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

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To distill the genre of medieval romance to its core, a knight defeats his enemy so that he may love his lady, thus laying the foundation for the perpetuation of his bloodline through procreation. In his classic study *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach succinctly declares, “Except feats of arms and love, nothing can occur in the courtly world,” for, as he explains, love and battle serve as the preeminent concerns of these tales. In his retellings of Boccaccio’s *Teseida* and *Il Filostrato*, Chaucer degrades the amatory fecundity of the romance tradition into a death-driven and moribund genre in his *Knight’s Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*: in these narratives, a knight’s love for a woman is inextricably interconnected with images and fantasies of death and destruction, culminating in his death for love and, at least potentially, his love for death. Moreover, from this perspective of male narcissism in love, the *Knight’s Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde* rewrite female fertility into morbidly, underlining the nexus of love and death, eros and thanatos, in sexual relationships. With women reflecting the inherent emptiness of male narcissism rather than acting on their own amatory desires, these tales suggest the inherent fatality of male desire and the queer force of female ant eroticism. A virgin and a widow, Emily and Criseyde, who are cast unwill-

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ingly into the roles of the imperious beloveds of romance, paradoxically achieve signifying force by rechanneling male eroticism to its necrotic ends, thus threatening, if not achieving, the destruction of civilizations antithetical to female desire. In contrast to the amorous desires of Arcite, Palamon, and Troilus, Emily’s and Criseyde’s desires for freedom from eroticism arise in the spectral image of Athens and Troy destroyed, for these commonweals evince little concern for female agency, as evidenced by their conquest of and trade in women.

In exposing the death-dealing underbelly of heteroeroticism and its fantasies of self-destruction, Chaucer’s tales counter affirmative conceptions of romantic love, especially in regard to its tacit promise to propagate the human species through childbirth. Sigmund Freud affirms that the erotic is the “prototype of all happiness,” such that “genital erotism [should be] the central point of life”; he also argues that eroticism binds communities together, positing that “a group is clearly held together by a power of some kind: and to what power could this feat be better ascribed than Eros, which holds together everything in the world.” Indeed, Freud theorizes that civilization itself emerges from erotic drives: “civilization is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples, and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind.” In positing the relationship between eroticism and the death drive, which counters the organic unity of eros, Freud insists that erotic drives are the primary force in the daily pursuit of life and love: “the death instincts are by their nature mute and . . . the clamour of life proceeds for the most part from Eros.” The death drive, in subverting eros, impels one to destruction and dissolution, but Freud simultaneously sees eros and the death instinct as integrally fused, proposing that “Only by the concurrent or mutually opposing action of the two primal instincts—Eros and the death-instinct—, never by one or the other alone, can we explain the rich multiplicity of the phenomena of life.” He further declares, “From the concurrent and opposing action of [eros and thanatos] proceed the phenomena of life which are brought to

an end by death.” 7 For Freud, the business of life is the desire for eroticism coupled with a muted but no less insistent desire for death, for death will come, whether desired or not.

Many medieval romances showcase the complementary yet conflicted interplay of eros and thanatos: such narratives are sites of converging erotic and necrotic desires, in which a knight’s erotic desire to love his lady is frequently coupled with (and projected externally through) his necrotic desire to kill his enemy. As Northrop Frye observes, romances frequently incorporate depictions and fantasies of death only then to stage their transcendence: “romance is nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream. . . . [T]he romance expresses . . . the passage from struggle through a point of ritual death to a recognition scene that we discovered in comedy.” 8 Certainly, many romances, like comedies, feature generative resolutions, concluding with marriage and the birth of a child (or children). With an astonishing display of fertility, Havelok the Dane ends as Havelok and his queen Goldeborou “geten children hem bitwene / Sones and doughtres right fivetene.” 9 Sir Tryamour concludes by celebrating “Kyng Tryamowre and hys qwene” who share “mekyll joye” because “man chylder had they twoo,” 10 and in Eger and Grime, Eger fathers fifteen children with his wife Winglaine, Grime fathers ten children with Loosepine, and their friend Pallyas fathers five children with Emyes. 11 Such fecundity can be achieved only after the knights dispatch their enemies, and in this manner medieval romances encapsulate the struggle between eros and thanatos in the story of a knight’s victory over death (as represented by his foe) and his subsequent enjoyment of erotic pleasure resulting in reproduction and the perpetuation of his bloodline. Similarly, many romances conclude with depictions or promises of marriage, thus ending with the expectation that the knightly protagonist will propagate his bloodline, even if the expected children of the union do not yet appear.

Whereas *Havelok the Dane*, *Sir Tryamour*, and *Eger and Grime* provide clean divisions between eros and thanatos, in which the punishment of death is inflicted outwardly so as to preserve the illusion of erotic desire purged of its necrotic taint, Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde* intertwine these desires, braiding them together into a dark mixture of ostensibly opposed impulses. In her reading of *Romeo and Juliet*, Julia Kristeva observes the necessity of death and its organic unity with erotic desire in the play’s resolution: “Death, like a final orgasm, like a full night, waits for the end of the play.”\(^{12}\) Death is the final enactment of sexual desire in *Romeo and Juliet*, as it is also the penultimate register of desire in the *Knight’s Tale* and the conclusive desire of *Troilus and Criseyde*. As Celia Lewis affirms of Chaucer’s literature and its frequent emphasis on themes of death, “fiction’s inadequacy rests not only on its ability to offer spiritual consolation, but in its impotence vis-à-vis the preservation of physical life.”\(^ {13}\) If to love a woman is to embrace death, however, the male desires that drive these narratives must themselves bear a necrotic responsibility for the unhappy endings, more so than the women who find themselves objects of desires unsought and unimagined. In destabilizing the erotic foundations of these genres, Chaucer’s narrators encode a queer power of resistance to Emily’s and Criseyde’s respective roles of virgin and widow: preferring the anti-heteroerotic freedom of life without men, these female characters allow an intriguing glimpse into alternate models of kinship and alliance. Coincident with female eroticism freed from men emerges the submerged narrative panic such a vision sparks, because it encodes the erasure of children, fertility, and propagation that might well portend the collapse of civilization.

**CHAUCEIRIAN ROMANCE AND THE NECROTIC ALLURE OF WOMEN**

As is well established in the critical tradition, Chaucer’s treatment of romance throughout the *Canterbury Tales* suggests his ambivalence toward the genre.\(^ {14}\) The *Squire’s Tale* and *Sir Thopas* are both interrupted

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14. For studies of Chaucer and romance, see Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in*
rather than allowed to conclude on their own terms, which implies Chaucer’s amused impatience with the genre, and the Nun’s Priest’s Tale records the narrator’s dismissal of the romance tradition, as he ironically compares the truthfulness of his tale of amorous chickens to that of Arthurian romance: “This storie is also trewe, I undertake, / As is the book of Launcelot de Lake, / That women holde in ful greet reverence” (7.3211–13). From the Nun’s Priest’s perspective, medieval romance is a woman’s tradition, not a man’s, but even when Chaucer puts a romance in a woman’s voice in his Wife of Bath’s Tale, this Arthurian romance only superficially endorses the protocols of the genre, particularly in casting a rapist in the role of its knightly protagonist. Furthermore, the conclusion of the Wife of Bath’s Tale indicates that Alison, as she curses “olde and angry nyngrades of dispence” and wishes that “God sende hem soon ver-ray pestilence” (3.1263–64), perceives and indict[s the hollow fantasies of romance. Of course, Squire’s Tale, Tale of Sir Thopas, Wife of Bath’s Tale, along with Knight’s Tale and Troilus and Criseyde, do not exhaust Chaucer’s engagement with romance, and scholars have noted the interplay of romance with other genres, such as hagiography and exemplum, in his literature, discerning connections among these distinct genres in such works as the Man of Law’s Tale and the Clerk’s Tale. Furthermore, the Franklin’s Tale’s genre of Breton lai depends primarily on the romance tradition. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to engage fully with these disparate treatments of romance, but this brief survey illustrates that Chaucer found the traditional parameters of romance to be confining and that he played with the form in numerous ways.

From this perspective, in counterbalancing necrotic drives with eroticism in the Knight’s Tale and Troilus and Criseyde, Chaucer tacitly acknowledges the uncomfortable fit between narratives of the classical past and medieval idealizations of courtly love in romance, as did Boccaccio before him in Teseida and Il Filostrato. As Winthrop Wether-

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16. For studies of Chaucer’s debts to Boccaccio, see Piero Boitani, Chaucer and Boccaccio (Oxford: Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 1977); David Wallace, Chaucer and the Early Writings of Boccaccio (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1985); Robert Edwards, Chaucer and Boccaccio: Antiquity and Modernity (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); and
bee postulates, “Every medieval poet who engages the classical tradition must . . . come to terms with the conflicting tendencies of the literary modes he seeks to align.” 17 The glory of dying bravely in battle in classical epics brings honor to a warrior, yet such an ending cannot bring about the fecund expectations of generation of medieval romance. John Finlayson argues of Chaucer’s generic debts: “To note that the Knight tells a romance is to fail to notice that the ‘romance’ he tells is unlike any other romance in English. . . . In addition, the Teseida is not a romance in the French, and derived English fashion, but is instead an attempt to transform a love story into something akin to epic.” 18 Arcite’s and Troilus’s courtships do not conform to the typical parameters of medieval romance, for each man’s quest to win his lady’s love, when accomplished, is rewarded with death rather than communal adulation or a lifetime of erotic pleasure sanctioned in marriage. Within this hybrid genre of epic romance, a knight pursues his lady while exterior conflicts—the Theban campaigns with Athens, the Trojan War—complicate the knight’s amatory affairs and his quest for erotic satisfaction. 19

Before addressing the ways in which Arcite’s and Troilus’s desires for women become implicated with necrotic desires, it is helpful to consider Chaucer’s most explicit statement concerning a desire for death: “Ne Deeth, allas, ne wol nat han my lyf” (6.727), laments the old man in the Pardoner’s Tale, expressing his desire to end desire, which is also his desire to be desired by Death. Seeking to find eternal rest, the old man acknowledges the role of thanatos in his life’s journey as he craves the maternal comforts of the grave. Furthermore, as Carl Phelpstead elucidates, the old man contaminates the young rioters with death, unveiling their latent mortal desire as camouflaged under their venality: “Their

19. It should be noted that Lee Patterson disputes the classification of Troilus and Criseyde as a romance, arguing that “on the whole the term [of romance] was restricted to the narratives that fit the primary definition now offered by the Middle English Dictionary: ‘A written narrative of the adventures of a knight, nobleman, king, or an important ecclesiastic; a chivalric romance’” (Acts of Recognition: Essays on Medieval Culture [Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2010], 205). Yet similar to the anachronistic recasting of the Trojan War as fought by medieval knights, romance elements of courtly love are interspersed throughout Troilus and Criseyde, muddying any taxonomy that would strip it of its multiple significations.
encounter with the old man who is prepared for, and even desires death . . . fails to instill wisdom in them and he directs them to Death by indicating the way to treasure: their avarice leads them to murder one another, so that Death finds them.”

Drawing on the longstanding analogy between the womb and tomb, the old man repeatedly refers to his grave with feminine imagery, calling the ground where he will be buried his “moodres gate” (6.729, cf. 6.731, 6.734). Chaucer constructs the old man’s desire for death as a maternal longing, an urge to unite with the feminine at the moment when all desires—erotic or otherwise—cease, albeit one that, as Robert Sturges explains, is marked by an “image of impotence” in “the staff that cannot penetrate the female opening.”

In this manner the Pardoner’s Tale makes explicit what the Knight’s Tale and Troilus and Criseyde camouflage under a veneer of eroticism: within a heteroerotic matrix of sexuality, a man’s desire for death is entangled and in many ways inseparable from a desire for women, whether in the old man’s quest for the maternal tomb or in Arcite’s and Troilus’s quests for erotic satisfaction.

Before necrotic desires enter the Knight’s Tale and Troilus and Criseyde, erotic yearnings spark their plots, and in this regard in the romance tradition, to gaze at a beautiful woman is to be filled with love-longing. Medieval theories of sight accord varying degrees of agency to the viewer and the viewed, as Carolyn Collette summarizes: “the most influential late medieval thinking about optics assumed a degree of power in the object of vision itself. As a result, the subject one looked at was thought to be as important as the act of looking itself, and the act of looking always a dynamic interchange between viewer and viewed.”

Such constructions of optical desire function narratologically to set the plot in motion—the
knight will prove his valor to win his beloved’s affections—as they also establish the narrative within the purported purview of the erotic. Furthermore, these medieval theories of sight assign an important sense of agency to the female beloveds, who act and react simply by being seen by their lovers.

Jacques Lacan perceives such scenes of courtly desire as reflective of male narcissism, suggesting that “the element of idealizing exaltation that is expressly sought out in the ideology of courtly love . . . is fundamentally narcissistic in character,” and in this regard, for Emily and Criseyde to function as appropriate narcissistic mirrors for Arcite and Troilus (and Palamon as well), they must be attractive. Chaucer stresses their radiant beauty in numerous lush passages, and such depictions of female beauty stand in stark contrast to the portrayal of the Loathly Lady in the Wife of Bath’s Tale, in which much of its humor arises in her refusal to serve as a narcissistic mirror for the rapist knight, instead forcing him to lie in bed with a woman who is “so loothly, and so oold also” (3.1100). Emily and Criseyde, on the other hand, inhabit the role of the beautiful beloved unproblematically for their suitors. At the moments when Palamon, Arcite, and Troilus gaze upon them for the first time, the “love at first sight” trope that introduces these female beloveds reduces them to their bodies. Emily is “fairer . . . to sene / Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene” (1.1035–36), and Criseyde’s matchless beauty elevates her above all other women: “Right as oure firste lettre is now an A, / In beaute first so stood she, makeles” (1.171–72). Furthermore, they are praised for the heavenly and divine nature of their beauty: Emily sings “as an aungel hevenysshly” (1.1055), and Criseyde is described as “aungelik” (1.102), as a “thing inmortal” (1.103), and as “an hevenyssh perfit creature” (1.104). Palamon wonders whether Emily is “womman or goddessse” (1.1101), and Troilus likewise muses whether Criseyde is a “goddesse or womman” (1.425). As Simon Gaunt notes of the interplay of spiritual and erotic discourses in the Middle Ages, “One consequence of taking religious imagery and language in medieval love literature seriously is that, taken at face value, they lend ethical seriousness to love, in that they impute to those subject to love a set of principles which determines right and wrong behavior and feelings, while offering concurrently a means of spiritual improvement and salvation.” Following the standard expectations of romance, Chaucer

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eloquently expounds on Emily’s and Criseyde’s beauty to cement their status as embodiments of heteroerotic male desire that elevate earthly passions into matters of spiritual import.

Within an androcentric framework, the function of female beauty, its cultural work, however, is not limited to the purview of piquing the sexual interest of men, as it also stands in opposition to necrotic desires by encouraging men to live for and through their love. Freud, while admitting that “beauty has no obvious use,” also claims that “civilization could not do without it.” As Lacan explains in his consideration of the death drive, beauty cannot negate thanatos, but it bears the power to neutralize it, at least momentarily:

The true barrier that holds the subject back in front of the unspeakable field of radical desire that is the field of absolute destruction, of destruction beyond putrefaction, is properly speaking the aesthetic phenomenon where it is identified with the experience of beauty—beauty in all its shining radiance, beauty that has been called the splendor truth.26

Within the heteroerotic matrix of male desire that Lacan unpacks, in which a woman is conscripted to serve “as an object of desire,” but one that “has nothing to do with her as a woman,” her beauty allows her lover to transcend his mortality. To see this woman is to be inspired with the erotic and thus to suspend the necrotic, if only for the briefest of moments. Although one can never truly escape thanatos, much of the pleasure of medieval romance derives from the fantasy that loving a beautiful maiden allows a knight to accomplish this impossible feat. For Chaucer’s narrators, however, the beauty of Emily and Criseyde does not circumvent the necrotic desires of men (as it cannot); rather, their attractiveness facilitates the knights’ acceptance of death’s inevitability.

Whether as objects of beauty or as purported means for forestalling the reemergence of thanatos, Emily and Criseyde frequently appear in the Knight’s Tale and Troilus and Criseyde as reflections of male desire rather than as women in their own right, with the sharp irony that they are conscripted to serve as male fantasies despite their avowed preference for anti-eroticism. As Susan Crane argues, women in romance reflect male desire: “Intrinsic to masculine identity in romance is the concept of a fundamental difference between self and other. In the dominant paradigm of

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27. Ibid., 214.
courtship, women attest to their suitors’ deeds and reflect back to them an image of their worth.”

Crane’s feminist readings of Chaucerian romance align with Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories, as both point to the functionality of female characters for males. Indeed, although without the terms of feminist, queer, or psychoanalytic theory, medieval women’s narcissistic functionality for men was recognized in much the same manner, as evident in the words of the wife in the Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry, who, in debate with her husband, admonishes her daughters to beware men’s fickle words. She castigates men for using women to enhance their reputations:

“Lords and felawes . . . saye that alle the honour and worshyppe whiche they gete and haue, is comynge to them by theyre peramours . . . but these wordes coste to them but lytell to say, for to gete the better and sooner the grace and good wylle of theyr peramours. For of suche wordes, and other moche merueyllous, many one vseth full ofte; but how be hit that they saye that ‘for them and for theyr loue they done hit.’ In good feth they done it only for to enhauce them self, and for to drawe vnto them the grace and vayne glory of the world.”

Lords and fellows exploit women to their narcissistic advantage, proving the instrumentality, more than the desirability, of women, at least from this fictional medieval woman’s perspective. Lacan argues that narcissism and narcissistic desires are imaginary relations that obscure the identity of the beloved, for she merely mirrors what the man desires to see in himself: “At this point the object introduces itself only insofar as it is perpetually interchangeable with the love that the subject has for its own image.”

Roughly 600 years prior to Lacan, the wife in the Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry urges women not to heed men’s empty words motivated more by narcissism than eroticism, for they erase the women supposedly at their core.

In the opening sequences of the Knight’s Tale and Troilus and Criseyde, Palamon, Arcite, and Troilus perceive Emily and Criseyde not as women, in the sense of females granted autonomy of identity and agency, as much as they perceive them as fantasies of their male desires, stripped of any sig-

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28. Susan Crane, Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, 13.
nifying ability other than of male heteroeroticism. As Winthrop Wetherbee observes in regard to Criseyde, but which applies equally well to Emily: “The inability of the male figures in the poem to recognize Criseyde as a person in her own right . . . is symptomatic of the profound limitations of the chivalric view of life, limitations which it is one of the major projects of Chaucer’s poetry to expose and criticize.”\(^{31}\) Emily and Criseyde are not allowed the freedom or agency to assert their amatory desires because both women live under the sufferance of their male patrons: as Hippolyta’s sister, one who was likewise conquered when Theseus triumphed over “al the regne of Femenye” (1.866), Emily inhabits a marginal position in Athens, relying on the sufferance of her brother-in-law for her continued well-being. As Elizabeth Fowler dryly remarks, “Conquest is by definition supremely indifferent to consent,” and in her reading of the tale’s power dynamics, she asserts that “the Knight’s Tale proves to be a consideration of conquest and its claims to dominion,” as she also notes how the romance concludes with Emily’s coerced marriage to Palamon mirroring Hippolyta’s coerced marriage to Theseus.\(^{32}\) In her reading of Emily as an “Amazon at the Gate,” Karma Lochrie traces how “Emelye as Amazon is . . . disguised by her generic rendering as object of Palamon and Arcite’s desire,”\(^{33}\) for the focus of this epic romance is to reconstitute her as a courtly beloved despite her aversion to this role. Criseyde, whose residence in Troy is threatened due to her father’s betrayal, depends on the mercy of Trojan men, particularly Hector, who permits her to “dwelleth with us, whil yow good list, in Troie” (1.119). Both women live in potentially


\(^{33}\) Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn’t* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 127. Commenting on the ways in which a tension between absence and presence structures Chaucer’s depictions of women and their desires, Susan Schibanoff similarly posits: “At the same time, Chaucer makes less more, in the sense that Emily has not only been a warrior but, also like a man, she wishes to control her own sexuality” (“Chaucer’s Lesbians: Drawing Blanks?” *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 13 [1992]: 11–14). Emily’s dual perspectives on pursuits gendered masculine and feminine are sacrificed in her resignification as an object of heteroerotic desire.
hostile environments, necessitating that they adapt their erotic desires as circumstances dictate, and so they must sacrifice their avowed anti-eroticism as virgin and as widow in favor of the men who love them. As David Aers acknowledges of Criseyde and medieval women who share similar plights, “To survive in this society the isolated woman needs to make use of her sexuality and whatever courtly sexual conventions or fictions as may serve her.”

Emily and Criseyde must act by reacting in this man’s world. They never initiate a heteroerotic relationship based on their sense of their own desires; on the contrary, they are presented with lovers and must then confront the repercussions of being the object of a man’s unsought affections. Thus, a fundamental irony arises in these romances, as Arcite and Troilus select erotic partners who, conscripted to love men for whom they share no interest, prefer to embody eroticism’s death (or, at least, its dearth) rather than its flourishing.

In contrast to the many romance heroines who desire, or even toy with, a knightly protagonist’s love, Emily and Criseyde reject heteroerotic desire, and their refusals align them in an adversarial position to their future lovers. Both Arcite and Troilus refer to their beloveds as their “swete fo[o]” (KT 1.2780, TC 1.874, 5.228), a phrasing that encapsulates the intersection of the erotic and the adversarial in their relationships. Aware of his sister-in-law’s anti-erotic stance, Theseus laughs at Palamon and Arcite’s violent conflict over her:

“But this is yet the beste game of alle,  
That she for whom they han this jolitee  
Kan hem therfore as muche thank as me.  
She woot namoore of al this hoote fare,  
By God, than woot a cokkow or an hare!” (1.1806–10)

In one of the narrative’s grand ironies, Emily has no knowledge of Palamon’s and Arcite’s affections for her, despite the many years they pursue her, and, more importantly, she expresses no desire to serve the role of the courtly beloved. Likewise, Criseyde’s words to Pandarus, following his revelation that Troilus loves her, accentuate her anti-erotic stance:

“What, is this al the joye and al the feste?  
Is this your reed? Is this my blisful cas?

Her string of rebuking rhetorical questions dismantles Pandarbus’s celebration of Trojan amorousness, as she pierces through the “paynted process” that grants her a lover when no love was sought. In the closing line of this passage, Criseyde ironically foresees her death resulting from a relationship with Troilus, not perceiving that, through erotic union with her, Troilus, too, will realize his necrotic desires.35

In light of their resistance to male desire, Emily and Criseyde must be conquered, and the texts unite in their depiction of the two women failing to withstand the onslaught of male desires as expressed through Palamon and Arcite’s tournament for Emily’s affections and through Pandarbus’s sly machinations to win Criseyde for Troilus. As Helen Cooper outlines of women’s role in romance, “in the symbolic progression of the quest with its male hero, the dangers of sexuality will inevitably take the form of a female adversary, whether the point at issue is ultimately about the danger of women, the danger of his own unbridled sexuality, or . . . the danger of temptation at large.”36 In this passage Cooper writes particularly of such romance villainesses as Bertilak’s wife in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, those seductive temptresses who attempt to distract the knight from his morality and/or his mission. As much as Emily and Criseyde play the role of the female beloved, they are also female adversaries who must be subdued because of their erotic resistance to their suitors. These “sweet foes”

35. Despite the narrative’s overarching focus on Troilus’s death, Chaucer proleptically includes Criseyde’s demise in the narrative’s opening stanzas:

Now herkneth with a good entencioun,
For now wil I gon streght to my matere,
In which ye may the double sorwes here
Of Troilus in lovyng of Criseyde,
And how that she forsook hym er she deyde. (1.52–56)

must be defeated as much as any knightly or otherworldly antagonists, even if such defeats are registered in the sexual consummation of amatory relationships rather than in their deaths.

Complementing their refusal of standard romance erotics in their rejection of male sexual desire, Emily and Criseyde also reject the future potential of motherhood in bearing children with Arcite and Troilus, and through these twin refusals, they disrupt the generative erotics of romance by spurning the necessity of reproductive futurism as symbolized in the figure of the Child. Although their respective cultures expect women to reproduce the social order by bearing children, these women resist the cultural imperative to procreate and thus are compelled to symbolize death within the romance’s erotic imaginary. Lee Edelman perceives the cultural role of the Child in its work as the foundational tool of sexual policing: societies are based on “the ideological truism” that necessitates “our investment in the Child as the obligatory token of futurity.”

Quite simply, cultures can only propagate themselves by producing children, regardless of the individual wishes of the women through whom this work must be borne. Building on Edelman’s work, Noreen Giffney posits “the impossibility of exercising agency if one partakes of a system steeped in reproductive futurism which permeates all social, political, and cultural structures.” From this perspective, women living under patriarchal regimes, in snubbing their potential fecundity in favor of thanatos, have the power to tear the cultural fabric by refusing to stitch it whole through motherhood. By withholding their bodies and their generative capacity from the aegis of a masculinist ideology (and, in Emily’s case, an overtly hostile one), Emily and Criseyde frustrate the generic expectations of medieval romance as much as they subvert the foundations of patriarchy. Patrilineal societies, despite their focus on the male’s role in determining kinship relations, need women if they are to survive, but Emily and Criseyde resist reproducing the next generation of warriors to defend Athens and Troy, societies characterized by their hostile treatment of women through war, rape, and ravishment. In these amatory environments, where Emily and Criseyde cannot choose their lovers, they succeed in expressing an etiolated and queer sense of agency by rejecting childbirth. Men may love them despite their wishes to the contrary, yet men cannot compel...


them either to love them in return or willingly to produce the babies they might wish for them to bear.

These queer edges to Emily and Criseyde are evident in their rebuffing of maternity, but also in their preference for homosocial environments. Emily would not reside in Athens if the Amazons had not been conquered, and, when readers first see Criseyde, she has ensconced herself among the homosocial company of her female reading group (2.81–84). Within Chaucer’s necrotic romances, in which death awaits Arcite and Troilus, Emily and Criseyde repudiate children and childbirth in tandem with their refusal of male desire. In this light, Emily opposes reproduction in her prayer to Diana to be spared from marriage and childbirth, and as Robert Edwards notes, Chaucer reimagines Boccaccio’s prayer sequences to allow her to speak: “Chaucer adds a description of Diana’s temple to balance the descriptions of Mars’s and Venus’s temples in Boccaccio and to give a rare space for feminine subjectivity.”39 In this setting where female desires may be voiced, Emily aligns herself with anti-eroticism:

“Chaste goddesse, wel wostow that I
Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf,
Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf.
I am, thow woost, yet of thy compaignye,
A mayde, and love huntyng and venerye,
And for to walken in the wodes wilde,
And noght to be a wyf and be with childe.
Noght wol I knowe compaignye of man.” (1.2304–11)

Choosing lifelong virginity, Emily denies any wifely or maternal desires, asserting for herself perpetual allegiance to the virginal Diana and life in the “wodes wilde.” As William Woods proposes, “For Emelye, ‘to ben a mayden al my lyf’ is, in a psychological sense, to deny change and thus to be free forever. By contrast, the ‘compaignye of man’ may for her suggest eternal bondage.”40 Analyzing Chaucer’s rewriting of this scene from Boccaccio’s Teseida, Stephen Russell argues that Chaucer stresses Emily’s preference for remaining a virgin rather than marrying, in direct contrast to the source text: “In the Teseida, Emilia’s initial wish to remain in the company of Diana . . . seems largely pro forma. . . . Her real wish—to wind up with the one who loves her most—receives all the

39. Robert Edwards, Chaucer and Boccaccio, 32.
rhetorical and narrative emphasis in the original. In Chaucer's version, however, Emily's prayer to remain a virgin is forceful, while her second choice . . . is a mere afterthought.” For Emily, a captive in Athens, reproduction would entail reproducing the society that has subjugated her, her sister, and her fellow Amazons. By striving to maintain her virginity through her allegiance to Diana, she refuses to propagate a social order that has literally captured her. Although she cannot pronounce a death sentence upon Athens and so destroy the commonweal, she can resignify her erotic conquest into an act of necrotic resistance. Furthermore, the troubling scene of childbirth depicted in Diana's temple— “A womman travaillynge was hire biforn; / But for hir child so longe was unborn, / Ful pitously Lucyna gan she calle / And seyde, ‘Help, for thou mayst best of alle!’” (1.2083–86)—suggests that a woman's preference for virginity protects her from the mortal dangers of childbirth. In debasing fecundity and aligning herself with Diana, Emily may merely seek the simple anti-erotic pleasure of staying alive.

In complementary contrast to Emily, Criseyde, as a widow, is no longer a virgin, but she appears similarly averse to reproduction. The narrator states obliquely, “But, wheither that she children hadde or noon, / I rede it naught, therfore I late it goon” (1.132–33), and through this elliptical passage, he refuses to take a definitive stance on the issue. Robert Levine proposes that “Chaucer may very well have refrained from making a categorical assertion of [Criseyde’s] childlessness in the first book, to prevent a medieval reader from recognizing her immediately as an iconographical figure . . . of sterile love.” But if Chaucer were to depict Criseyde as a mother, and, in so doing, contradict Boccaccio’s depiction of her in Teseida, she appears wholly unconcerned with her children, and no mention of any offspring is made when she leaves Troy to join the

42. For the intersection of Diana and Lucyna in classical and Chaucerian mythology, see Jane Chance, The Mythographic Chaucer: The Fabulation of Sexual Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 207–9.
Greeks. Instead, Criseyde’s status as a widow guides her portraiture in the romance, with the narrator frequently emphasizing her black mourning weeds. She appears “in widewes habit large of samyt brown” (1.109) and “in widewes habit blak” (1.170). Her beauty shines through despite the darkness of her dress—“Nas nevere yet seyn thyng to ben preyed derre, / Nor under cloude blak so bright a sterre” (1.174–75)—and the narrator summarizes his view of her and her wardrobe succinctly: “She, this in blak” (1.309). In her black clothes symbolic of death, Criseyde not only enacts mourning but also personifies the necrotic end of all relationships. As her first husband died prior to fathering a child with her, so too will Troilus fail to generate life with a woman committed to the anti-erotic pleasures of widowhood.

Conscripted to serve as objects of heteroerotic male fantasy, Emily and Criseyde fail in staving off the advances of men in the patriarchal environs of medieval romance, but their grudging acquiescence to this role allows them, finally, freedom from Arcite and Troilus (if not from Palamon and Diomede). Slavoj Žižek sees subversive potential in a woman’s position as male fantasy, declaring that the “ontological denigration of women as a mere ‘symptom’ of man . . . is, when it is openly admitted and fully accepted, far more subversive than the false direct assertion of feminine autonomy.” He further suggests, “perhaps the ultimate feminist statement is to proclaim openly: ‘I do not exist in myself, I am merely the Other’s fantasy embodied.’” 44 Žižek identifies a radical power in feminine acquiescence to male power: forced to adapt themselves to Arcite’s and Troilus’s fantasies, compelled to cede resistance and accede to male sexual desire, they prepare Arcite and Troilus to succumb to the necrotic lure of their erotic desires. For, quite simply, Arcite and Troilus are virtually interchangeable with Palamon and Diomede, and if Emily and Criseyde cannot rid themselves of all lovers, Fortune and the generic structures of romance intervene to eradicate two of them: when two knights battle, typically only one survives, and such is true in the Knight’s Tale and Troilus and Criseyde as Palamon and Diomede, the last men standing, assume their positions as the women’s lovers.

In this manner, Emily and Criseyde, who affirm virginity and widowhood as their preferred cultural roles for the asexuality encoded in them, share their externally necrotic tendencies with their potential lovers. Freud suggests that one resists the death drive through the destruction of

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44. Slavoj Žižek, The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology (London: Verso, 1999), 306.
an entity exterior to the self: “It really seems as though it is necessary for us to destroy some other thing or person in order not to destroy ourselves, in order to guard against the impulsion to self-destruction.” Emily and Criseyde do not appear to desire to destroy Arcite and Troilus in the sense of killing them; their goals are simply to live unmolested by heteroerotic desire, to preserve their asexuality in a homosocial environment, and to reject undesired amatory advances. Nor, it should be noted, do they desire to destroy children: Emily merely wishes not to bear any, and Criseyde has not done so despite her marriage. But the success of these anti-erotic goals hinges upon their eradication of male eroticism, for which they need only rely on male competition in love. The romance tradition frequently depicts amatory competitions resulting in at least one dead man, and the combative relationships both between Arcite and Palamon and between Troilus and Diomede follow this pattern, even if neither Palamon nor Diomede is directly responsible for his adversary’s death. Readers may see Emily’s and Criseyde’s roles in Arcite’s and Troilus’s deaths as the necessary cost to preserve themselves, if only momentarily, as they queerly refract and recirculate male erotic desires through female anti-eroticism, anti-fecundity, and male competition. What else can a woman do, when a man loves her so passionately, despite her desire merely to be left alone?

**CHAUCERIAN ROMANCE AND THE DEATH OF MEN**

When medieval men say that they will die for love, readers should believe them, despite the exaggerations endemic to this discourse. As Mary Wack certifies in her magisterial *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages*, many medieval physicians and scholars viewed lovesickness as a physical malady, one with numerous causes, symptoms, and cures:

> The authority and pragmatism of the medical descriptions of lovesickness were able to assist the evolution of a cultural fantasy into social reality. “I’m dying of love” became both a cliché and a medical possibility, remote but dreadful. Once romantic ideology had become a social practice that the nobility had to reckon with, the medicalized vision of lovesickness enabled lovesick aristocrats to cope with their own erotic vulnerability.

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Wack’s scholarship showcases the circularity of medieval scientific thought and literary production, as romance depictions of love corroborated learned exegesis on the subject, and scientific accounts of lovesickness found their way into the literary record. As Donald Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella explain of medieval theories of lovesickness, “Because human love is fundamentally *amor concupiscentiae*, carnal desire, it is, by definition, capable of causing states of disease because, being a *passio*, it could alter the balance of elements within the body that constitutes health.” 47 Within this medieval discourse, love bears somatic effects evident in the lover’s behavior, such that the emotionality and physicality of love are intertwined in a shared enactment of love’s pains. Although neither Arcite nor Troilus die of lovesickness—it is, after all, a horse accident and an enemy’s superior might that kill them—the possibility that they will die for love percolates throughout the narratives, imbuing their stories with eroticism never devoid of its necrotic edges.

Chaucer describes Arcite’s and Troilus’s erotic suffering in detail, painting extended pictures of the lovers and the physical toll that love takes upon their bodies. Arcite’s “loveris maladye” (1.1373) dramatically alters his appearance: “lene he wex and drye as is a shaft; / His eyen holwe and grisly to biholde, / His hewe falow and pale as asshen colde” (1.1362–64). Indeed, the plot of the *Knight’s Tale* depends on the physical changes that lovesickness inflicts upon Arcite’s body, for it is only due to the profound alterations in his appearance that he can return to Athens and assume his new identity as Emily’s page Philostrate. In Troilus’s case, lovesickness renders him prostrate for much of the romance’s first two books. Pandarus diagnoses his lovesickness as a “disese” (2.1360) and a “maladie” (2.1515), and in an ironic passage indicative of her role in Troilus’ s illness, Criseyde affirms her ability to cure him: “Best koud I yet ben his leche” (2.1582), she muses to herself, as she earlier recognized that granting him her love would be “for his heele” (2.707). These passages underscore the physical effects that love bears on the male body, as it also foreshadows that such suffering typically ends in death. As Sealy Gilles observes of the interrelationship of love, gender, and disease in *Troilus and Criseyde*, “this redemptive function, the feminine body’s efficacy in the reconstitution of the masculine whole, rests upon prior construction of that body as first pathogenic, then curative. The beloved infects, then cures, only to prove

by her willful absence and fickleness that earthly salve is illusory." But what happens when the woman refuses to share her curative powers with her afflicted lover?

In large measure, the converging discourses of lovesickness as an illness and as a cause of death explain the extraordinary focus on death in the *Knight’s Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, in which most of Arcite’s and Troilus’s laments focus on love and death but do not then metaphorically construct the beloved as death herself. When Arcite muses, “A man moot nedes love, maugree his heed; / He may nat fleen it, thogh he sholde be deed” (1.1169–70), he does not employ language that figures Emily as necrosis personified. In passages similar to this one, he suffers for his love and envisions himself dying but refrains from visualizing Emily as the allegorical embodiment of his imminent demise:

> . . . “Allas that day that I was born!
> Now is my prisoun worse than biforn;
> Now is me shape eternally to swelle
> Noght in purgatorie, but in helle.” (1.1223–26)

In a similar manner, Troilus laments that love may kill him, yet he does not hold Criseyde accountable for his potential death. In an address to his spirit, he urges it to flee his body so that it may continue to follow Criseyde after his passing:

> “O wery goost, that errest to and fro,
> Why nyltow fleen out of the wofulleste
> Body that evere myghte on grounde go?
> O soule, lurkynge in this wo, unneste,
> Fle forth out of myn herte, and lat it breste,
> And folowe alwey Criseyde, thi lady dere.
> Thi righte place is now no lenger here.” (4.302–8)

As with these lines, in the majority of instances in which Arcite and Troilus foresee their passing as consequences of their love, they do not see Emily and Criseyde as avatars of death. Love catalyzes lovesickness, and

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lovesickness may kill, but that it does so does not entail that the lady herself is depicted as the embodiment of the knight’s death drive, for the focus on death reveals the male lover’s confusion of his own erotic and necrotic desires.

Despite the fact that Arcite and Troilus primarily vocalize their erotic desires for Emily and Criseyde as distinct from their willingness to die for love, it is striking just how briefly eroticism flowers in the *Knight’s Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde* before necrotic desires emerge, for to see the beloved is also to see a foreshadowing of one’s death. In this regard, the collapse of the erotic as distinct from the necrotic, whose separation is the foundational fantasy of romance, obscures for the reader the cultural work of beauty. When Arcite first espies Emily, he is pained by her comeliness: “And with that sighte hir beautee hurte hym so” (1.1114), the narrator proclaims. The young knight then foresees his death arising due to her attractiveness: “The fresshe beautee sleeth me sodeynly / Of hire that rometh in the yonder place” (1.1118–19). He presciently avows, “I nam but deed; ther nys namoore to seye” (1.1122), and soon repeats himself almost verbatim: “I nam but deed; ther nys no remedye” (1.1274).49 Troilus likewise responds visually to Criseyde—“‘O mercy, God,’ thoughte he, ‘wher hastow woned, / That art so feyr and goodly to devise?’” (1.276–77)—and soon feels the grip of death clenching hold: “That sodeynly hym thoughte he felte dyen” (1.306). The beauty of Emily and Criseyde sparks the erotic plot of these romances, with Arcite pursuing Emily (as his cousin competes for her affections) and Troilus pursuing Criseyde (under Pandarus’s able guidance), but these initial moments of desire also foretell the impossibility of separating necrotic desires from erotic ones. In a complementary fashion, both Arcite’s and Troilus’s desire for death can be read as their longing for the petite mort of orgasm, which imbues their

49. When Palamon first espies “fresshe Emelye” (1.1068), he likewise experiences the pains of love:

“But I was hurt right now thurghout myn ye
Into myn herte, that wol my bane be.
The fairnesse of that lady that I see
Yond in the gardyn romen to and fro
Is cause of al my crying and my wo.” (1.1096–100)

In Palamon’s stricken response, he denies himself the agency of a male lover, describing himself with passive phrasings (“I was hurt”) that cast Emily as his conqueror (the “cause of al my crying”). In contrast to Arcite, Palamon survives his encounter with Emily’s deadly beauty, but his survival depends on Arcite’s death, which allows him to preserve the romance fantasy that one’s necrotic desires can be transcended through love.
amatory pursuits with an erotic optimism that camouflages their latent necrotics.

In many of their declarations of affection for Emily and Criseyde, Arcite and Troilus proclaim their willingness to die for love, linking their necrotic and erotic drives together as an expression of their own volition. Arcite proclaims not merely that he does not fear death but that he desires to die, if he can do so in Emily's presence: “Ne for the drede of deeth shal I nat spare / To se my lady, that I love and serve. / In hir presence I recche nat to sterve” (1.1396–98). It is certainly a strange mix of desires, such that, if the erotic drive merely to be in the lady's presence is sated, necrotic desires can be fully realized without regret. The narrator agrees with Arcite's assessment of his necrotic and erotic desires: “And shortly, outher he wolde lese his life / Or wynnen Emelye unto his wif” (1.1485–86). As Arcite realizes, death becomes his destiny simply because he loves:

“Love hath his firy dart so brennyngly
Ystiked thurgh my trewe, careful herte
That shapen was my deeth erst than my sherte.
Ye sleen me with youre eyen, Emelye!
Ye been the cause wherfore that I dye.” (1.1564–68)

Assuming a passive role in these lines, one who is pierced by love's dart and slain by his beloved's eyes, Arcite denies himself agency in love. He is capable of fighting Palamon for Emily's hand in marriage, but whether through passivity in love (such as when Emily slays him with her eyes) or activity (such as when he defeats Palamon but dies anyway), death can never be divorced from his motivations, for it is so frequently conjoined with his passion for her. Again, this desire for death alludes to orgasm, but the darkness of orgasm's metaphoric construction as a momentary death challenges a sustained optimistic view of the erotic.

In a striking passage describing the eroticism motivating Troilus to kill Greek soldiers, the narrator stresses that Troilus does so neither due to any enmity toward these foes of his homeland nor even due to any desire to save his people from the siege. On the contrary, death is a seductive tactic, one that enhances his desirability to Criseyde:

But for non hate he to the Grekes hadde,
Ne also for the rescous of the town,
Ne made hym thus in armes for to madde,
But only, lo, for this conclusioun:
To liken hire the bet for his renoun,
Fro day to day in armes so he spedde
That the Grekes as the deth him dredde. (1.477–83)

For the Greeks, Troilus personifies death. It is, of course, little surprise that the Greeks view him (or any other Trojan warrior) in this light, but it is critical to realize that Chaucer strips Troilus of any allegiance to the Trojan cause in his martial motivations. Internal erotics intersect with necrotics projected externally in this scene, as the Greeks’ reaction to Troilus illuminates how his necrotic desires will shift into internal and self-directed ones.

Building on these corruptive links between eros and thanatos that denude the fantasy of their partition in romance, certain passages further erode the knights’ fantasies of an eros uncorrupted by thanatos and bring to light that their “sweet foes” are inextricably linked to their imminent demises. In his death scene, Arcite couples his sense of his approaching demise with regret for losing Emily, uniting them into a joint expression of erotic and necrotic desire. In his cry “Allas, the deeth! Allas, myn Emelye” (1.2773), the two may be seen either as separate entities or as synonyms, and his words indicate simultaneously that he regrets that his death will deprive him of his beloved and that his beloved has caused his death. In his following words, he continues to merge love and death, describing Emily as the cause of his demise: “Allas, myn hertes queene! Allas, my wyf, / Myn hertes lady, endere of my lyf!” (1.2775–76). Arcite’s subsequent lines further collapse any remaining distinction between Emily and death:

“What is this world? What asketh men to have?
Now with his love, now in his colde grave
Allone, withouten any compaignye.
Fare wel, my sweete foo, myn Emelye!” (1.2777–80)

It initially appears that the answer to Arcite’s second rhetorical question is that a man desires to live with his love, but his attention then shifts away from such an erotic affirmation as he comments on the transience of life, observing that one is “Now with his love, now in his colde grave / Allone.” The coupling of eros and thanatos in this passage tacitly paints them as equally desired, suggesting that Arcite has sought his death in equal measure to his love, for they both stand as the response to the question of what do men desire. As the guiding demande d’amour of the Wife of Bath’s
Tale inquires what women most want and proposes its answer in women’s sovereignty over men in their amatory decisions, Arcite's final musings on male desire point to the necessity of achieving equanimity between eros and thanatos, so that they are harmonized as one’s life draws to a close. In these final words to Emily, who stands beside him as physical and emotional agony wracks his mind and body, Arcite reminds her that she is his enemy, his “sweete foo,” who was long desired but never conquered. In defeat, he now seeks relief in the comforts of the grave.

In similarly striking passages, Troilus likewise reveals that his erotic desires are inseparable from his necrotic ones. Echoing Petrarch’s “S’ amor non è, che dunque è quel ch’ io sento?,” he questions in his first Canticus Troili how love could be united with suffering—“If love be good, from whennes cometh my woo?” (1.402)—but then confesses that their union results from his own volition: “O quike deth, O swete harm so queynte, / How may of the in me swich quantite, / But if that I consente that it be?” (1.411–13), as Petrarch wondered before him, “O viva morte, o dilettoso male, / come puoi tanto in me s’ io nol consento?”50 In these lines that explicitly link erotic and necrotic desires by describing death as a “swete harm so queynte,” Chaucer unites thanatos with sexuality through the pun on queynte as female genitalia. In this love song, Troilus metaphorically constructs death and woman as consuming him from the inside, despite his inviting such suffering through his own free consent. One may reasonably counter that Troilus’s sense of consent is meaningless: humans can no more consent to thanatos than they can consent to eros. Nonetheless, Troilus’s sense of volition in this passage underscores that his attempts to negotiate eros merely camouflage his latent investment in realizing his death drive through Criseyde. The emergence of womb and tomb imagery in Troilus’s song proleptically reminds readers of the young lover’s fate, as it also points to the ways in which his expressions of desire confuse one’s understanding of male desire, for the erotic merely enfolds the necrotic within it.

Arcite’s and Troilus’s quests for love are doomed attempts to free themselves from death, but love can never free a lover from death’s snare. To stand as men and lovers, Arcite and Troilus need Emily and Criseyde, but doing so only proves the narcissistic necessity of women for men within the heteroerotic economy of medieval romance. When men desire undesiring women (not, it should be noted, undesirable women), the emptiness of

their eroticism comes to the fore, underscoring the futility of desires that are undesired in return yet that reveal the male’s attempt at transcendence. Serge Leclaire intriguingly asserts that thanatos requires the sacrifice of the phallus that promises to generate signification:

What has to be put to death are the constructions and phantasies claiming to account unambiguously for our filiation, or, more precisely, focusing on a single point the source of the forces moving us. . . . What we must bring about so as to exist is our absolute separation from the phallus. At the same time, however, what we cannot erase in ourselves is the figure of that phallus.51

With its first-person pronouns encoding the phallic order on all of his readers regardless of their sexes, Leclaire’s analysis metaphorically reenacts the phallic impositions of discourse that he attempts to denude. Still, his theories of phallic separation highlight the tragedy of heteroerotic desire: if we can hypothesize that for a man to love a woman is to seek separation from the phallic order by embracing the feminine and the erotic, doing so requires the necessary impossibility of freeing himself from the phallic order that both privileges him in the social world yet ties him to the necrotic impossibility of severing himself from his penis. A man can only physically escape the symbolic signification of his penis through castration, but such a possibility does not arise within Chaucer’s fictions (except possibly in the figure of the Pardoner). Indeed, as Jean-Joseph Goux explains, the threat of castration imbues the phallus with its symbolic meaning: “We may infer that the acceptance of castration affords access to the real, to realization.”52 Arcite and Troilus die with their penises rather than live with their loves, proving the virtual impossibility of transcending an erotic order that is coterminous with death.

Thus, the failure of erotic desires in the Knight’s Tale and Troilus and Criseyde fractures the matrimonial and generative promises of the romance tradition, as Arcite and Troilus die without the women they love. Georges Bataille trenchantly observes, “Marriage is most often thought of as having little to do with eroticism,”53 and such is the case with the Knight’s

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Tale and Troilus and Criseyde as the texts rewrite the familiar trope of marriage(s) closing a romance. The Knight’s Tale ends a mere ten lines after readers learn that Arcite’s rival Palamon “hath . . . ywedded Emelye” (1.3098), and thus the abruptness of the conclusion abrogates any nascent eroticism in marriage beyond these skeletal outlines. In Troilus and Criseyde, the question of whether the two protagonists marry is perplexing: the narrator records that they “pleyinge entrechaungeden hire rynges, / Of which I kan nought tellen no scripture” (3.1368–69). Concerning the issue of Troilus and Criseyde’s potential marriage, John Maguire demonstrates that clandestine marriages were a recognized social phenomenon in medieval England; however, the fact that the exchange of rings in Troilus and Criseyde is undertaken in a playful manner undercuts interpretations of their marriage, if it is one, as a serious affair. In both cases, marriage (or quasi-marriage) harkens the end of eroticism, for the Knight’s Tale concludes prior to the announcement of any childbearing with the curt pronouncement “Thus endeth Palamon and Emelye” (1.3107), and Troilus and Criseyde soon turns to Troilus’s despair as Criseyde is traded to the Greeks for Antenor. Although Troilus’s death is delayed, its inexorable approach imbues the final books with a dirgeful air, for the erotic climax of book 3 cannot halt the text’s necrotic drive. Simon Gaunt posits that “the courtly lover speaks of death in order to live,” but Arcite and Troilus prove that, in other instances, speaking of love only camouflages the knight’s incessant pursuit of death.

Finally, despite the many similarities between Arcite’s and Troilus’s love affairs that end so disastrously, the reactions to their deaths contrast sharply. Arcite’s death scene is long and drawn out, and, in scenes that feel emotionally contrived, Palamon and Emily grieve mightily for a man whom the former sought to kill and the latter sought to evade. Elizabeth Edwards reads Arcite’s death and funeral scenes as indicative of the necessary cultural work of mourning to heal the loss of the loved one, as she also explores how this cultural production is coded as feminine: “That the excesses of mourning are figured as ‘womanish’ here, when the martial funeral and its games have been so markedly masculine, fits into the economy of loss of the entire textual genealogy, where, in Thebes or Athens, the work of mourning is woman’s work, a different order of productivity.” In contrast, Troilus views his funeral from his new perspec-

55. Simon Gaunt, Love and Death in Medieval French and Occitan Courtly Literature, 209.
56. Elizabeth Edwards, “Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale and the Work of Mourning,” Exemplaria
tive in the afterlife and laughs at “hem that wepten for his deth” (5.1822). Alone yet newly aware of the trivial nature of erotic pursuits, Troilus perceives mourning as expressive of merely a transient desire that is ephemeral and benignly and forgivably risible: it represents the desire to call a lost loved one back from the grave, and thus it is the ultimate act of futility. From these divergent vantage points, of Arcite’s survivors’ grief and of Troilus’s laughter, Chaucer limns the ways in which the cultural work of mourning must always and only commemorate that which has been lost, in women’s tears on earth and in men’s laughter in heaven, yet neither response alleviates the desire to find meaning in earthly suffering. Theseus’s wan words on the subject—“Thanne is it wysdom, as it thyneketh me, / To maken vertu of necessitee, / And take it weel that we may nat eschue” (1.3041–43)—encode the emptiness of signification through speech. As Aranye Fradenburg notes, “What is asked for is a boundless credence, a credence beyond the bounds of the law, which can only be produced through the arbitrariness of the law and the jouissance of the law’s absurdity,” and the impossibility of the law and its concomitant calls for its own transgressions ensnare Arcite and Troilus in necrotic pursuits camouflaged under the guise of eros. Beyond the obstacles of pursuing the imperious beloved of courtly romance, Arcite and Troilus must tackle the queer challenges of loving women aligned with female homosociality and anti-eroticism, never realizing that their eroticism blinds them to their own necrotic impulses.

CONCLUSION

In Shakespeare’s As You Like It, Rosalind famously mocks men’s necrotic impulses as expressed through their amorous pursuits, stating humorously, “men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love.” In this same speech, she dismisses legendary depictions of Troilus’s death, pointing out that, by dying in battle, he did not die for love: “Troilus had his brains dash’d out with a Grecian club, yet he did what he could to die before, and he is one of the patterns of love.” By laughing at

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58. William Shakespeare, As You Like It, in The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. Blakemore
the possibility that lovesickness can kill, Rosalind in many ways personifies an inversion of desire as expressed in the *Knight’s Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*; indeed, she tutors her beloved Orlando to live and to love her, and so here a woman desires, and succeeds in winning the object of her affections. Lovesickness, from this Renaissance woman’s perspective, needs no deeper cure than female laughter at the excessive posturing of men in pursuit of their affections.

In contrast, both Arcite and Troilus die for love in the *Knight’s Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, believing that life without love is impossible. Arcite falls at Saturn’s behest, and Troilus dies heroically in battle while defending his eponymous homeland in a scene startling for its brevity: “Despitously hym slough the fierse Achille” (5.1806). Even this slight glory in death, however, is predicated upon failure: Troy will fall as Troilus has fallen, and given Troy’s dubious conduct in amatory affairs, with the rape of Helen and the exchange of Criseyde, it is by no means clear that Troy was worthy of the sacrifices mounted for its defense. Likewise, at the beginning of the *Knight’s Tale*, Palamon and Arcite almost die in defense of Thebes, despite its vicious treatment of the bodies of enemy soldiers, thus again proving men’s willingness to die for suspect causes that they pursue without regard to the questions of moral justice that should always be considered in martial conflicts. Although one might view war as an appropriate effort to channel the death drive into beneficial work on behalf of the commonweal, readers are given little reason to cheer the military causes of Troy, Thebes, and Athens. As Herbert Marcuse mordantly ponders, “Western civilization has always glorified the hero, the sacrifice of life for the city, the state, the nation; it has rarely asked the question of whether the city, state, nation were worth the sacrifice.”

In a similar manner, readers might well wonder whether women are worthy of the sacrifice of Arcite’s and Troilus’s lives: do Emily and Criseyde merit the men who fall to their affections for such beauty? They cannot merit this sacrifice from the perspective of male narcissism and its follies, for they were never women in these poems beyond necrotic reflections of male desire refracted through eroticism. Such an interpretation, it must be acknowledged, runs the risk of erasing women and female desire from these poems, but doing so within this framework alleviates Emily and Criseyde from the burden of male necrotic desires, ones that quite literally encrypt them as reflections of narcissistic desires that could never equal the sacrifice of lives.

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bear fruit. But through their refusal to bear children with Arcite and Troilus, and further through Chaucer’s refusal to depict their bearing children with Palamon and Diomede, the lovers from whom Fortune allows them no escape, Emily and Criseyde decline the generative erotics of courtship and marriage. Athens stands at the end of the Knight’s Tale, whereas Troy’s fall is imminent at the close of Troilus and Criseyde, but both polities suppress women’s desires in the erotic realm to counterbalance the fantasies of anti-eroticism and childlessness that would be their ultimate undoing. In these instances, the reproductive logic of romance attempts to trap women in a downward spiral of perpetuating societies that celebrate women for their beauty while refusing to acknowledge that their deepest desires might well be to live their lives undesired and unmolested by men, in queer celebration of anti-erotica devoid of children and husbands but populated with pleasures left untold.