a rejection of the feminine, unlike either Orpheus' improper pursuit of it or the Prioress' (and the alternative commentary tradition's) positive transvaluation of it. The Pardoner's connection with Orpheus comes through the refusal of heterosexual procreativity, linked to his possible dismemberment and to his singing: we first meet him singing a love song, but accompanied by the Summoner's "stif burdoun," a song that thus allows us to imagine both male-male desire (though a desire for the feminine is implied elsewhere, as in the Pardoner's encounter with the Wife of Bath) and the Pardoner's possible fragmentation or lack. The terms, however, are now

reversed: instead of being dismembered, like Orpheus, as a result of this refusal of heterosexual desire, the Pardoner's (possible) refusal is (apparently) the result of his (possible) prior dismemberment, or is at least associated with it. Ironically, the feminine, rejected in his tale and apparently in his erotic object-choice, comes back to haunt him in his very identity. Rather than a Christian improvement on the pagan myth like *The Prioress's Tale*, the Pardoner is a parody of it, or of its usual medieval commentaries, stripping away or at least interrogating its usual spiritual significance.

Dismemberment appears almost everywhere the Pardoner turns up in *The Canterbury Tales*. Many of the portraits in the *General Prologue* tend to analyze their subjects as their bodies' component parts, following a common medieval mode of visual description. The portraits of only a few pilgrims, however, dismember them as thoroughly as the Pardoner's. Some phrases give an overall impression of a pilgrim's body without such analysis: the "scandre colerik" Reeve (I, 587), the Prioress who is "nat undergrowe" (I, 156), the thin Clerk (I, 288–89), etc. Often the descriptions focus on one or two telling bodily details: the Squire's curled hair (I, 81), the Yeoman's "not heed" and "broun visage" (I, 109), the Prioress' courtly features (I, 152–54), the Friar's "nekke whit" (I, 238), the Cook's "mormal" (I, 386), the Wife of Bath's teeth (I, 468), and so on. A surprising number of pilgrims receive no descriptions of their bodies at all in the *General Prologue*: the Knight, the Second Nun and Nun's Priest, the five guildsmen, the Shipman, the Parson, the Plowman, the Manciple.

The fullest analysis or descriptive fragmentation of any pilgrims' bodies is reserved for four of the five low-class men grouped together at the end of the *General Prologue* portraits: the Miller, Reeve, Summoner, and Pardoner. These are also the *General Prologue's* most unattractive physical descriptions by conventional fourteenth-century middle-class standards. The Miller's body is analyzed as big muscles and bones, a thick neck ("shortsholdred" [I, 549]), a broad, red beard, a nose further subdivided into the famous hairy wart and wide, black nostrils, a big mouth, and a "golden thumb" (I, 545–66). The Reeve, besides being slender and choleric, has close-shaven hair and whiskers and long, skinny legs (I, 587–92), while the Summoner's diseased face is analyzed as a red complexion, pimples (mentioned three times, as "whelkes" and "knobbes" [I, 632–33] as well as being part of his "saucefleem" complexion [I, 625]), "scalled browes blake," and "piled berd" (I, 627). This kind of fragmented description seems to be associated with certain anxieties, both social and physical: these are class-bound descriptions of potential violence and disease, emphasizing both social disruption and physical dissolution.

Of all the pilgrims, including these last-described members of the lower orders, the Pardoner is the one who most fully embodies this

threat of physical dissolution and fragmentation. He is the only pilgrim who may literally not have all of his body parts: "I trowe he were a gelydyng or a mare" (I, 691), however it may be interpreted, carries on its surface the possibility of castration. And his verbal description fragments this body even further, subdividing the Pardoner into yellow hair (which is further subdivided or fragmented into "ounces" and individual "colpons" [I, 675–79]), shoulders (I, 678), glaring eyes (I, 684), lap (I, 686), beardless chin (I, 689–90), and tongue (I, 712). We are not allowed an overall impression of the Pardoner's body as a whole, such as we have of the burly Miller or slender Reeve, but experience it in disconnected bits and pieces.

The fragmentation associated with the Pardoner does not stop at the description of his body; besides being both literally (perhaps) and verbally fragmented, he also carries body fragments with him, the "pigges bones" (I, 700) that he passes off as relics. Fragmentation is, in a sense, his defining attribute.

We hear more about both these bones and his own body in the *Prologue* to his tale. His body, for instance, requires the protection of the bishop's seal on his pardoner's license (VI, 337–38), and he verbally fragments himself, just as the *General Prologue's* narrator does, emphasizing the apparently independent actions of his neck, hands, and tongue: "Thanne peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke, / And est and west upon the peple I bekke, / As dooth a dowve sittynge on a berne. / Myne handes and my tonge goon so yerne / That it is joye to se my bisynesse" (VI, 395–99). The hands and tongue, especially, seem to take on an existence of their own in this passage, and they return again in lines 413 ("Thanne wol I styngge hym with my tonge smerte") and 444 ("I wol nat do no labour with myne handes"). And, again like the narrator of the *General Prologue*, the Pardoner also emphasizes his attributes of fragmentation, the supposed relics whose bodily and fragmentary nature is emphasized in the repetition of the word "bone":

Thanne shewe I forth my longe cristal stones,
 Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones—
 Relikes been they, as wenen they echoon.
 Thanne have I in latoun a sholder-boon
 Which that was of an holy Jewes sheep.
 'Goode men,' I seye, 'taak of my wordes keep;
 If that this boon be wasse in any welle,
 If cow, or calf, or sheep, or oxe swelle
 That any worm hath ete, or worm ystonge,
 Taak water of that welle and wassh his tonge,
 And it is hool anon . . . (VI, 347–57).

The tongue appears yet again in this passage, now the sick cattle's instead of the Pardoner's, along with a desire for wholeness that we may be tempted to impute to the fragmentary Pardoner himself as well as to the cattle's owners. The dominant image here, however, is of dismembered bones: as in the *General Prologue*, these false relics appear as the Pardoner's defining attribute, comparable to the dismembered breasts with which St. Agatha is pictured. His attribute is an image of fragmentation. Yet these bones make the sick animals "hool": wholeness is paradoxically to be achieved through fragmentation; or fragmentation is to give way to an idealized wholeness.

The image of the hand also appears shortly hereafter: "Heere is a miteyn eek, that ye may se. / He that his hand wol putte in this mitayn, / He shal have multiplieng of his grayn, / Whan he hath sowen, be it whete or otes, / So that he offre pens, or elles grotes" (VI, 372-76). Like the tongue in the previous passage, this hand is not the Pardoner's; it belongs to a hypothetical villager who will profit from another relic—once more, imagined fragmentation gives way to an ideal plenitude, and once more we may be tempted to displace this desire for completion onto the Pardoner himself, especially given the references to his own verbally dismembered hands and tongue that follow these passages so quickly.

As we might by now expect, fragmented body parts are also to be found throughout *The Pardoner's Tale* itself: virtually everyone in this story is subjected to verbal or physical fragmentation. Foremost among those who suffer dismemberment is Christ himself, who is repeatedly—obsessively—imagined as being literally torn apart by the three rioters' verbal act of swearing oaths on the parts of his body: "Hir othes been so grete and so dampnable / That it is grisly for to heere hem swere. / Oure blissed Lordes body they totere— / Hem thoughte that Jewes rente hym noght ynough— / And ech of hem at otheres synne lough" (VI, 472-76); "And many a grisly ooth thanne han they sworn, / And Cristes blessed body they torente" (VI, 708-09). The theoretical basis for such statements is presented in the section of the opening sermon devoted to swearing, and specific examples are given both in the sermon and in other descriptions of the rioters' behavior. Gambling and swearing are related to each other, and both rely on the imagery of bodily fragmentation: "'By Goddes precious herte,' and 'By his nayles,' / And 'By the blood of Crist that is in Hayles, / Sevene is my chaunnce, and thyn is cynk and treye!' / 'By Goddes armes, if thou falsly pleye, / This daggere shal thurghout thyn herte go!' / This fruyt cometh of the bicched bones two, / Forsweryng, ire, falsnesse, homycide" (VI, 651-57). The dice themselves are bones like the Pardoner's relics, but whereas the fruit of the supposed relics is an imagined plenitude, the fruit of these bones is division—both the physical fragmentation threatened in line 655 and the verbal fragmentation of

Christ's body into its component parts of heart and blood. The "nayles" themselves seem in this context to refer at least as clearly to fingernails as to the nails of the Crucifixion, and the "arms" as much to Christ's bodily limbs as to the *arma Christi*.³⁵ This is the sense in which the rioters tear and rend the body of Christ: "Ye, Goddes armes!" (VI, 692); "I make avow to Goddes digne bones!" (VI, 695). Such linguistic fragmentation is apparently opposed to the type of literal, bodily fragmentation (leading to a hypothetical wholeness or plenitude) in which the Pardoner himself claims to participate in his use of "holy" relics.

Dismemberment in the Pardoner's sermon is not limited to his disquisitions on gambling and swearing; gluttony and drunkenness, too, are imagined in terms of bodily fragmentation. Gluttons, according to the Pardoner, also participate in a sinful pleasure involving dismemberment: "Out of the harde bones knockke they / The mary, for they caste noght away / That may go thurgh the golet softe and swoote" (VI, 541–43). This is yet another variation on the image of bones, this time imagined as a source of sinfully pleasurable food. The gluttons' punishment at the Pardoner's hands is to be repeatedly dismembered in their turn, his language (and that of St. Paul) reducing them to the organs of digestion and their excretions; one after another, the throat, mouth, and belly each plays its role, the results being belches, farts, and shit:

Allas, the shorte throte, the tendre mouth. (VI, 517)

Of this matiere, O Paul, wel kanstow trete:
 "Mete unto wombe, and wombe eek unto mete,
 Shal God destroyen bothe," as Paulus seith. (VI, 521–23)

. . . of his throte he maketh his pryvee. (VI, 527)

" . . . wombe is hir god!"
 O wombe! O bely! O stynkyng cod,
 Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun!
 At either ende of thee foul is the soun. (VI, 533–36)

In the Pardoner's language nothing is left of the glutton except his organs and his excrement. A similar linguistic fate awaits the "dronke man" (VI, 551), who is reduced, in turn, to disfigured face, sour breath, snorting nose, and wayward tongue (VI, 551–57).

It should be clear by now just how obsessive the imagery of dismemberment—or the dismembered imagery—becomes whenever the Pardoner is speaking or being spoken of. Even in his brief exchange with the Wife of Bath, in the course of her *Prologue*, he seems unable to resist pre-

senting himself as alienated from his own flesh: "I was aboute to wedde a wyf; alas! / What sholde I bye it on my flessch so deere?" (III, 166–67). The figure for this fragmentation and alienation in the *Pardoner's Tale* proper is the Old Man.

As we have seen previously,³⁶ the Old Man is horribly conscious of his own physical decay. This self-conscious alienation from the body is expressed in imagery of dismemberment that, like his other characteristics examined in chapter 5, links him to the Pardoner's own obsessions and to the Pardoner's own possibly dismembered body: "Lo how I vanysse, flessch, and blood, and skyn! / Allas, whan shul my bones been at reste? . . . / For which ful pale and welked is my face" (VI, 732–33, 739). Once again the dismembered bones surface, now as a stark reminder of physical dissolution, and once again the Pardoner's language further dismembers the Old Man into his component body parts: flesh, blood, skin, and withered face. This is not an image of death—the Old Man cannot die—but of suffering in life. It seems as if every aspect of life the Pardoner cares to mention—every human activity from the most virtuous to the most sinful—comes to be represented, for him, in terms of bodily fragmentation and alienation: from preaching (in *The Pardoner's Prologue*) and marrying (in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*), to religious worship (again in *The Pardoner's Prologue*), to eating and drinking, to swearing (in the sermon), to aging (in *The Pardoner's Tale* proper).

An analysis of this kind of imagery in terms of gender must, once again, include Lacan's early writings. The image of the dismembered body, the *corps morcelé*, appears in several key essays devoted to the passage from dependent infancy into the Symbolic order. Lacan argues that the human relation to reality is "altered by a certain dehiscence at the heart of the organism, a primordial Discord betrayed by the signs of uneasiness and motor unco-ordination of the neo-natal months. The objective notion of the anatomical incompleteness of the pyramidal system and likewise the presence of certain humoral residues of the maternal organism confirm the view I have formulated as the fact of a real *specific prematurity of birth* in man."³⁷ The sense of "anatomical incompleteness" returns in adult dreams and fantasies related to "disintegration in the individual. . . in the form of disjointed limbs, or of those organs represented in exoscopy, growing wings and taking up arms for intestinal persecutions—the very same that the visionary Hieronymus Bosch has fixed, for all time, in their ascent from the fifteenth century to the imaginary zenith of modern man."³⁸

Another early essay of Lacan's asserts that a fixation on this *corps morcelé* is related to an adult aggressivity that seems especially relevant to our reading of the Pardoner: "Among these *imagos* are some that represent the elective vectors of aggressive intentions, which they provide with an efficacy

that might be called magical. These are the images of castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body. . . ." Lacan also refers to practices that deny "respect for the natural forms of the human body," including fashion and the themes of decapitation and disembowelment in children's play. He suggests that

[w]e must turn to the works of Hieronymus Bosch for an atlas of all the aggressive images that torment mankind. The prevalence that psychoanalysis has discovered among them of images of a primitive autoscopy of the oral and cloacal organs has engendered the forms of demons. These are to be found even in the ogee of the *angustiae* of birth depicted in the gates of the abyss through which they thrust the damned. . . .

These are all initial givens of a *Gestalt* proper to aggression in man: a *Gestalt* that is as much bound up with its symbolic character as with the cruel refinement of the weapons he makes. . . .³⁹

Like Bosch's images, Chaucer's, in those passages devoted to the Pardoner, virtually provide a catalogue of these *imagos* of the *corps morcelé*, and not only, as we might expect, of the image of castration. The "magical" efficacy of images of dismemberment are clearly seen throughout his *General Prologue* portrait, his own *Prologue*, and his *Tale*: in each case supernatural powers are attributed to dismembered bones, be they the supposed relics of the two *Prologues* or the vow sworn to "Goddes digne bones" (VI, 695) with which one of the rioters swears his intention to find and kill Death. Similar supernatural attributes—or invocations of divine assistance—are attached to the other oaths sworn by the rioters, which the Pardoner identifies, as we have seen, as the literal rending of Christ's body—Lacan's images of "mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration."

The Pardoner's language in his *Tale* can itself, with its constant linguistic division of bodies into their component parts, be recognized in Lacan's catalogue as well: like Lacan's playing children, the Pardoner's emphasis is on the organs of mouth and belly with their excretions. He performs the same disembowelment in language as they. (And as for decapitation, let us recall only the dismembered face of Christ on the Pardoner's vernicle, as discussed in chapter 4.) And in a reversal of Lacan's reading of Bosch, the Old Man of *The Pardoner's Tale*, in his desire for death, imagines it as another passage through the maternal gates. The Old Man, whose flesh and blood are "vanishing," may recall the dream of a transparent body also recorded by Lacan.⁴⁰

Even Lacan's reading of fashion as an extension of the *corps morcelé* finds its correspondence in the Pardoner who, we may recall from *The General Prologue*, is a fourteenth-century fashion victim: "But hood, for jolitee, wered he noon, / For it was trussed up in his walet. / Hym thoughte he

rood al of the newe jet; / Dischevelee, save his cappe, he rood al bare" (I, 680–83). It may not be too far-fetched to relate even the Pardoner's well-filed tongue (I, 712), with which he claims in his *Prologue* to sting his enemies (VI, 413), to Lacan's cruelly refined weapons, understood as another projection of bodily dismemberment, as well to his citation of the "social practice" of incision.

Lacan might find that the Pardoner's fixation on the *corps morcelé* is also given an image in his aggressivity, located in his "recriminations, reproaches, phantasmic fears, emotional reactions of anger, attempts at intimidation,"⁴¹ all amply demonstrated in the Pardoner's relations with both the villagers he fleeces and the other pilgrims, who are not taken in: "So wrooth he was, no word ne wolde he seye" (VI, 957).

Lacan's language in these essays ignores—or represses—gender, but it is present nonetheless. The infantile experience of incompleteness occurs before the mirror-stage allows the anticipatory assumption of a totalizing body-image and eventually of "the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development."⁴² That is to say, though Lacan does not say so, incompleteness and fragmentation are experienced before the disruption of the mother-child dyad by the Law of the Father. Fantasies of dismemberment, like the Pardoner's, represent once again the return of the maternal feminine, which, as we have seen, troubles the assumption of masculine identity. The maternal presence is hinted at in Lacan's references to the infant's "humoral residues of the maternal organism," and perhaps in his characterization of the disintegrating subject as hysterical. For Lacan, a healthy relation to reality demands that the individual move beyond the mother-child continuum into the paternal Symbolic.

On the other hand, Lacan also insists, in "The Subversion of the Subject," that the subject constructed in this movement is illusory. As Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy read it, "One might be tempted to restore the 'total' or 'unified' reality of the subject by counting on the concrete reality of the body; but Lacan considered that even this can be contested, merely by reference to the body in psychotic states of disintegration; or the hysterical and hypochondriacal bodily symptoms, which follow no medical reality; or the body of the infant before it is unified in the mirror image."⁴³ The illusory unity of the subject is thus marked by lack, "the object which is ungraspable in the mirror, the 'remainder,' the lacking or lost object. The unified body image, which can be grasped in the mirror, is only the 'clothing' or 'phantom' . . . of the lost object."⁴⁴ This lack is also associated with castration, and thus "unchains desire, especially desire for what is lacking with regard to the mother, and then what the mother desires."⁴⁵ For Lacan, this lack too is represented by

fragmentation, its concrete manifestation (*objet a*) appearing as the erogenous zones,

the result of a cut (*coupure*) expressed in the anatomical mark (*trait*) of a margin or border—lips, ‘the enclosure of the teeth,’ the rim of the anus, the tip of the penis, the vagina, the slit formed by the eyelids. . . . [T]his mark of the cut is no less obviously present in the object described by analytic theory: the mamilla, faeces, the phallus (imaginary object), the urinary flow. (An unthinkable list, if one adds, as I do, the phoneme, the gaze, the voice—the nothing.) For is it not obvious that this feature, this partial feature, is applicable not because these objects are part of a total object, the body, but because they represent only partially the function that produces them?⁴⁶

Once again we may find the feminine and maternal between the lines (and only between the lines) of this essay: this catalogue of eroticized partial objects represents the mother’s lack and desire, and may remind the reader (though once again Lacan does not say so) of the comparable catalogue of images of the *corps morcelé* discussed above. And the addition of the phoneme and the voice (not to mention “the nothing”) must remind us of Julia Kristeva’s maternal semiotic. The lost object would seem to be implicitly feminine, and associated with the infant’s experience of fragmented dependency in the presymbolic mother–child continuum.

Feminist scholars following Lacan have provided a cogent critique of his model by making explicit what remains unsaid in his own essays. Such commentaries have taken a more and more oppositional stance toward Lacan’s thought in recent years. Jacqueline Rose, in her introduction to a selection of Lacanian essays originally compiled in 1975, adheres closely to Lacan in suggesting that the paternal intervention and castration threat that severs the mother–child dyad need not be identified with a “real” father:

Castration means first of all this—that the child’s desire for the mother does not refer to her but *beyond* her, to an object, the phallus, whose status is first imaginary (the object presumed to satisfy her desire) and then symbolic (recognition that desire cannot be satisfied). . . . Thus when Lacan calls for a return to the place of the father he is crucially distinguishing himself from any sociological conception of the role. The father is a function and refers to a law, the place outside the imaginary dyad and against which it breaks. To make of him a referent is to fall into an ideological trap. . . .⁴⁷

In that case, why refer to “him” as “father” and in terms of a “phallus?” Subsequent feminist thinkers have pointed out this slippage in Lacan’s thought between the father and phallus as functions and as referents.⁴⁸

In the 1980s, Jane Gallop, following Laplanche and Pontalis, pointed out that the *corps morcelé* and its discomforts, which apparently precede the illusory assumption of unity in the mirror-stage, can also be read as being produced retrospectively by it: "The mirror stage would *seem to come after* 'the body in bits and pieces' and organize them into a unified image. But actually, *that violently unorganized image only comes after* the mirror stage so as to *represent what came before*. What appears to precede the mirror stage is simply a projection or reflection."⁴⁹ The disorganized, fragmented body cannot be experienced as such except from the illusory perspective of organization and unity. Gallop uses this insight specifically to criticize Lacan's (and his followers') assumption that the infant's experience of fragmentation is one of insufficiency, anxiety, and anguish that is to be relieved only by the anticipation and ultimate assumption of an identity:⁵⁰ "But let us carefully examine the chronology implicit here. The infant is thrown forward from 'insufficiency' to 'anticipation.' However, that 'insufficiency' can be understood only from the perspective of the 'anticipation.' The image of the body in bits and pieces is fabricated retroactively from the mirror stage."⁵¹ If this is so, we might further ask (taking Gallop's argument in a different direction) whether the *corps morcelé* in its connection with the mother could represent a positive lost experience that the alienated subject might desire, and indeed the dissolution of self and body into the maternal is just what the Pardoners' Old Man longs for. The slippage of the Pardoners' anxiously assumed masculine authority toward the feminine and maternal is a troublesome threat, but it is troublesome only insofar as it is also desired.

In the 1990s, feminist philosophers like Jane Flax took up an even more clearly oppositional stance with regard to Lacan. While Flax does not discuss the *corps morcelé* directly, her observations can be applied to Lacan's negative understanding of it.

Inasmuch as women are associated with the presymbolic, they appear as the repressed within Lacan's theory. Yet like all repressed material they continue to affect the dynamics of the whole self, for to be repressed is *not* to be absent. The repressed is omnipresent as an unconscious force within the psyche and therefore in culture itself. This repressed material cannot be made conscious by Lacan's theory because he relegates it to the presymbolic and therefore to the unspeakable and unknowable. The presymbolic nevertheless haunts both symbolic systems and the subject.⁵²

Thus Flax reconceives the presymbolic mother-child continuum as an image of relational plenitude rather than anxiety, anguish, and insufficiency: "Freud's drive theory and Lacan's rereading of it reflect in part an

unconscious motive: to deny and repress aspects of infantile experience that are relational (e.g., the child's dependence upon and connectedness with her or his earliest caregiver, who is almost always a woman). Hence in utilizing the concepts of Freud and Lacan, we must pay attention to what they conceal as well as reveal, especially the unacknowledged influences of anxieties about gender on their supposedly gender-neutral concepts."⁵³ What is needed, then, is a discourse or interpretive strategy of difference rather than a discourse of sameness—or of unity. Such a discourse would value multiplicity and would itself be multiple, fragmentary:

Masculine discourse is constituted by a binary logic (logocentrism) in which "a law organizes what is thinkable by oppositions." Logocentrism is inextricably connected to phallogentrism. . . . No true difference can exist within (masculine) discourse. The other is always reduced to being the other of the same, its inferior, reflection, "excess," hence still defined by and an extension of it. . . . Hence the insertion of *female* specificity into these discourses would explode the claim of sexual indifference and instead particularize these discourses as masculine. Female particularity would disrupt these unitary and solid discourses. *The same would fragment into multiplicity.*⁵⁴

Fragmentation is here explicitly valued as the return of the repressed female.

Like the Maenads attacking Orpheus for his neglect of the feminine, dismembering his unitary phallic body in a vengeful return of the repressed, these critiques of Lacan dismember his discourse and, in the act of dismemberment, return to that of the neglected feminine and maternal. That which is devalued in both Ovid and Lacan may be revalued in a critique that proceeds from and deconstructs the misogynous text itself. Medieval as well as postmodern commentaries allow this revaluation of the fragmentary and the discontinuous.

Both ways of understanding bodily fragmentation—that which regards it with horror and that which embraces it—would have been familiar to late medieval readers, as several recent accounts by Caroline Walker Bynum have eloquently demonstrated: "Resurrection was asserted by theologians and believed by ordinary Christians both because bodily fragmentation was not really a threat and because it was!"⁵⁵ Bynum argues on the one hand that bodily fragmentation was, for example, a sign of damnation as represented in the visual arts: "[S]alvation is wholeness, damnation is decay and partition. . . . [T]he damned are represented in a state of fragmentation that is a symbolic expression of their sins. Heaven is associated with wholeness, Hell with partition; redemption is regurgitation and reassemblage."⁵⁶ Similarly, religious, legal, and medical discourse all imagined an association of fragmentation with sin and crime. Since decay and decomposition were associated with sin, saints and other holy persons were sometimes thought

to resist the partition of their corpses, reassembling their own relics and protecting their bodies from interference.⁵⁷ Legally, torturers were forbidden to sever the body, and only the most abhorrent crimes were to be punished by bodily mutilation and dismemberment. Leprosy could be regarded as an expression of sinfulness because it caused the body's spontaneous fragmentation.⁵⁸

On the other hand, bodily fragmentation was practiced more enthusiastically in the late Middle Ages than ever before. The dissection of corpses for various medical purposes had been introduced by the early fourteenth century; at the same time, the German practice of dismembering and distributing the corpses of rulers and aristocrats for political purposes (the *mos teutonicus*) was becoming more widely accepted.⁵⁹ Most significant for the Pardoner is the widespread traffic in relics, the fragmented and preserved body parts of the saints.

These two readings of fragmentation are not simply symmetrical alternatives: as Bynum demonstrates, the enthusiastic pursuit of bodily partition beginning in the twelfth century should not be understood as a rejection of the ideal of wholeness, but as another way of pursuing it as an ultimate goal in the body's resurrection. (Recall the Pardoner's fantasized passage from the relics' fragmentation to an imagined plenitude.) Modern feminist thinkers revalorize the Maenads' work, finding in fragmentation the return of the repressed feminine. In the later Middle Ages, however, beginning in the twelfth century, fragmentation might also be understood as an assertion of patriarchal power. The *mos teutonicus* mentioned earlier is a good example: "By 1200, especially north of the Alps, the bodies of prominent ecclesiastics or nobles were often eviscerated, boned, or boiled after death, and the resulting parts were buried in several places near several saints."⁶⁰ In other words, fragmentation could be a patriarchal privilege: this particular form of dismemberment was reserved exclusively for secular and ecclesiastical leaders. Far from only revalorizing the feminine, fragmentation in its medieval context could just as well reassert patriarchal wholeness. Bynum finds in this practice only one example of a more general enthusiasm for bodily partition and distribution "made possible by the confidence in ultimate victory over it. By the twelfth century, bodies were divided in order to bestow their power more widely, to associate them with disparate human communities; they were divided because they were crucial to, and therefore distributed, self."⁶¹ Medieval fragmentation, then, can represent not a Lacanian dissolution of self, but the confidence that self will remain; regardless of the condition of our bodies on earth, they will be reassembled and perfected in Heaven—by God the Father. Both the horror of fragmentation and its enthusiastic pursuit, then, can be assimilated to the same patriarchal unity, earthly or heavenly.

In Heaven, in fact, the body's earthly defects will be repaired. By Chaucer's period, even by the thirteenth century, according to Bynum, "most thinkers held that each person possessed a *caro radicalis* (a core of flesh) formed both from the matter passed on by parent or parents to child and from the matter that comes from food. It was this *caro radicalis* that God reassembled after the Last Judgment. . . . If matter is somehow missing, the power of God must make up the deficit by miracle."⁶² If the Pardoner is a castrated eunuch on earth, his original flesh will be supplied in Heaven. One might ask, though, whether this divinely supplied matter includes flesh that ideally should be part of one's physical makeup even if it was never part of the actual body in question: if the Pardoner is to be understood as a *eunuchus ex nativitate*, for instance, will his missing organs still appear at the Resurrection? Aquinas, John of Paris, and Durandus of St. Pourçain would seem to think so: God will use whatever is needed to make "a perfect human body."⁶³

Earthly fragmentation, then, can be read, and by the fourteenth century was likely to be read, consciously at least, as expressing not the return of the repressed feminine but rather a confidence that it will ultimately be overcome: the monolithically patriarchal unity will be reasserted in Heaven, and earthly dismemberment is merely a preparation for it, even a privilege. The Pardoner's discourse is undoubtedly unitary and expressive of the church's masculine authority; his obsessive catalogues of body fragments are filled with disgust, with the anguish and sense of insufficiency that Lacan associates with the presymbolic and that we might expect of the subject whose masculine identity is so anxiously and repeatedly assumed and reassumed, and for whom feminization is an ever-present threat. In that sense the Pardoner is striving toward the unified, phallic body promised to be resurrected in Heaven. The linkage of his dismembered body to the supposed saints' relics of his *Prologue* and to the body of Christ in his *Tale* make this desire for wholeness especially clear: after the Last Judgment these are the selves who will be resurrected in perfect bodily form.

The Pardoner, however, is no saint. Although his attempts at bodily authenticity and completion in the *Prologue* ("That shewe I first, my body to warente" [VI, 338]), like his identification with the "relics," imply a longing for the perfectly masculine resurrection body, one that in Heaven would not require the anxious veiling explored earlier, the Pardoner is unlikely to achieve that unified and phallic physical being. As Bynum also points out, in the late medieval imagination, "[w]hether or not fragmentation or diminution is characterized as significant (or even in fact as occurring) depends not on what happens to the body physically but on the moral standing of the person to whom the bodily events pertain."⁶⁴ The

Pardoner's moral standing seems unlikely to get him to Heaven, though in his *Prologue* he does make some claims for the moral efficacy of his preaching: "Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice / Which that I use, and that is avarice. / But though myself be gilty in that synne, / Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne / From avarice and soore to repente. / But that is nat my principal entente; / I preche nothyng but for coveitise" (VI, 427–33); "For though myself be a ful vicious man, / A moral tale yet I yow telle kan, / Which I am wont to preche for to wynne" (VI, 459–61). The claim to morality here resembles his claim to masculinity: neither can really be justified in their aspirations to states of perfection that the Pardoner fails to achieve even as he paradoxically lays claim to them. This idealized and ultimately rejected morality, masculine "virtue," is directly related to the equally idealized, masculine, phallic resurrection body, which is thus similarly beyond the Pardoner's reach; and the fragmented body is also the feminized body in an age that could conceive of the female as an imperfect or defective male.⁶⁵ His moral status condemns him to an eternity of fragmentation like the damned souls depicted in the visual representations of Hell and the Last Judgment examined by Bynum,⁶⁶ an eternity of longing for perfection (in both senses)—an eternity that has, for the Pardoner, already commenced. If fragmentation is a return of the repressed feminine, that return is marked by disgust and rejection, and thus serves as a reinforcement of the patriarchal values so prized by the Pardoner. From this perspective the Pardoner resembles not the fragmented hero of *The Prioress's Tale*, whose resurrection is foretold by the Virgin Mary, but the villainous Jews, who are the ultimate victims of legal dismemberment: "Therefore with wilde hors he dide hem drawe, / And after that he heng hem by the lawe" (VII, 633–34), a connection reinforced by the similarities between the Pardoner's stand-in, the Old Man, and the Wandering Jew.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the discourse of fragmentation is also, paradoxically, a discourse of desire, most nakedly in the Old Man's longing for a final dissolution and return to Mother Earth, but also in its association of fragmentation with the divine and the magical: the Pardoner's various bones are an attempt (one that he claims not to believe but which he nevertheless constantly reasserts) to redeem (his own?) bodily fragmentation, to find in it the source of maternal plenitude Flax discovers instead of—or in addition to—the anxiety of the illusory subjectivity emphasized by Lacan. It should not be forgotten that the Pardoner's anxious assertions of masculinity are also marked by a desire for union with the feminine, for instance in his *Prologue*: "I wol noon of the apostles cowntrefete; / I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete, / Al were it yeven of the povereste page, / Or of the povereste wydwe in a village, / Al sholde

hir children sterve for famyne" (VI, 447–51). The desire for "moneie" here quickly becomes the desire for more homely goods ("wolle") and for the physical nurture represented by "chese, and whete," whether they come from a boy or a woman, and the interchangeability of boys and women may remind us once again of Orpheus: the "page" and the "wydwe" are equally feminized as sources of nourishment for the needy Pardoner. His insatiable, infantile desires here place him in the position of the hypothetical widow's children: he will take their place and be nourished by their mother while they starve. This passage is a strange and disturbing amalgam of, on the one hand, an asserted masculine privilege, dominating the page and widow with typical phallic authority and, on the other, an all-consuming need for this representative, nurturing mother. The Pardoner's fragmented self seems to need both; the assertion of phallic, masculine wholeness depends upon this desire for the feminine.

The lines immediately following may also remind us of the Orpheus myth: "Nay, I wol drynke licour of the vyne / And have a joly wenche in every toun" (VI, 452–53). The constellation of these multiple wenches and the wine he drinks with them might recall the Maenads, the Dionysiac revelers who effect the dismemberment of Orpheus, but the Pardoner's participation in their revels suggests that unlike the mythic singer, this singing Pardoner desires the frightening, disorderly feminine. Once again, unexpectedly, the assertion of masculine control is shown to be dependent upon the very feminine that it also represses.

The Old Man of *The Pardoner's Tale* makes these hidden relationships clear. I argued earlier that the Old Man, though troubled by a desire for the maternal, is ultimately another means by which the Pardoner reasserts patriarchal authority. Here I would like to emphasize the troubling maternal itself, the feminine that is desired even as it is repudiated. The Old Man, as we have seen, tries to fulfill this desire in the wrong way, through a patriarchal economic exchange: "Mooder, with yow wolde I chaunge my cheste / That in my chambre longe tyme hath be, / Ye, for an heyre clowt to wrappe me!" [VI, 734–36]). But despite his faulty approach to the feminine, this sentiment itself also bespeaks his desire to have done with the symbolic world of money and to enfold himself in the maternal body: literally in a body, a shroud made of hair to be provided by the mother. The feminine folds of the haircloth replace, in the Old Man's imagination, the money-chest of paternal inheritance and economic exchange.

And it is the Old Man who furnishes most directly the essential connection between bodily fragmentation and the desire for the feminine. His return to Mother Earth is imagined as physical dissolution: "And on the ground, which is my moodres gate, / I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late, / And seye 'Leeve mooder, leet me in! / Lo how I vanysshe, flesh, and

blood, and skyn! / Allas, whan shul my bones been at reste? . . .” (VI, 729–33) The body that returns to the womb is the fragmented, disorganized body, the body before it assumes its illusory phallic unity. The Old Man thus represents an alternative to the idealized masculine resurrection body to be united with God the Father in Heaven: his desire is, instead, for a maternal resting place for his bones, for a feminine dissolution of the body itself into Mother Earth rather than the masculine perfection of the body by the Heavenly Father. The Old Man as stand-in for the Pardoner suggests, perhaps, the Virgilian rather than the Ovidian myth of Orpheus: here the Pardoner, dismembered singer, sings in his dismembered state of his longing for the feminine.

The union of masculine and feminine in a single body, or the dissolution of masculine into feminine, would hardly have been regarded as desirable by most medieval thinkers: the phallic resurrection body is the *desideratum*. As Alan of Lille demonstrates, gender ambiguity is a source of tremendous anxiety in the erotic just as it is in the grammatical realm.

Alan’s specific complaint against Orpheus is not simply his introduction of male-male desire, but the conjunction of sodomy with the crossing of cultural and grammatical gender boundaries:

Solus homo, mee modulationis citharam aspernatus, sub delirantis Orphei lira delirat. Humanum namque genus, a sua generositate degenerans, in constructione generum barbarizans, Venereas regulas inuertendo nimis irregulari utitur metaplasmo. Sic homo, Venere tiresiatus anomala, directam predicationem per compositionem inordinate conuertit.

[Man alone turns with scorn from the modulated strains of my cithern and runs deranged to the notes of mad Orpheus’ lyre. For the human race, fallen from its high estate, adopts a highly irregular (grammatical) change when it inverts the rules of Venus by introducing barbarisms in its arrangement of genders. Thus man, his sex changed by a ruleless Venus, in defiance of due order, by his arrangement changes what is a straightforward attribute of his.]⁶⁸

Alan, here once again, conflates erotic practice, gender (including, but not limited to, grammatical gender), and even anatomical sex: the sodomites are “tiresiatus,” referring to the sex changes undergone by the seer Tiresias (and thus rightly translated by Sheridan as “sex changed”). Similar confluences of sex, gender, and erotic practice are not uncommon in high medieval discussions of sodomy, for example in Peter Damian’s *Liber Gomorrhianus*: “Quis de clerico facit pellicem, de masculo mulierem?” [Who will make a mistress of a cleric, or a woman of a man?].⁶⁹ The continued

influence of this tradition in the fourteenth century, and specifically among the authors Chaucer is known to have read, has been documented by McAlpine and more recently by Keiser.⁷⁰

The Pardoner's association with the feminine in his voice and body might, therefore, raise the possibility of unauthorized erotic practices as well. The Pardoner's imaginary union of male and female, masculine and feminine, in one body—the longing for a state in which the sexes and genders are not differentiated—would have hinted at sodomy to a fourteenth-century audience. And the problem of his eroticism would have been intensified by his association with the Orpheus myth. If, as I have been arguing, Chaucer refers primarily to the mainstream medieval Orpheus tradition, derived from Ovid, rather than the alternate, Virgilian tradition, then we should explore the role that male-male eroticism plays in this connection as well.

Ovid's Orpheus, we may recall, assimilates male-male desire to the hegemonic discourse of patriarchy. His Ganymede and Narcissus are, like Eurydice, feminized victims of divine, authoritative masculine desire. The love of God the Father is primarily a relation of power that brings servitude and death to the beloved, who then becomes the subject of an ordered, patriarchal poetry whose function, for Ovid, is to naturalize this power relation. Masculine and feminine, then, are united not in the powerful male lover, whose desire feminizes its object regardless of anatomical sex, but only in the powerless, feminized objects themselves, such as Narcissus and Ganymede. For Orpheus (and, as we have seen, for the mainstream tradition of medieval Orpheus commentaries in which Chaucer places himself), this desire for the male is imagined specifically as a rejection of the female and of feminine characteristics. Women—the Bacchantes—get something of their own back in the dismemberment of Orpheus, but Ovid punishes them and restores Orpheus to a position of scopophilic power over Eurydice in the underworld.

In this context, the Pardoner's apparent combination of sodomy and dismemberment suggests that he is marked by the fragmentary, disordered feminine.⁷¹ Like Orpheus, he appeals to the divine—the Christian Logos represented by the vernicle—for restoration to wholeness and phallic authority. Unlike Orpheus, however, the Pardoner does not receive the divine guarantee of wholeness that he seeks. Instead, his gender confusions leave him in the position of powerlessness, a position that becomes explicit when he is exposed and humiliated by the Host. Such a position is foreshadowed in the receptive sodomitical role he plays with the Summoner: the episode with the Host re-imagines their sodomitical relationship as humiliation.

In the Pardoner's case, then, the link with sodomy is as troubling as his other gender confusions. It does figure the Orphic rejection of the "infe-

rior” feminine characteristics that we find in the commentaries: we should recall here that only one of the Pardoner’s songs is a love song; the other is an offertory, which, while he does use it primarily for its acoustic effects, nevertheless signals his participation in the masculine worlds of the church and economic exchange. But this connection to phallic masculinity is at best tenuous. The link with sodomy also implies that his anxiously repeated attempts to reject the feminine merely disguise a deeper longing for it. This feminization is marked on his very body and in the possibility of his erotic relations with the Summoner.

To return to the question that opened this chapter: What does any of this have to do with Chaucer’s poetry? Like Orpheus and the Pardoner, Chaucer too is a poet/singer, creator, as he writes in the *Retraction*, of “many a song and many a leccherous lay” (X, 1086). He is also a feminized, and even a sodomitical, figure, according to Jane Chance’s discussion of *The House Of Fame*: “Like the figure of Ganymede, the ravished figure of ‘Marcia’ suggests, on one level, the possibility of Chaucer’s homosexuality, on another, his psychological identification with and insistence on female or feminized texts and textuality, and on yet another, his understanding of the passive feminized role of the contemporary vernacular poet who must bear the weight of Latin tradition.”⁷² The textual fragmentation and feminization of Chaucer’s literary corpus, and the Pardoner’s role in these processes, will be the subject of my concluding chapter, where I will also show that it is this troubling gender ambiguity that is taken up and exploited by subsequent authors who make use of Chaucer’s figure of the Pardoner.