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

Pugh, Tison

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CHAPTER THREE

“FOR TO BE SWORNE BREOTHEREN TIL THEY DEYE”

Satirizing Queer Brotherhood in the Chaucerian Corpus

In Chaucer’s canon, when a man swears an oath of brotherhood to another man, the vow is soon repudiated, rejected, or otherwise rendered problematic.¹ No exceptions to this rule appear. Fraternal promises in Chaucer’s literature evoke homosocial tensions and aggressions, and this dynamic hints that, for Chaucer, these particular bonds of brotherhood carried with them the likely possibility of erotic queerness. By characterizing such homosocial relationships as intrinsically susceptible to betrayal and ridicule, Chaucer hints that male friendships, as incarnated through brotherhood oaths, were often viewed suspiciously in courtly and aristocratic contexts of fourteenth-century

¹ Studies of oaths in Chaucer’s literature include Lois Roney, “Chaucer Subjectivizes the Oath: Depicting the Fall from Feudalism into Individualism in the Canterbury Tales,” in The Rusted Hauberk: Feudal Ideals of Order and Their Decline, ed. Liam Purdon and Cindy Vitto (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1994), 269–98; Daniel Kline, “‘Myne by right’: Oath Making and Intent in the Friar’s Tale,” Philological Quarterly 77 (1998): 271–93; and William Keen, “Chaucer’s Imaginable Audience and the Oaths of the Shipman’s Tale,” Topic 50 (2000): 91–103. Richard Firth Green addresses many of Chaucer’s works in his A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); the chapters “From Troth to Truth” (1–40) and “Trothplight” (41–77) are particularly relevant for their analysis of the social discourses surrounding truths and oaths and the ways in which oaths reflect character. This chapter analyzes the particular subset of Chaucerian oaths pledged between two or more men in which they guarantee to act as brothers for their common good.
England, despite the normative and chaste valence accorded such relationships in these same social settings. The discrepancies between Chaucer’s depiction of homosocial oaths and those of his contemporaries point to the inherent difficulty of locating queerness in the Middle Ages, as we see in this instance that the same social phenomenon can reflect both queerness and normativity, both submerged eroticism and presumed anteroticism, depending upon the circumstances of its enactment. In their potential to spark either suspicions of latent homoeroticism or approval of ennobling social ritual, brotherhood oaths straddle the lines of sexually illicit and asexually licit.

Chaucer deploys brotherhood oaths satirically in each of the five narratives in which they appear—House of Fame, Knight’s Tale, Friar’s Tale, Pardoner’s Tale, and Shipman’s Tale. The narrator of the House of Fame describes a plenitude of brotherhood oaths at the narrative’s close, and this scene, which mocks the allegorical figures who engage in such relationships, imbues the poem with a comic dismissal of homosocial friendships that teasingly undermines its conclusion. The Knight’s Tale features Palamon and Arcite’s oaths of brotherhood, which are subverted in their decision to forgo sworn homosocial union in pursuit of heteroerotic courtship and marriage with Emily; in this instance, fraternal oaths structure the narrative’s deconstruction of romance values. In the Friar’s Tale, Pardoner’s Tale, and Shipman’s Tale, Chaucer mocks the pretensions of noncourtly men—including summoners, devils, rioters, merchants, and monks—who enact courtly rituals, thereby highlighting the fractious issues of social class, mercantilism, and religion inherent in the Canterbury pilgrimage. Through these examples, both individually and collectively, it becomes apparent that Chaucer found great satiric potential in male brotherhood oaths, with which he causes narrative constructions of fraternal masculinity to founder, because the chaste foundations of these pairings bear the potential, slight though it may be, for homoeroticism to blossom.

Chaucer’s satire, by highlighting the failure of homosocial oaths to direct proper masculine conduct, strips male brotherhood of its gravitas. In other literary and historic texts of the fourteenth century, however, such oaths are depicted as ennobling the men who swear fidelity to each other. As C. Stephen Jaeger describes the social phenomenon of ennobling love, as practiced in medieval courtly and ecclesiastical cultures, “It is a form of aristocratic self-representation. Its social function is to show forth virtue in lovers, to raise their inner worth, to increase their honor
and enhance their reputation.” This possibility of positive homosociality through sworn bonds of brotherhood, which is dependent upon the presumed absence of eroticism between the men, is repeatedly frustrated in Chaucer’s literature. Certainly, Chaucer depicts numerous other incarnations of brotherhood, including fraternal relationships based on blood and/or friendship, in a positive light. For example, the Parson and the Plowman in the *General Prologue* apparently embody a mutually beneficial example of brotherhood, but their brotherhood is predicated upon blood and spirituality rather than courtly and chivalric oaths. In contrast, brotherhood as enacted through sworn oaths consistently merits narrative ridicule and satire due to its latent erotic potential.

In describing medieval brotherhood oaths as potentially queer, my goal is not to locate a submerged homosexuality within the fictions of the Chaucerian corpus but to expose the ways in which the latent possibility of eroticism in male friendships bleeds into narrative circumstances addressing other social phenomena. *Queer* alludes to sexual acts and gendered identities that stray from constructions of cultural normativity, yet it is critical to realize that medieval brotherhood oaths participated within the range of normative behavior while simultaneously bearing the potential to subvert normativity. These pledges constituted a recognized part of knightly culture in the Middle Ages, yet the normativity of such oaths could never fully eclipse their queer potential. As Richard Zeikowitz documents in his study of courtly discourse, “Chivalric treatises also illustrate how ideal chivalric conduct promotes male–male intimacy.” The barest potential for normative homosocial intimacy, which is predicated upon anti-erotic assumptions of friendship rather than of homosexual desire, can elicit fear of nonnormative eroticism under certain circumstances. In this

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manner, perceptions of sodomy could construe men who swear fraternal oaths as meriting cultural opprobrium, despite the absence of homoeroticism in their relationships.

As Paul Strohm observes of sworn brotherhood within the Chaucerian corpus, “Chaucer’s poetry not only presents a society in which vassalage has been replaced by an array of more casual relations epitomized by sworn brotherhood, but includes a critique of those relations.”5 In the House of Fame, Knight’s Tale, Friar’s Tale, Pardoner’s Tale, and Shipman’s Tale, Chaucer deploys the satiric potential of brotherhood oaths to criticize social values. According to Paul Miller, medieval satire adheres to the following characteristics: “its proper form is verse; dialogue is often included; the style ranges between humour (as in Horace) and severity (as in Lucilius); the tone is moderate; the language is ‘low’ (humilis), which befits both the subject-matter and the audience; irony is frequently employed; and allegory is eschewed.”6 The two great Roman satirists, Horace and Juvenal, established contrasting models for satiric voices: the Horatian satire invites the reader to laugh at the target of criticism, whereas the Juvenalian satire encourages the audience to feel anger and contempt toward the object of the invective. For the most part, Chaucer’s satire of brotherhood appears Horatian in spirit: the failure of the brotherhood oaths contributes to the humor of the tales, even if the tales themselves—such as the Knight’s Tale and Pardoner’s Tale—are not particularly comic in content. The sharp irony that accompanies Chaucer’s portraits of brotherhood oaths—men pledging fidelity in one breath and breaking their pledges in the next—establishes a Horatian valence to these texts that builds humor while criticizing a persistent social phenomenon within Ricardian England.

Chaucer’s congruency in satiric aim in these five narratives does not accordingly construct them as satires. Defining a narrative’s genre inevitably elicits a critical debate, and, with an appreciation of the benefits and liabilities of deeming these polyvalent texts as representative of singular genres, I consider the House of Fame primarily to be a dream vision, the

5. Paul Strohm, Social Chaucer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 96. In his analysis of “Opportunistic Brotherhood,” Strohm addresses the oaths of the Friar’s Tale, Summoner’s Tale, Pardoner’s Tale, and Shipman’s Tale. Although brotherhood is mentioned in the Summoner’s Tale, the friar and Thomas are not depicted as united through a brotherhood oath to each other; therefore, I do not address this instance of brotherhood in this chapter, but instead consider their relationship in regard to its homosocial and latently eroticized wrangling in chapter 5, pp. 145–51.

Knight’s Tale a romance, the Friar’s Tale an exemplum, the Pardoner’s Tale a sermon, and the Shipman’s Tale a fabliau. My objective in this chapter is not to argue for the generic identification of these texts as satires but to explore how their satiric moments allow insight into Chaucer’s view of brotherhood oaths and their convoluted status in relation to eroticism. Indeed, it becomes apparent that Chaucer’s satiric depiction of brotherhood oaths crosses many borders among the diverse genres within his corpus. One might expect the romance of the Knight’s Tale to have little in common with the fabliau of the Shipman’s Tale, but brotherhood oaths unite these disparate texts through their shared skepticism regarding fraternal union.

Chaucer’s satiric touch in his treatment of this theme is nonetheless somewhat surprising, given that the cultural record documents the gravity and respect ideologically accorded to such fraternal relationships in numerous circumstances. Recent studies of sworn homosocial friendships and brotherhood oaths attest to the prevalence of such relationships in the Middle Ages. Such pledges were known throughout the medieval era, but the cultural response to such relationships is difficult to ascertain. John Boswell concludes his controversial Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe with an entreaty to acknowledge the hitherto unacknowledged: “Recognizing that many—probably most—earlier Western societies institutionalized some form of romantic same-sex union gives us a much more accurate view of the immense variety of human romantic relationships and social responses to them than does the prudish pretense that such ‘unmentionable’ things never happened.” In response to


Boswell’s claims, many scholars questioned his argument that same-sex unions were considered analogous to heterosexual marriage throughout the classical and medieval eras. Although scholars do not agree on the precise cultural meaning of these homosocial oaths, the extant records of their performance document a form of homosocial union between men, even if such relationships were ideologically constructed as wholly asexual and normatively masculine. Such brotherhood oaths, as enacted through civil and social ritual, were a familiar part of the medieval social fabric, and thus it is difficult to imagine that these relationships gave free rein for men to indulge in queer eroticism. Leaving aside the question of whether homosocial oaths were viewed as analogous to heterosexual marriage oaths, James A. Schultz argues that the ambiguity of homosocial relationships stems from their cultural particularity and uniqueness, and that scholars need a new model for studying homosocial attachment, “one that does not assimilate male couples of the Middle Ages to modern homosexuality but that also does not refuse them the possibility of erotic involvement.”

Despite the social approbation accorded to brotherhood oaths in certain circumstances, it is also likely that they could mask queer affinities under a veneer of normativity. Although disagreeing with much of Boswell’s hypothesis, Constance Woods concurs that such strong ties between two men might spark the “suspicion that such exclusive friendships could lead to homosexual activity.” Brotherhood oaths potentially incarnate both normativity and queerness, as these ideologically sanctioned homosocial pacts allow two men to join in a courtly relationship in which their primary allegiance is to each other, even to the extent of marginalizing both the women whom they should serve as courtly lovers and the lords whom they should serve as vassals. Describing such relationships as marriages may be overstating the case, but as the ensuing examples document, the bonds enacted through homosocial oaths were powerful indeed.

Such homosocial covenants can be traced throughout their long literary history. In the Judeo-Christian Bible, the friendship between David...
and Jonathan is described in terms that stress both the depth of their friendship and the covenant that binds them together:

et factum est cum conplesset loqui ad Saul, anima Ionathan conligata est animae David, et dilexit eum Ionathan quasi animam suam . . . inierunt autem Ionathan et David foedus diligebat enim eum quasi animam suam. nam expoliavit se Ionathan tunicam qua erat vestitus et dedit eam David et reliqua vestimenta sua usque ad gladium et arcum suum et usque ad balteum. (1 Samuel 18:1, 3–4)

And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. . . . And David and Jonathan made a covenant, for he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan stripped himself of the coat with which he was clothed, and gave it to David, and the rest of his garments, even to his sword, and to his bow, and to his girdle.

Indeed, the relationship between David and Jonathan achieves such an emotional pitch that it is explicitly compared to heteroerotic love, and heteroerotic love is found lacking: “doleo super te frater mi Ionathan, decore nimis et amabilis super amorem mulierum” (2 Samuel 1:26; “I grieve for thee, my brother Jonathan: exceeding beautiful, and amiable to me above the love of women”), David sings in his lament over Jonathan’s death.12 Such a close homosocial relationship, which surpasses man’s love for woman, is not necessarily homosexual, especially in that the relationship then assumes a maternal cast as David compares himself to Jonathan’s mother. Furthermore, extensive evidence testifies to David’s heteroerotic love interests, especially his lust for Bathsheba that results in Uriah’s murder. The interpretive crux that this friendship poses demands that modern readers accord a place for homosocial covenants of love coexisting with heterosocial relationships. The homosocial beauty of David and

12. For analysis of this passage, see Boswell, Same-Sex Unions, 135–37. For additional biblical passages describing the covenant and love between David and Jonathan, see 1 Samuel 20:8, 20:16–17, and 23:18. For a recent study of David and Jonathan’s relationship, see Susan Ackerman, When Heroes Love: The Ambiguity of Eros in the Stories of Gilgamesh and David (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); she concludes of this arresting passage, “David’s words in 2 Samuel 1:26 [mean] that David perceived Jonathan to have loved him in a way analogous to the sexual-emotional way in which a woman (Michal, say) would love a man and to imply that David returned that love, finding it to be something ‘wonderful,’ indeed, more wonderful than the love David received from the women with whom he had been sexually involved” (192).
Jonathan’s relationship resonated throughout the Middle Ages, as it is referred to in numerous texts as a model for male–male relationships. Chaucer’s own reference to Jonathan and David’s friendship in Legend of Good Women—“Hyd, Jonathas, al thy frendly manere” (F 251)—is elliptical, but it seems to point to the moment in 1 Samuel 19:2 when Jonathan protects David from Saul’s murderous intentions.

The concept of homosocial sworn brotherhood persisted throughout the Middle Ages, and evidence of such relationships survives in medieval literature. Romances such as Amis and Amiloun and Eger and Grime describe the deep friendships between the eponymous protagonists and the oaths that link them together. Amis and Amiloun survives in the Auchinleck manuscript, and scholars have long accepted that Chaucer read this compilation. In this passage from Amis and Amiloun, the narrator recounts the homosocial oath of brotherhood the two young men pledge to each other:

On a day the childer, war & wight,  
Trewethes to-gider thai gun plight,  
While thai might live & stond  
That bothe bi day & bi night,  
In wele & wo, in wrong & right,  
That thai schuld frely fond  
To hold to-gider at everi nede,  
In word, in werk, in wille, in dede,  
Where that thai were in lond,

13. Medieval references to David and Jonathan’s friendship can be found in such varied sources as the writings of Dhuoda (Jaeger, Ennobling Love, 43), Abelard (John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980], 238–39), and the Cambridge Songs (Jaeger, Ennobling Love, 55).


Fro that day forward never mo
Failen other for wele no wo:
Ther-to thai held up her hond. (145–56)

Amis and Amiloun’s oath to maintain fidelity to each other “In wele and wo” is reminiscent of the vow of “for bettere for wors” in heterosexual marriage rites. Regardless of any semantic similarities in the phrasing of the oath with marriage vows, their pledge establishes them as united in pursuit of each other’s common good.

Within the romance world of Amis and Amiloun, this oath takes precedence over all other social and familial obligations, including those to the knights’ lords, wives, and children. Indeed, Amiloun soon repeats their oath and reminds Amis to be true to him in all circumstances:

“Brother, as we er trewthe-plight
Bothe with word & dede,
Fro this day forward never mo
To faily other for wele no wo,
To help him at his nede,
Brother, be now trewe to me,
& y schal ben as trewe to the,
Also god me spede!” (293–300)

The repetition of the vow establishes its narrative significance, as more attention is paid to this oath of fraternal union than to the vows solemnized at the knights’ respective weddings. For instance, to save his beloved brother Amiloun from leprosy, Amis sacrifices his two children. Homosexual union directs Amis and Amiloun’s every action as they live and fight together until they die; they then share a grave for all eternity: “Both on oo day were they dede / And in oo grave were they leide, / The knyghtes both twoo” (2503–5). Despite that their heterosexual love interests are

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nowhere to be seen at the romance’s conclusion, Amis and Amiloun epitomize the overarching normativity of male homosociality and sworn brotherhood in the Middle Ages.¹⁸

Likewise, the eponymous protagonists of *Eger and Grime* share an oath of brotherhood that directs their every action, as in this scene in which Grime explains the primacy of their relationship to Eger:

> “Egar,” he said, “thou & I are brethren sworne,  
> I loued neuer better brother borne;  
> betwixt vs tow let vs make some cast,  
> & find to make our formen fast,  
> for of our enemies wee stand in dread,  
> & wee Lye sleeping in our bedd.” (489–94)²⁰

In the illustration of Eger and Grime sharing a bed together, readers see that homosocial—but not necessarily homosexual—intimacy deeply colors their relationship.²⁰ Brotherhood oaths so powerfully define these knights that forming other amatory and familial relationships becomes difficult, because brotherhood means more to them than any other social connection. Eger and Grime conclude the narrative by marrying women, yet the

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¹⁹. James Ralston Caldwell, ed., *Eger and Grime: A Parallel-Text Edition of the Percy and the Huntington-Laing Versions of the Romance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933). Since the manuscripts of *Eger and Grime* date to the fifteenth century, it is difficult to ascertain whether Chaucer would have known this romance; however, given the oral nature of literary performance in the Middle Ages, it likely circulated orally prior to being written down. Whether or not Chaucer knew this particular narrative, its existence points both to the longevity of sworn brotherhoods throughout the Middle Ages and to their practice throughout the British Isles. For a detailed study of *Eger and Grime* and its treatment of friendship, see Mabel Van Duze, *A Medieval Romance of Friendship: Eger and Grime* (New York: Franklin, 1963).

²⁰. See Alan Bray, *The Friend*, 153–54 and 167–68, for the social import of men sharing beds. Bray’s analysis ranges beyond the Middle Ages, but his admonition that “the shared bed and the embraces of masculine friendship suggested the sodomitical no more than the conventions of the familiar letter” (167) is surely applicable to the circumstances depicted in *Eger and Grime*. 
romance focuses more on their struggle to maintain their vows to each other than on the pleasures of wooing their respective ladies. Their mutual (and presumably chaste) affection for each other takes precedence over the erotic pursuits of their wives until the narrative ends with a tremendous display of fecundity through the births of their many children.

In romances such as Amis and Amiloun and Eger and Grime, homosocial oaths reflect the characters’ deep similarity to each other, such that their shared biological sex and preternatural physical resemblance render them more similar to each other than to their wives. Amis and Amiloun are virtually twins, and Eger and Grime share a similar unexplained yet unbreakable bond. These friendships thus parallel Cicero’s belief that “Verum etiam amicum qui intuetur, tamquam exemplar aliquod intuetur sui” (“Again, he who looks upon a true friend, looks, as it were, upon a sort of image of himself”). From this classical perspective on friendship, which endured throughout the Middle Ages, homosocial relationships allow a man to find his mirror image not through heterosexual contact with a woman but through homosocial union with a man whose body reflects his own. From this perspective, eroticism is transcended through homosociality, yet its specter lingers in many narratives focused on such brotherhoods, latently querying the role of the erotic in texts from which it has been, at least on the surface, erased.

Beyond the literature of the Middle Ages, brotherhood oaths appear in historical records as well. Boswell and Bray uncover numerous homosocial relationships in their scholarship, and the ones likely most relevant to Chaucer’s understanding of such oaths would include the relationships of Edward II and Piers Gaveston and of John Clanvowe and William

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21. Additional romances, such as Guy of Warwick, Athelston, and King Horn, depict a homosocial world of deep male friendships, yet their eponymous protagonists do not share the stage equally with their male friends. Another subset of homosocial romances includes narratives such as “The Tale of Balyn and Balan” in Malory’s Morte D’Arthur, in which the brothers are indeed blood brothers. The variety of romances in which brotherhood appears testifies to the popularity of this theme, as well as to the diverse incarnations of friendships that might appear within such texts.

Neville. The relationship between Edward and Piers is memorialized in their shared covenant of brotherhood: “quem filius regis intuens, in eum tantum protinus amorem iniecit quod cum eo fraternitas fedus iniit, et pre ceteris mortalibus indissolubile dileccionis vinculum secum elegit et firmiter disposuit innodare” (“the king’s son felt so much love for him that he entered into a compact of brotherhood with him and chose and decided to tie himself to him, against all mortals, in an unbreakable bond of affection”).23 Another such fraternal union was formalized between two of Chaucer’s contemporaries, John Clanvowe and William Neville; similar to the fictions of Amis and Amiloun, these two men were buried together in the same grave.24 Timothy O’Brien suggests that “Chaucer’s connections with such knights as John Clanvowe and William Neville . . . make it likely that he knew well the language and conventions of sworn brotherhood.”25 From the biblical, literary, and historical record, as well as within the courtly circles in which Chaucer circulated, homo-social oaths of brotherhood were an accepted ritual of solidarity between two men. Given the normative valence of such fraternal relationships in these circumstances, why might Chaucer satirize them as potentially erotic and thus latently queer, rather than depicting them in their more culturally sanctioned role as chaste and anti-erotic partnerships?

When social ideologies conflict, normativities often collapse, and such appears to be the case with fraternal oaths. As vows of brotherhood served as an accepted rite of chivalric honor and mutual respect between


men, such relationships could nonetheless mask queerness (and possibly eroticism), leaving onlookers perplexed as to the true nature of the friendship. (As I soon discuss, such confusion appears to have surrounded Edward II’s relationship with Piers Gaveston, which provides another cultural context for Chaucer’s satiric depiction of sworn brotherhoods.) Reflecting this occluded possibility, Chaucer’s satires of homosocial oaths entail his likely perception that some of these relationships might be not latently but rather blatantly queer. Ostensibly a simple relationship of blood or of mutual honor, brotherhood refuses to signify clearly about the meaning of the relationship described. Chaucer depicts brotherhood in various ways in his tales, and Jean Jost taxonomizes his varying illustrations of fraternal relationships into seven primary divisions:

(1) literal brothers of the same mother such as Placebo and Justinus in the Merchant’s Tale; (2) closely related kin such as the cousins Palamon and Arcite in the Knight’s Tale; (3) the putative “cousins,” the monk and the merchant, in the Shipman’s Tale; (4) the three comrades who pledge sworn brotherhood in the Pardoner’s Tale; (5) men connected in some affectionate or emotional bond such as the philosopher and his “leave brother” in the Franklin’s Tale (V 1607); (6) those bound together in a religious confraternity such as the Franciscans in the Summoner’s Tale; and (7) simple acquaintances who acknowledge the other’s friendship, as does Harry advising the Miller, “Robyn, my leave brother.”

Brotherhoods as enacted through oaths muddy the borders of Jost’s taxonomy, as her second, third, and fourth categories—referring respectively to the brotherhoods illustrated in the Knight’s Tale, Shipman’s Tale, and Pardoner’s Tale—are united through their thematic focus on men swearing oaths to each other. Nonetheless, these many categories of friendship point to the multiplicity of ways in which Chaucer uses brotherhood to develop the themes and characters of his fictions.

Chaucer’s satiric depiction of brotherhood oaths does not extend uniformly throughout his treatment of brotherhood, which is rich and multivalent in its portrayal, including negative and positive depictions. Of course, brotherhoods, including brotherhoods not depicted as consummated through fraternal rituals, are often illustrated in a problematic light in the Chaucerian corpus. For example, Chaucer frequently uses “brother”

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as an ironic term, such as when the Miller refers to the Reeve with dripping sarcasm as “Leve brother Osewold” (1.3151), and his male characters also use it as an ingratiating term to win their superior’s approval, as when Placebo sycophantically refers to January as his brother: “Myn owene deere brother and my lorde, / So wysly God my soule brynge at reste, / I holde youre owene conseil is the beste” (4.1488–90). Timothy O’Brien demonstrates that, in Troilus and Criseyde, the theme of brotherhood “get[s] exploited—by the poem’s characters and even to a lesser extent by the narrator,”27 and this narrative offers Chaucer’s most extensive consideration of male–male friendship, to such an exaggerated extent that Pandarus declares to Troilus, “For the have I bigonne a gamen pleye / Which that I nevere do shal eft for other, / Although he were a thousand fold my brother” (3.250–52).28 Despite the importance of their friendship to each other, however, Troilus and Pandarus never formalize their relationship through an oath of brotherhood.29

For Chaucer, however, brotherhood is not intrinsically a subject of satire and ridicule, and the positive depictions of brotherhood in such narratives as the Franklin’s Tale and the Second Nun’s Tale highlight the good that arises from brothers caring for each other and tending to each other’s needs. Aurelius’s brother helps him to overcome his melancholic torpor over Dorigen in the Franklin’s Tale, and Valerian encourages Tiburce to convert to Christianity for his spiritual salvation in the


29. Why might Chaucer avoid describing Troilus and Pandarus’s brotherhood as enacted through a chivalric oath? In Amis and Amiloun, Eger and Grime, and the Knight’s Tale, the many physical similarities between the two male characters underscore the appropriateness of their vows. Troilus and Pandarus, however, are never depicted as resembling each other, and readers have long wondered about their respective ages. Although Chaucer never answers this question, it appears that Pandarus is somewhat older than Troilus: Sally Slocum posits that Pandarus, while “perhaps older than the lovers, is nevertheless close to them in age” (“How Old Is Chaucer’s Pandarus?” Philological Quarterly 58 [1979]: 16–25, at 23). The following idea can only remain a conjecture, but it seems likely that Chaucer did not see Troilus and Pandarus as sufficiently similar to each other in terms of physical appearance and age to undertake such a vow. Certainly, their friendship is not predicated upon any detailed likenesses to each other, as is explicitly the case in Amis and Amiloun, Eger and Grime, and the Knight’s Tale.
Second Nun’s Tale. These positive depictions of male relationships contrast directly with Chaucer’s satiric depiction of brotherhood and brotherhood oaths in the House of Fame, Knight’s Tale, Friar’s Tale, Pardoner’s Tale, and Shipman’s Tale. In the conflicting visions of brotherhood as ironic in some instances and as sincere in others, Chaucer allows himself a wide artistic license with which to depict brotherhood; such an ecumenical perspective contracts to a singular disparaging view when brotherhood is enacted through ritual oaths.

In the House of Fame, Chaucer depicts fraternal oaths at the end of the narrative and immediately dismisses them as representative of the most vain and empty chatter. Allegorical figures representing truth and falsehood, who reside in the House of Rumor, undertake such promises in a willy-nilly fashion, and Chaucer as narrator notes that these oaths of truth metamorphose into falsehoods:

And somtyme saugh I thoo at ones  
A lesyng and a sad soth sawe,  
That gonne of aventure drawe  
Out at a wyndowe for to pace;  
And, when they metten in that place,  
They were acheckked bothe two,  
And neyther of hem moste out goo  
For other, so they gonne crowde,  
Til ech of hem gan crien lowde,  
“Lat me go first!” “Nay, but let me!  
And here I wol ensuren the,  
Wyth the nones that thou wolt do so,  
That I shal never fro the go,  
But be thyn owne sworn brother!  
We wil medle us ech with other,  
That no man, be they never so wrothe,  
Shal han on [of us] two, but bothe  
At ones, al besyde his leve,  
Come we a-morwe or on eve,  
Be we cried or stille yrouned.”  
Thus saugh I fals and soth compouned  
Togeder fle for oo tydynge. (2088–109)

Chaucer’s sources for this passage—Ovid’s Metamorphoses and Dante’s Il Convivio—similarly treat the mixture of truth and lies and the spread of
rumor, yet with no mention of sworn brotherhood in their respective
passages. This passage parodies oaths of brotherhood through the haphazard
fashion in which allegorical representations of truth and falsehood pledge
them, and Chaucer as narrator declares that the promises communicate
only falsehoods. How could it be otherwise, since a lie uniting with a truth
can only result in truth being besmirched by falsehood, rather than false-
hood being elevated to truth, as they compound into “oo tydynge”?

Queerness permeates this scene, as the allegorical figures pledge
fidelity to one another, yet the fulfillment of this oath would ironically
destroy any truth at the basis of the relationship. Truth—both literal and
allegorical—can only be lost in this particular instance of oath-making.
Moreover, the promise that truth and falsehood “wil medle us ech with
other” peripherally connotes erotic activity and the debasement of the
oath through carnal practice: according to the Middle English Dictionary,
medlen primarily means “to blend, mix,” but the word carries sexual con-
notations as well in its secondary meaning of “to join sexually, to have
sexual intercourse.” Chaucer uses the word “medlen” in Romaunt of the
Rose to connote sexuality several times, which indicates the word’s util-
ity for addressing amatory affairs. As the many truths and falsehoods in
the House of Fame so promiscuously promise to enjoy brotherhood and
to “meddle” together with one another, the satiric scene exaggeratedly
debases fraternal oaths as potentially queering all discourse through a per-
verse orgy of “inter-meddling.”

Most scholars concur that, in the House of Fame, Chaucer tackles the
meaning of poetry and his place in the poetic tradition, but it seems
unlikely that scholars will ever definitively identify the “man of gret auct-
orite” (2158) who abruptly concludes this poem. Indeed, as A. J. Min-
nis notes of the House of Fame, the “man of gret auctorite” threatens

30. In Metamorphoses, Ovid writes: “Atria turba tenet: veniunt, leve vulgus, eunteque / mixtaque cum veris passim commenta vagantur / milia rumorum confusaque verba volu-
halls; / and mingling with the true, the false reports— / in thousands—babble, wandering
about” (The Metamorphoses of Ovid [San Diego: Harvest, 1993], 399). For the relevant pas-
sage in Dante, see Il Convivio (The Banquet), trans. Richard Lansing (New York: Garland,
1990), 1.3, at 8–10, in which he builds upon and alludes to Vergil in the fourth book of the
Aeneid: “Fame thrives on movement and acquires greatness by going about” (10).

31. For Chaucer’s use of “medlen” in Romaunt of the Rose, see lines 3788, 4545, 6036,
and 6050.

32. See Glenn Steinberg, “Chaucer in the Field of Cultural Production: Humanism,
Dante, and the House of Fame,” Chaucer Review 35 (2000): 182–203, for an overview of
Chaucer’s relationship to his poetic forebears.
the poem on a narrative level, foreclosing the sense of play unleashed throughout the dream vision: “there is no place for ‘the reasoned, authoritative, single voice.’ The ‘man of grete auctorite’ should not be admitted; he would only spoil the party.” Chaucer’s suggestive depiction of truths and falsehoods vowing homosocial oaths to one another so promiscuously could also explain the poem’s terse ending. Is this the moment when the joke goes too far, when a real and powerful man might find himself insulted by Chaucer’s play with homosociality, if not homosexuality, as well as with the slippage between truth and lies that might sully this unidentified man’s reputation? As with any conjectures about the “man of gret auctorite,” this point cannot be conclusively proved, yet the pieces of evidence unite in a compelling fashion to indicate that, in this instance, Chaucer realized the potential limits of his penchant for satirizing male brotherhood and homosociality.

For example, one “man of gret auctorite” during Chaucer’s lifetime was Richard II, whose potentially erotic relationship with Robert de Vere piqued queer suspicions among the English court. As Michael Hanrahan documents,

Thomas Walsingham unmistakably establishes the sexual threat posed by Richard’s favorites. During his account of Robert de Vere’s royal appointment to the Duke of Ireland in 1386, Walsingham describes Richard and de Vere, the king’s closest friend and confidante, as sharing “obscene intimacies” (“familiaritatis obscenae”), an attack that implies that unmentionable vice, sodomy. Adam of Usk will later record a more overt reference to Richard’s sodomy, when he includes the king’s “sodomies” (“sodomica”) among the causes of Richard’s deposition. The charge of sodomy was never officially brought against Richard, but its occurrence in these Lancastrian chronicles betray[s] the political agenda behind the allegations, namely, Richard’s unfitness for rule.34

The Evesham chronicler also hints at sinful sexual behavior in his account, recording that “totam noctem in potacionibus et alis non dicendis in sompnem duceret” (“he would spend all night in drinking and other things that ought not be mentioned until passing out”).35 If Chaucer

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intended to depict Richard II as the “man of gret auctorite,” perhaps he then realized he was taking his joke too far by presenting his king so soon after illustrating a roomful of sexually licentious and homosocially sworn allegorical figures breeding falsehoods among themselves. Given the historical record’s suggestive accounts of Richard’s relationship with de Vere, it seems unlikely that the monarch would appreciate any queerly homosocial relationships being obliquely hinted at in such an outrageous manner, even within the covert space of allegorical representation. Typically the *House of Fame* is dated to 1379–80, and it has been hypothesized that the poem, had Chaucer completed it, was intended to celebrate Richard’s anticipated marriage to Anne of Bohemia; if these theories are correct, the satiric inclusion of denigrated brotherhood oaths would ostensibly be corrected in the announcement of the marriage. It should be reiterated that any allegorical and contextual identifications of the “man of gret auctorite,” including this one, are highly speculative, but the latent queer dynamics of the scene color the poem’s inconclusive conclusion, rendering a definitive ending increasingly difficult to imagine.

In the *Knight’s Tale* Palamon and Arcite are precisely the type of aristocratic protagonists who might be expected to pledge and maintain brotherhood oaths to each other.\(^\text{36}\) Indeed, before the *Knight’s Tale* was given its place of prominence in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer refers to it as “the love of Palamon and Arcite” in the Prologue of the *Legend of Good Women* (F 420), a title that identifies love as the narrative’s theme but ambiguously allows the possibility for love between its eponymous protagonists as well as for their love of the as-yet-unnamed Emily.\(^\text{37}\) The reader first sees them in a reverse image of Amis and Amiloun’s final resting place in a shared grave, in that Palamon and Arcite are buried but still alive:

> And so bifel that in the taas they founde, Thurgh-girt with many a grevous blody wounde, Two yonge knyghtes liggyngye by and by, Bothe in oon armes, wroght ful richely. (1.1009–12)


\(^{37}\) For Chaucer’s revising of “the love of Palamon and Arcite,” see John Bowers, “Three Readings of the *Knight’s Tale*,” 287–91.
The iconography of their shared arms stresses their similarity to each other, which the narrator iterates in mentioning that they “weren of the blood royal / Of Thebes, and of sustren two yborn” (1.1018–19). In these early scenes Chaucer prepares the reader to learn of their brotherhood oaths; ironically, these oaths are broken before readers realize that the cousins undertook such pledges. Only after their shared sighting of Emily threatens the foundations of their relationship does Palamon remind Arcite of the promises that should unite them under all circumstances:

“It nere,” quod he, “to thee no greet honour
For to be fals, ne for to be traitour
To me, that am thy cosyn and thy brother
Ysworn ful depe, and ech of us til oother,
That nevere, for to dyen in the peyne,
Til that the deeth departhe shal us tweyne,
Neither of us in love to hyndre oother,
Ne in noon oother cas, my leve brother,
But that thou sholdest trewely forthren me
In every cas, as I shal forthren thee—
This was thyn ooth, and myn also, certeyn.” (1.1129–39)

This oath should guide Palamon and Arcite’s every action, but because they continually fail to act in a manner to “trewely forthren” each other’s needs, the oath registers their ready sacrifice of each other’s desires in pursuit of their own. In subsequent moments Palamon reminds Arcite that he is “to my conseil and my brother sworn” (1.1147), and Arcite similarly acknowledges that Palamon is “to my cosyn and my brother sworn” (1.1161). Despite the repeated allusions to their oath, the bulk of the narrative concentrates on its dissolution after the two men see Emily. Palamon also foreshadows the tale’s conclusion; his words “Til that the deeth departhe shal us tweyne” bespeak not the fulfillment of a life lived together, but the failure of the vow to unite them until death. Also, the phrase “Til that the deeth departhe shal us tweyne” echoes marriage rites, which points both to the gravity of the vows and to the preeminence this homosocial bond should hold over subsequent heterosocial unions.38 Furthermore, such an emphasis on brotherhood and brotherhood oaths, as well as Palamon and Arcite’s quick and aggressive bickering, does not appear in

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Boccaccio’s *Teseida*, in which the young men initially comfort each other over love’s wounds.\(^3^9\)

Palamon and Arcite break their brotherhood oath after they espy Emily and begin competing for her affections, but Chaucer reinforces its thematic meaning at key points in the narrative. When the two knights prepare to fight to the death, Palamon threatens Arcite with his imminent demise: “I drede noght that outher thow shalt dye, / Or thow ne shalt nat loven Emelye. / Chees which thou wolt, or thou shalt nat asterte!” (1.1593–95). Arcite soon returns with the necessary battle gear, and the narrator underscores the similarity between the two foes by detailing their shared thoughts. Here the men are literally of one mind, with the narrator recounting their identical reaction to each other and their shared predicament:

\[
\ldots \text{“Heere cometh my mortal enemy!} \\
\text{Withoute faille, he moot be deed, or I,} \\
\text{For outher I moot sleen hym at the gappe,} \\
\text{Or he moot sleen me, if that me myshappe.”} \\
\text{So ferden they in chaungyng of hir hewe,} \\
\text{As fer as everich of hem oother knewe. (1.1643–48)}
\]

Although it may appear paradoxical to argue that their shared minatory musings reestablish the theme of brotherhood, these lines underscore the singular like-mindedness of the two men. In a manner consistent with Cicero’s description of brotherhood as a man looking at an image of himself or into a mirror, the narrator evokes the deep connection that continues to unite Palamon and Arcite, despite their outward antagonism. Furthermore, the narrator then somewhat surprisingly remarks, “Everich of hem heelp for to armen oother / As freendly as he were his owene brother” (1.1651–52). The irony of these lines, in that congenial brotherhood is now represented when the two men arm each other for the purpose of their mutual destruction, reminds the reader of the brotherhood oath while highlighting their inability to adhere to its basic tenets.

Sworn brotherhood fails to foster Palamon and Arcite’s goodwill toward each other, and there is little to suggest that Chaucer sees such chivalric brotherhood in a positive light in the remainder of the narrative. After

\footnote{39. For the relevant passages in Boccaccio’s *Teseida* depicting Palamon and Arcite’s initial sighting of Emily and their kind responses to each other’s suffering, see N. R. Havely, ed. and trans., *Chaucer’s Boccaccio: Sources of Troilus and the Knight’s and Franklin’s Tales* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1980), 113–15.}
Arcite’s fatal accident (but before he dies), Theseus consolidates civic and martial order by calling for brotherhood between the two men’s opposing factions:

For which anon duc Theseus leet crye,
To stynten alle rancour and envye,
The gree as wel of o syde as of oother,
And eyther side ylik as ootheres brother;
And yaf hem yiftes after hir degree,
And fully heeld a feeste dayes three. (1.2731–36)

After brotherhood oaths have fomented fraternal battles rather than fraternal peace, these words ring with irony. If Theseus succeeds in restoring order at this moment, the peace is likely to be short-lived, as readers see little evidence that men treating each other like sworn brothers quells any tendencies toward male–male aggressions or competition. Male brotherhood has foundered due to the allure of heteroeroticism, and one sees little reason to believe that Theseus’s call for brotherhood will vanquish the erotic rivalries that inevitably arise and disrupt presumably chaste brotherhoods.

Critical analysis of Palamon and Arcite’s brotherhood highlights the ways in which fraternal union stands in conflict with heterosexual courtship and marriage. Robert Stretter argues that Chaucer deploys “brotherhood as shorthand for a (theoretically) indestructible male relationship in order to highlight the power of an even stronger force that destroys it—love between the sexes,” and Patricia Clare Ingham likewise notes that “the tale’s denouement displays state-sponsored heterosexual union as a compensation for the losses to chivalric fraternity.” The satiric potential engendered by Palamon and Arcite’s oath is thus multivalently formulated to celebrate heterosexuality and to debase homosociality. If heterosexuality is to trump homosociality in this romance, if Palamon

42. Patricia Clare Ingham, “Homoerotic and Creative Masculinity in the Knight’s Tale,” in Biedler, Masculinities in Chaucer 23–35, at 27.
is to win Emily’s hand in marriage, the oath must be sacrificed. The potential queerness incarnated through the oath, in that two men united themselves to each other and then cohabitated in a prison where their only sexual releases could have been masturbatory or homoerotic, is then vehemently denied by their determined pursuit of Emily. As John Bowers asserts, “Chivalric brotherhood of the sort idealized by the Knight came freighted with an unspoken and unspeakable anxiety that a same-sex pair might lapse into a homosexual bond, as Palamon and Arcite might have done during life-long imprisonment in their single cell.”

The satire of this narrative arises in that the brotherhood oath cannot escape the threat of queerness, no matter whether it is upheld or cast aside: maintaining the oath leaves Palamon and Arcite united in homosocial union and thus alienated from the heterosexual pursuits of courtly love, but breaking the oath detracts from their chivalric status as knights of honor. Interpretations of the Knight’s Tale frequently address the Knight’s ambiguous relationship to his tale, and this failed oath of brotherhood provides another example that Chaucer encodes a critique of chivalric values within this romance.

The Miller certainly sees queer potential in the Knight’s romance, as he debases and transforms it into his own fabliau, in which the rarefied homosocial brotherhood of knights metamorphoses into a sordid sexual competition between clerks. At the conclusion of his tale, the hot iron with which Absolon penetrates Nicholas bears a historical forebear in the implement responsible for the demise of Edward II and Piers Gaveston, as the uneasiness that surrounded their homosocial relationship spurred accounts of Edward’s execution by means of a hot iron inserted in his anus. Historians disagree whether the story is true or apocryphal, but the factuality of the incident, in this instance, is secondary to its ideological import, in its lurid depiction of an anal punishment for a man united in brotherhood with another man. Absolon’s branding of Nicholas’s buttocks with a hot coulter in the Miller’s Tale ironically and violently indicts sodomy, as the Miller satirizes the Knight’s romance of

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44. The most famous critique of the Knight, his tale, and its implied debasement of courtly values remains Terry Jones, Chaucer’s Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980). See also David Aers, Chaucer (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1986), 24–32; and Charles Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), who finds that the plot does “not sustain very close scrutiny” (175).
45. For a discussion of Edward’s demise due to the insertion of a hot iron poker, see John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality, 300.
homosocial brotherhood and courtly love by inverting its narrative status and meaning. As Chaucer transforms the Knight’s romance populated with courtly lovers into a fabliau of debased and predatory sexuality, the hot iron makes explicit the possibility of anal intercourse between Palamon and Arcite latent in the Knight’s Tale and thus deepens the satiric potential of both the Knight’s and the Miller’s narratives. Within the Knight’s Tale, and within the Miller’s reconstruction of its amatory politics, homosocial union provokes Chaucer’s satire of men whose erotic pursuits are entangled with those of other men, even when such pursuits are entirely heterosexual in nature. The heterosexuality of these relationships cannot preserve men united in a brotherhood oath from the tinge of queerness that their friendship carries, no matter the greater likelihood of the heteroerotic orientation of their desires.

The men who swear fraternal oaths in the Friar’s Tale, Pardoner’s Tale, and Shipman’s Tale likewise break their promises almost immediately upon enunciating them, and in these tales Chaucer satirizes the aristocratic pretensions of noncourtly men who perform chivalrous acts without the requisite social status to imbue the acts with appropriate meaning. When oaths of male brotherhood appear in these tales, they build humor through their merciless ridiculing of aristocratic pretension as enacted by characters of other, and predominantly lower, social classes.46 In the Friar’s Tale the summoner’s erotic venality, as evidenced by his work as a pimp (3.1355–62), encourages readers to view his actions suspiciously, and this vocational pursuit locates him on the fringes of society in regard to his sexually inflected identity. When he then pledges a fraternal oath with his new friend, readers should realize that it will soon be broken:

“Depardieux,” quod this yeman, “deere broother,
Thou are a bally, and I am another.
I am unknowne as in thi contree;
Of thyn aquotance I wolde praye thee,
And eek of bretherhede, if that yow leste.
I have gold and silver in my cheste.”

“Grant mercy,” quod this somonour, “by my feith!”
Everych in ootheres hand his trouthe leith,
For to be sworne bretheren til they deye.
In daliance they ryden forth and pleye. (3.1395–1400, 1403–6)

The repetition of “broother,” “bretherhede,” and “bretheren” in this passage ridicules the morally corrupt summoner, who engages in this oath with a man whom he has only recently met and about whom he knows little (other than that he carries gold and silver). Indeed, the word brother occurs more frequently in the Friar’s Tale than in any other Chaucerian work except Troilus and Criseyde, a work approximately twenty times longer.47 The relationship is based more on the desire for pecuniary gain than on fraternal affection, and Chaucer ironically mocks their romance pretensions of male–male bonding, as this oath is enacted by the most morally unscrupulous of men. Certainly, the summoner is not known for his courtly treatment of women, as evidenced by his cruelty to the old woman whom he plans to cheat of her twelve pence and pan.

Queer edges to the Friar’s Tale satirically suggest that this summoner and his new friend engage in a homoerotic relationship. The two men engage in “daliance” (3.1406), a word that carries a sexual undertone.48 Linking “daliance” to “pleye,” Chaucer also hints at a muted sexual tension in this scene because this word likewise carries sexual connotations. According to the Middle English Dictionary, pleye can refer to “sexual play, sexual intercourse,” as well as the “copulating of animals.” Furthermore, the Friar depicts the devil as somewhat of a medieval dandy, as he is described as

A gay yeman, under a forest syde.
A bowe he bar, and arwes brighte and kene;
He hadde upon a courtepy of grene,
An hat upon his heed with frenges blake. (3.1380–83)

The “brighte and kene” arrows indicate that this apparent yeomen does not use his equipment, as they register no telltale signs of wear and tear.

47. John Tatlock and Arthur Kennedy document that “brother” appears nineteen times in Friar’s Tale, in comparison to its forty appearances in Troilus and Criseyde. The other works in which the word “brother” most appears include Second Nun’s Tale (ten times) and Knight’s Tale (nine times). See Tatlock and Kennedy, A Concordance to the Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer and to the Romaunt of the Rose (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1963).
The green “courtepy” (jacket) most obviously serves as part of the devil’s disguise as a woodsman, as this color also appears in the depiction of the Yeoman in the General Prologue (“And he was clad in cote and hood of grene” [1.103]). In addition to green’s connotations of woodsmen and forestry, the green jacket also bears numerous unsavory and sexual registers, as Laura Hodges elucidates in her explication of medieval color symbolism: “[green] was the color of love; it was a color ‘particularly suitable for the clothing of newly-weds’; it was the most commonly worn color of church vestments. In addition, green carried negative meanings such as inconstancy.”

Each of these qualities of green debases the character of the devil/yeoman and, by extension, the summoner: the greenness of the coat satirically casts the two as lovers; it positions them as “newlyweds” recently joined in bonds of brotherhood; and it calls to mind the vestments of the clergy and thereby satirizes the summoner’s failure to maintain the ideals of his church office. Chaucer’s use of green to connote inconstancy, in addition to this instance, is evident in “Against Women Unconstant,” which ends every stanza with the lament, “In stede of blew, thus may ye were al grene” (7, 14, 21). Such inconstancy in the Friar’s Tale foreshadows the climactic demise of their brotherhood when the devil leads the summoner to hell, adhering to the old woman’s curse rather than to his oath with the summoner. In this remarkably detailed picture, the depiction of homosocial union as enacted through a brotherhood oath sets the stage for the exemplum’s satiric message condemning religious hypocrisy and greed, and the implied homoeroticism between the summoner and the devil magnifies the enormity of their transgressions.

Beyond the submerged eroticism of this brotherhood, such a relationship also corrupts the social class borders of Ricardian England in its intermingling of marginal men from ecclesiastical and courtly milieus. Summoners and yeomen serve in subservient positions to men of greater authority and prestige in distinct realms of spiritual and secular authority, and these two men thus violate the associative positions tied to their vocational identities by forming their friendship. David Wallace notes that the bond “is undermined from the start by bad faith: rather than the sharing of professional secrets (as encouraged in the guilds) we find a disguising of professional identities”; this bastardized commingling fractures the basic tenets of sworn brotherhood, in that such relationships

50. David Wallace, Chaucerian Polity, 143.
should be based on friendship and social similitude. The devil warns the summoner that he assumes a pleasing form to expedite his nefarious intentions (“For we . . . wol us swiche formes make / As moost able is oure preyes for to take” \[3.1471–72\]), and, according to this logic, the similitude of their male bodies serves a seductive purpose. The summoner of the *Friar’s Tale* thus appears especially susceptible to the advances of a devil assuming the form of a male yeoman, with the lure of homosocial union proving more effective in seducing him than the enticements of heterosexual passion. The summoner’s temptation is thus intrinsically different from the temptations offered to medieval saints such as Antony, who withstood the seductive blandishments of the devil in female form.\(^5\) Furthermore, the most frequently cited analogues of the *Friar’s Tale*—including “De Injustitia,” “Narracio de quodam senescallo sceleroso,” and Robert Rypon’s “A Greedy Bailiff”—make no such mention of brotherhood or the seductive tactics of the devil figure, suggesting that Chaucer’s attention to sworn brotherhood and submerged eroticism is his unique contribution to this tale.\(^5\) Finally, it should be noted that the Friar is insulting his enemy the Summoner with this tale, and thus the queer edges to the friendship between the summoner and the devil within his narrative comment metatextually on the Summoner and Pardoner’s queer friendship, as evident when these men sing “Come hider, love, to me!” to each other in the *General Prologue* (1.672).

The Friar’s exemplum teaches a lesson to the pilgrims about religious hypocrisy, as it also alerts them to the dangers of rashly swearing brotherhood oaths. In a similar manner, the Pardoner’s sermon instructs his audience of the moral turpitude associated with homosocial union and its potentially erotic valence. The morally bankrupt Pardoner recounts an instructive sermon during the Canterbury pilgrimage, and he structures his lesson by depicting three riotous, dangerous, and stupid criminals. Numerous studies explore the satiric potential of Chaucer’s depiction of the Pardoner and his sexual ambiguity, primarily in regard to his interactions with the other pilgrims.\(^5\) By including a homosocial oath of broth-


erhood within the tale, Chaucer links the frame narrative’s concern with the Pardoner’s sexual indeterminacy—evidenced in descriptions of both his appearance and his enigmatic friendship with the Summoner—to his depiction of the rioters within the tale. The Pardoner is introduced through his connection to the Summoner: “With [the Summoner] ther rood a gentil PARDONER / Of Rouncivale, his freend and his compeer” (1.669–70). Although this friendship is not presented within the context of a sworn brotherhood, it sets the stage for the inclusion of a brotherhood oath in the Pardoner’s Tale, which exposes the corruption of brotherhood as enacted by textual rioters and metatextual religious men. Chaucer’s description of the Pardoner’s sexual ambiguity makes manifest the erotic suspicions that the men’s friendship sparks:

A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot.
No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;
As smothe it was as it were late shave.
I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare. (1.688–91)

Given the questionable nature of the Pardoner’s gender, sexuality, and his friendship with the Summoner, it is initially perplexing that he criticizes brotherhood oaths in his tale. Nonetheless, he lambastes numerous sins in his sermon that he confesses to in his prologue, and so readers witness yet another example of this character exposing his stunning hypocrisy.

After determining to kill Death (and thus laying the groundwork for their imminent demise), the three rioters in the Pardoner’s Tale undertake a fraternal vow to one another. The lead rioter exhorts his fellows:

“Herkneth, felawes, we thre been al ones;
Lat ech of us holde up his hand til oother,
And ech of us bicomen otheres brother,
And we wol sleen this false traytour Deeth.

He shal be slayn, he that so manye sleeth,
By Goddes dignitee, er it be nyght!”
Togidres han thise thre hir trouthes plight
To lyve and dyen ech of hem for oother,
As though he were his owene ybore brother. (6.696–704)

Approximating consanguinity through their vow, the three rioters affirm their fraternal union and their joint mission to conquer Death. Once again, such a brotherhood oath represents Chaucer’s elaboration of his source materials—including such exempla and folk tales as “De tribus sociis, qui thesaurum invenerunt” (“Of three companions who found a treasure”), “De Contemptu mundi” (“Of contempt for the world”), and an exemplum based on the life of St. Bartholomew—that depict these rioters simply as friends or even as Christ’s disciples.54

Of course, the vow is then broken both when two of the three men decide to kill the third and when the third man likewise determines to poison the other two; however, in Chaucer’s telling of the tale, even at the moment when the two rioters decide to betray their brother, the vow is not forgotten. Rather, the rioter who advocates fratricide ironically reminds his friend of their communal oath when pressuring him to conspire against their momentarily departed companion: “Thow knowest wel thou art my sworen brother; / Thy profit wol I telle thee anon. / Thou woost wel that oure felawe is agon” (6.808–10). The exquisite irony of these lines, with the rioter reminding his “brother” of their fraternal vow while simultaneously cajoling him to murder their sworn brother, punctures any value accorded to homosocial oaths. The murder itself carries latent queer potential as well, as Steven Kruger observes: “At the heart of the Pardoner’s exemplum, we find a physical penetration, a violent parody of sexual intercourse, that leads not to renewed life . . . but rather to a stark

54. For Chaucer’s sources for the story of the three rioters and their untimely deaths, see Robert Correale and Mary Hamel, eds., Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales, 1.287–313. In the folk tale “De tribus sociis, qui thesaurum invenerunt” (“Of three companions who found a treasure”), the men are described as “tres socii mercatores” (“three friends, traders”) who try to steal gold from a hermit. In another exemplum (from British Library, MS Add. 27336, fol. 40, #187), the story is cast in the form of a parable from the life of St. Bartholomew, in which Jesus appends the moral to the tale after some disciples have died as a result of their avariciousness: “Sic dixi vobis: quod propter aurum et argentum multa mala fiant, sic ut videtis; modo accidit hic” (“Thus I said to you: that for the sake of gold and silver many evils come about. As you see, it has just happened here” [290–91]). The exemplum “De contemnu mundi” is quite similar to this exemplum from the life of St. Bartholomew, except that the figure of Jesus is played by the generic figure of a “quidam philosophus” (“certain philosopher”).
and sterile death.” In a world where oaths are uttered so promiscuously, they indicate little other than the depravity of the men who speak them. By including this scene in the *Pardoner’s Tale*, Chaucer adds yet another level of queerness to the Pardoner’s morally complex and sexually perplexing character.

The end of the *Pardoner’s Tale* features the Pardoner’s hypocrisy yet again, as he attempts to sell his relics to the pilgrims, and Harry Bailly’s indignant and crude anger in response. Harry re-symbolizes male eroticism into male aggression with his graphic rejoinder:

> “I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond
> In stide of relikes or of seintuarie.
> Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;
> They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!” (6.952–55)

In his description of handling a man’s testicles, Harry reimagines homosexual fondling as castration, a sharp reinterpretation of the submerged homoerotic dynamics ubiquitously potential in sworn brotherhoods. Furthermore, his imagery of male genitalia “shryned in an hogges toord” tacitly points to anal intercourse as yet another potential outcome of male homosociality. The Knight’s call for Harry and the Pardoner to kiss and reconcile in some ways ironically establishes a “brotherhood” between these two men who detest each other:

> “I prey yow that ye kisse the Pardoner.
> And Pardoner, I prey thee, drawe thee neer,
> And, as we diden, lat us laughe and pleye.”
> Anon they kiste, and ryden forth hir weye. (6.965–68)

As the clearest representative of aristocratic and courtly values, the Knight demands a kiss to soothe over the fractured social harmony of the pilgrimage. The final irony of the *Pardoner’s Tale*, then, is the reinstitution of a homosocial bond that can never withstand the animosity that it cloaks. Any sort of friendship between Harry and the Pardoner carries a latent hint of forced queerness, in that they are compelled to reconcile due to the commands of a powerful and aristocratic man, not in response to their own sense of homosocial affection. From his tale of Palamon and Arcite, the Knight should understand the folly of enforcing male friendships, yet

he compels these men of the pilgrimage to unite in momentary affection that can in no manner quell their mutual antagonism.

The Shipman’s Tale likewise deploys an oath of homosocial brotherhood to heighten the narrative’s satiric effect and to undermine narrative masculinity. In the carnivalesque environment of the fabliau, normativity as a social and ideological construction often establishes the inversionary grounds of the narrative, which is readily apparent in the genre’s thematic deployment of cuckoldry as a measure of masculinity. As Holly Crocker argues, “Throughout the fabliau corpus, structuring desire on a binarized lack reduces women as well as men to competitive, oppositional, and instrumental relations. . . . [I]t produces a form of masculinity that only gains authority through competitive, oppositional, and instrumental relations.”56 Chaucer’s primary sources for the Shipman’s Tale include the first two tales of the eighth day in Boccaccio’s Decameron, but in neither of these tales do the men swear oaths of brotherhood to each other.57 In Chaucer’s adaptation of the story, the merchant wholly trusts his sworn brother, Daun John, because of their oaths of brotherhood, as well as this man’s vocation as a monk:

The monk hym claymeth as for cosynage,  
And he agayn; he seith nat ones nay,  
But was as glad therof as fowel of day,  
For to his herte it was a greet plesaunce.  
Thus been they knyt with eterne alliaunce,  
And ech of hem gan oother for t’assure  
Of bretherhede, whil that hir lyf may dure. (7.36–42)

The oath cements the merchant’s trust in his friend the monk, as it thus establishes the foundation for this fabliau’s satiric and humorous consideration of dishonest trade, religious hypocrisy, and adulterous marriage. As John Hermann notes, “The circulation of vows as defective signs in the tale takes place against the background of the marital vows of the couple and religious vows of the Monk.”58 No oath is sacred in this tale, which

57. For Boccaccio’s tales and their influence on Chaucer’s Shipman’s Tale, see John Scattergood, “The Shipman’s Tale,” in Correale and Hamel, Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales, 2.565–81.
points to the dissolute state of the fallen world that provides an appropriate setting for a fabliau.

Similar to the “brothers” of the Friar’s Tale and the Pardoner’s Tale, the merchant and the monk do not belong to the aristocratic social class deemed appropriate for such relationships, and thus readers are well prepared for Daun John’s randy rejection of brotherhood so that he may enjoy lascivious delights with his brother’s wife:

“He is na moore cosyn unto me
Than is this leef that hangeth on the tree!
I clepe hym so, by Seint Denys of Fraunce,
To have the moore cause of aqueyntaunce
Of yow, which I have loved specially
Aboven alle wommen, sikerly.
This swere I yow on my professioun.” (7.149–55)

According to John, the brotherhood oath with the merchant was merely a ruse so that he could approach the man’s wife, but in a narrative heavy with irony, Chaucer adds an additional layer of comic betrayal in that the monk swears his love “on my professioun.” His monastic vows are as meaningless as his brotherhood oaths, and both are used to seduce his friend’s wife rather than to uphold his sense of fraternal union with the merchant or spiritual union with his order (or with God, for that matter).

The merchant’s wife cuckolds him so that she may build her wardrobe, and this emasculation of husbandly authority accords ironically with the merchant’s misprision of fraternal loyalty as a mutually constitutive relationship. The ending is consistent with the debasement of homosocial oaths enacted in Chaucer’s other treatments of this theme, and, through the term “cosynage,” the wife defends her duplicity by using the merchant’s relationship with the Monk as a blind:

“For, God it woot, I wende, withouten doute,
That he hadde yeve it me bycause of yow
To doon therwith myn honour and my prow,
For cosynage, and eek for beele cheere
That he hath had ful ofte tymes heere.” (7.406–10)

Due to the close relationship between the two men, the wife argues, it would be perfectly reasonable for the monk to show his affection for him through her as an intermediary figure. Queer theory asks readers to look
at the diverse sexual energies circulating in a text, and in the *Shipman’s Tale*, readers see the familiar structure of the erotic triangle, in which two men pursue the same woman.\(^{59}\) Adding an even queerer edge to this dynamic, however, is that the wife focuses her husband’s attention on the source of his betrayal, which is his own relationship with another man. Moreover, the wife’s erotic energies focus more on her clothes and debts than on either man, who serve as conduits to her sartorial rather than her sexual passions. Thus, at the end of the tale when the wife declares to the merchant, “Ye shal my joly body have to wedde; / By God, I wol nat paye yow but abedde!” (7.423–24), the man is promised sexual pleasure but at the price of his masculine worth as a lover. As Mary Leech avows in her reading of the Old French fabliaux *Le Chevalier a la robe vermeille* and *Les Braies au Cordelier*, which tackle similar sexual and social dynamics as the *Shipman’s Tale*, “The male role of dominance is usurped, leaving the male authority deceived, chastised, and impotent to change or even understand the situation. In the end, although the appearance of social stability is maintained, the tale shows that masculine authority is an illusion that is as changeable as a suit of clothes.”\(^{60}\) In this light, the merchant need not confront his cuckoldry because he never learns of his wife’s infidelity, and this moment raises a question of almost philosophical depth for a fabliau: if a man’s wife cheats on him, but he and no one else realizes it, is he truly a cuckold, if cuckoldry is at least partially determined by a concomitant sexual humiliation? Regardless of the answers posed to this question, readers see the merchant’s queered masculinity at the tale’s conclusion, which showcases yet again the disruptive erotic energies sparked by an apparently anti-erotic brotherhood.

These examples of sworn brotherhood from Chaucer’s diverse genres consistently proclaim the undesirability of such relationships. Different genres strive for various literary effects, whether entertainment (romance and fabliau), or spiritual enlightenment (exemplum and sermon), or a mixture of the two (dream vision). In Chaucer’s fictions, however, the entertainments of romance and fabliau contain a corresponding didactic aspersion against homosocial brotherhoods, and the hortatory impulses of exemplum and sermon are accompanied by satiric and amusing depic-


tions of sworn brotherhood oaths failing to ennoble the non-aristocratic men who swear them. In Chaucer’s polygeneric play, the consistency with which he treats this theme argues for an overarching distrust of such relationships despite the countervailing views promulgated in numerous contemporary texts. The historic and literary record documents that male oaths of friendship and brotherhood were often revered as enactments of the noblest virtues, but such was not the case for Chaucer. In each instance in his literature when men pledge brotherhood to each other, the subsequent betrayal of the oath satirizes and ridicules this social practice. Speculations regarding the reasons behind Chaucer’s satiric disdain for such relationships aside, it is clear that he found no opportunity in his vast literary canon to depict such oaths and the men who swore them in a positive light. Such an absence of positive depictions, contrasted with a plenitude of negative ones, is queer indeed, and points to the ways in which apparently chaste social paradigms carry latent implications of an unwelcome eroticism destructive to their own conception and practice.