The best part of married life is the fights. The rest is merely so-so,” writes Thornton Wilder in *The Matchmaker,* with his words capturing a simple truth of narrative pleasure: in many instances, readers prefer depictions of conflict over companionship, of aggression over amour, and such is certainly the case throughout Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales.* Marriage recurs frequently as a subject during the Canterbury pilgrimage, but, as is readily apparent, often in problematic or unsettling ways. Cuckoldry and sexual aggression cloud the portrayals of marriage in the *Miller’s Tale, Reeve’s Tale, Merchant’s Tale,* and *Shipman’s Tale* (and even when cuckoldry is not surely depicted in Chaucer’s fabliaux, its specter lingers, as in the flirtatious behavior between Thomas’s wife and the friar of the *Summoner’s Tale*). Domestic violence, both physical and emotional, disrupts marital harmony in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue, Clerk’s Tale,* and *Manciple’s Tale,* and marriage catalyzes religious conflict in *Man of Law’s Tale* (in which Custance’s mothers-in-law embark on their murderous and duplicitous acts in response to their sons’ unions) and *Second Nun’s Tale* (in which Cecilia threatens Valerian with his imminent demise should he seek satisfaction for the marital debt). Due to the antagonism, pain, and humiliation associated with marriage

in so many of the *Canterbury Tales*, the *Franklin's Tale*, with the apparently egalitarian relationship between Dorigen and Arveragus, stands as the strongest antidote to Chaucer's matrimonial satire.

But if Wilder is correct that the “best part of married life is the fights,” then where is the pleasure of the *Franklin's Tale*, a narrative that, at least on the surface, doggedly refuses to depict marital disharmony? Numerous critics have analyzed the *Franklin's Tale* and its depiction of marital tribulations, pointing to subtle gradations of power and authority enacted in Dorigen and Arveragus's union. Notable voices in these discussions include Cathy Hume, who argues, “having established an egalitarian marriage ideal at the beginning of the Tale, Chaucer goes on to explore how such an ideal would be tested by real world circumstances”; Craig Davis similarly observes, “Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale* shows us that perfect marriages can be just as fraught emotionally as any other kind, even when they are contracted with deliberate consideration of advantage and liability in social status, wealth, or political alliance.” These nuanced assessments of the marital dynamics depicted in the *Franklin’s Tale*, along with those of Emma Lipton, Elizabeth Robertson, Conor McCarthy, David Raybin, Angela Lucas, and many others, enhance readers’ understanding of a union that appears outwardly harmonious yet also hints at its inherent discontents.

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2. It should be noted that additional companionate marriages appear in the *Canterbury Tales*: Melibee and Prudence’s marriage in Chaucer’s *Tale of Melibee* exemplifies mutuality, yet their rich discussion of forgiveness is set within the context of the horrific violence against their family. Chauntecleer and Pertelote’s union in Nun’s *Priest’s Tale*, despite Chauntecleer’s polygamous tendencies, surprisingly models for human readers the possibility of a healthy, if excessively animalistic, eroticism, as discussed in the monograph’s Epilogue.


The marital mutuality that stands at the core of the *Franklin’s Tale* is not achieved easily, and Arveragus and Dorigen’s mutual masochism enables their sharing of authority and submission in marriage. As a disavowal of sexual desire, with such desire sublimated through pain and denial, masochism registers the anti-eroticism latent in relationships predicated upon hierarchy, for particularly in the Middle Ages, marriage can be stripped of its gendered hierarchy only through concentrated effort. Numerous theoretical accounts of courtly love posit a sadistic/masochistic valence between the suffering suitor and his female beloved, but the *Franklin’s Tale* subverts this binary relationship and invites readers to contemplate the possibility of a relationship founded upon oscillating positions of masochistic subservience, as well as the fruits of such a refiguring of romance. Concomitant with the mutually masochistic potential in courtly romance is the refiguring of gender roles within this archetypal dyad: the Courtly Lady need not be a lady when a relationship is defined through mutual masochism, and thus, when Arveragus assumes the mantle of this presumably feminine role, he models the latent hermaphroditism of ostensibly rigid gender hierarchies. The Franklin’s mutually masochistic tale undermines standard structures of narrative as well, with the tale’s focus on masochism paralleling that of the Franklin’s performance of modesty for his fellow pilgrims, through which he likewise compels them to confront the fictions of gender.6

**MUTUAL MASOCHISM AND THE HERMAPHRODITIC COURTLY LADY, OR WHY CAN’T THE COURTLY LADY BE MORE LIKE A MAN?**

The logic of courtly love: such a phrase should be paradoxical, for under which epistemology (except perhaps its own) should its mores be considered logical? Slavoj Žižek ponders the intransigence of courtly love in modern society, questioning its enduring legacy, its continued appeal despite its outmoded forms, and its persistently gendered tropes, all of which ostensibly assume an internal logic:

Florida, 2001), analyzes the contractual language spoken by Dorigen, Arveragus, and Aurelius in their many conflicting promises to one another (24–27 and 53–57).

6. In her *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), Elaine Tuttle Hansen explores the intersection of “the mutability of gender . . . and the instability of meaning” in Chaucer’s canon, a pithy yet illuminating encapsulation of his play with gender, literary form, and social structure (60).
Why talk about courtly love [l’amour courtois] today, in an age of permissiveness when the sexual encounter is often nothing more than a “quickie” in some dark corner of an office? The impression that courtly love is out of date, long superseded by modern manners, is a lure blinding us to how the logic of courtly love still defines the parameters within which the two sexes relate to each other.7

The archetypal genders of courtly love—evident in the troubadour tradition of the male poet pleading mercy for his fair beloved—endure in modern culture, but often these archetypes more obscure than reflect the gendered dynamics of the medieval texts, particularly lyrics and romance, from which they arise.8 Foremost among these paradigms is the vision of the Courtly Lady, whose cruel and imperious command over her lover accords her absolute and arbitrary power over him. Jacques Lacan’s excurses on the Courtly Lady have reified her standard characteristics into a static entity, one who not only is eternal but is dehumanized as a reflection of unknown and untapped desires. For Lacan, courtly love in its entirety is a fantasy, a structure of imbuing meaning through elaborate images divorced from reality. His sense of fin’ amors is of a complex poetic game, one with certain gendered tropes that are insistently uniform: “courtly love was, in brief, a poetic exercise, a way of playing with a number of conventional, idealizing themes, which couldn’t have any real concrete equivalent. Nevertheless, these ideals, first among which is that of the Lady, are to be found in subsequent periods, down to our own.”9 For Lacan, the Lady is ideal in her abstract yet recurrent features and persistent through time: she survives the Middle Ages and courtly literature to flourish in the present day, yet she never existed other than as an imaginary formulation of desire’s impossibility.10

8. For a representative sampling of such troubadour verse, see Robert Kehew, ed., The Lark in the Morning: The Verses of the Troubadours (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), including such lyrics as Jaufre Rudel’s “Lanquan li jorn,” Guillem de Cabestanh’s “Lo jorn qu’ie-us vi, dompna, primeiramen,” and Arnaut de Marueill’s “Si•m destreignetz, dompna, vos et Amors,” among many others.
10. Recent scholarship explores modern theorists’ debts to medieval literature, in such studies as Andrew Cole and Vance Smith, eds., The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages: On the Unwritten History of Theory (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), Erin Felicia Labbie, Lacan’s Medievalisms (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), and Bruce Hols-
Of course, the Lady need never have existed in order to function because her existence, in this instance, does not accord with her power. She is a psychological construct, one revealing the narcissistic desire of her suitor to assert his masculinity within the realm of a primarily homosocial grouping. Žižek discerns the Otherness that the Lady must embody and posits her as a reflection in which the knightly lover views himself narcissistically in response to her imperious commands:

This coincidence of absolute, inscrutable Otherness and pure machine is what confers on the Lady her uncanny, monstrous character—the Lady is the Other which is not our “fellow-creature”; that is to say, she is someone with whom no relationship of empathy is possible. . . . Deprived of every real substance, the Lady functions as a mirror on to which the subject projects his narcissistic ideal.  

Stripped of her humanity in Žižek’s formulation, the Lady is rendered inhuman and inhumane, serving merely to mirror masculine desire. In this paradigm male narcissism transforms a woman into monstrosity: in needing and thus creating the cruel Lady as a means of ideal self-definition, the knight must metamorphose a woman into the Lady, must define himself through his relationship with her despite the fact that she has been rendered monstrous due to her presumed lack of humanity. In so doing, the knight’s play with narcissistic desires reveals the inherent queerness of performing heterosexuality, for the narcissistic yearning to be desired by a woman reveals the intransigence but ultimate superfluousness of the woman’s role in the process. (As Narcissus himself showed, any mirror will serve this purpose.) The Courtly Lady becomes a mirror reflecting male desire for desirability who thus queerly reflects the knight’s image: she highlights his failure to attain the standards of masculinity she is coded to represent.

In this light, the Courtly Lady embodies a queer torquing of the knight’s desires, despite his apparent sexual normativity, for the homosocial valence of his performance of heterosexuality cannot be stripped from his courtship. At its core, being entails being without, and for Lacan,
the Lady signifies a lack, an absence that the knight seeks to fill through her position as the inscrutable Other: “The object involved, the feminine object, is introduced oddly enough through the door of privation or of inaccessibility.” The Lady can only be accessed through the knight’s lack and thus becomes a cipher for the knight to decode, albeit an ultimately indecipherable code, one whose actions reflect not her desires but his refracted desires to project his identity through her. Lacan explains the ways in which the Lady must embody cruelty at its most arbitrary so that she represents both the knight’s desire and the impossibility of comprehending desire:

By means of a form of sublimation specific to art, poetic creation consists in positing an object I can only describe as terrifying, an inhuman partner.

The Lady is never characterized for any of her real, concrete virtues, for her wisdom, her prudence, or even her competence. If she is described as wise, it is not because she embodies an immaterial wisdom or because she represents its functions more than she exercises them. On the contrary, she is as arbitrary as possible in the tests she imposes on her servant.

The Lady is basically what was later to be called, with a childish echo of the original ideology, “cruel as the tigers of Ircania.”

Because of this cruelty, many readers see the courtly lady as the sadist to the knightly masochist, and Lacan cites Chrétien de Troyes’s literature as a prime example of this dynamic (despite the paucity of evidence to support his claims). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen memorably refers to Guinevere, in his Deleuzian reading of Chrétien’s Lancelot, ou Le Chevalier de la charrette, as “Guinevere in Furs,” a mordant yet apropos assessment of her arbitrary

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13. Ibid., 150–51.
14. Ibid., 151. For a reading of the Lacanian dynamics of Lancelot, ou Le Chevalier de la charrette, see Robert Sturges, “La(can)nclot,” Arthurian Interpretations 4.2 (1990): 12–23. Other than Guinevere in Lancelot, one might well wonder to which of Chrétien’s female characters Lacan refers. As I discuss briefly at the end of this section, Enide in Erec et Enide more fits the role of the suffering suitor than the cruel Courtly Lady, and Cliges focuses more on the mutuality of suffering, first between Alexander and Soredamors and then between Cliges and Fenice, than on these women’s supposed cruelties. Laudine’s request that Yvain return to her after a year of knightly homosocial pastimes seems quite reasonable in its demands upon him, and Perceval’s relationship with Blancheflor gives her little opportunity to dispense arbitrary or cruel tests of his knightly abilities.
power over an often hapless and suffering Lancelot.\textsuperscript{15} Because the knight fails to prove his constant devotion by hesitating a mere two steps before debasing himself in the cart while attempting to rescue her, Guinevere asserts her amatory authority over him and unleashes much physical pain to punish him, notably in the tournament scenes in which she bids him to do his worst and thus to suffer mightily and physically. While Chrétien imbues these scenes with a sly and ironic humor, as frequently accompanies such depictions of courtly love, the power dynamics remain in force, with Guinevere staging Lancelot’s actions.

It is nonetheless unclear in such scenes whether the Lady acts on her own volition or whether she is acted through in service of the knight’s masochistic desires. Continuing his discussion of the Courtly Lady, Lacan describes her not as an agent but as a catalyst, one conscripted into her service as the Thing:

The idealized woman, the Lady, who is in the position of the Other and of the object, finds herself suddenly and brutally positing, in a place knowingly constructed out of the most refined of signifiers, the emptiness of a thing in all its crudity, a thing that reveals itself in its nudity to be the thing, her thing, the one that is to be found at her very heart in its cruel emptiness. That Thing . . . is in a way unveiled with a cruel and insistent power.\textsuperscript{16}

Lacan’s passive descriptions of the Lady, who “finds herself” in the position of “brutally positing . . . the emptiness of a thing,” establish her cruelty as incidental to her character (if she is granted any sense of character at all). If, for Lacan, \textit{das Ding} is that which represents “the beyond-of-the-signified,” whose function is that the subject is thereby “constituted in a kind of relationship characterized by primary affect, prior to any repression,”\textsuperscript{17} the Lady’s gender is ultimately unnecessary because, as she metamorphoses into \textit{das Ding}, whose purpose is freed from her body, the knight grapples not with her corporeality but with his own interiority and his desires vis-à-vis his homosocial milieu. The Courtly Lady is thus also a Queer Thing, one by which the knight must confront the potential

\textsuperscript{15} Cohen’s rich reading of Guinevere and Lancelot’s relationship pays particular attention to its inherently unstable dynamics and oscillating gendered inflections; see his “Masoch/Lancelotism,” in \textit{Medieval Identity Machines} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 78–115.


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 54.
homoerotic desire inherent in the narcissistic mirroring that she performs for him. Furthermore, if the Lady is acted through rather than acting, she inhabits not a sadistic but a powerless and ultimately anti-erotic position, one paradoxically staged by the knight through his own masochistic performance of subservience to and for her. Gilles Deleuze suggests that sadomasochism is primarily an illusion, positing instead that “the concurrence of sadism and masochism is fundamentally one of analogy only” and that the male masochist must “fashion the woman into a despot . . . persuade her to cooperate and get her to ‘sign.’”\(^{18}\) Stripping away the façade of sadomasochism in medieval romance reveals the mutual masochism at its heart and the queer tensions inherent in a man defining and refining both his desire and his desirability through a woman acting as a Queer Thing, one who latently reflects the potential desirability of the knight among his homosocial affiliations rather than one who simply exists as a woman (if this possibility is available to her at all).

Accessing the power that the Courtly Lady purportedly wields, the knight seeks his narcissistic ideal by relying on the play of masochism, for masochism is often a performance. Žižek explains:

> The next crucial feature of courtly love is that it is thoroughly a matter of courtesy and etiquette; it has nothing to do with some elementary passion overflowing all barriers, immune to all social rules. We are dealing with a strict fictional formula, with a social game of “as if,” where a man pretends that his sweetheart is the inaccessible Lady.\(^{19}\)

The knight engages in an elaborate theatrical ritual in which he shields his agency in service to his lady, but this subservience only masks his real power that is queerly designed to emasculate him. For in the patriarchal environs of the Middle Ages, when men wielded authority in virtually all realms of life, such performances are almost laughable in their farce-like enactments of male submission yet nonetheless transformatively effective in altering the gendered landscape of courtly society. One need only think of the rapist knight in Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* to see the severe penalties for forgoing the masochistic play of courtly love in favor of the violent sadism inherent in rape, yet these transgressions paradoxically

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18. Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism* (New York: Zone, 1991), 46 and 21. Deleuze dismisses the hypothetical union embodied in sadomasochism with such memorable turns of phrase as “pseudomasochism” (124) and as a “semiological howler” (134).

encode further the pleasures of masochistic ritual at the heart of knightly identity: the female victim of Chaucer’s rapist knight is forgotten by the tale’s end, but he atones for his crime by embracing the passive queerness of submission to his wife. In this disturbing reversal, in which a rapist finds himself rewarded sexually for his earlier crime against a woman, his masochistic performance of servility then redounds to his pleasure when she metamorphoses into a young, beautiful, and faithful wife. Normative heterosexuality in marital bliss triumphs at this tale’s conclusion, yet it is nonetheless a queered enactment of heterosexuality in which intercourse must be resignified into a pleasure so that it no longer signifies the violence or abjection that made it possible, either in his rape of the maiden or in his new wife’s sly taunting of his sexual puissance: “Fareth every knyght thus with his wyf as ye? / Is this the lawe of kyng Arthures hous?” (3.1088–89). The knight who sadistically raped a woman undergoes a moment of teasing that threatens to resignify sexual pleasure into a degrading experience with an unattractive woman, but this ruse merely delays the pleasures due him when he accepts the performance of masochism he has for too long denied.

If the masochist stages the encounter with his cruel lady (or at the very least finds himself rewarded for accepting the role), then sadism itself is a ruse within the masochistic ritual, and the Courtly Lady may herself partake of the masochistic posturings frequent in the play of courtly love. Žižek investigates the tension between the masochist and his female partner, stressing the performative nature of their play:

Masochism . . . is made to the measure of the victim: it is the victim (the servant in the masochistic relationship) who initiates a contract with the Master (woman), authorizing her to humiliate him in any way she considers appropriate (within the terms defined by the contract) and binding himself to act “according to the whims of the sovereign lady.” . . . It is the servant, therefore, who writes the screenplay—that is, who actually pulls the strings and dictates the activity of the woman [dominatrix]: he stages his own servitude. One further differential feature is that masochism, in contrast to sadism, is inherently theatrical: violence is for the most part feigned, and even when it is “real,” it functions as a component of a scene, as part of a theatrical performance. Furthermore, violence is never carried out, brought to its conclusion; it always remains suspended, as the endless repeating of an interrupted gesture.20

20. Ibid., 91–92.
Again the Courtly Lady wields little power: in Žižek’s formulation, she follows the will of her masochistic lover, who “pulls the strings and dictates the activity of the woman.” Feigning his lack of authority as he “stages his own servitude,” the knight also stages the servitude of the Courtly Lady by directing her cruel behavior toward him so that he will be queered and so that the narrative will thus unfold on the expectation that he will somehow rehabilitate himself from this queering. Freedom from the gendered roles of male masochist and female sadist potentially emerges in this theatricality, for if the Courtly Lady is not a sadist because she responds to her suitor’s masochistic contract, it is furthermore possible that she can stage her own complementary masochistic ritual in tandem with and in response to her suitor’s, to define herself narcissistically through him by likewise employing him as a Queer Thing.

For why must the Courtly Lady be a woman? If her function is to allow the knight to confront the impossibility of his subjectivity against the void of signification, to see the emptiness of himself as a signifier as he narcissistically attempts to assert just such an identity, could not a man fulfill this role? If one is guided by the logic of the phallus, the answer must be no, since the phallus’s role in signification adheres to a man’s body, signifying the potential for signification even when such signifying is rendered incoherent. As Judith Butler argues in her deconstruction of phallogocentric “logic” and its insistent gendering of bodies, “The psychoanalytic critique succeeds in giving an account of the construction of ‘the subject’—and perhaps also the illusion of substance—within the matrix of normative gender relations,” and here the “logic” of courtly love sutures over Lacan’s and Žižek’s critiques of Freud in terms of their own gendered arguments. Because the Lady is coded in and of absence, at least in Freudian terms, she better symbolizes the privations of identity and signification that stand at the heart of the encounter between her and her beloved. As Žižek also observes, relying on the body to distinguish the sexes obscures the symbolic processes at the heart of sexual identity: “It thus seems more productive to posit as the central enigma that of sexual difference—not

21. Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990), 28–29. Butler’s provocative troublings of psychoanalytic theories are relevant to the masochistic play of desire as well, as in her perceptive observation “Desire will aim at unraveling the subject, but be thwarted by precisely the subject in whose name it operates. A vexation of desire, one that proves crucial to subjection, implies that for the subject to persist, the subject must thwart its own desire. And for desire to triumph, the subject must be threatened with dissolution” (The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997], 9).
as the already established symbolic difference (heterosexual normativity) but, precisely, as that which forever eludes the grasp of normative symbolization.  

Affirming the gender of the Courtly Lady as female, however, succumbs to the logic of “established symbolic difference,” whereas according the potential for the Courtly Lady to be a man, or to be a hermaphroditic figure capable of inhabiting masculine and feminine genders simultaneously, allows readers the freedom of “elud[ing] the grasp of normative symbolization.”

In the queer play of man and woman when heterosexuality falters at the point of desire, hermaphroditism emerges as a key tactic in ongoing power struggles in courtship and marriage. As a hermeneutic theorizing the breakdown and reassemblage of gender, hermaphroditism captures the insistent possibility of surpassing the gender binary through new models of bodies and desires, and this modern conception of hermaphroditism’s potential strikingly aligns with classical conceptions of gender stripped of rigorous distinctions between male and female. The Ovidian sense of hermaphroditism is detailed in his etiological account of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, in which the naiad’s attempted rape of Mercury and Aphrodite’s son ends as the two merge into one body following her invocation to the gods:

> “pugnes licet, inprobe,” dixit
> “non tamen effugies. ita di iubeatis, et istum nulla dies a me nec me deducat ab isto.”
> vota suos habuere deos: nam mixta duorum corpora iunguntur faciesque inducitur illis una.

> “However hard you try, you won’t escape, you wayward one! O gods, do grant my plea: may no day dawn that sunders him from me, or me from him.”
> Her plea is heard; the gods consent: they merge the twining bodies: the two become one body with a single face and form.


Twining and then united, their bodies register as one, but what is the gender of this newly sexed body? Conflicting models of hermaphroditism coexist, which entail both the erasure of the male/female binary in the depiction of a single body and envisioning it as a battleground of conflicting genders forced to share the same body.\textsuperscript{24} Ovid’s story in its entirety illustrates both these models, in the descriptions of the gender switching evident in Hermaphroditus’s femininity (despite his male body) and Salmacis’s masculinity (despite her female body) prior to their union in one form. Given the inherent flux of hermaphroditic identities, their potential to signify in contradictory and complementary fashions disrupts gendered binaries by negating gender as a stable referent.

If readers grant the variability of the sexed body in relation to the identity of the Courtly Lady in medieval romances and courtly lyrics, numerous texts showcase her ultimately hermaphroditic cast. For example, Jane Burns notes the gender play inherent in courtly love, pointing out the “cross-gendered conundrum that lies at the very heart of courtly lyrics where a man’s role (that of the feudal lord) is played by a woman who, while retaining the highly fetishized and desired female body, wields masculine abilities and male prerogative in love.”\textsuperscript{25} Such a polyvalent and hermaphroditic Courtly Lady is strikingly evident in Chrétien de Troyes’s \textit{Erec et Enide,} his account of the legend of “Gereint and Enid” as told in the \textit{Mabinogion.} In brief, are not Erec/Gereint’s stern commands to Enide/Enid reminiscent of Guinevere’s callous treatment of Lancelot in their virtually inexplicable cruelty, in their insistent punishments of trivial transgressions, in the ways in which the sadism apparently on display ultimately returns the masochistic suffering of Lancelot and Enide to prove their virtue and desirability? Indeed, Gereint’s motivations—why must he treat her so cruelly?—are so obscured in the texts of Chrétien and the \textit{Mabinogion} that Alfred, Lord Tennyson, provides a more credible explanation for this protagonist’s inscrutable actions in \textit{Idylls of the King,} positing Gereint’s fear that Guinevere’s adultery has tainted Enid:

\begin{quote}
. . . and there fell
A horror on him, lest his gentle wife,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{24} Tison Pugh, \textit{Sexuality and Its Queer Discontents in Middle English Literature} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 80–81.


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\textsuperscript{1} in medieval literature, see David Rollo, \textit{Kiss My Relics: Hermaphroditic Fictions of the Middle Ages} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
Without this hint of credible motivation, Erec/Gereint’s actions appear merely arbitrary, designed to punish Enide/Enid and to force her to revel in masochistic abjection so that she may eventually triumph through her own masochistic ritual. In the *Mabinogion*, Enid merely declares, “Woe is me, if on my account these arms and chest are losing the fame and fighting ability they once possessed”\(^{27}\); in Chrétien’s *Erec et Enide*, she states, “Con mar i fus,”\(^{28}\) a remarkably ambiguous phrase translated as divergently as “How disastrous for you”\(^{29}\) and “Beloved, / How you’ve been wronged.”\(^{30}\) This obscure yet innocuous statement instigates Erec’s incessant testing of his wife in the medieval tradition, yet Tennyson’s Enid, in contrast, states more clearly, “O me, I fear that I am no true wife,”\(^{31}\) a phrase misinterpreted within the context of the story yet more damaging in terms of its apparent denotation. Tennyson frees his retelling of Gereint and Enid’s relationship from the incoherency of desire frequent in medieval romance while maintaining the mutual masochism at its heart. Jeanne Nightingale argues of genders’ mutability in this romance that Enid functions as Erec’s mirror, positing that “her creative function in the narrative is to free the narcissistic paragon from the burdens of his inflated self-image . . . and redefine . . . Erec’s proper role in chivalric society.”\(^{32}\) In a similar vein, Michel-André Bossy suggests, “this strategy enables Chrétien to splay male and female consciousness into discrete realms of discourse, even while keeping his two characters present to each other and engaging them in the same adventures.”\(^{33}\) With their gendered realms discrete yet


\(^{31}\) Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 78, line 108.


\(^{33}\) Michel-André Bossy, “The Elaboration of Female Narrative Functions in *Erec et Enide*,” in *Courtly Literature: Culture and Context*, ed. Keith Busby and Erik Kooper (Am-
mutual masochism and the hermaphroditic courtly lady

unintelligible to each other except through the performance of masochism, Erec and Enide model the queer disavowal of eroticism that dismantles the genders so central to their performance.

Beyond this example from the genre of romance, many medieval lyrics play with such masochistic desires between the male suitor and his imperious beloved. As mentioned previously, the troubadour tradition foregrounds such constructions of desire, and so do many such Middle English poems, including “Love for a Beautiful Lady,” “A Song in His Lady’s Absence,” “A Love Letter,” and “To the One I Love Most.” The genders of these roles can be readily reversed or otherwise reimagined, however, such as in the figure who might be termed the Beautiful Monastic Boy, the object of desire in courtly love verses written by monastic authors who cast themselves as suffering masochistically when bereft of the ravishing boy’s amorous attention. Each of these texts and genres merit deeper investigation for their occluded hermaphroditic treatment of courtly identity, but I now turn to Chaucer’s Franklin’s Tale, in which these dynamics subvert the vision of companionate marriage by revealing the queer torsions of identity needed to achieve its peaceful resolution.

MUTUAL MASOCHISM AND THE HERMAPHRODITIC COURTLY LADY IN CHAUCER’S FRANKLIN’S TALE

The opening lines of the Franklin’s Tale stress its key theme of courtly love’s masochistic edge in a knight’s willingness to suffer for his beloved. In introducing Arveragus to the Canterbury pilgrims, the Franklin emphasizes his protagonist’s love through his ready acceptance of pain and thus codes this character as a masochistic suitor who eagerly serves his lady according to the precepts of the courtly love tradition: “In Armorik, that
called is Britayne, / Ther was a knyght that loved and dide his payne / To serve a lady in his beste wise” (5.729–31). The Franklin’s ambiguous description of Arveragus’s love muddies attempts to read the knight’s motivations: particularly, the object of his affections appears not to be Dorigen herself, who is as yet unnamed in the story and thus as yet indistinguishable from any other Courtly Lady, as so too is Arveragus as yet indistinguishable from any other courtly lover.36 Rather, the Franklin’s words—that Arveragus “loved and did his payne”—affirm not the knight’s love for his lady but his love for the pain of serving her. Surely this passage contextually implies that Arveragus loves Dorigen and “did his payne” to win her affections, but its grammatical construction establishes Arveragus’s objective to be his painful service of Dorigen. It is a telling example of the conflicted play of fin amours, in which desire for a beloved favors the pain of amatory service rather than its solaces. The Franklin also soon comments, “Lerneth to suffre, or elles, so moot I goon, / Ye shul it lerne, wher so ye ye wole or noon” (5.777–78), thereby reaffirming his key theme of suffering’s necessity throughout his depiction of an apparently ideal marriage.

The narrative moves quickly to Arveragus and Dorigen’s marriage but not before gesturing strongly to the standard tropes of the long-suffering courtier and his imperious beloved, whom he perceives as unattainable due to her high social status:

And many a labour, many a greet emprise,  
He for his lady wroghte er she were wonne.  
For she was oon the faireste under sonne,  
And eek therto comen of so heigh kynrede  
That wel unnethes dorste this knyght, for drede,  
Telle hire his wo, his peyne, and his distresse. (5.732–37)

Within the traditional tropes of romance courtship in which this scene is colored, to love a beautiful and high-born woman requires a knight to labor incessantly to break through her cold exterior to the love she hides underneath the surface. Arveragus’s woe, pain, and distress are merely cat-

36. In her Naming and Namelessness in Medieval Romance (Cambridge: Brewer, 2008), Jane Bliss notes the “performatif function of name” in medieval romance in regard to “what it can do to characters in the story and what effect it can have on an audience” (15). In the Franklin’s Tale, the delay in revealing Arveragus’s and Dorigen’s names first accentuates their status as stock literary characters—the courtly lover and his imperious beloved—before individualizing them and then troubling their performances of these expected roles.
alogued in these opening lines, rather than recounted in precise detail, because they are tropes that signal extensive suffering through their super-
ficial mentioning. The brevity of the account, however, does not lessen
the pain that has constituted his life in courting (and thus in suffering for) Dorigen.

In response to Arveragus’s masochistic posturings, Dorigen confronts
the shifting potential of courtly love, in which the ostensibly sadis-
tic Courtly Lady may find herself bereft of the authority she purported-
edly yields. Deleuze posits that masochism “is animated by a dialectical
spirit, . . . resulting in a scene being enacted simultaneously on several
levels with reversals and reduplications in the allocation of roles and
discourse,” and this dialectical spirit circulates in the erotic tensions of
their relationship. As encoded in the hierarchical gender roles of court-
ship, the Lady is granted power in contrast to the man’s submissiveness,
yet the mutuality of masochism, which springs from its dialectical play,
upsets typical expectations of feminine amatory authority. As she falls in
love with Arveragus and accedes to her position as wife, Dorigen loses the
power of the Courtly Lady while nonetheless maintaining the role:

But atte laste she, for his worthynesse,
And namely for his meke obeysaunce,
Hath swich a pitee caught of his penaunce
That pryvely she fil of his accord
To take hym for hir housbonde and hir lord. (5.738–42)

Arveragus’s worthiness and meek obedience define his character in this
passage, but his agency emerges in these submissive performances, for it is
through this play that Dorigen “fil of his accord.” In accord with Žižek’s
theorization of masochism as a performance, Arveragus successfully enacts
his painful subservience so that Dorigen renounces her amatory author-
ity. Intriguingly, Chaucer mentions Arveragus’s “penance” in this passage,
but readers see no evidence of any amorous (or spiritual) transgression
for which he need atone; the suffering courtly lover, however, need not
actually transgress against the dictates of love, for such transgressions are
always and already the precondition of his pursuit and the basis of his per-
formance. From viewing Arveragus’s performance of masochism, Dorigen

37. Gilles Deleuze, Masochism, 22.
38. Penance conjures a range of denotations and connotations, which, as registered
in the Middle English Dictionary, include: “the sacrament of penance or reconciliation”;
“repentance, change of heart; compunction, contrition”; “penalty, punishment; a judicial
realigns her role from imperious Courtly Lady to wife, one that further shifts the gendered inflections of their relationship. Both Courtly Ladies and wives are women, of course, but the genders accorded to these feminine roles range widely, and thus the transience of gendered categories points to the hermaphroditic potential inherent in the Courtly Lady. If a woman can assume both the roles of Courtly Lady and of wife, so too may her suitor assume both the roles of husband and of Courtly Lady in an ultimate queering of gender.

After ceding her authority as Courtly Lady, Dorigen appears to be Arveragus’s amatory equal, and the Franklin praises mutuality as love’s key value. For courtly and marital relationships to prosper, the narrator argues, both a knight and his lady must embrace the mutuality inherent in their love:

For o thyng, sires, saufly dar I seye,
That freendes everych oother moot obeye,
If they wol longe holden compaignye.
Love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye. (5.761–64)

The narrator’s call for mutual obeisance stands as the ideal virtue espoused in the narrative, and the Franklin’s vision of a successful marriage relies upon the impossibility of sadism through the renunciation of maistrye. Long-standing interpretations of the Franklin’s Tale as the resolution of the marriage debate posit that, by declaring “freendes everych oother moot obeye,” the Franklin refutes the vision of husbandly sadism embodied by Walter in the Clerk’s Tale.39 Certainly, Arveragus’s relationship with Dorigen evinces little of the cruelty evident in Walter’s relationship with Griselda, but to view these marriages as opposite ends of a spectrum occludes their overlapping concern with the play of gender when hus-

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39. Over 100 years later, G. L. Kittredge’s “Chaucer’s Discussion of Marriage” (Modern Philology 9 [1912]: 435–67) remains relevant in exploring Chaucer’s depiction of marriage. He concludes that the Franklin’s Tale “ends an elaborate debate” and urges readers “to accept the solution which the Franklin offers” (467). Jill Mann, particularly in her chapter “The Surrender of Maistrye,” offers a compelling evaluation of marriage and “maistrye” in the Franklin’s Tale; see her Feminizing Chaucer (Cambridge: Brewer, 2002), 70–99.
bands and wives debate their respective authority and control over each other.

Within the masochistic play of courtly love, such a paradigm shift as evident in Arveragus and Dorigen’s attempts to renounce maistrye would require not only for the Courtly Lady to relinquish the veneer of sadism attributed to her but also for her male suitor to relinquish the play of masochism through which he orchestrates his lady’s actions. But such a simplistic resolution merely camouflages the intertwined play of desire initiated in mutual masochism, in which cruelty can never be fully renounced because the anti-erotic play of both knight and lady now requires that each beloved demand his/her partner to instigate masochistically cruel rituals to test each other. Complementing their renunciation of maistrye, Arveragus and Dorigen vow sufferance to each other so that they may live together in harmony:

And therfore hath this wise, worthy knyght,
To lyve in ese, suffrance hire bihight,
And she to hym ful wisly gan to swere
That nevere sholde ther be defaute in here. (5.787–90)

How, though, can one promise sufferance without subjecting oneself to another’s maistrye? The Middle English Dictionary includes among the definitions of sufferance the “willingness to be acted upon by an agent,” which underscores the passivity inherent in Arveragus and Dorigen’s marriage through their joint adherence to this marital virtue. As opposed to maistrye, mutual sufferance defines the parameters of conjugal harmony in this marriage, yet it is a virtue of masochistic passivity in which, paradoxically, Arveragus and Dorigen accept each other’s maistrye, despite their purported rejection of it, through their mutual sufferance. Mutual masochism should not be envisioned as necessitating an on/off switch, in which one partner embraces the masochistic position of subservience to the other’s Courtly Lady in rigid demarcations of performance and identity; on the contrary, these oscillating identities pulse erratically in Dorigen and Arveragus’s relationship. Deleuze believes that masochism is characterized by its dialectical qualities, which, in this instance, emerge in the continuing return of maistrye to a marriage from which it has presumably been banished.

40. The Middle English Dictionary also defines sufferance as “the undergoing of hardship, affliction, punishment, etc.”; “suffering”; “the capacity to endure or manner of bearing up under pain”; and “the patient endurance of hardship, affliction, etc.”
The hermaphroditism inherent in the Courtly Lady comes to the surface of the narrative as the Franklin subverts and reimagines gender roles throughout his romance. Foremost, the Franklin exposes the contradictions at the heart of courtly love when he hints that women, who should enjoy the prerogatives of the Courtly Lady’s authority, wield little real power: “Wommen, of kynde, desiren libertee, / And nat to been constreyned as a thral; / And soo doon men, if I sooth seyen shal” (5.768–70). Both women and men desire liberty, but it is noteworthy that the Franklin emphasizes women’s potential to be “constreyned as a thral” despite their supposedly superior positions in courtly love. The hazy relationship between courtly love and marriage, in that the two are often interrelated in medieval amatory discourse yet need not be so, could explain these lines in the latent suggestion that a woman cedes her power in courtship upon becoming a wife (which again underscores the variability in the gender roles of Courtly Lady and of wife). Within the overlapping traditions of courtship and marriage, sharp distinctions are often encoded, such as in Andreas Capellanus’s foundational text De Amore, when, in a passage from the Eighth Dialogue between a man and woman of the higher nobility, the man declares:

“Confiteor, me pulchram satis habere uxorem, et ego quidem ipsam totius mentis affectione diligo maritali. Sed quum sciam, inter virum et uxorem posse nullatenus esse amorem, et in hac vita nullum posse fieri bonum, nisi illud ex amore originis sumpserit incrementa, non immerito extra nuptialia mihi foedera postulare cogor amorem.”

“I admit that I have a wife who is beautiful enough, and I do indeed feel such affection for her as a husband can. But since I know that there can be no love between husband and wife . . . and that there can be nothing good done in this life unless it grows out of love, I am naturally compelled to seek for love outside the bonds of wedlock.”

Mark Taylor reads the Franklin’s Tale as an interrogation of such distinctions between marital and courtly love, in which Chaucer “adopt[s] the ideal of the anti-adultery tradition and defend[s] it against the tradition

41. Andreas Capellanus, De Amore, ed. E. Trojel (Havniae: In Libraria Gadiana, 1892), 172.
of adulterous love.” Taylor’s account of love’s vagaries is persuasive, yet the ultimate impossibility of distinguishing between marital and courtly love once mutual masochism disrupts the expected parameters of this gendered paradigm muddies a dichotomous view either of Courtly Lady or of wife. For even when the Franklin’s Tale most clearly endorses mutuality, the inherent imbalance of masochistic ritual remains in effect, as does the threat of serving “as a thrall.”

If a woman as Courtly Lady faces the possibility of losing her authority in love and thus of sliding into a subservient position of thralldom when married, the Franklin’s concomitant observation regarding men’s desire “nat to been constreyned as a thrall” is clearly linked to courtship rather than to marriage. Given medieval culture’s assumption of masculine authority in marriage, men should not be expected to face thralldom in marriage after their masochistic performances during courtship have ceased. The Franklin notes the distinction between men’s gender roles in courtship and in marriage:

Thus hath she take hir servant and hir lord—
Servant in love, and lord in mariaghe.
Thanne was he bothe in lordshiphe and servage.
Servage? Nay, but in lordshiphe above,
Sith he hath bothe his lady and his love. (5.792–96)

Similar to the ways in which the biological sex of the lady masks two complementary yet discrete gender roles of Courtly Lady and wife, the knight’s biological sex obscures the competing yet complementary versions of masculinity open for his performance: suffering suitor, authoritarian husband, and even, as Arveragus soon demonstrates, Courtly Lady. Here the knight’s play of masochistic subservience in courtship is revealed as a ruse to gain control of his beloved in marriage, and even the egalitarian ideal of mutuality is merely a patriarchal façade, one by which Arvera-
gus is able to maintain lordship over Dorigen in marriage because he wins her both as the Courtly Lady of romance and as his love in marriage. Both Courtly Ladies and wives, in their performance of gendered femininity, must accede to male prerogatives, yet nonetheless the man’s potential position as Courtly Lady will reveal his willingness to perform for her narcissistic desires when she stages her own masochistic rituals.

Once married, Dorigen experiences the keen pain of suffering while awaiting her husband’s return from England, and in these scenes she mirrors Arveragus’s masochistic torments during their courtship.\(^\text{45}\) Similar to her husband, who performed “many a labour” to win her, she snares the amatory attention of a suitor through the masochistic and public ritual of suffering without him. Deleuze theorizes that waiting enhances the masochist’s experience of suffering, that the “masochist is morose,” and this “moroseness should be related to the experience of waiting and delay.”\(^\text{46}\) After Arveragus departs, pain dominates Dorigen’s life: “She moorneth, waketh, wayleth, fasteth, pleyneth; / Desir of his presence hire so destreyneth / That al this wyde world she sette at noght” (5.819–21). Her desire for Arveragus empties her life of meaning, and she sees herself as bound to Fortune’s cruel vagaries: “Alas . . . on thee, Fortune, I pleyne, / That unwar wrapped hast me in thy cheyne” (5.1355–56). Even the black rocks, emblematic of her emotional torment during Arveragus’s absence, signify the performativity encoded in her suffering. On a surface level, they are concrete reminders of her loss and her fears for her husband’s safety, yet Timothy Flake intriguingly suggests that Dorigen needs these rocks, that she “really does not want the rocks to be removed. The rocks’ presence . . . is the foundation of her sense of certainty, for it is on this certainty that she bases her defense against Aurelius’s advances and her declaration of faithfulness to Arveragus.”\(^\text{47}\)

\(^{45}\) Dorigen’s status in a primarily masculine world has drawn the attention of numerous scholars, such as Alison Ganze, who sees her negotiating masculine values in her search for trouthe (“‘My trouthe for to holde—allas, allas!’: Dorigen and Honor in the Franklin’s Tale,” *Chaucer Review* 42.3 [2008]: 312–29); Andrea Rossi-Reder, who describes the ways in which the tale establishes that “masculine mobility is grounded in female fixity” (“Male Movement and Female Fixity in the Franklin’s Tale and Il Filocolo,” in *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Peter Beidler [Cambridge: Brewer, 1998], 106–16, at 115); and Mary Bowman, who describes Dorigen as a possession traded between men rather than as an individual (“‘Half as she were mad’: Dorigen in the Male World of the Franklin’s Tale,” *Chaucer Review* 27.3 [1993]: 239–51).


\(^{47}\) Timothy Flake, “Love, Trouthe, and the Happy Ending of the Franklin’s Tale,” *English Studies* 77.3 (1996): 209–26, at 219. Concerning these rocks, see also John Friedman, “Dori-
The pain that readers witness in Arveragus’s performance of masochism during courtship, which cracked when he could finally “tell hire his wo, his payne, and his distresse,” now envelops Dorigen in marriage, but through such apparent passivity, she defines her own narcissistic image. Aurelius’s desire for her—which he has hidden “two yeer and moore” (5.940) but can hide no longer—indicates her success in this regard, for it is at the moment of her deepest pain that he can no longer hide his desire for her.

The cause of Dorigen’s suffering is at least somewhat arbitrary, for why, except to allow his wife to stage her masochistic ritual, does Arveragus depart for England? The Franklin mentions the knight’s journey without explaining his motivation beyond a cursory reference to his knightly duties, and so here Arveragus enacts the arbitrary callousness of the Courtly Lady, as he compels Dorigen to experience his former suffering:

A yeer and moore lasted this blissful lyf,
Til that the knyght of which I speke of thus,
That of Kayrrud was cleped Arveragus,
Shoop hym to goon and dwelle a yeer or tweyne
In Engelond, that cleped was eek Briteyne,
To seke in armes worshipe and honour—
For al his lust he sette in swich labour—
And dwelled there two yeer; the book seith thus. (5.806–13)

From a conventional perspective, Arveragus is a knight and knights must engage in battle and fight in tournaments; it is simply an occupational obligation, one that reflects negatively neither upon him nor upon his devotion to Dorigen. Yet such a rationalization is based on establishing an internal logic to the machinations of courtly love, an amatory system almost immune to logic in its oscillating play of gender and amatory authority. Similar moments in other romances when knights fail to prioritize their ladies over their homosocial responsibilities and pleasures—such as in Chrétien de Troyes’s Yvain, ou Le Chevalier au lion, when Yvain departs from Laudine to join Gawain in knightly tournaments, and in Marie de France’s Lanval, when Lanval fails to adhere to his Lady’s demand for silence regarding their relationship—highlight these knights’ propensity to sabotage their love in order to replay the mutual masoch-

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ism that should no longer be necessary due to love’s fruition. Such scenes privilege the knight’s homosocial relationships with his peers over his love for his lady, thus further positioning her as a narcissistic mirror of his performances for other men’s pleasure. These plotlines also suggest that once the knight’s relationship with his beloved is so firmly established that he need no longer enact his masochistic ploys, he compels her to experience the painful effects of his newly returned sense of agency, even to his own detriment, for by refusing his initial position of masochistic subservience, the knight paradoxically ensures that both he and his beloved will suffer more than previously by undermining the foundations of their love. At the very least, the Franklin’s declaration that Arveragus prefers the worship and honor of arms to the sexual bliss of marriage—“For al his lust he sette in swich labour”—denigrates the love he so desperately sought but from which he seeks to escape after merely “[a] yeer and moore.” With the erotic pleasures of marriage forsworn in favor of the (assumedly) chaste pleasures of homosocial companionship in service to his lord and fellow men, Arveragus anticipates two years—approximately twice the length of the year or so he spent with Dorigen as husband and wife—without the sexual pleasures he so keenly pursued in the narrative’s opening. The Franklin cites his textual source in this moment—“the book seith thus”—and this rhetorical flourish provides documentary evidence to a common trope of romance that makes little sense according to external logic but profoundly affects the contours of courtly love and its perverse traditions. Fracturing the bliss of their marriage through his actions, Arveragus provides Dorigen with the opportunity to stage her own masochistic ritual, one that ensnares both her husband and her suitor in a new round of suffering. As she served as Queer Thing / Courtly Lady for Arveragus as suitor, he will serve this role for her by encouraging her to abandon the sadism to which she ostensibly had access in her role as Courtly Lady and to undergo the suffering play of contractual masochism with both him and Aurelius.

Aurelius loves and fears Dorigen, and, like his rival Arveragus, he employs the standard tropes of masochistic disavowal in approaching her. “My righte lady . . . / Whom I moost drede and love as I best kan, / And lothest were of al this world displese” (5.1311–13), he declares, performing his trepidation before her, and he also accords her the imperious position of the Courtly Lady by referring to her as “my sovereyn lady” before humbly placing his fate in her hands (5.1325, cf. 5.1072). Readers learn that Aurelius has long loved Dorigen without seeking relief for his suffering: “But nevere dorste he tellen hire his grevaunce. / Withouten
coppe he drank al his penaunce” (5.941–42). In these amatory posturings, complete with their tropes of suffering and penance, Aurelius mirrors Arveragus, and in this nascent conflict, it appears that the Franklin’s Tale will address the vexed (and often queer) negotiations of aggression and affection inherent in triangulations of desire. Arveragus, Dorigen, and Aurelius’s relationship bears the structure of an erotic triangle, and readers might expect the narrative to end with Arveragus and Aurelius fighting in a tournament to ensure the winner’s position as her beloved, in a manner similar to Palamon and Arcite’s combat at the conclusion of the Knight’s Tale. In terms of the erotic choice before Dorigen, little distinguishes Arveragus and Aurelius from each other in terms of personality, appearance, or profession: like Palamon and Arcite in the Knight’s Tale, the two men are nearly interchangeable in their performance of amatory ritual, yet within the logic of this romance, Arveragus’s position as Dorigen’s first lover, and thus as her husband, cannot be stripped from him. Nor should it be: despite surface similarities between Arveragus and Aurelius, Arveragus’s role as Dorigen’s husband is sacrosanct within the erotic logic of this tale. The Franklin’s Tale focuses on the pains and pleasures of abstention first in courtship and then in marriage, not of action in adultery, and so this erotic triangle—unlike the violent enactment of triangulated desire in the Knight’s Tale—concentrates on sharing masochistic ritual with Aurelius and thereby disciplining him into love’s service. One does not need to defeat a masochist in an erotic rivalry that, by the tale’s end, is rendered anti-erotic; one need only encourage him to continue his masochistic subservience and to alienate him, to queer him, from a vision of masculinity predicated upon amatory success with women. He must be taught not to transcend masochism as the primary seductive tactic in a man’s erotic repertoire but to languish in its painful pleasures.

And so, rather than bolstering the aggression latent in triangulated desire, masochism infuses Arveragus and Aurelius’s amatory competition with a mutually painful dynamic that strips away the aggression latent in

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49. Palamon and Arcite resemble each other in numerous qualities, but Catherine Rock, in her “Forsworn and Fordone: Arcite as Oath-Breaker in the Knight’s Tale” (Chaucer Review 40.4 [2006]: 416–32), explores how Arcite’s actions after falling in love with Emily distinguish him morally from his sworn brother. In this instance Chaucer’s refusal to distinguish between erotic rivals reflects the inscrutable vagaries of Fortune in amatory affairs.
love. Foremost, Arveragus remains unaware of Aurelius’s desire for his wife throughout most of the narrative, in which several years pass with little to advance the narrative. Time passes quickly yet slowly in the Franklin’s Tale, which heightens the Franklin’s rhetorical flourishes regarding love’s suffering. For example, Aurelius suffers “two yeer and moore” after confessing his love for Dorigen (5.1102), and this line regarding time’s passage heightens the emotional pain of this scene, pointing to the long periods of suffering that the characters endure.50 While pursuing another man’s wife, Aurelius, rather than openly confronting his rival, publicly performs his masochistic suffering, and in this masterful enactment of desire he sings numerous songs of love purportedly to hide yet paradoxically to announce his amorous intentions:

He was despeyred; no thyng dorste he seye,
Save in his songes somwhat wolde he wreye
His wo, as in a general compleynyng;
He seyde he lovede and was biloved no thyng,
Of swich matere made he manye layes,
Songes, compleintes, roundels, virelayes,
How that he dorste nat his sorwe telle,
But langwissheth as a furye dooth in helle. (5.943–50)

Aurelius hides his amatory woe, but only to reveal it in song in no less than five separate genres, as it if were a “general compleyning,” not his personal lament. Both revealing and cloaking his pain, Aurelius transforms his private suffering into a public performance, one that occludes his masochism while it is nonetheless on full display for his audience.

When Dorigen confronts Aurelius about the impropriety of his desires, she focuses on the painful pleasure of forbearance, encouraging him to accept the queer regenderings of masochism available to him by renouncing the possibility of consummating his desires. In her rhetorical question to him—“What deyntee sholde a man han in his lyf / For to go love another mannes wyf, / That hath hir body whan so that hym liketh?” (5.1003–5)—she emphasizes that he should disavow sexuality while simultaneously highlighting Arveragus’s former enjoyment of sexual pleasure with her. Michael Calabrese rightly points out the provocative nature of Dorigen’s words, seeing them as “an inflammation

50. Other such lines addressing time’s passage in the tale include 866, 809, 813, 940, 1568, and 1582.
of the male rivalry that Aurelius is conducting. . . . By reminding him in sexually suggestive terms that her body is freely enjoyed, but not by him, she only encourages Aurelius to commit himself to achieving the ‘impossible’ and to have what his rival freely enjoys.”

I would only qualify Calabrese’s perceptive observation by changing its verb tense: her body is not currently being freely enjoyed by Arveragus, who is in England pursuing homosocial knightly pastimes rather than sating his amatory desires when she speaks these words; rather, erotic pleasure, at the moment of this confrontation, is unavailable to Dorigen, Arveragus, and Aurelius, which leaves only the specter of sexuality behind. By so publicly performing her suffering during Arveragus’s absence and by reminding Aurelius of the sexual pleasure of which she herself cannot partake, Dorigen accentuates love’s pains as a renouncing rather than as a fulfilling of desire. In this passage she is both the Courtly Lady who enhances Aurelius’s suffering through her cruel rejoinder while also serving as the masochist subservient to Arveragus, who, in his own role as Courtly Lady, disciplines her by denying her the erotic pleasure available to her in marriage (and, it appears from these lines, keenly missed).

In his masochistic ritual with its polymorphous gender play, Aurelius enacts the theatrical ploys of masochism not merely for Dorigen but for the magician who supernaturally obscures the black rocks so central to Dorigen’s heartfelt performance of erotic suffering. These structural similarities of masochistic ritual in Aurelius’s appeal to the magician do not suggest a latent homoeroticism in this scene but instead point to the queer and masochistic underbelly of desires circulating both through men and women and throughout their relationships; regardless of Dorigen’s or of the magician’s biological sex, Aurelius’s narcissistic strategies reveal the ubiquity of masochism throughout virtually all encounters in this tale. He assumes the masochist’s obsequious position vis-à-vis his superior, even threatening the magician with his suicide should his amatory pains be left unresolved:

Aurelius in al that evere he kan
Dooth to this maister chiere and reverence,
And preyeth hym to doon his diligence
To bryngen hym out of his peynes smerte,
Or with a swerd that he wolde slitte his herte.

This subtil clerk swich routhe had of this man
That nyght and day he spedde hym that he kan
To wayten a tyme of his conclusioun. (5.1256–63)

Aurelius’s relationship with the magician structurally mirrors that of his relationship with Dorigen, in which his masochism encourages these “masters” to act on his behalf, as Dorigen does in her rash promise to love him should he remove the black rocks. His ready embrace of death wins “swich routhe” from “this maister” that his plan to win Dorigen’s affections proceed apace. Deleuze believes that death intertwines with eroticism in masochism, such that “destruction is always presented as the other side of a construction, as an instinctual drive which is necessarily combined with Eros,”52 and in this manner Aurelius pursues erotic satisfaction through his declared readiness for death.

From her relationship with Arveragus, Dorigen learns that masochistic suitors do not act except through their contractual performance of suffering, and so she is duly shocked when Aurelius informs her that he has successfully moved the black rocks from the coast. In a tale that emphasizes forbearance and inaction, Aurelius’s apparent rejection of passivity shocks Dorigen:

“Allas,” quod she, “that evere this sholde happe!
For wende I nereve by possibilitee
That swich a monstre or merveille myghte be!
It is agayns the proces of nature.” (5.1342–45)

Dorigen refers to a “monstre” in Aurelius’s successful removal of the black rocks, and this “monstre” could signify either the magical event or Aurelius himself. In at long last rising from his melancholic torpor and momentarily refusing the masochistic suffering that the suitor should continually perform, he metaphorically transforms into a monster who abrogates the expected rituals of courtly love merely by acting. Surely the disappearance of the black rocks “is agayns the proces of nature,” but so too is Aurelius, who disrupts the expected sexual roles of lover and beloved by disavowing the mutual masochism at the heart of their relationship in favor of activity rather than passivity. Like the Courtly Lady, he now acts as a Queer Thing in this passage, forcing Dorigen to confront the emptiness of her masochistic performances of forbearance and the possibility that the

52. Gilles Deleuze, Masochism, 116.
narcissistic image she created for herself is merely an anti-erotic veneer, one that defined her virtue while awaiting Arveragus’s return, but that can no longer withstand the pressures of an eroticism unconstrained by masochism. The irony, however, of Aurelius’s presumed activity is that he has, in fact, done little other than stage his suffering both for Dorigen and the magician; whatever illusion obscures the black rocks is the magician’s work, not his, and the narrator reports the evanescence of this magical feat: “But thurgh his magik, for a wyke or tweye, / It s emed that alle the rokkes were aweye” (5.1295–96). To compel Dorigen to abandon her façade as the impervious courtly lady, Aurelius relies on the appearance of action rather than on action itself, demonstrating yet again the ruse of masochistic passivity in a startling display of inactivity couched as his passionate pursuit of her.

The remainder of the Franklin’s Tale must quell this disruption to its masochistic logic so that passivity will triumph as the defining feature of eroticism and its queer disruptions of gendered paradigms. When Dorigen contemplates suicide in a scene akin to Aurelius’s threat of suicide to the magician, she again appears to be acting masochistically in pursuit of punishment, and Deleuze notes the “provocative fear” that sparks the masochist to “aggressively demand punishment since it resolves anxiety and allows him to enjoy the forbidden pleasure.”53 Due to Dorigen’s multiple positions—as Courtly Lady, as Queer Thing, and as masochistic performer of her own suffering—gender can no longer guide her in her decisions, for gender is incapable of pinning down these oscillating roles to a singularly sexed body. When she catalogs virtuous wives and maidens who choose suicide over dishonor, she attempts to gird herself to act, to embrace the agency necessary to abrogate her suffering:

“And with my deth I may be quytt, ywis.  
Hath ther nat many a noble wyf er this,  
And many a mayde, yslayn hiself, allass,  
Rather than with hir body doon trespas?” (5.1363–66)

Unlike the many heroines of Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women, who prove their virtue by their willing deaths, Dorigen does not act; instead, she “pleyned . . . a day or tweye, / Purposynge evere that she wolde deye” (5.1457–58). As Warren Smith attests, “Dorigen’s Lament reveals her struggling toward a resolution of her dilemma which will keep her from

53. Ibid., 75.
suicide and preserve both her ‘trothe’ and her fidelity to her husband.”\textsuperscript{54} This moral conundrum also allows her masochistic performances to continue, for ending them through suicide would abrogate the oscillations at the core of her romance that define her pursuit of pleasure. Although some might argue that suicide represents the logical end point of masochism in the disavowal of desire through death, suicide corrupts the performative nature of suffering and substitutes irrevocable action for momentary posturings designed to perpetuate the lovers’ anti-erotic play.

In his capricious and arbitrary reaction to Dorigen’s amatory suffering, Arveragus again assumes the position of the hermaphroditic Courtly Lady, one whose actions deflect internal logic yet compel Dorigen as masochist to embrace ever more suffering. Strangely, he initially seems pleased with Dorigen’s plight: in response to her tears, he replies “with glad chiere, in freendly wyse” (5.1467), and his words to her, “Is ther oght elles, Dorigen, but this?” (5.1469), imply that the matter of her incipient unfaithfulness is a trifling concern, of little relevance to their continued happiness. Alcuin Blamires perceives in Arveragus’s reaction “the Stoic ideal of the compassionate person, who relieves those who are in tears, but without weeping with them,”\textsuperscript{55} and this image of reacting by not reacting captures the rigidity of the Courtly Lady’s stance, in which the suitor must prove his devotion by acting against his own self-interest and privileging the beloved’s inscrutable desires. In a swift reversal of his initial nonchalance, Arveragus then threatens Dorigen with her imminent death: “I yow forbede, up peyne of deeth, / That nevere, whil thee lasteth lyf ne breeth, / To no wight telle thou of this aventure” (5.1481–83). Raymond Tripp observes an “irony . . . emerg[ing] in the fact that Arveragus, in his attempt to escape his masculine role (and all of its attendant trials and complications), finds himself assuming an absolute maistrye over Dorigen, even to the point of threatening her with the ‘peyne of deeth.’”\textsuperscript{56} Whether the imperious Courtly Lady or the masochistic suitor, Arveragus acts through his inaction and thus paradoxically circulates masochistic desire throughout the triangulated affair.


\textsuperscript{55} Alcuin Blamires, Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 154–55; italics in original.

arbitrary rulings as Courtly Lady / Queer Thing, Arveragus showcases his impervious self-control by preparing himself for the pain of her cuckolding him, thereby reconfiguring himself into yet another masochistic position, once again defined by anti-eroticism. Deleuze observes the masochist’s propensity to pander his wife: “the masochist persuades his wife, in her capacity as good mother, to give herself to other men.”57 The male masochist’s ultimate humiliation in cuckoldry is thus the fullest pleasure available to him, but one to which he must coerce his wife to submit so that the queer pleasure of abjection will surface through the circulation of a woman among a male homosocial milieu.

The ending of the Franklin’s Tale details the perfect stasis of masochism, in which the four primary characters cannot sate their desires other than through the continued play of forbearance. The Franklin records Arveragus and Dorigen’s “happily ever after” ending and then dismisses them from the narrative: “Of thise two folk ye gete of me namoore” (5.1556). It is intriguing to contemplate Arveragus’s masochistic disappointment in his wife’s failure to cuckold him, and readers see little evidence to suggest that the purportedly “happily ever after” ending concludes the mutually masochistic maneuverings that define their courtship and marriage. At the very least, the tale continues after its ostensible protagonists’ departure from the narrative, which highlights that this husband and wife’s marital adventures cannot circumscribe its thematic concerns, and instead posits masochism as a generative force within various human relationships. In light of Arveragus and Dorigen’s mutual masochism, Aurelius purges himself of desire:

And in his herte he caughte of this greet routhe,
Considerynge the beste on every syde,
That fro his lust yet were hym levere abyde
Than doon so heigh a cherlyssh wrecchednesse
Agayns franchise and alle gentillesse. (5.1520–24)

Furthermore, Aurelius is prepared to abase himself perpetually for their love: “I have wel levere evere to suffre wo / Than I departe the love bitwix yow two” (5.1531–32). Choosing perpetual pain, Aurelius emerges as an avatar of masochism, one rid of any desire other than to suffer for others so that he may be celebrated for such suffering. In a final scene of recu-

57. Gilles Deleuze, Masochism, 63.
perating and reframing desire, the magician sacrifices monetary gain and forgives Aurelius his debt. From the mutually masochistic play of courtly love and marriage, Dorigen, Arveragus, Aurelius, and the magician embody the emptiness of gender and the intransigence of the queer Courtly Lady, a hermaphroditic position that guides them to renounce desire for the sake of the anti-erotic pleasure at the heart of this renunciation and the narcissistic refashioning of desirability through the suffering and depredations incurred.

EPILOGUE: THE MODEST FRANKLIN

I do not argue in this chapter’s concluding section that the Franklin engages in a mutually masochistic relationship with Harry Bailly and his fellow pilgrims by telling his tale. The relatively scant descriptions of the Franklin—his General Prologue portrait (1.331–60), his words with the Squire at the close of the Squire’s Tale (5.673–708), and his Prologue (5.709–28)—do not offer sufficient evidence to warrant such an interpretation. The masochistic performances of amatory submission in the Franklin’s tale and his performance of modesty in tale-telling are nonetheless analogous in their deployment of submission as an obfuscatory tool that camouflages desires circulating throughout interpersonal relationships. Power and gender dynamics resonate throughout the Canterbury pilgrimage, and the Franklin’s modesty emerges as yet another tactic in the ongoing squabbling among the pilgrims, couched as it is under the guise of play and game.

The Franklin’s relationship with his fellow pilgrims showcases the subtle power of modesty and etiquette, in which social pleasantries and his amiable disposition cloak his authority. In describing the Franklin in the General Prologue, Chaucer stresses this character’s largesse and hospitality. He is compared to St. Julian, patron saint of hospitality (1.340), and the abundance of food in his house establishes the character’s ample generosity: “It snewed in his hous of mete and drynke” (1.345). Likewise, when the Franklin joins the narrative action of the pilgrimage by interrupting the Squire’s rambling tale, readers witness the latent authority accessible to those who understand social ritual. “As to my doom, ther is noon that is heere / Of eloquence that shal be thy peere, / . . . / For of thy speche I have greet deyntee” (5.677–78, 81), the Franklin graciously declares to the Squire, but, of course, his deeper purpose is not to praise the young man but to silence him. Similarly, after Harry Bailly rudely interrupts the
Franklin—“Straw for youre gentillesse!” (5.695)—the Franklin employs his eloquence to silence Harry while promising to submit to him:

“Gladly, sire Hoost,” quod he, “I wol obeye
Unto your wyl; now herkneth what I seye.
I wol yow nat contrarien in no wyse
As far as that my wittes wol suffyse.
I prey to God that it may plesen yow.” (5.703–7)

Much like the Clerk, who earlier pledged his obedience to Harry’s will but then immediately qualified this submission—“And therfore wol I do yow obeisance, / As far as resoun axeth, hardily” (4.24–25)—the Franklin promises fidelity to Harry’s rule while simultaneously excluding his full adherence to this authority. Like the masochist who performs subservience for his imperious beloved, the Franklin plays his role in submission to Harry’s authority, but this performance only highlights the potential emptiness of such playacting.

Chaucer continues his description of the Franklin’s submissiveness when, in the Franklin’s Prologue, the Franklin introduces his tale through his modesty topos and dissembles his rhetorical skills:

“I lerned nevere rethorik, certeyn;
Thyng that I speke, it moot be bare and pleyn.
I sleep nevere on the Mount of Pernaso,
Ne lerned Marcus Tullius Scithero.” (5.719–22)

Such proclamations of rhetorical modesty appear in other Chaucerian narratives, and Donald Fritz posits that these instances of modesty reveal that Chaucer’s characters “wrestl[e] with the problem of artistic communication of deep and abiding truths.” In this instance, the Franklin cannot openly criticize the social structure of the Canterbury pilgrimage, but he can employ his story to reimagine the gendered dynamics of the pilgrimage that the blustering Harry Bailly controls. Tale-telling involves rhetorical choices that at times camouflage violent desires, as Sandra McEntire provocatively explains of the Franklin’s Tale: “In taking old stories, remaking them and interpreting them, Chaucer is in effect acting like Aurelius with the body of narrative. He takes a texts and breaks it apart, rapes

and dismembers it as it were, and puts it back together—remembers it—with his own insights, subtexts, interpretations." McEntire's startling metaphors of rape and dismemberment for retelling narratives capture the aggressive dynamics latent throughout the Canterbury pilgrimage and points to the ways in which the Franklin engages in such aggression through rhetorical choices rather than through direct insults or bawdily allegorical narratives.

In regendering narrative through his mutually masochistic tale, the Franklin forecloses masculine pleasure in climax, and, in so doing, queers the meaning of normative gender for his fellow pilgrims. Numerous narratological theories posit that plotlines emulate the physiological pleasures of male orgasm, such as in Robert Scholes's (in)famous formulation:

> The archetype of all fiction is the sexual act. In saying this I do not mean merely to remind the reader of the connection between all art and the erotic in human nature. . . . For what connects fiction—and music—with sex is the fundamental orgiastic rhythm of tumescence and detumescence, of tension and resolution, of intensification to the point of climax and consummation. In the sophisticated forms of fiction, as in the sophisticated practice of sex, much of the art consists of delaying climax within the framework of desire in order to prolong the pleasurable act itself.

But what of narratives without climaxes? Where is the narrative pleasure of orgasm in an ultimately anti-erotic tale that refuses its reader the pleasure of climax? One would be hard-pressed to locate a climax in the Franklin's Tale: is it Dorigen's decision to commit suicide (which she then ignores), her confession to Arveragus of her commitment to Aurelius (which he then forgives), her meeting with Aurelius in which she is prepared to fulfill her obligations (of which he then absolves her)? One could argue that the tale's climax and its inconclusive conclusion unite in its closing demande d'amour, as the Franklin queries: "Which was the mooste

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fre, as thynketh yow? / Now telleth me, er that ye ferther wende. / I kan namoore; my tale is at an ende” (5.1622–24). To end a narrative with a demande d’amour, however, encodes a fundamentally different structure into its plotline, for in Chaucer’s other narratives containing demandes d’amour—the Knight’s Tale and the Wife of Bath’s Tale—these amatory rhetorical questions occur early in the plot and are at least implicitly resolved. The Knight’s Tale queries, “Who hath the worse, Arcite or Palamon?” (1.1348), and although the debate of whether the imprisoned lover who can see his beloved fares better or worse than the emancipated lover who cannot see her is not definitively answered, the narrative concludes in favor of Palamon as he wins Emily in marriage and thus settles any unresolved aspects of the lovers’ fates. The provocative query at the heart of the Wife of Bath’s Tale—“What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren” (3.905)—is conclusively answered: “Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee / As wel over hir housbond as hir love, / And for to been in maistrie hym above” (3.1038–40). The Franklin, in contrast, ends his tale with a question that refuses a pat answer and thus rejects the narrative rhythms of male desire and masculinist plotlines. As his play of modesty invites his fellow pilgrims to dismiss him as an inept storyteller before he commences his narrative, the Franklin reveals his sophisticated technique throughout his tale, which culminates without a climax or definitive conclusion. In so doing, he asks his fellow pilgrims to consider the possibility of a form of narrative pleasure distinct from those that have come before, one in which recalcitrant inaction trumps action.

The Franklin’s refusal to end his story conclusively encodes an absence in his narrative, and as Elizabeth Scala argues, such absences, in many instances, constitute a narrative’s core: “In these complex medieval stories themselves, and through their indications of what is not the subject of the story, the absent narrative is revealed as an unconscious subject of narrative.”61 Because Chaucer did not depict the pilgrims’ reactions to the Franklin’s Tale, it is impossible to gauge their responses to it and its narrative ploys. Nonetheless, in reconfiguring the narratological expectations of pleasure in climax, the Franklin effectively asks his audience to experience female narrative pleasure. The Franklin does not address narratology when he declares, “Pacience is an heigh vertu, certeyn / For it venquysseth, as thise clerkes seyn, / Thynges that rigour sholde nevere atteyne” (5.773–75), but these words are intriguing in their dismissal of

masculine rigor in favor of endless patience and suffering and in their rewriting of mutually masochistic forbearance into the rules of courtly love and of narrative. As Dorigen, Arveragus, and Aurelius queer the foundations of gender and reveal the inherently convoluted play of masochistic desire in the Franklin’s Tale, so too does the Franklin coerce his fellow pilgrims to embrace such patience, even if this narrative strategy refuses them the pleasure of climax in favor of patiently waiting for an ending that will never arrive.