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## Homoerotic Medievalism: Looking at Queer Desire in the Homosocial Relationships of Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" and Fletcher and Shakespeare's The Two Noble Kinsmen

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

HOMOEROTIC MEDIEVALISM: LOOKING AT QUEER DESIRE IN THE  
HOMOSOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS OF CHAUCER'S "THE KNIGHT'S TALE"  
AND FLETCHER AND SHAKESPEARE'S THE TWO NOBLE KINSMEN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH

by

Juan Espinosa Chávez

2022

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences, and Education

This thesis, written by Juan Espinosa Chávez, and entitled Homoerotic Medievalism: Looking at Queer Desire in the Homosocial Relationships of Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" and Fletcher and Shakespeare's The Two Noble Kinsmen, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Heather E. Blatt, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 30, 2022

The thesis of Juan Espinosa Chávez is approved.

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Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
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Andres G. Gil  
Vice President of Research and Economic Development  
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2022

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my Lord God,  
my mother, Yanin, and my father, Juan Carlos, my family,  
my friends, my students,  
Dr. Heather Blatt, who aided me its completion,  
Dr. James Sutton, and Dr. Vernon Dickson.

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My experience in this coursework has been rewarding and has allowed me to grow. This is the ending of a heavy journey and the beginning of a new one. I am eternally grateful for all of those who have helped me get to where I am today.

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

HOMOEROTIC MEDIEVALISM: LOOKING AT QUEER DESIRE IN THE  
HOMOSOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS OF CHAUCER'S "THE KNIGHT'S TALE"  
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Florida International University, 2022

Miami, Florida

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The purpose of this thesis is to explore queer interiority within the heteronormative social constructions of late medieval England. Queer interiority is not an occurrence of modernity, but rather a response to social constructions that date back to the Middle Ages. It is essential to account for queerness in the Middle Ages because authors like Chaucer promote the successive resurfacing of queer characters within heteronormative social constructions. Writing during the queer reign of Richard II, Chaucer constructs the interior identities of Palamon and Arcite as a reflection of the king and the political norms of England. Inspired by Chaucer, authors in the early modern period, such as Fletcher and Shakespeare, explore the queer propositions of Chaucer and reimagine his stories by extending the characters' queer potential. This phenomenon is known as medievalism, which encompasses the transformations and retellings of medieval cultural productions in post-medieval periods.

Queerness in medieval and early modern literature occurs through desire, nominally, same-sex relationships; it exists in the mimicked normative relationship constructions of same-sex characters. To access queer desire, Lacanian

psychoanalysis explains the signification of language in romantic discourse. His theories do not apply solely to heterosexual relationships, but also the “inversions” (as Freud would name it) that exist when two characters of the same sex desire one another. Through close readings of Geoffrey Chaucer's “The Knight's Tale” and John Fletcher and William Shakespeare's *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, as well as historical, psychoanalytic, theoretical, and analytical texts, this paper will account for queerness in medievalism.

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## **Introduction**

With contemporary research moving into critical theory, scholars have focused on topics that challenge traditional literary understanding. Queer studies enables the deconstruction of the normative politics of literature from its respective historical ground. Despite contemporary scholars moving away from psychoanalysis, the post-structuralist frameworks of Jacques Lacan offer a useful methodology to explain the normative structures of a text and its underlying queer behaviors. The question is, how far back should queer analyses go? What should be the archival focus? Likewise, scholars such as Pamela VanHaitsma ask the question: what should be queered? The theorist Michel Foucault, argues for the performances of queer behaviors as a product of modern societies, beginning in the seventeenth century (Foucault 11; Webster 377). Scholars like David Halperin claim that both hetero and homosexuality are modern and that recent historical developments created the division between heteronormative standards and queer performances (10; Webster 379). Nevertheless, Scholars of queer studies need to account for the Middle Ages as part of the historical development of queerness. The division created by normative standards and queer performances belongs to a historical construction going further back than the modern period since medieval social, cultural, political, and religious values exist in continuity.

Archives from the Middle Ages, such as legal documents, literary works, and historical narratives, should be a focus for scholars of queer studies because they challenge our understanding of normative and queer structures; they are beyond our cultural comfort zones. Comparing archives of the Middle Ages to later periods, authors like Chaucer introduce the susceptibility of normative structures being deconstructed to its queer components. Chaucer's writing still speaks to post-medieval audiences, such as Shakespeare's. Shakespeare's inspiration from

Chaucerian narrative poems promotes the concept of medievalism, where the cultural productions of the Middle Ages are transformed and retold. In a chapter by Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz titled “Making Medievalism: A Critical Overview,” they cite Leslie Workman’s argument of presentism as a vital part of studies in the Middle Ages; presentism refers to the individual interpretations of the Middle Ages that raise modern concerns as to how such period “may have actually been” (4; Workman 451-2).<sup>1</sup> Being concerned with the sociocultural productions of the Middle Ages, Fletcher and Shakespeare adapt Chaucer’s portraits of interiority into the early modern period. *The Two Noble Kinsmen* reveals queer issues in the long-lasting influence of pre-modern English culture by exploring the queer interiority of “The Knight’s Tale.” Demonstrated by applying Lacanian psychoanalysis, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Fletcher engage with queer interiority; its exploration should be considered by contemporary scholars of queer studies as a continuist method since medievalism carries presentism into modernity.

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<sup>1</sup> In Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz’s, “Making Medievalism: A Critical Overview” in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms* (Boydell and Brewer 2014, p. 3-4), they discuss Leslie Workman’s concern with continuity and presentism in the Middle Ages, found in “Leslie Workman: A Speech of Thanks” by William Calin in *Medievalism in the Modern World* (Brepols 1998, p. 451-2).

## The Queer Reign of Richard II and Chaucer's Gossip of Identity Politics

It is essential to explore the cultural politics of late medieval England, whereby a double standard between the role crown and the practice of “sodomy” coexisted in the corpus of King Richard II.<sup>2</sup> This double standard entailed the queer identity of the king while he ruled a straight, hypermasculine country. The term *queer* applies to the cultural politics of late medieval England. Queerness adheres not only to modernity, but also to a mode that deconstructs a wider pool of texts, most notably Chaucer. Specifically, it includes anti-normative behaviors within masculine constructions, presented via same-sex desire. Through *The Canterbury Tales* and his other poems, Chaucer introduces gossip networks and gendered imaginings of queerness that influenced post-medieval authors, such as Shakespeare. Chaucerian literature lends itself to the queer historiography of the Ricardian court. Gossip that was contemporary with Chaucer alluded to Richard's relations with his favorite courtiers, including Robert de Vere, Duke of Ireland and 9<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford (Federico 34). We can access the queer historicism in Chaucer's time using gossip rhetoric, where queer gossips (societal speculations of anti-normative behaviors) in *The Canterbury Tales* exist via Chaucerian spectatorship of courtly behavior.

Interrogating the queer rhetoric of the Ricardian court should begin with a review of Richard II's reign since it is pivotal to Chaucer's literature. The reign of Richard II was troublesome. He began ruling at just ten years old in 1377 after his grandfather, Edward III, passed away one year after Richard's father, Edward Prince of Wales and Aquitaine had also passed. During his youth, Richard's government was controlled by

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<sup>2</sup> See the second part of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologicae*, question 154 for *sodomy*. In “Satirizing Queer Brotherhood in the Chaucerian Corpus,” Tison Pugh explains that medieval fraternal oaths are often interpreted under sodomical standards despite homoerotic absence.

his regency council, given that he was too young to rule himself. The life and reign of Richard II is notoriously adapted in the chronicles of the 14<sup>th</sup> century chronicler, Thomas Walsingham.<sup>3</sup> Although his bias leaned to anti-Ricardian propaganda, his chronicles appealed to gossip-induced portrayals of Richard that were necessarily queer. Richard's most preeminent moment was his involvement in suppressing the Rising of 1381, most commonly known as the Peasant's Revolt, where the English peasants, merchants, and others engaged in rebellion due to the poll tax of 1380. While Richard's method was to appease those in the uprising, he made it clear that any form of rebellion would result in punishment, including execution (Ormrod 22). As a result, Richard suppressed the uprising through fear rhetoric in his remarks at Smithfield, London (Saul 74).<sup>4</sup> Since then, chroniclers like Walsingham have made it clear that Richard was already ambitious and desired political dominance at just fourteen years of age. Since the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 by King John, kings exercised limited power. However, this was not the case for Richard because he was flouting its restrictions. There were moments in his reign where he potentially desired to do as he would, which resulted in other members of nobility rising against him, such as Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, and Richard's cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, Earl of Derby. As a result, Richard banished Mowbray, but pardoned Bolingbroke given their kinship (Given-Wilson 561). Not many years later, Bolingbroke returned to the political stage. The year 1399 included efforts from Bolingbroke to depose Richard. Bolingbroke subsequently took the throne as King Henry IV.

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<sup>3</sup> See Thomas Walsingham's "Historia vitæ et regni Ricardi Secundi" in his *Chronica maiora*.

<sup>4</sup> In his 1999 publication, "The Great Revolt, 1381," Nigel Saul translates Walsingham's text regarding Richard II's words to the leaders of the uprising.

Richard II displayed qualities that historians view under queer lenses. In *Historia Vita Ricardi Secundi* (1377-92) we are provided with queer aspects of Richard: “*facies alba et rotunda et feminia ... lingua brevis et balbuciens*” (Anonymous 166). Discussing this passage, Sylvia Federico translates it as “blond hair, feminine aspects, and stuttering lisping speech” (25), noting how Richard’s physical characteristics are perceived as feminine, thus queering his masculine identity. Contemporary records thus present him as a feminized figure who evoked homophobic associations that would not constitute a reputable masculine king, like his grandfather Edward III had been (Federico 26). Chroniclers writing within a generation of Richard II’s death also emphasize his femininity. A primary motivation for this emphasis is the political discourse that legitimized Henry Bolingbroke’s reign after deposing Richard. Historical accounts vouch for suspected perversion in Richard that deemed him unfit as a king, though such accounts remain suspect as Lancastrian propaganda attempting to defend Henry’s deposition of Richard (Federico 26). Lancastrian refers to Bolingbroke and his proponents; Bolingbroke was made Duke of Lancaster after his father John of Gaunt passed away.

Inspired by earlier queer portrayals of Richard II, Shakespeare contributed to creating a queer portrait of Richard II in penning his history play, *The Tragedie of King Richard the Second* (1597), which included a feminized version of the king. Even in the early modern period, the gossip propagated by antagonistic chroniclers remained relevant. The story of Richard II (notably in Shakespeare’s play) was used by Robert Devereux, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Essex, to create a parallel between Richard II and the then-queen of England, Elizabeth I. Essex used the example of Richard’s feminized unfitness as an attribute he assigned to Elizabeth’s feminine reign. (Warren

208). Richard's story was thus continuously used to reinforce heteronormativity, especially during the reign of a woman (Irish 165).

Consequently, queer rhetoric emerges in late medieval chronicles to underline Richard's unfitness to rule. Walsingham's *Historia Anglicana* presents a narrative of Richard's queer behavior, touching on his unfitness to rule. Richard's queerness made him a figure that chroniclers needed to underscore, as it supported gossip narratives and propaganda that were destined to vindicate Richard's overthrow.

Historical accounts like Walsingham's are categorized under the term that Carolyn Dinshaw calls "queer historicism," where queer approaches can be applied to chronological and normative developments that disrupt historical and present boundaries (Dinshaw 6; Federico 26). These scholars focus on periodization in literature, a construction that separates events into periods. Periodization parallels the construction of queerness as a modern phenomenon (de Grazia 3). It is essential to consider literary works without focusing on them as mere products of their time. There is a relationship between pre-modern and modern archives that raises critical thinking. I argue that anachronism raises the value of critical theory. To exemplify this, Margreta de Grazia says that anachronism occurs when modern worldview is applied to the periods in question (3). Furthermore, de Grazia adds: "Anachronisms are now being seen as productive, creative, and useful (3-4). The queer historiography of late medieval England helps scholars of queer studies in analyzing queer undertones stuck in normative times (Dinshaw 6). In his analysis of approaches to medieval studies, Richard Zeikowitz recommends that "students need to navigate the very different mores, values, and identity-forming acts expressed in medieval texts" (69). All scholars of literary studies would benefit from this lesson. Scholars of queer studies should access a historical network of "strange social meanings and relations"

(Burger 157; Zeikowitz 70). Moreover, anachronistic texts are figures of modern criticism. In other words, queer analysis imposes a modern understanding that needs not be adherent to its time (VanHaitsma 135).<sup>5</sup> Queer scholarship should account for the complex social relationships in the medieval period to enhance scholars' understanding of queerness; it is not just a modern phenomenon because its performance can be traced further. Therefore, I am using Dinshaw's queer historicism to revitalize historical narratives that circulate in medieval studies.

As previously mentioned, Richard II's departure from the standards of an effective rule – such as the ones laid down by the Magna Carta – set the stage for representing his queerness and conflicted with political tides in medieval politics (a double standard), which cannot be reduced to antagonistic chroniclers, like Walsingham and the *Vita Ricardi*. Richard engaged in “obscene” behaviors that went against religious and political heteronormativity. We know that homosexual behavior was coded as “sodomy” (Aquinas II-II.154.12; Pugh 283-4) and therefore a crime in medieval England, as it violated natural law and order. Under normative pretenses, the king was to follow and enforce these laws. However, Walsingham alluded to the king's “obscene intimacies” with his favorites, predominantly Robert de Vere (Pugh 292-293). Historical accounts also vouch for suspected perversion in the king that deemed him unfit as a king. In this way, historical accounts – often ones suspected of Lancastrian sympathies – allude to Richard II's suspected perversion as a way of both representing him as unfit and justifying his deposition. Authors like John Gower and Chaucer used literature to include queer undertones inspired by Richard's sexuality in

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<sup>5</sup> In “Gossip as Rhetorical Methodology For Queer and Feminist Historiography”, *Rhetoric Review* (Taylor & Francis 2016), Pamela Van Haitsma argues that gossip is a methodology that deconstructs literary and historical archives. Queer methodology can access texts before post-colonial texts (135).

order to justify their sympathy for Bolingbroke. As Linkien mentions, Gower's renowned poem, *Confessio Amantis*, was previously dedicated to Richard II and changed to Bolingbroke in 1392 (125).<sup>6</sup> As for Chaucer, his support for Bolingbroke was, in part, due to his relationship with John of Gaunt, whose third wife, Katherine Swynford, was Chaucer's sister-in-law. Furthermore, late medieval English poets, such as Gower and Chaucer, worked within concepts of sodomy in the Ricardian court to moderate themes of loyalty and honor (Federico 27), where texts like Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" signify a queer relationship between two chivalric figures.

Richard's queer reign was brought to an end by Bolingbroke in 1399, but we are unaware of the true cause of Richard's death. The most popular theory he was placed in solitary confinement within prisons where he suffered dehydration and starvation; there was no trace of wounding in Richard's corpse. In contrast to Richard's reign, the reign of Henry IV signifies dominant masculinity returning to the court, where queer behaviors become erased.

Despite Henry IV reinstating normative behaviors for the English public during his reign, gossip during Richard II's lifetime, including the discourse between chroniclers and scholars since, remains a topic for queer analysis and the performance of queer behaviors in a repressive society. Evidently, gossip of Richard's anti-normative circulated in the English court during late medieval England, and Richard was aware of this. The nobility around him knew of his relationship with his favorites and labelled them as "seductors" – in Medieval terms, "traitors" – a term that equates

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<sup>6</sup> Gower previously dedicated the poem to King Richard II in the "yer sextenthe" (P.25) of his reign. After the king's defamation, procured by Lancastrian propaganda, it was changed to "This bok, upon amendment... / I sende unto myn oghne lord, / Which of Lancastre is Henri named" (P.83-87).



to “seducers” (Federico 28). Richard II was not the first supposed sodomite in late Medieval England. His great-grandfather, Edward II, was suspected of a homosexual relationship with his favorite, Piers Gaveston. Scholars have continuously drawn on parallels between both kings to create a queer analysis, both in history (Richard Sévère, Tom Linkien, and Sylvia Federico) and literature,<sup>7</sup> where historical narratives and gossips are conjured. Edward II engaged in behaviors parallel to Richard’s, such as his relationships with his favorites. (Federico 29-30, 35, 37). There are several accounts of his death, but the most prominent that gossip tradition purports his death via a hot poker inserted into his anus, symbolic of a phallic object representative of his homosexuality. It is no coincidence see this represented in Chaucer’s “The Miller’s Tale,” where the character Absolon brands Nicholas with a red-hot poker in a comical rendition. According to Federico, it seems to be a reminder for Richard II’s moral behavior: if it once happened to a king, it could happen to the current one, therefore posing a threat to Richard’s life (37).<sup>8</sup> Whether this historical account of Edward’s death is accurate or not, the performance of his queer behaviors remains a topic of discussion and he continues to be cross-examined with Richard.

To describe queer desire as a deviation from social norms, Tison Pugh writes in *Chaucer’s Anti-Eroticisms and the Queer Middle Ages* that queer love and desire “divorces” from social and religious norms that regulated sexuality, where queerness serves as a disruption to natural love (heterosexual performance) (3). Pugh also

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<sup>7</sup> See Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II* (1594) and William Shakespeare’s *Richard II* (1598).

<sup>8</sup> Federico mentions that the anal poker narrative was popular during Chaucer’s time. It was a sufficient justification to depose him. Also see Walsingham’s *Cronica maiora* (I.189) for his account of the anal rape.

mentions that anti-eroticism emerging from the lack of heteronormative sexuality is repressed by chastity and therefore a subversion of normativity (3); I propose to take this concept further. Applying Pugh's perspective to the anti-eroticism of Richard II's marriage, his distanced marriage with Queen Anne demonstrates how Richard was figuratively divorced from heterosexual practices and inclined towards the homoerotic. Combining the factors of a figuratively divorced bed, neglect of his wife, and the relationship with his favorites, these factors underline his interior identity regarding the double standard. Jennifer Garrison, a scholar in the literature of the Middle Ages, writes in "Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and the Danger of Masculine Interiority" that his political authority invites him to ignore external consequences (321). Following the construction of Richard's figurative divorce, Chaucer's reliance on these gossip networks (a system of speculated narratives) can be traced in *The Canterbury Tales* and his other poems. He observes how the desires of individuals represented medieval cultural conflicts and how the normative order suppresses interiority (Pugh 4; Harper & Proctor 2); the pilgrims' tales and his other works pick up on identity politics of the Ricardian court and illustrate its resulting conflicts (e.g., the masculine frustration between Palamon and Arcite in "The Knight's Tale," the queer desire for female sovereignty in "The Wife of Bath," and the "bromance" between Troilus and Pandarus in *Troilus and Criseyde* (Sévère 2008)). The pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* portray the effect of suppressive normativity and that seems to be Chaucer's goal. As an observer, he seeks to present hyperbolic personalities within normative England (e.g., the five husbands of the Wife and elaborate deception of the feminized Pardoner). Examining the list of pilgrims (including those who did not get a tale) reveals that the point of views neglect upper-class perspectives that adhered to cultural normativity. Despite the Knight being the highest pilgrim in the

social hierarchy, it was not sufficient for him to be accepted into high nobility, regardless of how he presents himself. The pilgrims' interior identities are expressed in literature, while Chaucer might claim their critical discourses as everyday gossip. We know what the individuals in the pilgrimage had to say without knowing the exact names of the pilgrims that Chaucer represented. Chaucer illustrates the interior nature of the pilgrims in their tales and meticulously avoids any negative public response by covering up unfixed controversies. This occurs when other pilgrims chastise the tale-teller and when Chaucer excuses the stories he wrote in his "Retraction." That being said, the Knight exemplifies the repressive structures of Ricardian England, providing a tale with queer interiority hovering under a masculine guise. The following analysis will focus on "The Knight' Tale."

Chaucer uses "The Knight's Tale" to resituate the court of Richard II in Athens. Ironically, Theseus' court exemplifies hypermasculinity. Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" focuses on multiple conditions of masculinity set after Theseus' successful siege of Thebes. Taking control of the city, Theseus imprisons the tale's two protagonists, Palamon and Arcite. After witnessing the beauty of Emelye, Theseus' unmarried sister-in-law, they challenge each other to marry her. These events nominally underline the hypermasculinity of Theseus' court. Theseus also represents the normative order of late medieval England, representing its religious values and cultural practices. Patricia Ingham, who writes about "Homosociality and Creativity Masculinity in 'The Knight's Tale'" argues that Theseus' power is "creative" due to his masculine attribution (24); the creative power of the war-driven duke demands combat between warriors (24-25). Theseus conveys a heteronormative standard by having knights wound each other to prove their masculinity (25). This is an accepted manner for an English king to demonstrate political fitness (Federico 33). Such

political fitness depends on a series of suffered losses. Theseus constructs the late medieval normative standard.

While Theseus offers a normative standard, the other male protagonists in the story, Palamon and Arcite, introduce a queer standard. Despite the way that Chaucer applies repressive medieval English politics to his representation of Athens, the relationship between the cousins offers a counter perspective of queer interiority in ideal friendship bonds. According to Freud's first essay in his *Theory of Sexuality*, Palamon and Arcite represent *amphigenic inverts*, meaning that they display a sexual attraction for both males and females (136). In other words, despite their attraction for Emelye, Chaucer represents them as also desiring each other by incorporating poetic language symbolic in vows and oaths. Moreover, homosexuality categorizes inversion, meaning that a person deviates from heteronormative sexuality. Inversion depends on outside influences, not limited to detention in prison (Freud 140); this notion exemplifies the cousins' case. The prison scene shows how Palamon and Arcite are ironically protected from the exterior world (Theseus' Athens) and can display their queer interiority.

With that said, scholars of queer studies should consider late medieval texts as an archival resource. Pre-modern texts should be accounted for when queer theory is applied to literature. We could not have queer studies if repressive structures did not exist in the first place; modern theory thrives on historical constructions. Despite the limited accessibility of medieval texts, modern theory allows us to dissect both historical and literary documents and extract the interiorities that were considered "deviant" in the time in which they were produced. Consequently, medieval interiorities become open to critical analysis, allowing scholars to extend historiography further back. According to Glenn Burger and Steven Kruger in

*Queering the Middle Ages*, queer theorists have not rethought history through its timeline of privileged individuals since the period of classic antiquity. Queer theory, instead, focuses on the constructions of modern thought; it can benefit from historical thinking dating back to primitive and medieval texts (3-4). In retrospect, it seems that Chaucer plants such an invitation in his texts.

### **Homoeroticism in “The Knight’s Tale” and Lacan’s Medievalism**

The sociocultural influences of Richard II’s court exist in the framework of Chaucer’s writing, particularly in “The Knight’s Tale.” In comparison with the other pilgrims in “The General Prologue,” the Knight has the highest social rank; nonetheless, he places low in the ranks of the English nobility. The Knight conveys a sense of honor in chivalry that is indicative of late medieval English society. Indeed, the Knight’s character is one of the closest examples useful to the masculine standards of the Ricardian court: “A KNIGHT there was and that a worthy man / ... he loved chivalry, / Truth and honour, freedom and courtesy” (General Prologue 43-46). Naturally, the Knight will present a tale of romance, specifically courtly love. The two noble cousins, Palamon and Arcite, become immediately infatuated with Emelye, which serves as a pretense to what Lacanian psychoanalysis codes as a “signifier” (Seminar III 167). Lacanian psychoanalysis helps to access homoeroticism in “The Knight’s Tale.”

Queer desire serves as the essence that breaks the masculine and feminine boundaries constructed by normative politics; formations of it complicate medieval texts. Thus, a queer analysis of “The Knight’s Tale” would require desire to be a core in which formations of queerness exist. The most influential successor of Freud, Jacques Lacan, whose theories still shape psychoanalytic studies today, established

that language is the bedrock for desire. He proposed that desire hinges on language rather than material sexuality (Lacan 40); moreover, “it is caught up, rather, in social structures and strictures, in the fantasy version of reality that forever dominated our lives after the entrance into language” (Felluga 2015).<sup>9</sup> While Lacanian psychoanalysis suggests heterosexual desire, scholars of queer studies extend it to queer relationships. Ian Parker, Tim Dean, and Erin Labbie propose that Lacan does not dismiss queer desire. Labbie, specifically, contextualizes this extension as “Lacan’s Medievalism.” Lacan’s medievalism make his applicability to Palamon and Arcite strong. In particular, five key concepts apply: *signifier*, *signified*, *phallus*, *castration*, and *jouissance*. These terms conceptualize the homoerotic desire of Palamon and Arcite and the role of Emelye as “coming between” them. Moreover, “The Knight’s Tale” represents queer gossip in the Ricardian court.

Chaucerian scholars that provide a link between queer rhetoric and his poetry, Tison Pugh and Richard Zeikowitz, deconstruct the “The Knight’s Tale” within *The Canterbury Tales*. According to Pugh, “Fraternal promises in Chaucer’s literature evoke homosocial tensions and aggressions; for Chaucer, these particular bonds of brotherhood carried them with the likely possibility of queerness” (282).<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Scala proposes Lacan’s theory of desire as a means to queer *The Canterbury Tales* in her book, *Desire in the Canterbury Tales*. In what follows, Scala’s research helps

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<sup>9</sup> See Jacques Lacan’s *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, page 40.

<sup>10</sup> In “Satirizing Queer Brotherhood in the Chaucerian Corpus,” Pugh is not linking queerness to homosexuality. However, he is emphasizing that in the framework of power structures, homosexuality arises from the “cultural disenfranchisement arising from queerness” (282). This is also formulated by Richard Zeikowitz in *Discourses of Same-Sex Desire in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century* (2003, p. 4). Likewise, Glenn Burger and Steven Kruger present a similar argument in *Queering the Middle Ages* (2001, p. xvi).

formulate the analysis of Chaucer and Lacan to queer Chaucerian scholarship with Lacanian desire, exploring homoeroticism in “The Knight’s Tale.”

The work of Chaucer in question invites heterosexual standards of desire that can be queered. Even if “The Knight’s Tale” was written with the primary goal of joining one of the cousins with Emelye in marriage, the poem has queer potential. Jacques Lacan’s sixth book, *Desire and its Interpretation* (1959-60) graphs his theory of desire via heterosexual standards. However, this is not to say that his contribution to desire cannot be queered (Parker 238-9; Stockton 102, 111).<sup>11</sup> Societal constructions are able to be broken down no matter how masculine or straight they are. Lacanian desire extends to the homosocial relationships of “The Knight’s Tale,” focusing more on Palamon and Arcite’s interactions with one another than those with Emelye (Scala 52).<sup>12</sup> Scala defines two of Lacan’s key concepts. First, the signifier as an “audible image” of a sign through communication and the signified as an invoked mental concept (12). Likewise, Scala emphasizes that assuming the signifier allows language to enter the “symbolic order,” making itself understood (13-14). Following these terms, the phallus ( $\Phi$ ), signifies a lack (Seminar IV 219) and castration ( $\phi$ ) as “a symbolic lack of an imaginary object” (Evans 23).<sup>13</sup> Finally, *jouissance* is “the satisfaction of a drive” (Seminar VII 209).<sup>14</sup> These terms will be used to analyze the

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<sup>11</sup> Ian Parker, “Queer Directions from Lacan” (2017) and Kathryn Stockton, “Jouissance, the Gash of Bliss” (2017).

<sup>12</sup> In this section, Scala argues that, despite Emelye being the literal object of courtly desire, Lacan’s discourse of desire and aggressivity is focused more on Palamon and Arcite.

<sup>13</sup> See Jacques Lacan’s Seminar IV: *The Object Relation*, 209 for *phallus* and Dylan Evans’ *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (1996, p. 23) for *castration*.

<sup>14</sup> See Jacques Lacan’s Seminar VII: *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-1960, 209) for *jouissance*.

homoerotic connection between Palamon and Arcite in Theseus' heteronormative court and the significance of their love for Emelye.

The prime instance of signification in "The Knight's Tale" takes place in the prison containing Palamon and Arcite; in this location, the intense homosocial discourse between the cousins takes place. The symbolic language that can be read as homoerotic underlines the signification of their discourse. First, because they can enjoy each other's company without the interference of the outside world, namely, Thebes, and secondly because they can be one another's "wife" and "heir." Freud's mention of prison detention applies to the current scenario found in "The Knight's Tale." Palamon and Arcite's discourse presents language abundant in oaths, indicating a similarity to a wedding vow:

That nevere, for to dyen in the payne,  
Til that the deeth departe shal us tweyne,  
Neither of us in love to hyndre oother,  
Ne in noon oother cas, my leeve brother (KT 1129-36).

The lines spoken by Arcite, specifically, "til that the deeth departe shal us tweyne," mimic the wedding vow of being *one* until death parts the two. They enjoy each other's company because they create the role of a wedded couple. The medieval audience saw this as a normative relationship given the perception of an intense social bond.<sup>15</sup> Reading the tale through a modern perspective, Pugh tells us that "difference construct identities, and identities are thus phantastically synthesized in response to sexual variance upon men. Any man can be subsumed into queerness" (Pugh 6). In

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<sup>15</sup> For medieval perceptions of marriage and sexuality, see Ruth Mazo Karras' "The Regulation of Sexuality in the Late Middle Ages: England and France." Perceptions of intense social bonds in the late medieval period can be found in Robert Stretter's "Rewriting Perfect Friendship in Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale' and Lydgate's 'Fabula Duorum Mercatorum.'"



this same passage, he claims that the condition for men to be “subsumed into queerness” depends on the cultural constructions of sexual signifiers in relation to the signifiers given to males (i.e., the intense social bond of brotherhood). Nonetheless, medieval politics policed the queer potential of male-male relationships, making their performance a cultural taboo. Repressive restrictions beget queer relationships. According to Lee Edelman, political policing can produce straight or gay men alike, and both hetero and homosexuality are produced through social forces as by biological and hormonal ones (Pugh 6, quoting Edelman). The social force applicable to “The Knight’s Tale” is the prison environment where they are one another’s partner, policed by the hypermasculinity of Theseus. Likewise, the Knight presents this tale because, according to Pugh, his queer potential for this tale serves as a response to “antithetically gendered tensions” (11).

In “The Knight’s Tale,” heteronormative standards restrict queer relationships, nominally, the pretense that a knight ought to be wedded to a lady. According to Pugh, the normativity of heterosexual relationships restricts male brotherhood from reaching its queer potential (283-4). In Paul Strohm’s words, “Chaucer’s poetry not only presents a society in which vassalage has been replaced by an array of more casual relationships by sworn brotherhood but includes a critique of those relations” (Pugh 284, quoting Strohm). Chaucer uses the queer potential of Palamon and Arcite’s bond to critique casual relationships since their exterior aspect fears the suspicion of nonnormative behavior. Strohm adds that Chaucer satirizes the potential of brotherhood oaths in criticizing the social values of late medieval England.<sup>16</sup> That being said, the presence of Emelye as an object of desire signifies the restriction of the

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Harvard University Press 1994, p. 96).

cousins' queer potential and a critique of normative relationships. Once Palamon discovers Emelye outside of the window cell, he immediately falls in love with her and professes it to Arcite. After Arcite looks at her from afar as well, he too falls in love with her and shares it with Palamon. Given that desire relies on language, Palamon's cries of "alas" (KT.1073) and "a!" (KT.1078) not only signify his desire for Emelye grounded in normative standards, but also a 'wounding,' for the sight of Emelye disrupts his relationship with Arcite. In other words, the queer sanctuary of the prison is disrupted by the societal expectation of heterosexual relationships. Likewise, Arcite's witness of Emelye creates the same occurrence. Thus, the conflicting desires in the cousins creates rivalry that causes them to quarrel. The brotherhood oaths are in danger of normative standards. Doing this, language transforms the shifts in desire regarding the Lacanian perspective in reference to Seminar IV and extends to the discourses of Palamon and Arcite. The appearance of Emelye serves to cement the bonds between men, creating an intense homosocial dynamic (Sévère 424).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the mediation of male-male relationships depends on the object, Emelye; the female figure intermediates the homosocial bond of Palamon and Arcite, creating a 'bromance', the equivalent of a male-male relationship. (Reeser 61; Sévère 424).<sup>18</sup>

Even though Emelye mediates male-male relationships, Chaucer characterizes her as a maiden who does not desire a normative marriage structure. When praying to

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Sévère, "Pandarus and Troilus's Bromance: Male Bonding, Sodomy, and Incest in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*" (424). Although Sévère focuses on the male-male-female love triangle of Troilus, Pandarus, and Criseyde, the principle applies to the triangulated love of Palamon, Arcite, and Emelye.

<sup>18</sup> See Todd Reeser's *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* for intermediaries in male-male relationships. Also see Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* for homosocial bonds.

Diana, she says, “wel wostow that I / Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf, / Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf... / Noght wol I knowe compaignye of man” (KT 2304-11). With these lines, Emelye seems to be constructing herself as an asexual individual, which correlates with Pugh’s argument on medieval anti-eroticism; queerness (in the guise of asexuality) disrupts the communal order (3). Emelye goes against social constructions of femininity and marriage, but also allows queer lenses to be centered on Palamon and Arcite.

As formerly discussed, the language of romantic desire applied to Emelye by Palamon and Arcite creates the following signification: the womanhood of Emelye is a mediation by which homoerotic relationships can exist in a heteronormative society. In Sévère’s words,

The key to this acceptance is based on the notion that one’s heterosexual identity must remain intact so the intimacy of the bond does not arouse suspicion. In other words, intimate moments between men must have a heteronormative valence in order to counter the appearance of same-sex attraction or desire (425-6).

Sévère here advances the concept of heterosexual identities disguising intimate bonds, which centers on Emelye mediating Palamon and Arcite’s relationship. The bond between Palamon and Arcite needs to be disguised with courtly oaths to Emelye so that same-sex desire will not be under suspicion. This notion of disguising reveals that the hypermasculinity of Theseus’ court (in the guise of heterosexual desire) is exerted to indicate hidden “gayness.” It also parallels how Richard II’s marriage to Queen Anne served as a heteronormative cover-up for his queer relationship with Robert de Vere. In a society of gossip, cover-ups provide the normative standard by which heteronormative relationships can exist. Emelye serves the role of the signifier of

Palamon and Arcita's homoerotic interest (the *signified*). I mentioned that the phallus, according to Lacan, signifies lack. In other words, the lack in the cousins revolves around the inability to exert their desire for one another. Lacan codes the phallus as an imaginary object that does not directly symbolize the penis, but rather its function within fantasy (Seminar VI 153). Evidently, Palamon and Arcite are missing something – indicative of a lack – and thus, the phallus comes into play. Such a lack creates a fantasy in both men that triangulates on a potential courtship of Emelye. Close-reading their discourse and recalling their words of brotherly love towards one another reveals that they cannot project the phallic need towards each other given the repressive standards of late medieval England. That being said, Chaucer's inclusion of this complication alludes to the double standard of the Ricardian court; the king who enforces these norms cannot avoid the gossip of his homosexual performances. Richard II, Palamon, and Arcite have to create secrets through a heterosexual cover-up. This is not to say that Palamon and Arcite's rivalry extends displays of homoeroticism later in the text.

“The Knight's Tale” progresses with Palamon and Arcite's will to face each other in combat, where the victor will Emelye. Both cousins are determined to go the extremes. However, what happens during the course of the kinsmen's quest is seldom account for Chaucerian studies, specifically the moments where they continue to express language that remains symbolic of their love for each other. The scene where Palamon and Arcite prepare to battle is abundant in language that enunciates their desire still lingering:

“And mete and drinke this night will I bringe  
Y-nough for thee, and clothes for thy beddinge...”  
And after that, with sharpe speres strong

They foynen ech at other wonder longe (KT 1615-1654).

The first two lines, spoken by Arcite, emphasize language that shows how both men still love each other even if it connotes rivalry for Emelye. The last two lines, spoken by Chaucer's narrator, evoke language that indicates not only desire, but also the use of phallic objects. Words like "sharpe" and "speres" symbolize the male genitalia inviting sexual imagery. The imaginary phallus links with the connotative penis to formulate the previous signification of Emelye as a disguise for the desire for themselves. The men want to enter *jouissance* (the need to exert satisfaction through a drive (Seminar VII 209)) and attain a homoerotic dynamic. To explain the gestures interchanged between the cousins, such as "mete" and "drinke," Derek G. Neal writes:

Men [in the Middle Ages] expected a 'true' friendship to be cemented and manifested through outward signs: gestures, embraces, gifts, even bed sharing. At the same time, the possibility of sodomical desire bubbled under the surface... passionate expressions of mutual affection were almost expected or ritualized, but could be utterly poisonous also (Sévère 425, quoting Neal).

Homoerotic desire surfaces through this interchange, centering in the gestures of nutrition and the notion of the two men going to bed near each other, signified by "clothes for thy beddinge." Nevertheless, the symbolic phallus cannot be negated as it is a signifier of *jouissance* (Seminar IV 308). What Lacan means by this is that the subject(s) – Palamon and Arcite – cannot negate phallic instances. In other words, the phallic language in the discourse does not allow the cousins to avoid *jouissance*; their physical proximity desires the satisfaction of a sexual urge. They enter into a chain of signification where language alludes to homoerotic motivations towards one another. Again, Chaucer incorporates the gossip of the Ricardian court through Richard II's

phallic motivation to go into *jouissance*. The cousins' frustration revolves on their inability to reach *jouissance*.

Palamon and Arcite cannot assert their full queer potential because Chaucer must restore the tale to normative codes at the end. Because of these instances, queer relationships are disrupted by marriages. After Palamon and Arcite fight, Arcite is the victor and wins the hand of Emelye. After falling off a horse, he meets his fate and hands Emelye to Palamon. By having Palamon wed Emelye, Chaucer neutralizes any instance of queer identity. Interestingly enough, there seems to be one last signification of the cousin's love mediated by Emelye. As Arcite dies, he says:

This al and som, that Arcita moot dye;  
For which he sendeth after Emelye  
And Palamon, that was his cosyn deere.  
Thanne seyde he thus, as ye shal after heere:  
“Naught may the woful spirit in myn herte  
Declare o point of alle my sorwes smerte  
To yow, my lady, that I love moost.  
But I biquethe the servyce of my goost” (KT 2761-8).

In a way, when Arcite says he will “biquethe the servyce” of his “goost” (spirit), he imparts himself into Emelye for Palamon's remembrance. Even if Palamon marries Emelye, he and Arcite are still connected.

## **Extending Queer Potential to *The Two Noble Kinsmen***

Throughout “The Knight’s Tale,” Chaucer attempts to highlight Palamon and Arcite’s queer interiority while they are attempting to cope with Theseus’ repressive government. Chaucer resurfaces throughout post-medieval literature as the celebrated father of English poetry. His writing carries queer interiority into the early modern period, where writers like William Shakespeare transform it into queer medievalism. Shakespeare’s characters carry the queer potential proposed by Chaucer and extend it to diverse personalities, giving us queer kings, brothers, and women. Shakespeare also uses the medieval gossip of Richard II’s court to create a deliberately queer story of the king in the play *Richard II*. In writing *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1634), Shakespeare and John Fletcher take “The Knight’s Tale” and dramatize it in a way relevant to their contemporary audience, translating medieval poetry into the early modern period. Nonetheless, the play maintains the relationship between the cousins Palamon and Arcite. The language that the playwrights use extends Chaucer’s characters’ queer potential and develops it explicitly. Their discourses invest in more poesy, the oaths are further queered, and their actions offer close physical contact. However, the playwrights do not focus queer interiority on Palamon and Arcite only, as they also add dimensions to Theseus and Emilia (Chaucer’s Emelye). It is important to discuss the significance of queer interiority moving into early modern literature because Shakespeare innovates queerness and engages with Chaucer to develop early modern queer medievalism. The queer interiority of early modern literature provides a smooth transition for medievalism to flow through different periods.

In contrast to Chaucer, Fletcher and Shakespeare give queer undertones to Theseus. This is significant because it complicates Theseus’ personality and mimics

the double standard of Richard II's politics during Chaucer's time. Like Richard, Theseus rules under a normative pretense while aligning with the homosocial bond displayed by Palamon and Arcite. The homosocial bonds of male-male relationships in the late medieval period are replicated in the play, while also incorporating women's queer desires.

In analyzing "The Knight's Tale," I mentioned that the queer potential of the story of Palamon and Arcite focuses on the homosocial dynamic of the cousins. Shakespeare and Fletcher exaggerate such bromance through dialogue and poetic language significant in courtly romance and innuendo. Moreover, they go beyond the relationship of the cousins to create a queer identity for Duke Theseus. Medievalism carries stories like "The Knight's Tale" into the early modern period and the writers unpack it for further potential; in this case, a queer one. The relationship between Theseus and his friend Pirithous forms an ideal brotherhood bond that mimics that of Palamon and Arcite's. In other words, the queer framework of Theseus and Pirithous is the ideal bond, described by Hippolyta, that applies to Palamon and Arcite, thus creating a significant homoerotic relationship in both pairs. Theseus and Pirithous' homosocial relationship queer the normative politics of Athens, as in the case of Richard II's reign. Therefore, the ideal bond of Theseus and Pirithous parallels with the queer framework of Palamon and Arcite. As noted in the prologue of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Shakespeare's audience knew the expositions of the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*. Fletcher and Shakespeare celebrate Chaucer's lyricism as an inheritance passed down to them by the medieval author himself, which indicates Chaucer's exemplary position in the transition of medievalism into the early modern period. The playwrights find a way to queer Chaucer's lyricism by incorporating theirs, nominally, Shakespeare's romantic discourses. *The Two Noble Kinsmen*



assumes romantic discourses in the dialogues between their same-sex characters; it materializes the intense homosocial kinship of the cousins and the erotic dynamics between the others. Instead of having a play with ideal male friendships (and female), however, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* fails to idealize them (Steward 58; Stretter 271).<sup>19</sup> In other words, the playwrights replicate the friendship bonds of the late medieval period – intended to be homosocial – with a queer interiority. The same-sex friendships of the play are fragile and susceptible to what Freud calls “external intrusion,” meaning that external factors (e.g., the prison) create a “degenerate behaviour” (anti-normative) (Freud 138-40); as a result, the playwrights develop and exaggerate romantic bonds (Stretter 271). Richard Mallette writes that *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is an important play because “it highlights the web of affiliations between the erotic and the homosocial (33);” Shakespeare and Fletcher are the premier representatives of how this web of affiliations emerges and can be studied in early modern England.

Externally, Theseus wants to show that he is a figure of Athenian masculinity and portray the heteronormative politics of England. However, his internal homosocial devotion to Pirithous puts that display at risk. Yet Renaissance drama often questions the role of masculinity. Even though the plays are structured under straight, patriarchal societies, we can deconstruct hypermasculine male characters into their queer components, especially in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. While Theseus begins as a symbolic masculine man who conquered Hippolyta with his “sword,” Fletcher and Shakespeare’s language invite us to dive into his queer undertones. Since Chaucer

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Stretter, “Flowers of Friendship, Amity and Tragic Desire in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*” in *English Literary Renaissance* (271). Also see Alan Steward’s, “‘Near Akin’: The Trials of Friendship in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*” in *Shakespeare’s Late Plays: New Readings*, ed. Jennifer Richards and James Knowles (Edinburgh University Press 1999, p. 58).

failed to illustrate Pirithous' character, the playwrights take advantage of complicating Theseus' character by amplifying his relationship with Pirithous. Both Hippolyta and Emilia discuss the relationship of Theseus and Pirithous, and Hippolyta mentions:

Yet fate hath brought them off: Their knot of love

Tide, weau'd, intangled, with so true, so long,

And with a finger of so deepe a cunning

May be out worne, never undone...

*Theseus* cannot be umpire to himselfe

Cleaving his conscience into twaine, and doing

Each side like Iustice, which he loves best (I.iii.493-9).

In this passage, Hippolyta underlines Pirithous' esteem for Theseus, and how Theseus depends on Pirithous' friendship. Her emphasis on "cleaving his conscience into twaine" signifies Theseus and Pirithous being joined as one. Similar to Chaucer's detailed bond of the cousins in "The Knight's Tale," Fletcher and Shakespeare depict an oath that exceeds mere brotherhood; the oath that they depict is homoerotic and parallels the same "knot of love" that Palamon and Arcite share. While Ju Ok Yoon writes that their strong homosexual tie seems threatening to Hippolyta (448; Donaldson 62),<sup>20</sup> the play instead demonstrates how Hippolyta's sense of female agency (maintained somewhat by the playwrights) allows her to find the men's relationship admirable. In *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Hippolyta and Emilia do not seem concerned with heterosexual marriage structures, which leads them to approve of

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<sup>20</sup> Ju Ok Yoon, "A Psychoanalytic Reading of Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale' and Shakespeare's *The Two Noble Kinsmen*" (448). Ok Yoon cites Talbot Donaldson's *The Swan at the Well: Shakespeare Reading Chaucer* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1985, p. 62) and discusses Hippolyta's conversation with Emilia concerning Theseus' male bond.

strong homosexual ties. Even though the women deliver autonomous language, inversion from societal norms does not allow an external intrusion that can intensify the bond between him and Pirithous, contrary to the daring proximity written for Palamon and Arcite. According to Mallette, both Theseus and Pirithous, and Palamon and Arcite are entwined by a knot that is only revoked by death, going beyond the idealized friendships of the medieval period (33). These idealized medieval friendship bonds pave the way for queer interiority to continuously resurface in the early modern period and into modernity. Because of the bonds proposed by Chaucer and his contemporaries in late medieval England, queer interiority has developed and become more expressive.

Underlining the development of expressive queerness, the relationship between Palamon and Arcite in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* surpasses that of Theseus and Pirithous. While both couples exceed idealized friendship constructions, Palamon and Arcite excel in intensifying their emotional bonds. The other characters of the play seem to favor Palamon and Arcite's friendship bond, including Emilia. Despite the drive for both cousins to attain Emilia, she feels conflicted because she does not desire a marriage construction with a man and would not want the bond of the cousins to be broken:

Yet I may binde those wounds up, that must open  
And bleed to death for my sake else; Ile choose,  
And end their strife: Two such yong hansom men  
Shall never fall for me...  
Oh who can finde the bent of womans fancy?  
I am a Foole, my reason is lost in me...  
That women ought to beate me (IV.ii.2347-82).

Emilia feels culpable for the cousins' "strife," even if the blame does not fall upon her. But because she finds herself caught in a heteronormative construction, Emilia cannot shake off the weight of being responsible for the demise of Palamon and Arcite's bond. Such is her guilt that she wishes for other women to "beate" her; other members of her gender, caught in the same construction, would scorn her for yielding to Athens' heteronormative politics is what her soliloquy seems to point out. The lines, "two such yong hansom men / Shall never fall for me" indicate her will for both Palamon and Arcite to live while also pointing to a resolution of not letting their love for one another perish for hers.

Emilia's predicament exemplifies the repressive nature of Athenian politics; however, despite his masculine government, Theseus favors the relationship between Palamon and Arcite because it reminds him of his bond with Pirithous. Ju Ok Yoon mentions that the dramatists' main concern revolves around the subjects' (the cousins) homosexuality in conflict with their desire for the opposite sex (Emilia) (446-7).<sup>21</sup> With that said, the signifier, in this case Emilia, is also conflicted given her state of anti-eroticism (against heterosexual marriages structures) and her self-blame for having to break up an ideal bond between men.

According to Alan Steward, "Shakespeare and Fletcher place same-sex friends in a world plagued by dangerous and inescapable desires, one in which friendship disintegrates in the face of an inexorable drive toward marriage and procreation" (271). This predicament is underlined in the queer interiority of the cousins and Emilia's anti-eroticism. The normative regulations of Athens cause Palamon and

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<sup>21</sup> See Derek Brewer's "Escape from the Mimetic Fallacy" in *Studies in Medieval English Romances: Some New Approaches*, ed. Derek Brewer. Brewer argues that both male and female characters feel an obligation to be part of a heterosexual marriage structure and "function properly" in society. Homoerotic inclinations 'overpower' heteronormative structures (8).

Arcite to compete for Emilia. Yet, Emilia nevertheless loses her female agency. Both Palamon and Arcite and Emilia relate by being repressed from asserting their queer potential.

Like the prison in “The Knight’s Tale,” the prison in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is an intrusion to heteronormative structures from the outside world (Athens). Fletcher and Shakespeare detail this scene extensively in contrast with the Knight in his tale. A scene from the second act reads, “We are an endles mine to one another; / We are one another’s wife, ever begetting / New birthes of love... / We are in one another, Families, / I [Arcite] am your heir and you [Palamon] are mine” (II.ii..784-7). This passage epitomizes the knots of love by referring to their relationship as an “endles mine.” Arcite compares their love to that of husband and wife and creates a symbolic family by being one another’s “heir.” Moreover, they refer to the prison as their “Inheritance” and “holy sanctuary,” which “no hard Oppressour / Dare take this from us... / We shall live, and loving” (788-90).<sup>22</sup> In this discourse, the cousins deliberately oppose Athenian normative structures; they display significant language that tackles both medieval and early modern societal norms. According to Ju Ok Yoon:

The marked erotic expressions that they exchange with each other in prison intensify the characterization of their friendship from homosocial to homoerotic. Arcite can endure imprisonment only because Palamon is with him (448).

Palamon and Arcite have stepped beyond a mere homosocial bond and entered a homoerotic dynamic. By intensifying their relationship, they are stepping into the boundaries of gayness. *The Two Noble Kinsmen* takes the risk that “The Knight’s

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<sup>22</sup> Ju Ok Yoon emphasizes this scene as a pivotal reading of Palamon and Arcite’s relationship in the play.

Tale” omitted, which is the intensification of homoeroticism into explicit homosexuality. Taking note of Lacan’s discourse of the ego-ideal (what an individual wants to become (Lacan Seminar VIII 414), Yoon proceeds to mention that the cousin’s two ego-ideals include their homosexual objectification and their heterosexual one (Emilia) (449). Nonetheless, the cousins seem to negotiate with this conflict because, despite their conflict with the structure of heterosexual desire, they return to their male-male bond in private scenes. Any mention of Emilia would cause them to quarrel. To caution Palamon, Arcite reminds him by saying: “No mention of this woman, ‘twill distube us” (III.iii.1515). Arcite says this to Palamon because the thought of Emilia is sufficient to disrupt the bond that they are exercising. It would ruin the passive tone of the scene and their pause from feuding.

At its height, the scene with the most homoerotic connections involves Palamon and Arcite arming each other in the forest prior to fighting, and more intensified than Chaucer’s Knight. Despite their odds, the cousins are contented to see each other even if they consider themselves foes. A passage from the third act reads: “[Arcite] Enter your Musicke least this matchen between’s / Be crost... give me your hand... / Ile bring you every needfull thing... / Take comfort and be strong. / [Palamon] Pray hold your promise; / And doe the deede with a bent brown... / You love me not, be rough with me, and powre / This oile out of your language” (III.i.1420-7). While Chaucer includes discourse between the cousins, Fletcher and Shakespeare give it a queer interiority. Fletcher and Shakespeare amplify the discourses provided by Chaucer because, unlike the narrative format of “The Knight’s Tale,” the dialogical nature of plays allows for expanded conversations. The cousins take advantage of every opportunity they can obtain to be with each other before their fatal battle. Arcite, in promising to bring “every needfull thing,” stalls the eventual battle so that he and

Palamon can enjoy each other's company. The forest, like the prison, is away Athens and therefore a safe place for them. Any opportunity to bond occurs away from the Athenian public and the cousins can display queerness exteriorly. Chaucer signifies this scene with the forest as a place for loves, but the playwrights use it to justify their homoerotic vows. Fletcher (to whom scholars attribute the writing of this scene) provides us with homoerotic language that stimulates actions of coupling. Part of it includes imagery of phallic objects: "[Arcite] doe I pinch you?... / [Palamon] Faith so am I: god Cosen, thrust the buckle / Through far enough... / [Arcite] Will you fight bare-armd? / [Palamon] We shall be the nimbler" (III.vi.1835-51). In using words like "pinch" and "thrust," Fletcher creates an allusion to the physical phallus' role in intercourse; on the other hand, fighting "bare-armd" creates a signification between manhood and a modern connotation of contraceptives. Lastly, "nimbler" signifies physical eroticism. The language they express themselves with is, without a doubt, one that excels the normative homosocial relationships of early modern England and goes beyond the typical perception of kinship. Even if they wrote in different periods, Chaucer and the playwrights were part of repressive societal structures. Medievalism translates queer relationships and the future generations after Chaucer, such as the playwrights, gradually intensify them.

### **Moving Forward**

Considering all the facts, scholars of queer studies will benefit in tracing queer interiority to the medieval period. The straight, masculine constructions of the modern period find their origins in classic antiquity, whereas the political ideologies of the Middle Ages express the heightened state of such constructions. In response to Foucault and Halperin, the centering of queerness requires a development origin that is beyond our cultural comfort zone. We cannot dive into the minds of dead authors,

but we can apply modern theory to understand the structures that construct a text, examining how authors complicate heterosexual standards and return to them as the stories conclude. “The Knight’s Tale” is one of many examples of homoerotic desire in medieval English romances. Queer hermeneutics in Chaucerian scholarship refers to the reign of Richard II, whose queer behaviors compelled the creating of stories involving two men at odds with a repressive society. The transferred power of medievalism in the early modern period allows the tale to connect with authors like Shakespeare who were already characterizing the queer dynamics of Elizabethan and Jacobean male relationships. In contrast to his other plays, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* exemplifies the frustrations of Chaucer’s characters in the similar conditions of Athens during the early modern period.

Furthermore, the repressive politics of the medieval period still exist in Shakespeare’s time; therefore, Palamon and Arcite, as well as Theseus and Pirithous, are not able to fully reach their queer potential. In both “The Knight’s Tale” and *Kinsmen*, medieval politics exert marriage as a solution so that homosocial relationships do not intensify. Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Fletcher needed to make the final marriage act as a peace offering to their political environments. Contemporaries of Shakespeare also make this piece offering. Christopher Marlowe, for example, normalizes the queer play, *Edward II*, by concluding it with the masculine succession of Edward III. This concluding element of the plays extends the conversation of Shakespearean and other early modern scholars when discussing queerness. Recognizing this act five change assists in acknowledging the playwrights’ consciousness of public resentment for ending the plays in an anti-normative fashion.



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