

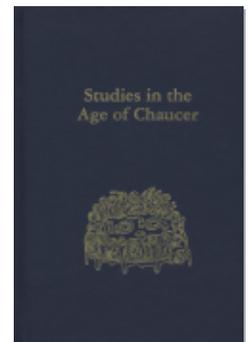


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*Homoeroticism and Chivalry: Discourses of Male Same-Sex
Desire in the Fourteenth Century* by Richard E. Zeikowitz
(review)

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Richard II,” examines the “Tale of Apollonius” and links Oedipus, Apollonius, and Richard II with Amans/Gower in interesting ways. Watt argues that Apollonius shares in the sins of Antiochus and thus that Gower’s depiction of Apollonius is deeply ambivalent. He, like Amans, does not learn from experience. These characters are meant to be warnings for the king and ultimately take us back to Gower: “Gower’s decision, not only to sign his own narrative, but to identify himself with Amans, and thus implicitly with Richard himself, may indicate his personal frustration with and sense of failure about his role, not as poet of love, but as political advisor” (p. 148).

In the epilogue, “Ethical Gower,” Watt returns to her main thesis and takes on very persuasively those who see the *Confessio* as unambiguous and moralistic. Gower’s *Confessio*, she argues, does not present straightforward moral teachings. It is a skeptical work and shows some disillusionment at the possibility of reform: “Even at its closure, *Confessio Amantis* is characterized not by success but by failure, not by reconciliation but by division” (p. 160). *Amoral Gower* is a sophisticated book. Different readers might disagree with some of Watt’s points, but all will find insightful readings and, overall, a highly compelling argument about the relationship between language, sex, and politics in the *Confessio*. In the preface Watt states: “I do not attempt to offer a final interpretation. My principal aim is to engage more readers, and thus to stimulate more interpretations” (p. xv). I have no doubt that Watt’s main aim will be accomplished. This book is an excellent contribution to Gower scholarship and, more generally, to the study of fourteenth-century literature.

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RICHARD E. ZEIKOWITZ. *Homoeroticism and Chivalry: Discourses of Male Same-Sex Desire in the Fourteenth Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Pp. 216. \$59.95.

In case anyone still doubts the relevance of queer theory to the Middle Ages, he or she should read the first chapter of this book. There Zeikowitz lays out the theoretical grounding of his argument and marshals an

overwhelming (if a bit defensive) justification for this study and many more like it. Concentrating in the first chapter on pedagogical treatises on knighthood and their call for younger males to study their more experienced elders, he argues that the fixation, admiration, and transference that such intense mimesis and figuration involve is always at least potentially homoerotic. It follows that such intense absorption in the body of another, whether a knight, a saint, or sexual beloved, is already a step toward the imaginary figuration of the self that underlies identity formation and, concomitantly, sexual orientation. Although this might sound like standard medieval queer theory at work, Zeikowitz is quite clear from the start that his project is not one of unveiling proscribed queer desires within medieval texts. Rather, he chooses to focus on late medieval normative desire, which only today might be considered "queer." The difference between these two positions is striking and very well illustrated in the case studies that follow. How bodies react within normative discourse, and specifically within the norms of chivalric culture, is what interests him, whether or not such behavior ever approaches anything that might today be thought of as homoerotic. This insistence on same-sex relations as embedded within heteronormative discourse marks this book as a strikingly original way to approach a queer middle ages, that is, a middle ages that might have built upon inherent same-sex bonding (or attraction) as a way of strengthening what seem today to be ideologically constrictive domains such as chivalric or sainthood. Thus even the bonds between counselor and counseled (Pandarus and Troilus, Gaveston and Edward II), model and initiate, are scrutinized within the broadest and least constrictive senses of the homosocial.

After this long introductory chapter, the book is divided into two sections: the first part discusses homoerotic desire as integrated almost seamlessly into normative discourse, and the second part takes up critiques and condemnations of homoeroticism as falling outside political and social norms. In the first section, one encounters some of the usual suspects, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for example, but also the less expected, *Troilus and Criseyde*. Cleverly using Geoffroi de Charny's *Book of Chivalry* as a model of the sort of double messages that sustain chivalric discourse (make your fellow knight your model and love him as yourself, yet love a lady as the badge of your excellence and your pretext for further adventure), he examines chivalry as a discourse that bonds men in ways that adumbrate Sedgwick's notion of homosocial masculinity.

Although the argument is convincing, it is also quite speculative, as might be expected when one seeks evidence from a discourse whose integrity depends upon secrecy and exclusion. Chapter 2 extends the argument into the arena of treatises on friendship. Cicero and Aristotle give way to Aelred of Rievaulx and the *Romance of the Rose* before introducing an impressive discussion of *Amy and Amylion* and the *Prose Lancelot* as texts that blur the boundaries between devotion and love, duty and devotion. Although Zeikowitz is still careful to admit no actual sexual activity with the texts, this is as close as it comes to love and his discussion is impassioned and convincing. Chapter 3 is the longest, the most closely argued, and in some ways the least consequential. A long discussion of Troilus and Pandarus, through the lens of triangular desire, is so convincing that it does not really need this much discussion. His conclusion is, however, spot on: the scenarios in which “heterosexual desire is somehow infused with homoeroticism alert us to the limited usefulness of modern categories of desire” (p. 66). The final chapters of this section are brilliant and probably the most useful to others working in this area. Augustine’s discussions of how emotions infuse visuality, phantasy, and memory leads us to a consideration of identification in film theory, which then segues into Freud’s articulation of sadism and masochism. The final chapter puts this theory to work in considering male-male gazing, both from a religious perspective in which such gazing is crucial and undertheorized and a scientific/philosophical discussion of medieval models of vision involving, once again, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Charny’s *Book of Chivalry*.

The second section, “Denigrations of Male Same-Sex Desire,” concentrates largely on politically motivated denunciations of what could be called homosocial relations that veer into the homoerotic. The trial of the Templars provides a useful example of a case in which the charge of sodomy serves a pragmatic purpose. It is explicitly mentioned as part of Templar rituals and even the initiation ritual is said in some documents to include sexual, often nonconsensual elements (kissing the anus, for example). But what Zeikowitz brings out is that the homoerotic in such discussions is always linked with aggression and victimization. The testimony elicited in the Templar trials should not be taken as truth but as political fodder, specifically elicited to prove a point. This is even truer of the next cases discussed, the relationship of Edward II and Gaveston and that of Richard II and his court favorites. The implications of how a discourse of the homoerotic, framed as violent and exploitative,

underpins even “innocent” relations (for example, Troilus and Pandarus) extend his argument to those normative texts that fall within heterosexualized boundaries. Finally, in a cogent conclusion, Zeikowitz calls into question the use of term such as “queer.” Queer is not the marginal; it thrives within the normative and homosocial and becomes worthy of note only when these socially sanctioned relations are looked at from a different perspective. I have only the most minor of quibbles with this book. The final chapter of Troilus and Pandarus could probably have been incorporated into an earlier chapter so as not to overwhelm the extremely interesting material in chapters 4 and 5; and Zeikowitz does at times overargue a point, when less could be much more. Nonetheless, this is a very clever and enlightening study, the implications of which are broad and worth extending. This is not a book for a special-interest audience or one of marginal importance. It should be taken as a model for future studies that locate vestiges of the queer at the heart of the canonical.

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