Chapter One

Introduction

Chaucer’s (Anti-)Eroticisms and the Queer Middle Ages

Who shal yeve a lovele any lawe?
—The Knight’s Tale

Courtly knights and horny clerks, chaste young virgins and lecherous old wives, randy chickens and amorous planets: eroticism circulates throughout Geoffrey Chaucer’s corpus, and as his characters pursue the fruition of their desires, they demonstrate through a mix of emotions—hope and despair, anticipation and fear, lust and longing—the ways in which pursuing one’s affections exalts and debases those caught in love’s throes. Norman Eliason proclaims Chaucer to be “the first [love poet] of any consequence in English and one of the finest who ever wrote,” and a wide body of scholarship plumbs the influence of various amatory traditions on Chaucer’s literature, particularly regarding his debt to Ovid as the premier classical poet of amatory satire, such that he is frequently dubbed the “medieval Ovid.” Virtually all of Chaucer’s


2. On the epithet “medieval Ovid,” see, for example, Michael Calabrese, Chaucer’s Ovidian Arts of Love (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 1; and Daniel Sylvia et al., “Thwarted Sexuality in Chaucer’s Works,” Florilegium 3 (1981): 239–67, at 239. On Chaucer’s debts to Ovid, John Fyler summarizes: “Chaucer and Ovid . . . are poets who speak for the comic pathos of human frailty and human pretensions, including those of the poet himself—emphatically human, emphatically limited, unable to rest assured in any earthly truth he discovers” (Chaucer and Ovid [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979], 163). The Ovidian influence on Chaucer is the subject of an important subfield of Chaucerian studies, including such additional works as Robert Hanning, Serious Play: Desire and Au-
major works, including the *Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *Legend of Good Women*, *Book of the Duchess*, *House of Fame*, and *Parliament of Fowls*, address love, sexuality, and eroticism to some degree, in scenes ranging from the zealous pursuit of intercourse in his fabliaux to the complex negotiations of love and maistrye in his marriage tales. From a narratological perspective, love's frustrations, rather than its succors, lay the foundation for the plots of Chaucer's tales, including genres as disparate as romance, fabliau, dream vision, hagiography, and exemplum. The quest for sexual fulfillment, even if achieved by a story's end, exposes the desperate lengths to which ordinary humans will pursue erotic union, whether in momentary coupling or lifelong marriage. Furthermore, the potential continually arises for erotic pursuits to camouflage, or to be camouflaged by, the anti-erotic desires that serve as their latent counterpart, thus calling into question the very meanings of desire in Chaucer's corpus—as well as in numerous other literary, religious, and social paradigms of the Middle Ages.

**(ANTI-)EROTICISMS IN THE QUEER MIDDLE AGES**

Amatory pursuits at times necessitate amatory transgressions, and this simple observation resonates throughout medieval literature, much of which is predicated on the striking collision of courtly love (with its premise of adulterous—or at least nonmarital—attraction) and a Christian faith that expressly forbids such attachments. Within Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and other works, such transgressions of social codes of sexuality evoke analyses based on queer theoretical perspectives, those attuned to disjunctions between individual desires and social practices as articulated in multiple and contradictory discourses of the Western Middle Ages. As Arcite inquires in the *Knight's Tale* when he prepares to pursue Emily despite

---

Palamon’s claims for her affections, “Who shal yeve a lovere any lawe?” (1.1164), with his words succinctly capturing the fracturing of the social order always potential when a lover pursues erotic satisfaction. When love becomes divorced from the social and religious codes that ostensibly regulate it, queerness disrupts the communal order upon which love itself is founded. Gregory Hutcheson and Josiah Blackmore consider queerness in medieval culture to be “that which normativity—in this case a cultural normativity—must reject or conceal in order to exist. Its presence is always palpable in the incongruities, excesses, or anxieties of normative discourse, but it is only exceptionally given expression, and this only at the margins.”

Queer need not imply homosexuality as much as a divergent stance vis-à-vis ideological normativity in matters of gender and sexuality; it is not a synonym for homosexual but rather a term that captures the disorienting effect of nonnormative sexual identities and their frequent clash with ideological power—of which anti-eroticisms may well be a part. Homosexuality and queerness are not intrinsically interrelated, yet they are often mutually implicated by ideological systems that link same-sex eroticism (homosexuality) with cultural disenfranchisement arising from sexuality (queerness).

Queer theory allows a broad view into the nexus of eroticism and anti-eroticism, for it showcases the ways in which either of these oppositional amatory valences can be rendered nonnormative within disparate discourses. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen observes, “queer theory’s tremendous strength is in its insistence upon the historical instability of epistemological categories, especially those involving sexuality,” and he calls queer theory “the most radical challenge yet posed to the immutability of sexual identities.” In this light, queer theory interrogates not only homosexualities but heterosexualities as well, and extends further to consider the ways in which anti-eroticisms such as virginity and chastity alternately reinforce and subvert cultural normativity. Calvin Thomas posits that “one possible goal, then, of a straight negotiation with queer theory is . . . neither to appropriate the signifier queer nor to

3. All quotations of Chaucer throughout this monograph are taken from The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
arrogate or confiscate queer theory but rather to proliferate the findings of queer theory in unexpected ways, or at least from unexpected points of enunciation.” In deploying queer theory on Chaucer’s predominantly “straight” texts, ones that, for the most part, do not engage with issues of same-sex desire, Chaucer’s (Anti-)Eroticisms and the Queer Middle Ages participates in the process of untangling the privileges and privations of heterosexual desire in medieval culture. The advantages of normative sexuality in the Middle Ages are hidden under a web of innate and internalized contradictions such that, while heteroerotic passion is lionized in much medieval thought, it is also criticized in favor of the anti-eroticism inherent in chastity and virginity. Chaucer’s fictions, far removed chronologically and ideologically from a sense of homosexuality as an act that confers social and individual identity, nonetheless foreground the queer potential of human sexuality and eroticism in the various circumstances against which his various characters must react. Primarily, by investigating the ways in which (anti-)eroticisms intercede in and dismantle narratives of otherwise normative desires, this monograph advances analyses of Chaucerian sexuality to include the queer potential in desires on the border between the erotic and the anti-erotic.

As historians of medieval sexuality and theorists of ideology have amply demonstrated, an individual’s erotic and sexual desires often clash with the mores and prohibitions of the social order, rendering the erotic a troubled site of conflicting desires. “Sexuality is culture: it is representative of a culture’s religion, attitudes, taboos, and experience,” argue April Harper and Caroline Proctor, and such regulations of sexual acts in no small manner define the social positions of various individuals. Caution is particularly warranted in analyses of medieval sexuality because, as Pierre Payer acknowledges, “Sexuality is decidedly not [a] medieval category.” From this perspective, homosexuality and other modern constructions of sexuality, whether queer or not, are historically inappropriate hermeneutics for assessing medieval gender and sexuality. Despite the potentially anachronistic examinations of the Middle Ages that these categories create, it is no less illuminating—and often more so—to examine the past


through interpretive frameworks alien to it. Michel Foucault’s excurses on the relationship between ideology and desire have alerted scholars of medieval culture to the ways in which sexuality is a conflicted category, and thus the need for the protean constructions of sexuality within a given society to be analyzed within their own historical conditions. The Western medieval world lacked a hermeneutic sense of homosexuality contra heterosexuality as a defining feature of an individual’s identity, yet this predominantly Christian culture faced continuous struggles in defining the proper role of love and eroticism for its people.

---


The difficulty of identifying medieval sexual normativity arises from the traditions that condemned apparently normative sexualities in favor of a range of behaviors that can be conjointly termed anti-erotic. Karma Lochrie points out the inherent contradictions between modern and medieval conceptions of sexual normativity:

Desire for someone of the opposite sex in modern norm-speak is natural or normal because it is the most widespread sexual practice and, secondarily, because of religious ideology that is likewise dependent on the concept of norms. Desire for someone of the opposite sex in medieval nature-speak is natural in the corrupted sense of resulting from the Fall, but it is not in any sense legitimated by its widespread practice or idealized as a personal or cultural goal.¹¹

Within medieval traditions of love and eroticism, the Christian Church encouraged the faithful to adopt the anti-eroticism of chastity in accordance with Paul’s injunctions: “dico autem non nuptis et viduis bonum est illis si sic maneant sicut et ego. quod si non se continent nubant melius est enim nubere quam uri” (1 Corinthians 7:8–9; “But I say to the unmarried, and to the widows: It is good for them if they so continue, even as I. But if they do not contain themselves, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to be burnt”).¹² He also declares, in a similar vein, “volo autem vos sine sollicitudine esse qui sine uxore est sollicitus est quae Domini sunt quomodo placeat Deo. Qui autem cum uxore est sollicitus est quae sunt mundi quomodo placeat uxori et divisus est” (1 Corinthians 7:32–33; “But I would have you to be without solicitude. He that is without a wife, is solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please God. But he that is with a wife, is solicitous for the things of the world, how he may please his wife: and he is divided”). Within Pauline thought, anti-erotic identities (virgins, bachelors) marked by chastity and sexual temperance are preferred over those identities (husbands, wives) defined partially by the erotic activities expected in marriage. Paul’s words on anti-eroticism reverberated throughout the Middle Ages such that, in the late eleventh century, Pope Gregory VII categorized all Christians according to their erotic status: “Preterea uniuersus catholice ecclesiatus aut uirgines aut continentes aut coniuges. Quicunque ergo extra hos tres ordines repetur, inter filios ecclesie siue intra christianes religionis limites non

¹¹. Karma Lochrie, Heterosyncrasies, xxiii.
¹². Biblical quotations are taken from Biblia sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994); translations are from Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version (Charlotte, NC: Tan, 2009).
numeratur” (“Moreover the whole company of the catholic church are either virgins or chaste or married. Whoever stands outside these three orders is not numbered amongst the sons of the church or within the bounds of the Christian religion”).¹³ In this simplistic yet universal assessment of the sex lives of the faithful, only three identities are licit, and only married people are permitted to act on their sexual drives.

The lines between licit and illicit sexualities shift in varying theological discourses, however, for as much as abstinence and virginity stood as medieval cultural ideals within the Christian church, the propagation of humanity, quite obviously, depends on intercourse (within the bounds of marriage from this cultural perspective). As Chaucer’s Wife of Bath tartly attests in her argument against virginity: “For hadde God comanded maydenhede, / Thanne hadde he dampned weddyng with the dede” (3.69–70). Due to the necessity of intercourse, marital eroticism was accommodated within religious worldviews, and, as Payer notes, medieval theologians justified intercourse on four primary grounds—“to have children, to pay the marriage debt, to avoid fornication, [and] to satisfy lust or for the sake of pleasure.”¹⁴ Their ambivalence on the subject of human sexuality is recorded as well, such as in Augustine’s ruminations over marriage, in which he accords a place for intercourse while condemning the “evil of lust”:

Marriage has also this good, that carnal or youthful incontinence, even if it is bad, is turned to the honorable task of begetting children, so that marital intercourse makes something good out of the evil of lust. . . . There is the added fact that, in the very debt which married persons owe each other, even if they demand its payment somewhat intemperately and incontinently, they owe fidelity equally to each other.¹⁵

Expressing his disapproval of eroticism, Augustine imagines couples engaging in intercourse “intemperately and incontinently,” yet he can justify such sexual exuberance if it cements the fidelity the couple pledges in marriage.


Numerous medieval writers echo Augustine’s cautions against eroticism, abjuring their readers to abstain from its pleasures while acknowledging its necessity, as well as its likelihood. For instance, Thomas Aquinas concedes that “the marriage act that is done out of sensuous pleasure is a lesser sin,” yet the pleasures of eroticism implicate even marital lovemaking as a transgression.

These strands of anti-eroticism in Christian thought and medieval social practice denigrated love and its enactments, rendering the erotic a vexed sphere of activity and of inactivity, of pleasure and its disavowal, all the while circulating around the concept of love. Chaucer’s Parson echoes the views of Paul, Augustine, and Aquinas in his “Remedium contra peccatum Luxurie”:

Thanne shal men understande that for thre thynges a man and his wyf fleshly mowen assemble. The firste is in entente of engendrure of children to the service of God, for certes that is the cause final of matrimoyne. Another cause is to yelden everyich of hem to oother the dette of hire bodies, for neither of hem hath power of his owene body. The thridde is for to eschewe leccherye and vileynye. The ferthe is for sothe deadly synne. (10.939–40)

Sufficiently versed in clerical injunctions to voice them through his Parson, Chaucer recognized his religion’s long history of strictures against eroticism, as much as he surely recognized that their narrative repur-
cussions would be stifling. Narrative theory posits that some type of transgression is a likely starting point for much literature, and many of Chaucer’s tales counterbalance the anti-eroticism endorsed in much medieval thought through pursuits of desire fracturing the already tenuous borderlines between approved and disapproved eroticisms. While Chaucer would not have labeled such narrative strategies as queer, as neither would the classical and contemporary poets from whom he drew inspiration for style and subject matter, queer theory illuminates the disjunction between licit and illicit portrayals of desire within his fictions. The dialogic relationships between eroticism and anti-eroticism undermine the very discourses that proclaim their respective merits, rendering literary treatments of the erotic as queer sites of conflicting desires.

Despite the many clerical and scholastic injunctions discouraging eroticism, the people of the Middle Ages glorified love and its expression as the most ennobling of passions in a variety of venues, yet even here the complementary force of anti-eroticism often arises. For example, Dante’s praise of love, “dicimus illud esse maxime delectabile quod per pretiosissimum objectum appetitus delectate: hoc autem venus est” (“here I say that what is most pleasurable is what is the most highly valued object of our desires; and this is love”), appears, with its focus on pleasure, to endorse eroticism unabashedly. Building from this foundation, his portrayals of Beatrice in La Vita Nuova and Divina Commedia illustrate the power of erotic attraction to guide one’s soul. Nonetheless, in most instances in which medieval poets address love, the lines between the amatory, the erotic, and the anti-erotic can be fine ones indeed, and Robert Edwards explicates how, for Dante, amatory pursuits flirt with transgressions, in that “love . . . offers a framework of conventions for expression and reception, for coding and uncoding, within which desire speaks obliquely, as by definition it must.” Erotic attractions frequently carry with them a frisson of transgression, and because so many medieval discourses castigate eroticism and extol anti-eroticism, voices such as Dante’s that celebrate love must often address their subject through codes, obfuscations, and apologies.

Many medieval treatments of eroticism, extolling desire in heartfelt tones yet muddling its expression, evince affinities with the precepts of courtly love promulgated by Andreas Capellanus in his De Amore. This

text, which continually teeters between irony and instruction, exalts love as the necessary suffering that catalyzes desire:

Amor est passio quaedam innata procedens ex visione et immoderata cogitatione formae alterius sexus, ob quam aliquis super omnia cupit alterius potiri amplexibus et omnia de utriusque voluntate in ipsius amplexu amoris praecipua compleri.¹⁹

Love is a certain inborn suffering derived from the sight of and excessive meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex, which causes each one to wish above all things the embraces of the other and by common desire to carry out all of love’s precepts in the other’s embrace.²⁰

Andreas rejects his celebration of love in his excursus’s third book to praise anti-erotic asceticism instead, but his theories of love nonetheless play out in numerous medieval narratives, particularly in the romance tradition. As C. Stephen Jaeger demonstrates, many medieval conceptions of love distilled—or attempted to distill—the erotic from the amatory in a like manner. In his interpretation of medieval amatory writings, he concludes, “The dilemma of romantic love is created by the tensions between sexuality and an ideal of virtuous love. In order to ennoble, love had to be a subject of virtue; it had to derive from virtue and in some sense also to be its source.”²¹ Ruth Karras likewise urges caution in assessing medieval depictions of eroticism and carnality from a modern perspective: “While for us the erotic equates with the carnal, for many medieval thinkers the erotic, to the extent it overlapped with the spiritual, was opposed to the carnal.”²² The flimsy borders between the erotic and the carnal allow anti-eroticism to seep into discourses of eroticism, and it is this juncture where eroticisms and anti-eroticisms converge that I focus on as a primary location of queerness in the Middle Ages. Who, indeed, can give a lover any law, when anti-eroticisms stand as preferred enactments of human sexuality in much of the Middle Ages? By the very

---


nature of being a lover in the Middle Ages, particularly if one is unmarried, one transgresses numerous religious doctrines, and so the possibility of love without transgression is rendered an ever more elusive goal.

A further interpretive difficulty in examining medieval eroticism arises in the disjunction between the obvious physical markers of the subject—the human body in or in pursuit of sexual congress—and the obfuscating discourses that couch texts addressing love and sexuality in allegorical, elliptical, ironic, satiric, or otherwise hazily anti-erotic frameworks. The conclusion of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* illustrates the ways in which eroticism, if not carnality, may be resignified at a narrative’s end, imposing an anti-erotic theme on a text boundlessly exploring the pleasures of eros. After Dioneo tells the collection’s final story, the king appends a moral that reinterprets the meaning of the many erotic and ribald tales: “For, as far as I have been able to observe, albeit the tales related here have been amusing, perhaps of a sort to stimulate carnal desire, . . . neither in word nor in deed nor in any other respect have I known either you or ourselves to be worthy of censure.”

Boccaccio revels in narrative carnality throughout his fictions, only to curtail this frisson of pleasure by rejecting his numerous erotic plots and themes as he draws the collection to a close: the audience of the tales, both textually and metatextually, is preserved from the contaminating influence of their sexually charged narrative play. As mentioned previously, so too does Andreas Capellanus recant the erotic lessons of *De Amore* when he appeals to his friend Walter to dismiss the pursuit of sexual satisfaction:

> Taliter igitur praesentem lege libellum, non quasi per ipsum quaerens amantium tibi assumere vitam, sed ut eius doctrina refectus et mulierum edoctus ad amandum animos provocare a tali provocatione abstinendo praemium consequaris aeternum et maiori ex hoc apud Deum merearis munere gloriari.

Read this little book, then, not as one seeking to take up the life of a lover, but that, invigorated by the theory and trained to excite the minds of women to love, you may, by refraining from so doing, win an eternal recompense and thereby deserve a greater reward from God.

---

Following this convoluted logic, learning seductive and erotic techniques enhances one's holiness, but only when one recants the pleasures arising from such amatory instruction. From a queer theoretical perspective, such rhetorical posturing disrupts the social construction of sexual normativity, for Boccaccio’s and Andreas’s texts revel in transgression only then to recode such transgressions as appropriate within the very discourses that would castigate them.

Within this medieval world of sexual injunctions and literary play, in which eroticisms and anti-eroticisms confront each other at a loggerheads of desire rendered queer through their mutual unintelligibility, and echoing Boccaccio’s and Andreas’s apologies for their narratives’ investments in carnality, Chaucer famously exonerates those “tales of Canterbury . . . that sownen into synne” in his retraction (10.1085). The most likely candidates that fit this description are Chaucer’s fabliaux, but it would be unwise to circumscribe his apology solely to these tales of erotic immoderation. In this passage concluding the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer makes clear his realization that his narratives transgressing Christian teachings might offend certain readers, as he also makes the dubious claim that he merely follows biblical injunctions: “For oure book seith, ‘Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,’ and that is myn entente” (10.1082). Echoing and blatantly misappropriating Paul’s statement “quaecumque enim scripta sunt ad nostrum doctrinam scripta sunt” (Romans 15:4; “For what things soever were written, were written for our learning”), Chaucer proposes the moral value of his tales, whether ribald or devout, yet provides readers with strikingly little evidence to suspect that any such morality is indeed located within the bawdier narratives.\(^{26}\) Interpreting the moral lessons afforded by such tales as the Miller’s, Reeve’s, Merchant’s, and Shipman’s in line with Christian teachings on sexual morality would tax even the most creative of exegetes, and thus, through their very presence in the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer’s narratives that “sownen into synne” map out the queer narrative tensions between eroticism and anti-eroticism, with the former providing the necessary humor, allure, and excitement to generate literary pleasure, and the latter redirecting this play to moral ends, yet ultimately in an equally pleasurable manner. The erotic politics percolating throughout Chaucer’s fictions proves the unlikelihood of quarantining sexuality from his non-fabliau tales as well,\(^{26}\)

---

\(^{26}\) On the difficulties readers have faced in uniting Chaucer’s literary achievements with his bawdy fictions, see Donald Green, “Chaucer as Nuditarian: The Erotic as a Critical Problem,” Pacific Coast Philology 18.1–2 (1983): 59–69.
yet the spiritual and narrative pleasure of such anti-eroticism can never be divorced from the full scope of Chaucer's literary play.

CHAUCER’S (ANTI-)EROTICISMS, OR, WAS CHAUCER QUEER?

If taken literally, the above subheading is silly, for one cannot know the intimate desires of a man dead for over six hundred years, and neither would this information affect in any measurable manner contemporary readers’ pleasure in his texts. In light of the commingling of sex, desire, and anti-eroticism in his fictions, it is nonetheless intriguing to consider Chaucer’s own relationship to love and its disappointments, yet the scant evidence from Chaucer’s sexual biography does little to illuminate the treatment of eroticism in his literature. The historical record notes his marriage to Philippa de Roet in 1366, but the extant documents cannot enlighten our understanding of its tenor, which, as Donald Howard muses, “may have been anything from a tender idyll to an open war.” Longstanding rumors allege that Philippa was John of Gaunt’s mistress, and thus that Chaucer was, perhaps knowingly, cuckolded, but evidence for these claims is tenuous. Surviving records also indicate that Geoffrey and Philippa produced at least four children—Thomas, Lewis, Elizabeth, and Agnes—but the fact that the marriage was consummated and generated offspring provides little insight into its dynamics. The vexed question of Cecilia

27. Numerous postmodern theorists have proclaimed the “death of the author” as a topic for literary analysis, but, despite the hoary edges to biographical criticism, Seán Burke calls for critics to investigate texts in relation to their “situated authorship” and to explore the author for the fact that she or he is “the principle of specificity in a world of texts.” Burke proceeds to argue, “far from consolidating the notion of a universal or unitary subject, the retracing of the work to its author is a working-back to historical, cultural and political embeddedness” (The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida, 2nd ed. [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998], 202).


29. Donald Howard, Chaucer, 95.

Chaumpaigne’s accusation of *raptus* against Chaucer, a charge indicative either of rape or of kidnapping but a charge from which she later exon-
erated Chaucer from all responsibility, further complicates any coherent vision of his erotic life.31

The historical record cannot be distilled for more than the barest insights into Chaucer’s views of marital and extramarital erotics, nor do his fictions illuminate his amatory experiences beyond shadowy outlines. Readers see hints of Chaucer’s desires in his poetry, such as in “Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan,” in which he sighs over the unfulfilled desires of aging men:

```
Now, certes, frend, I dreed of thyn unhap,
Lest for thy gilt the wreche of Love procede
On alle hem that been hoor and rounde of shap,
That ben so lykly folk in love to spede. (29–33)
```

One can read these lines in numerous ways: a humorous wink to desires long past but warmly remembered; a piquant and ironic jab at aging men who fail to act in accordance with the wisdom ostensibly congruent with their age; or even a rueful lament adumbrating erotic despair. Much as Chaucer’s recurrent hints at his immoderate girth do not give us a clear picture of his physical appearance,32 these lines in “Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan” do little to illuminate Chaucer’s views of the erotic and its disappointments. The poems “To Rosemounde” and “Womanly Noblesse” respectively register Chaucer’s regret that Rosemounde offers him no dalliance (8, 16, 24)

31. For the historical account of this event, see Martin Crow and Clair Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life Records* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), 343. For discussions of rape and its repercussions on Chaucer’s life and literature, see Christopher Cannon, “*Raptus* in the Chaumpaigne Release and a Newly Discovered Document Concerning the Life of Geof-
pute,” in *Law and Sovereignty in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Robert Sturges (Turn-

32. For Chaucer’s references to his girth, see *Sir Thopas* 7.700–701 and *House of Fame* 574.
and that his beloved will not alleviate his amatory suffering (22–23), but these poems’ deployments of the standard tropes of love-longing fail to enlighten his personal sense of the erotic. Neither have scholars yet ascertained to whom, if to any actual woman, they were addressed, especially given their formulaic adherence to the expected tropes of amatory verse.

In a similar vein, Craig Davis observes the structural similarities between Chaucer’s marriage to Philippa and Arveragus’s marriage to Dorigen in the *Franklin’s Tale*, in which “a socially inferior husband marries up in the world: above his own rank in the case of the knight Arveragus, above his own estate or class in the case of Geoffrey Chaucer,” and hypothesizes that the tale “shows us that perfect marriages can be just as fraught emotionally as any other kind.” These fictive glimpses into Chaucer’s desires pique more than sate one’s curiosity, and we are left with an erotic biography that can only remain conjectural beyond the skeletal outline of a man who married a woman and fathered children but who wrote continually of love’s vagaries in his fictions.

If the preceding thumbnail portrait of Chaucer’s erotic life sketches him as a medieval male with heteronormative sexual desires presumably sated in marriage, his narrative stances vis-à-vis his fictions nonetheless allow for, if not encourage, queer readings of sex, eroticism, and sexuality.

---


Modeling the subversive erotic potential in his fictions, Chaucer embodies for his readers the disorienting effects of narrative desire through his assumption of queer stances in and toward his tales. In their landmark queer-theory studies of Chaucer’s literature, Susan Schibanoff describes Chaucer’s relationship to his fictions as “the queer artist who wears passivity over his agency, who claims outsider status even as he stands at the centre of his work,” and Glenn Burger reads “Chaucer within his queer nation” to find “the perverse dynamic at work within the Canterbury Tales.” As Schibanoff and Burger astutely demonstrate throughout their readings, Chaucer assumes such a willfully conflicted position to his narration throughout his fictions, notably when he refutes responsibility for his own literature in the General Prologue:

> Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,  
> He moot rehearse as ny as evere he kan  
> Everich a word, if it be in his charge,  
> Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,  
> Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,  
> Or fynye thyng, or fynde wordes newe. (1.731–36)

Chaucer does not address sexuality or eroticism in these lines, yet they license him to speak of any taboo topic he might desire. As Laura Kendrick explains, “What enabled [Chaucer’s] rebellious and revitalizing discovery of forbidden desires, his undoing of the censoring artifices of the authoritative, ritualized text, were these metatextual, contextual denials of reality or seriousness: festive time, laughter, and the foolish persona that was patently not himself.” In a similar vein, Geoffrey Gust observes the

(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). It should be noted as well that this monograph continues my efforts to think through the queer ramifications of Chaucer’s fictions, as evident in chapters of my previous monographs: “Chaucer’s Queering Fabliaux” and “Queer Desires and Queering Genres in Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde,” in Queering Medieval Genres (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 45–106, and “Queering Harry Bailly: Gendered Carnival, Social Ideologies, and Masculinity under Duress in the Canterbury Tales” and “He nedes moot unto the pley assente’: Queer Fidelities and Contractual Hermaphroditism in Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale,” in Sexuality and Its Queer Discontents in Middle English Literature (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 49–99.

35. Susan Schibanoff, Chaucer’s Queer Poetics, 308.  
ways in which Chaucer’s “seeming presence” within his literature “is a kind of narrative mirage, inconsistent and unreliable.” Through his multiple performances of author, narrator, fabulist, and pilgrim, Chaucer liberates himself to address sexuality as both game and as earnest, as both erotic and anti-erotic, in which play spreads truths to medieval society while these truths are safely preserved from opprobrium under a ludic guise. Here then arises the potential for Chaucer’s narrative queerness, in that the multiple and converging layers of discourse—with Chaucer as narrator and as observer, with the text as game and as play—destabilize hermeneutic stability and, indeed, authorial culpability, as he addresses the border between erotic desires and their willful abandonment.

Beyond this authorial posturing that preserves him from any cultural repercussions arising from his own works, as if he did not control precisely the unfolding of his fictions, Chaucer metaphorically queers himself as author while further encoding himself in them in a humorous scene in the *House of Fame*. When he queries the eagle sent to snatch him to the heavens, “Wher Joves wol me stellyfye, / Or what thing may this sygnyfy?” (2.586–87), Chaucer aligns himself with the homoerotic archetype Ganymede while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge their parallels. John Boswell affirms that Ganymede was used virtually “as a synonym for ‘gay’” in medieval literature, noting the prevalence of Jove’s cupbearer in homoerotic literature in the classical era as well. Chaucer, however, denies any affiliation between Ganymede’s erotic service to Jupiter and his own divine conscription:

“I neyther am Ennok, ne Elye,  
Ne Romulus, ne Ganymede,  
That was ybore up, as men rede,  
To hevene with daun Jupiter,  
And mad the goddys botiller.” (2.588–92)

The multiple denials—that Chaucer in this moment of divine rapture does not represent Enoch, Elijah, Romulus, or Ganymede—stretch the bounds of the reader’s credulity, for Chaucer addresses his place in the literary tradition in the *House of Fame*, only here to deny any kinship with these four figures from the Hebrew Bible and classical mythology. 

---

40. For excellent studies of Chaucer’s treatment of the literary tradition in *House of*
Chaucer’s denial is all the more unconvincing in that he lists four such figures elevated to the heavens, yet elaborates only on Ganymede’s journey (and duties) in any detail. In reading the myth of Ganymede, Jane Chance suggests that “Ganymede’s rape by Jove’s eagle implies anagogically transcendent ravishment,”41 and Chaucer envisions himself undergoing such a rapturous metamorphosis, one that simultaneously allegorizes his poetic mission to Dante’s. Schibanoff observes of this scene, “Regardless of Jove’s intentions, Geffrey’s thoughts of stellification clearly project his own imagined ravishment. . . . Geffrey is associated with the Dante who dreamed himself Ganymede on the border between Inferno and Purgatory.”42 The queer figure of Ganymede allows Chaucer (and Dante before him) to comment on his place in the poetic tradition: he is ravished by divine insight to utter the wonders of the ineffable, but he must conquer this impossible task through his transcendent yet queer vision of himself and his fictions that both sets him apart from and ensconces himself within the literary tradition. In this light, Chaucer’s deployment of the Ganymede legend registers as both erotic and anti-erotic, for he calls upon this literary tradition of divinely homoerotic concupiscence while denying its sexual relevance to himself. Seeking to enjoy the privileges both of divine rapture and of literary kinship with Dante, Chaucer relies on a homoerotic tradition while resignifying its sexual valence as anti-erotic. Authors cannot strip their allusions of all registers, and the traces of eroticism and desire left behind in Chaucer’s allusion to Ganymede inflect him with their queer edges, no matter his denials.

And such is the crux of erotic, narrative, and all other desires: to desire is always to desire again, to confront the anti-erotic counterbalanc-

---

42. Susan Schibanoff, *Chaucer’s Queer Poetics*, 158–59. For a detailed analysis of eagle symbolism in medieval literature, see John Steadman, “Chaucer’s Eagle: A Contemplative Symbol,” *PMLA* 75.3 (1960): 153–59; for Dante’s use of eagle symbolism, see Warren Ginsberg, “Dante’s Dream of the Eagle and Jacob’s Ladder,” *Dante Studies* 100 (1982): 41–60. As Steadman and Ginsberg demonstrate, eagles connote a wide range of meanings in medieval literature, including contemplation, thought, and transcendence. In this instance, by linking the eagle to the legend of Ganymede and Jove, Chaucer imbues the scene with a rapturous subtext he denies but cannot efface.
ing of eroticism, for when desires cease, so too does the lover, and often the narrative as well. Even if an initial desire can be fulfilled, desire is itself always a reconstruction of other emotional and cultural forces, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari posit: “Desire has nothing to do with a natural or spontaneous determination; there is no desire but assembling, assembled, desire.” 43 These fragments of hypothetical desires are patched together to form an empty whole that consistently founders at the moment of its construction. In a similar vein, Judith Butler sketches the complex circularity of desire: “the desire to desire is a willingness to desire precisely that which would foreclose desire, if only for the possibility of continuing to desire.” 44 Thus, one of the sustaining threads of this volume is that, due to their inherent flux and interweaving, all desires bear the potential to be queering and anti-erotic ones, even ostensibly normative desires, for their pulsating circuitry continually pushes lovers in pursuit of they know not what, even to the ultimate anti-erotic consummation of their very selves in death. As Robert Rouse observes, “Often that which is viewed as erotic is somewhat transgressive of the norms of conventional sexuality, positioning the erotic at the margins of accepted behavior.” 45 Erotic desires pique lovers to pursue their affections, but doing so necessitates that they breach cultural codes regulating social and communal relations, for the communal order imposes its authority by disciplining the individual in the very moment of his or her most personal acts.

Such queer dynamics of Chaucerian desire are strikingly evident in “The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse,” a poem that, on its surface, focuses on financial needs rather than eroticism but simultaneously showcases how these ostensibly disparate desires merge in Chaucer’s poetry. In this poetic plea, Chaucer requests pecuniary assistance from King Henry IV while apostrophizing his purse as “my lady dere” (2). In lamenting its emptiness—“I am so sory, now that ye been lyght” (3)—Chaucer metaphorically constructs his purse as a vagina in need of filling, and he extends the metaphor by linking the yellow of gold to the yellow of his lady’s hair, which “of yelownesse hadde never pere” (11). In this poem, Chaucer is powerless to effect the happy ending he seeks

and exhorts Henry IV to answer his petition. Because only the king, not Chaucer, can fill the purse, the poet depicts himself as emasculated in the complaint’s erotic register. Furthermore, the poem’s conclusion reveals Chaucer’s homosocial desire of ingratiating himself to the king, whose rocky road to the throne likely necessitated the murder of his predecessor Richard II. These homosocial desires are camouflaged under financial distress for much-needed funds and under heteroerotic longing for sexual consummation with a woman, yet such obfuscation ironically exposes Chaucer’s greater interest in his king than in his beloved. It is worth remembering that the poem’s female beloved does not exist other than as a metonymic representation of Chaucer’s lack—a lack, however, not of sexual but of financial fulfillment. As Robert Sturges argues of the power dynamics of this short poem, “the patron-poet relationship can be deconstructed as a relation that is . . . both gendered and eroticized: like any discourse of desire or lack, the economic discourses has its gendered aspect.” In a time of political flux, Chaucer speaks to his purse as if it were a lady so that he may win the patronage—the affections—of his new ruler, which queers Chaucer and relegates heteroerotic desire to a secondary position within the masculine environs of the newly established court.

Within this framework of amatory longing and pecuniary need, mediated through a purse so that he may speak to his king, the apparent anti-eroticism of a simple homosocial request for funds is coupled with frequent allusions to death. The three stanzas of the poem end, “Beth hevy ageyn, or elles moot I dye” (7, 14, 21), as Chaucer also admonishes the purse, “For certes but yf ye make my hevy chere, / Me were as leef be layd upon my bere” (4–5). With such lines, Chaucer enhances the tensions among heteroerotic longing for a phantom beloved, homosocial desire for financial assistance, and a latent revelation of the death drive, which can be seen as the ultimate incarnation of anti-eroticism. Within this heady mixture of desires acknowledged, repressed, and redirected, it is unclear whether the king will grant the poem’s petitions, as it is also unclear whether Chaucer will succeed in the sexual pursuit that likens his purse


47. Robert Sturges, Chaucer’s Pardoner and Gender Theory, 17.

to his “Quene of comfort and of good companye” (13). The reference to Henry IV as “conquerour of Brutes Albyon, / Which that by lyne and free eleccion / Been verray kyng” (22–24) also introduces political anxieties into the poem. Paul Strohm’s meticulous reading of Chaucer’s rhetorical situation at this moment—requesting money from a newly installed king, whose rise to the throne took place under questionable circumstances—highlights the author’s strategic phrasings to win his monarch’s favor: “With his reference to Henry as conqueror, Chaucer cuts through more frequent and authorized reference to ‘recovery’ with a starker formulation, but then mitigates against any severity by displacing the conquest to the legendary Britain of the chronicles.”

Appealing to Britain’s mythic past, Chaucer aggrandizes his king as he diminishes himself in stature before him. One need not agree with the thesis of Terry Jones’s provocative Who Murdered Chaucer?—that Chaucer found himself out of favor in Henry IV’s court and died, or was executed, soon after—to grant that the currents at court were changing swiftly, and that Chaucer’s poem to his purse may have failed in its effort to ingratiate the petitioner to his king. Nonetheless, in Chaucer’s positioning himself as an avatar of chastity—“For I am shave as nye as any frere” (19)—it is clear that now, as when he took flight as an allegorical reenactment of Ganymede while refusing to acknowledge the implications of this allusion, he situates himself in a sexualized position ostensibly divorced from eroticism while nonetheless embroiled in it, seeking the succor of his king to relieve the emptiness of his finances, so that he may escape the metaphorical comparison to a chaste friar that reveals both his relative poverty and his emasculation in service to his king.

To answer the question with which this section of the chapter began—“Was Chaucer queer?”—the example of “The Complaint of Chaucer to


50. It is unclear whether Chaucer was successful in winning Henry IV’s favor. In Who Murdered Chaucer? A Medieval Mystery (New York: St. Martin’s, 2003), Terry Jones, Robert Yeager, Alan Fletcher, Juliette Dor, and Terry Dolan intriguingly conjecture that Chaucer was likely executed due to the court’s suspicions of his continued loyalty to Richard II; they cite the lack of documentation concerning Chaucer’s death to ground this hypothesis, but it is, of course, difficult to build a convincing argument upon a dearth of evidence. See also R. F. Yeager, “Chaucer’s ‘To His Purse’: Begging, or Begging Off?” Viator 36 (2005): 373–414; and B. W. Lindeboom, “Chaucer’s ‘Complaint to His Purse’: Sounding a Subversive Note?” Neophilologus 92 (2008): 745–51.
His Purse” demonstrates that Chaucer realized the necessity of queering himself before his new king by performing his subservience within the bounds of homosocial patronage networks, by reimagining and implicitly denigrating heteroerotic desires, and by embodying the anti-erotic chasity of a friar to underscore his king’s puissance. Under the authority of a king, virtually all men, whether their sexual desires are heteroerotic or homoerotic, encounter what can be termed situational queerness, for they face disenfranchisement from the pursuit of their desires, should their rulers so determine. As Chaucer’s poem illustrates, the rhetorical predicaments in which such queered men find themselves necessitate articulating a vast range of desires, erotic and otherwise, to advance their goals within such a hierarchical paradigm. The question then becomes not whether Chaucer was sexually normative, anti-erotic, or otherwise queer in his desires but how he understood the political, religious, and other social conditions that challenged one’s ability to voice one’s desires, and how strategies that we today might label queerly anti-erotic illuminate these contradictions.

CHAUCEr’S (ANTI-)EROTICISMS AND THE QUEER MIDDLE AGES

Following the lines of inquiry sketched in miniature in the preceding analysis of “The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse,” Chaucer’s (Anti-) Eroticisms and the Queer Middle Ages investigates the author’s contradictory stances toward (anti-) eroticism, outlining the nexus of the self and society in his fictions as it is conjointly negotiated in the vexed sphere of amatory affairs. For Chaucer, erotic pursuits establish the thrust and tenor of many of his narratives, as they also expose the frustrations inherent in pursuing erotic desires, whether encouraged or frowned upon by the religious foundations of Western medieval culture. Paul Taylor believes that “Chaucer is a love poet [who] conceives of love as the philosophic principle behind the ontological fact of creation,”51 yet it should not be overlooked that Chaucer frequently couples such a bounteous view of eroticism with violence. Cory Rushton and Amanda Hopkins propose that “Chaucer often presents male sexuality as inherently but not necessarily problematically violent,”52 and W. W. Allman and Thomas Hanks, in their analysis

52. Cory Rushton and Amanda Hopkins, “Introduction: The Revel, the Melodye, and
of erotics in the Canterbury Tales, conclude that “Chaucer’s characters, male and female alike, unite to refer to erotic experience in terms of a man’s stabbing or cutting a woman.” As their study persuasively demonstrates, Chaucer’s portrayals of desire and copulation elicit rhetorical flourishes of bloody penetration: from Theseus’s triumphant victory over “al the regne of Femenye” (1.866) that wins him Hippolyta’s hand in marriage in the Knight’s Tale to Phoebus Apollo’s murder of his adulterous wife in the Manciple’s Tale, sex, love, and violence unite in Chaucer’s fictions, exposing the ways in which erotic desires fracture concepts of self, beloved, and community that they ostensibly uphold. One cannot love freely within an ideological framework that polices sexuality, yet loving queerly creates escapes from social structures inimical to eroticism and its at times violent expressions. Normativity depends on the queer for its privileged cultural position, as the fatigued binary logic of ideology builds power through opposition to and denigration of the abjected Other, yet the queer then builds a radical means of reassessing the cultural codes that demand its subjected status. Furthermore, anti-eroticisms open outlets of unexpected desires in these texts, confounding the maintenance of erotic identities and codes as normative when the rejection of any type of erotic activity would be preferable to its expression.

The following chapter, “Mutual Masochism and the Hermaphroditic Courtly Lady in Chaucer’s Franklin’s Tale,” analyzes the queer challenges to heteroeroticism in its most culturally idealized locus: a loving marriage between man and wife. This tale, heralded by many readers as the successful resolution of the marriage debate undertaken by various Canterbury pilgrims, appears to celebrate the erotic ideal of marriage without maistrye, yet Dorigen and Arveragus’s mutually satisfying union is achieved only after heart-rending suffering both for the lovers and for Dorigen’s suitor, Aurelius. Conjoined pain makes possible the anti-erotic sacrifices at the heart of the tale, in that both Dorigen and Arveragus suffer in their courtship and marriage, with their mutually masochistic relationship stripping them of the pretense of gender as each inhabits the role of the imperious courtly lady who demands her lover’s obsequious service and painful sacrifice. If the eroticism at the heart of this tale triumphs in its conclusion, it

can only do so by fracturing the contours of gender within the patriarchal structures of medieval romance and reimagining them as fundamentally dependent on masochistic rituals stripped of gender stability. The masochistic play at the heart of this romance mirrors the Franklin's play of modesty for his fellow pilgrims, as his creation of a tale lacking a climax forces his auditors to reconceive their perception of narrative pleasure. In both the tale and its narration, an erotic façade masks its deeper investment in the anti-erotic pleasures of a masochistic disavowal of desire.

Whereas chapter 2 explores the vagaries of heteroerotic desire in marriage, chapter 3, “‘For to be sworne bretheren til they deye’: Satirizing Queer Brotherhood in the Chaucerian Corpus,” addresses the sublimated eroticism of sworn brotherhood in Chaucer’s fictions. In the Knight’s Tale, Friar’s Tale, Pardoner’s Tale, Shipman’s Tale, and House of Fame, Chaucer portrays men who have sworn oaths of brotherhood to each other, yet the potential homoeroticism in such close male bonds undermines the likelihood of depicting these deep friendships in a positive light. On the contrary, the quick rejections of these oaths satirize the men who pledge them, often emphasizing their failure to successfully enact aristocratic fraternal codes due to their inferior social positions. In these instances, subsumed eroticism elicits Chaucer’s debased treatment of male homosociality, for the potential homosexuality lurking beneath a veneer of homosocial respectability threatens to infiltrate the courtly cultures where these oaths are sworn. Such a perspective illuminates Chaucer’s conflicted treatment of disruptive erotics because his fictions, in this instance, police desires deemed subversively queer to medieval society despite their overarching normativity. The irony, therefore, is that, although one may expect to find queer desires between men in homosocial relationships, the mere fact that two men bond themselves together through an oath should be insufficient to undermine its status as normative; at the same time, the anti-erotic valence to the relationship cannot dispel the specter of queerness lurking in the background of any such homosocial friendship.

Many medieval romances celebrate the codes of eros as a knight quests to win his lady’s love and then her hand in marriage, but Chaucer rejects the potential fecundity of this storyline by concentrating on the intersection of necrotic and erotic desires in his Knight’s Tale and Troilus and Criseyde. This monograph’s fourth chapter, “Necrotic Erotics in Chaucerian Romance: Loving Women, Loving Death, and Destroying Civilization in the Knight’s Tale and Troilus and Criseyde,” analyzes the ways in which Emily and Criseyde are figured as objects of desire who reject the cultural imperative to reproduce through their avowed anti-eroticism.
Respectively a virgin and a childless widow, Emily and Criseyde desire to refrain from amatory pursuits with men, yet their narrative positions as the beloved and idealized lady of romance constrain their ability to negotiate the erotic landscapes in which they are ensnared. Only by exposing the necrotic underbelly of male heterosexual desires can they resist their construction as the beloved in amatory affairs that they reject, at least initially. In complementary fashion, Arcite and Troilus continually stress their willingness to die for love at the hand of their “sweet foes,” and in this manner, Chaucer illustrates the ways in which the union of erotic and necrotic desires corrupts the pleasurable fantasies of romance. When loving a woman entails loving death, the queer workings of desires are made manifest, for the love of death is revealed to be the preeminent desire of the narratives. Assuming the ostensibly anti-erotic roles of virgin and widow, Emily and Criseyde destabilize the meaning of male sexuality by negotiating the pitfalls of unsolicited love, as they also expose the frailty of civilizations erected against the desires of women.

“Queer Families in the Canterbury Tales: Fathers, Children, and Abusive Erotics,” the fifth chapter, studies the eroticized violence frequently accompanying depictions of children in Chaucer’s corpus. In their assumed cultural positions as avatars of asexuality, rendered anti-erotic through a cultural fantasy of their sexual ignorance, children are nonetheless drafted into amatory rivalries centered on their fathers’ attenuated masculinities. For Maline in the Reeve’s Tale, Thomas’s dead child in the Summoner’s Tale, Walter and Griselda’s unnamed children in the Clerk’s Tale, and Virginia in the Physician’s Tale, paternal authority entails not merely the assumed control of the child but subsuming the child’s erotic agency in service of the father’s desires. The father’s erotic drives are implicated with a vision of his child(ren) as his property and as representative of his erotic puissance, and thus these children become pawns in aggressive contests between men. Within this perverse system in which a man’s offspring measures his sexuality, the children depicted in these narratives tacitly resist their construction as sexual surrogates in homosocial conflicts, demonstrating their passive ability to reconstitute the erotic terrain of these tales. The queer vision of the desired child, rendered a sexual object of predatory and rapacious adults, proves the undesirability of adult sexuality when unmoored from social structures of conjugality.

The sixth chapter, “Chaucer’s (Anti-)Erotic God,” addresses Chaucer’s depictions of God’s sensuality, his sexual desires, and his queer interactions with his female beloveds, including Dido of the Legend of Good Women and Cecilia of the Second Nun’s Tale. In a startling passage in her
legend, Dido’s stunning beauty excites God’s passion, and the virginal Cecilia renounces earthly eroticism with her husband Valerian in light of the promises of heavenly rapture with the Divine. Visions of an erotic God also build Chaucer’s fabliau humor, most notably in the digressions concerning God’s pryvetee in the Miller’s Tale and Jesus’s facilitating of sexual congress in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue. At key points in these narratives, Chaucer imagines God in terms of a very human eroticism, and these texts enlighten Chaucer’s exegesis on human reason and sensuality in his Parson’s Tale, in which God fails to regulate human sexuality and thus becomes implicated with the erotic transgressions at the heart of religious experience. Chaucer’s God establishes the Law only to ignore it, casting anti-eroticism as a site of religious discipline that seeks its own destruction, and thus, contradictorily, the reinstatement of its perpetual authority. From this perspective, medieval culture’s policing of human sexuality is founded on the misapprehension of God’s own desires, which queerly extend to the earthly realm in terms of a strikingly human, yet insistently divine, love.

The brief epilogue of Chaucer’s (Anti-)Eroticisms and the Queer Middle Ages, “Chaucer’s Avian Amorousness,” leaves the realm of the human to examine the amorousness of chickens and thereby to postulate the possibilities and inherent problems of the rooster Chauntecleer serving as an erotic role model for the Canterbury pilgrims. No character in Chaucer’s corpus—not even the randy protagonists of his fabliaux—succeed in their erotic desires as frequently, energetically, and unabashedly as Chauntecleer. “He fethered Pertelote twenty tyme, / And trad hire eke as ofte, er it was pryme” (7.3177–78), the Nun’s Priest narrates in a candid observation of animal sensuality unmoored from human restraints, with Chauntecleer also fulfilling the role of courtly lover for his beloved Pertelote in a comic performance of courtly masculinity. When read through Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theories of becoming-animal, Chauntecleer models the potential to transcend the pitfalls of marital sexuality, if only through the sheer erotic humor of a horny yet virtually human rooster. Notwithstanding Chauntecleer’s erotic virtuosity, sexual discontents undermine the tale’s celebration of intercourse in its repeated reminders of avian incest. The incest taboo circulates throughout individual sexual desires and the structures of civilization to keep untamed sexuality in check, yet Chauntecleer’s breaching of this prohibition showcases the excess of desire necessary to achieve erotic autonomy, while also pointing to the precarious nature of societies without sexual taboos and thus the concomitant need for anti-eroticism.
Taken together, the chapters of Chaucer’s (Anti-)Eroticisms and the Queer Middle Ages chart amorous territories from heterosexual love in marriage to homosocial friendship in bachelorhood, from death in the midst of heteroerotic courtship to the dire situations faced by children ostensibly produced from the joys of matrimony, from the heavenly longings of the Divine to the animal lust of chickens. Along the way, these investigations expand the scope of queer theory’s utility for medieval literary studies through a conjoined, but not deferential, interest in psychoanalytic perspectives. Freud and Lacan’s foundational theorizations of consciousness underpin much of the ensuing analysis, as do Julia Kristeva’s, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s, and Slavoj Žižek’s reformulations of the field. Queer theory and psychoanalytic theory ponder the meaning of desire in the formation of culture and the individual, and this overlap testifies to the productivity of their union, for desire, in destabilizing identities, bears the potential to jar, to discombobulate, and to queer one’s foundational sense of self and psyche as mediated through the amatory field. Queer theoreticians including Lee Edelman, Tim Dean, and Simon Gaunt have unpacked the convoluted workings of heterosexual desire by arguing for queer theory’s necessity in interrogating social norms and their incoherencies. Edelman posits that “queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it . . . accept[s] its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure.”54 Within this realm of inquiry, the aims of queer theory overlap with those of Lacanian examinations of desire. Tim Dean posits the unique conjunctions of analysis available by uniting queer theory with Lacanian thought, suggesting that “Lacanian psychoanalysis may provide handy ammunition for queer theory’s critique of . . . heteronormativity”; certainly, as Dean points out, “by theorizing subjectivity in terms of language and culture, Lacan also denaturalizes sex.”55 In Beyond Sexuality, Dean further observes, “Lacan’s response to normativity is not to produce alternative imaginaries, but to elaborate an alternative of a different order—that of the real, a conceptual category intended to designate everything that resists adaptation.”56


Moreover, both psychoanalysis and queer theory frequently return to the question of love and its effects. As Simon Gaunt summarizes, “Love, for Lacan, encourages the belief in a perfect and symmetrical union between a man and a woman . . . [b]ut this perfect union is a discursive lure, a myth, fantasy (in the strictly Lacanian sense of that which structures the symbolic order).” The utility of this myth for queer analysis, as Gaunt details, is that a “Lacanian framework may help us to understand . . . how courtly literature can be both profoundly homosocial and yet apparently attracted to the idea of a perfect union between a man and a woman.”57 From both psychoanalytic and queer perspectives, sex must be divorced from naturalistic discourses that establish it as a sacrosanct ideal of normativity; it must be exposed to show the contradictions of consciousness and culture that surface as inherent conditions in pursuing an erotic attraction to another person.

Furthermore, so that readers may appreciate the full and contradictory vistas of Chaucerian eroticism, this volume traces connections among disparate tales and narratives, many of which are infrequently examined together in Chaucerian scholarship: Knight’s Tale, Friar’s Tale, Pardoner’s Tale, Shipman’s Tale, and House of Fame in the chapter on homosocial brotherhood; Reeve’s Tale, Summoner’s Tale, Clerk’s Tale, and Physician’s Tale in the chapter on the eroticized suffering of children; and Miller’s Tale, Wife of Bath’s Prologue, Second Nun’s Tale, Parson’s Tale, and Legend of Good Women in the chapter on God’s eroticism in Chaucer’s literature. Despite their many similarities in tone, theme, and genre, Knight’s Tale and Troilus and Criseyde are seldom addressed in tandem, most likely due to the abundance of textual riches each puts forth for the pleasure and analysis of readers and scholars. Only the Franklin’s Tale merits its own chapter in this study, for this narrative showcases the Herculean task necessary to build a heteroerotic attachment based on mutuality and affection.

In Chaucer’s literature, erotic attachments might elevate and ennoble his various characters, or eroticism might denigrate and degrade them, but in virtually every instance, eroticism and its counterpart of anti-eroticism reveal the potential queerness ubiquitous in the quest for human contact. Chaucer’s thematic return to shared issues of eroticism and anti-eroticism in such disparate texts allows wider insights into how love and desire function beyond the contours of a given genre, which, I hope, will

open new perspectives on these endlessly entertaining works. As Holly Crocker suggests in her study of Chaucer's masculinities, “Thinking about our emotive investments in the historical reception of Chaucer allows us to confront the ways in which we continue to naturalize masculinity’s claim to universality by maintaining its privileged invisibility.” So too does thinking through the possibilities of queerness and anti-eroticism in Chaucer’s fictions enable us to reconsider the foundations of the English literary tradition, as we see anew the queer paternalism that this originary fantasy engenders and camouflages.