“FOR TO BE SWORNE BRETHREN TIL THEY DEYE”: SATIRIZING QUEER BROTHERHOOD IN THE CHAUCERIAN CORPUS

by Tison Pugh

In Chaucer’s canon, when a man swears an oath of brotherhood to another man, the vow is soon repudiated, rejected, or otherwise rendered problematic.¹ No exceptions to this rule appear. Fraternal promises in Chaucer’s literature evoke homosocial tensions and aggressions, and this dynamic hints that, for Chaucer, these particular bonds of brotherhood carried with them the likely possibility of queerness.² By characterizing such homosocial relationships as intrinsically susceptible to betrayal and ridicule, Chaucer hints that male friendships, as incarnated through brotherhood oaths, were often viewed suspiciously in courtly and aristocratic contexts of fourteenth-century England, despite the normative valence nonetheless accorded such relationships in these same social settings. The discrepancies between Chaucer’s depiction of homosocial oaths and those of his contemporaries point to the inherent difficulty of locating queerness in the Middle Ages, as we see in this instance that the same social phenomenon can reflect both normativity and queerness, depending upon the circumstances of its enactment.

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

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

In describing medieval brotherhood oaths as potentially queer, my goal is not to locate a submerged homosexuality within the fictions of the Chaucerian corpus but to expose the ways in which the latent possibility of homosexuality in male friendships bleeds into narrative circumstances addressing other social phenomena; I use the term *queer* more expansively to refer to disruptions of cultural normativity engendered by sexual acts and actors, or even to suspicions aroused about sexual acts and actors, rather than simply as a synonym for *homosexual*. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen observes, “queer theory’s tremendous strength is in its insistence upon the historical instability of epistemological categories, especially those involving sexuality.”* Queer* typically alludes to sexual acts and gendered identities that stray from constructions of cultural normativity, yet it is critical to realize that medieval brotherhood oaths participated within the range of normative behavior while simultaneously bearing the potential to subvert normativity. These pledges constituted a recognized part of knighthood culture in the Middle Ages, yet the normativity of such oaths could never fully eclipse their queer potential. As Richard Zeikowitz documents in his study of courtly discourse, “Chivalric treatises also illustrate how ideal chivalric conduct promotes male-male intimacy.” The bare potential for
normative homosocial intimacy, under certain circumstances, could elicit fear of nonnormative sexual acts. In this manner, perceptions of sodomy might construe men who swear fraternal oaths as meriting cultural opprobrium, despite the absence of homoeroticism in their relationships.

As Paul Strohm observes of sworn brotherhood within the Chaucerian corpus, “Chaucer’s poetry not only presents a society in which vassalage has been replaced by an array of more casual relations epitomized by sworn brotherhood, but includes a critique of those relations.” In the *House of Fame, Knight’s Tale, Friar’s Tale, Pardoner’s Tale, and Shipman’s Tale*, Chaucer deploys the satiric potential of brotherhood oaths to criticize social values. According to Paul Miller, medieval satire adheres to the following characteristics:

- its proper form is verse; dialogue is often included; the style ranges between humour (as in Horace) and severity (as in Lucilius); the tone is moderate; the language is ‘low’ (*humilis*), which befits both the subject-matter and the audience; irony is frequently employed; and allegory is eschewed.  

The two great Roman satirists, Horace and Juvenal, established different models for satiric voices: the Horatian satire invites the reader to laugh at the target of criticism, whereas the Juvenalian satire encourages the audience to feel anger and contempt toward the object of the invective. For the most part, Chaucer’s satire of brotherhood appears Horatian in spirit: the failure of the brotherhood oaths contributes to the humor of the tales, even if the tales themselves—such as the *Knight’s Tale* and *Pardoner’s Tale*—are not particularly comic in content. The irony that accompanies Chaucer’s portraits of brotherhood oaths—men pledging fidelity in one breath and breaking their pledge in the next—establishes a Horatian valence to these texts that builds humor while criticizing a persistent social phenomenon within Ricardian England.

Chaucer’s congruency in satiric aim in these five narratives does not accordingly construct them as satires. Defining a narrative’s genre inevitably elicits a critical debate, and, with an appreciation of the benefits and liabilities of deeming these polyvalent texts as representative of singular genres, I consider the *House of Fame* primarily to be a dream vision, the *Knight’s Tale* a romance, the *Friar’s Tale* an exemplum, the *Pardoner’s Tale* a sermon, and the *Shipman’s Tale* a fabliau. My objective in this essay is not to argue for the generic identification of these texts as satires but to explore how their satiric moments allow insight into Chaucer’s view of brotherhood oaths and their queer potential. Indeed, it becomes apparent that Chaucer’s satiric depiction of brotherhood oaths crosses many borders among the diverse genres within his corpus. One might expect
the romance of the *Knight’s Tale* to have little in common with the fabliau of the *Shipman’s Tale*, but brotherhood oaths unite these disparate texts through their shared skepticism regarding fraternal union.

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

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

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

Such homosocial covenants can be traced through their long liter-
ary history. In the Bible the friendship between David and Jonathan is
described in terms that stress both the depth of their friendship and the
coventant that binds them together:

And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking to
Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and
Jonathan loved him as his own soul. . . . And David and Jonathan
made a covenant: for he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan
striped himself of the coat with which he was clothed, and gave
it to David, and the rest of his garments, even to his sword, and to
his bow, and to his girdle. (1 Kings 18.1, 3–4) 14

Indeed, the relationship between David and Jonathan achieves such
an emotional pitch that it is explicitly compared to heterosexual love,
and heterosexual love is found lacking: “I grieve for thee, my brother
Jonathan: exceedingly beautiful and amiable to me above the love of
women. As the mother loveth her only son, so did I love thee,” David
sings in his lament over Jonathan’s death (2 Kings 1.26). 15 Such a close
homosocial relationship, which surpasses man’s love for woman, is not
necessarily homosexual, especially in that the relationship then assumes
a maternal cast with David comparing himself to Jonathan’s mother;
furthermore, we have extensive evidence of David’s heterosexual love
interests, especially his lust for Bathsheba that results in Uriah’s murder.
The interpretive crux that this friendship poses nonetheless demands
that modern readers accord a place for homosocial covenants of love
coexisting with heterosexual relationships. The homosocial beauty of
David and Jonathan’s relationship resonated throughout the Middle
Ages, as it is referred to in numerous texts as a model for male-male rela-
tionships. 16 Chaucer’s own reference to Jonathan and David’s friendship in the
Legend of Good Women—“Hyd, Jonathas, al thy frendly manere” (F 251)—is
elliptical, but it seems to point to the moment in 1 Kings 19.2 when Jonathan
protects David from Saul’s murderous intentions. 17

The concept of homosocial sworn brotherhood persisted throughout
the Middle Ages, and evidence of such relationships survives in medi-
eval literature. Romances such as Amis and Amiloun and Eger and Grime
describe the deep friendships between the eponymous protagonists and
the oaths that link them together. 18 Amis and Amiloun survives in the
Auchinleck manuscript, and scholars have long accepted that Chaucer
In this passage from *Amis and Amiloun*, the narrator recounts the homosocial oath of brotherhood the two young men pledge to each other:

On a day the childer, war and wight,  
Trewethes togider thai gun plight,  
While thai might live and stond  
That bothe bi day and bi night,  
In wele and wo, in wrong and right,  
That thai schuld frely fond  
To hold togider at everi nede,  
In word, in werk, in wille, in dede,  
Where that thai were in lond,  
Fro that day forward never mo  
Failen other for wele no wo:  
Therto thai held up her hond.  

(145–56)

Amis and Amiloun’s oath to maintain fidelity to each other “In wele and wo” is reminiscent of the vow of “for bettere for wors” in heterosexual marriage rites. Within *Amis and Amiloun*, this bond between men is venerated with the respect traditionally accorded to marriage, but, in contrast, the men’s actual marriages are treated as irrelevant or troublesome.

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

“Brother, as we er trewthe plight  
Bothe with word and dede,  
Fro this day forward never mo  
To faile other for wele no wo,  
To help him at his nede,  
Brother, be now trewe to me,  
And y schal be as trewe to the,  
Also God me spede!”

(293–300)

The repetition of the vow establishes its narrative significance, as more attention is paid to this oath of fraternal union than to the vows solemnized at the knights’ respective weddings. For instance, to save his beloved brother Amiloun from leprosy, Amis sacrifices his two children.
Homosocial union directs Amis and Amiloun’s every action as they live and fight together until they die; they then share a grave for all eternity:

Both on oo day were they dede
And in oo grave were they leide,
The knyghtes both twoo.

(2503–5)

Despite that their heterosexual love interests are nowhere to be seen at the romance’s conclusion, Amis and Amiloun nonetheless epitomize the overarching normativity of male homosociality and sworn brotherhood in the Middle Ages.22

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

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

(489–94)23

In the illustration of Eger and Grime sharing a bed together, we see that homosocial—but not necessarily homosexual—intimacy deeply colors their relationship.24 Brotherhood oaths so powerfully define these knights that forming other amatory and familial relationships becomes difficult, because brotherhood means more to these men than any other social connection. Eger and Grime conclude the narrative by marrying women, yet the romance focuses more on their struggle to maintain their vows to each other than on the pleasures of wooing their respective ladies.25

In romances such as Amis and Amiloun and Eger and Grime, homosocial oaths reflect the characters’ deep similarity to each other, such that their shared biological sex and preternatural physical resemblance render them more similar to each other than to their wives. Amis and Amiloun are virtually twins, and Eger and Grime share a similar unexplained yet unbreakable bond. These friendships thus parallel Cicero’s belief that “When a man thinks of a true friend, he is looking at himself in the mirror.”26 From this classical perspective on friendship, which endured throughout the Middle Ages, homosocial relationships allow a man to find his mirror image not through heterosexual contact with a woman but through homosocial union with a man whose body reflects his own.
Beyond the literature of the Middle Ages, brotherhood oaths appear in historical records as well. Boswell and Bray uncover numerous such relationships in their scholarship, and the ones likely most relevant to Chaucer’s understanding of such oaths would include the relationships of Edward II and Piers Gaveston and of John Clanvowe and William Neville. The relationship between Edward and Piers is memorialized in their shared covenant of brotherhood: “the king’s son felt so much love for him that he entered into a compact of brotherhood with him and chose and decided to tie himself to him, against all mortals, in an unbreakable bond of affection.”27 Another such fraternal union was formalized between two of Chaucer’s contemporaries, Clanvowe and Neville; similar to the fictions of *Amis and Amiloun*, these two men were buried together in the same grave.28 Timothy O’Brien suggests that “Chaucer’s connections with such knights as John Clanvowe and William Neville, for instance, make it likely that he knew well the language and conventions of sworn brotherhood.”29 From the biblical, literary, and historical record, as well as within the courtly circles in which Chaucer circulated, homosocial oaths of brotherhood were an accepted ritual of solidarity between two men. Given the normative valence of such fraternal relationships in these circumstances, why might Chaucer satirize them as latently queer?

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

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

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

Chaucer’s satiric depiction of brotherhood oaths does not extend uniformly throughout his treatment of brotherhood, which is rich and multivalent in its portrayal, including negative and positive depictions. Of course, brotherhoods, including brotherhoods not depicted as consummated through fraternal rituals, are often illustrated in a problematic light in the Chaucerian corpus. For example, Chaucer frequently uses “brother” as an ironic term, as when the Miller refers to the Reeve with dripping sarcasm as “Leve brother Osewold” (I 3151) or when the unctuous friar of the *Summoner’s Tale* attempts to relieve Thomas of his money with his honeyed plea, “Now, Thomas, leeve brother, lef thyn ire” (III 2089). O’Brien demonstrates that, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the theme of brotherhood “get[s] exploited—by the poem’s characters and even to a lesser extent by the narrator,” and this narrative offers Chaucer’s most extensive consideration of male-male friendship, to such an exaggerated extent that Pandarus declares to Troilus,

“For the have I bigonne a gamen pleye
Which that I nevere do shal eft for other,
Although he were a thousand fold my brother.”

(III, 250–52)

Despite the importance of their friendship to each other, however, Troilus and Pandarus never formalize their relationship through an oath of brotherhood. Nonetheless, this friendship is linked to a mutual devolution of values, as the two men advance their friendship by trafficking in women.

For Chaucer, brotherhood is not intrinsically a subject of satire and ridicule, and the positive depictions of brotherhood in such narratives as the *Franklin’s Tale* and the *Second Nun’s Tale* highlight the good that arises from brothers caring for each other and tending to each other’s
needs. Aurelius’s brother helps him to overcome his melancholic torpor over Dorigen, and Valerian encourages Tiburce to convert to Christianity for his spiritual salvation. These positive depictions of male relationships contrast directly with Chaucer’s satiric depiction of brotherhood and brotherhood oaths in the *House of Fame*, *Knight’s Tale*, *Friar’s Tale*, *Pardoner’s Tale*, and *Shipman’s Tale*. In the conflicting visions of brotherhood as ironic in some instances and as sincere in others, Chaucer allows himself a wide artistic license with which to depict brotherhood; however, such an ecumenical perspective contracts to a singular disparaging view when brotherhood is enacted through ritual oaths.

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

> And somtyme saugh I thoo at ones
> A lesyng and a sad soth sawe,
> That gone of aventure drawe
> Out at a wyndowe for to pace;
> And, when they metten in that place,
> They were achekked bothe two,
> And neyther of hem moste out goo
> For other, so they gone crowde,
> Til ech of hem gan crien lowde,
> “Lat me go first!” “Nay, but let me!
> And here I wol ensuren the,
> Wyth the none that thou wolt do so,
> That I shal never fro the go,
> But be thy owne sworn brother!
> We wil medle us ech with other,
> That no man, be they never so wrothe,
> Shal han on [of us] two, but bothe
> At ones, al beseyle his leve,
> Come we a-morwe or on eve,
> Be we cried or stille yrouned.”
> Thus saugh I fals and soth compouned
> Togeder fle for oo tydynge.

(2088–2109)

This passage parodies oaths of brotherhood through the haphazard fashion by which they are pledged by allegorical representations of truth and
falsehood, and Chaucer as narrator declares that the promises communicate only falsehoods. How could it be otherwise, since a lie uniting with a truth can only result in truth being besmirched by falsehood, rather than falsehood being elevated to truth, as they compound into “oo tydynge”? Queerness permeates this scene, as the allegorical figures pledge fidelity to one another, yet the fulfillment of this oath would ironically destroy any truth at the basis of the relationship. Truth—both literal and allegorical—can only be lost in this particular instance of oath-making. Moreover, the promise that truth and falsehood “wil medle us ech with other” at least peripherally connotes sexual activity and the debasement of the oath through carnal practice: according to the MED, medlen primarily means ‘to blend, mix,’ but the word carries sexual connotations as well in its secondary meaning of ‘to join sexually, to have sexual intercourse.’ As these many truths and falsehoods so promiscuously promise to enjoy brotherhood and to “meddle” together with one another, the satiric scene exaggeratedly debases fraternal oaths as potentially queer ing all discourse through a perverse orgy of “inter-meddling.”

Most scholars concur that, in the House of Fame, Chaucer tackles the meaning of poetry and his place in the poetic tradition, but it seems unlikely that scholars will ever definitively identify the “man of gret auctorite” (2158) who abruptly concludes this poem. Indeed, as A. J. Minnis notes of the House of Fame, “there is no place for ‘the reasoned, authoritative, single voice.’ The ‘man of grete auctorite’ should not be admitted; he would only spoil the party.” Chaucer’s parodic depiction of truth and falsehood queerly vowing homosocial oaths to one another so promiscuously could also be a reason behind the poem’s terse ending. Is this the moment when the joke goes too far, when a real and powerful man might find himself insulted by Chaucer’s play with homosociality, if not homossexuality, as well as with the slippage between truth and lies that might sully this unidentified man’s reputation? As with any conjectures about the “man of gret auctorite,” this point cannot be conclusively proven, yet the pieces of queer evidence nonetheless unite in a compelling fashion to indicate that, in this instance, Chaucer realized the potential limits of his penchant for satirizing male brotherhood and homosociality.

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

Thomas Walsingham unmistakably establishes the sexual threat posed by Richard’s favorites. During his account of Robert de Vere’s royal appointment to the Duke of Ireland in 1386, Walsingham describes Richard and de Vere, the king’s closest friend and confidante, as sharing “obscene intimacies” ("familiaritatis obscoenae"), an attack that implies that unmentionable vice, sodomy.
Adam of Usk will later record a more overt reference to Richard’s sodomy, when he includes the king’s “sodomies” (“sodomica”) among the causes of Richard’s deposition. The charge of sodomy was never officially brought against Richard, but its occurrence in these Lancasterian chronicles betray[s] the political agenda behind the allegations, namely, Richard’s unfitness for rule.\textsuperscript{36}

The Evesham chronicler also hints at sinful sexual behavior in his account, recording that “totam noctem in potacionibus et aliis non dicendis in sompnem duceret” (he would spend all night in drinking and other things that ought not be mentioned until passing out).\textsuperscript{37} If Chaucer intended to depict Richard II as the “man of gret auctorite,” perhaps he then realized he was taking his joke a bit too far by presenting his king so soon after illustrating a roomful of sexually licentious and homosocially sworn allegorical figures breeding falsehoods among themselves. Given the historical record’s suggestive accounts of Richard’s relationship with de Vere, it seems unlikely that the monarch would appreciate any queerly homosocial relationships being obliquely hinted at in such an outrageous manner, even within the covert space of allegorical representation. Typically the \textit{House of Fame} is dated to 1379–80, and it has been hypothesized that the poem, had Chaucer completed it, was intended to celebrate Richard’s anticipated marriage to Anne of Bohemia; if these theories are correct, the satiric inclusion of denigrated brotherhood oaths would ostensibly be corrected in the announcement of the marriage. It should be reiterated that any allegorical and contextual identifications of the “man of gret auctorite” are highly speculative, but the latent queer dynamics of the scene nonetheless color the poem’s inconclusive conclusion.

In the \textit{Knight’s Tale} Palamon and Arcite are precisely the type of aristocratic protagonists who might be expected to pledge and maintain brotherhood oaths to each other.\textsuperscript{38} Indeed, before the \textit{Knight’s Tale} was given its place in the \textit{Canterbury Tales}, Chaucer refers to it as “the love of Palamon and Arcite” in the Prologue of the \textit{Legend of Good Women} (F 420), which elusively locates love as the narrative’s theme but ambiguously allows the possibility for love between its eponymous protagonists as well as for their love of the as-yet-unnamed Emily.\textsuperscript{39} The reader first sees them in a reverse image of Amis and Amiloun’s final resting place in a shared grave, in that Palamon and Arcite are buried but still alive:

\begin{quote}
And so bifel that in the taas they founde,
Thurfh-girt with many a grevous blody wounde,
Two yonge knyghtes liggynge by and by,
Bothe in oon armes, wroght ful richely.

(I 1009–12)
\end{quote}
Their similarity to each other is stressed through the iconography of their shared arms, and it is rhetorically heightened when the narrator mentions that they “weren of the blood roial / Of Thebes, and of sustren two yborn” (I 1018–19). In these early scenes Chaucer prepares the reader to learn of their brotherhood oaths; ironically, however, these oaths are broken before readers ever realize that the cousins made such pledges. Only after their shared sighting of Emily threatens the foundations of their relationship does Palamon remind Arcite of the oaths that should unite them under all circumstances:

“It nere,” quod he, “to thee no greet honour
For to be fals, ne for to be traitour
To me, that am thy cosyn and thy brother
Ysworn ful depe, and ech of us til oother,
That nevere, for to dyen in the peyne,
Til that the deeth departe shal us twyne,
Neither of us in love to hyndre oother,
Ne in noon oother cas, my leeve brother,
But that thou sholdest trewely forthren me
In every cas, as I shal forthren thee—
This was thyn ooth, and myn also, certeyn.”
(I 1129–39)

This oath should guide Palamon and Arcite’s every action, and it serves as a thematic touchstone to monitor their relationship, because they continually fail to act in a manner to “trewely forthren” each other’s needs. In subsequent moments Palamon reminds Arcite that he is “to my conseil and my brother sworn” (I 1147), and Arcite similarly acknowledges that Palamon is “to my cosyn and my brother sworn” (I 1161). Despite the repeated allusions to their oath, the bulk of the narrative is based upon its dissolution after the two men see Emily. Palamon’s words also foreshadow the tale’s conclusion; his words “Til that the death departe shal us twyne” bespeak not the complete fulfillment of a life lived together, but the failure of the oath to unite them until death. Also, the phrase “Til that the deeth departe shal us twyne” echoes heterosexual marriage rites, which points both to the gravity of the vows and to the preeminence this homosocial bond should hold over subsequent heterosocial unions.40

Palamon and Arcite break their brotherhood oath after they begin competing for Emily’s affections, but Chaucer reinforces its thematic meaning at key points in the narrative. When the two knights prepare to fight each other to the death, Palamon threatens Arcite with his imminent demise:
Arcite soon returns with the necessary battle gear, and the narrator underscores the similarity between the two foes by detailing their shared thoughts. Here the men are literally of one mind, with the narrator recounting their identical reaction to each other and their shared predicament:

“Here cometh my mortal enemy!
Without faille, he moot be deed, or I,
For outher I moot sleen hym at the gappe,
Or he moot sleen me, if that me myshappe.”
So ferden they in chaungyng of hir hewe,
As fer as everich of hem oother knewe.

(I 1643–48)

Although it may appear somewhat paradoxical to argue that their shared minatory musings reestablish the theme of brotherhood, these lines underscore the singular like-mindedness of the two men. In a manner consistent with Cicero’s description of brotherhood as a man looking into a mirror, the narrator evokes the deep connection that continues to unite Palamon and Arcite, despite their outward antagonism toward each other. Furthermore, the narrator then somewhat surprisingly remarks that

Everich of hem heelp for to armen oother
As freendly as he were his owene brother.

(I 1651–52)

The irony of these lines, in that congenial brotherhood is now represented when the two men arm each other for the purpose of their mutual destruction, both reminds the reader of the brotherhood oath while highlighting their inability to adhere to its basic tenets.

Sworn brotherhood fails to guide Palamon and Arcite’s actions toward each other, and there is little to suggest that Chaucer sees such chivalric brotherhood in a positive light in the remainder of the narrative. After Arcite’s fatal accident (but before he dies), Theseus consolidates civic and martial order by calling for brotherhood between the two men’s opposing factions:
For which anon duc Theseus leet crye,
To stynten alle rancour and envye,
The gree as wel of o syde as of oother,
And eyther syde ylik as ootheres brother;
And yaf hem yiftes after hir degree,
And fully heeld a feeste dayes three.

(I 2731–36)

After brotherhood oaths have fomented fraternal battles rather than fraternal peace, these words ring with irony. If Theseus succeeds in restoring order at this moment, the peace is likely to be short-lived, as the reader has seen no evidence that men treating each other like sworn brothers quells any tendencies toward male-male aggressions or competition. 41

Critical analysis of Palamon and Arcite’s brotherhood highlights the ways in which fraternal union stands in conflict with heterosexual courtship and marriage. Robert Stretter argues that Chaucer deploys “brotherhood as shorthand for a (theoretically) indestructible male relationship in order to highlight the power of an even stronger force that destroys it—love between the sexes,” 42 and Patricia Clare Ingham likewise notes that “the tale’s denouement displays state-sponsored heterosexual union as a compensation for the losses to chivalric fraternity.” 43 The satiric potential engendered by Palamon and Arcite’s oath is thus multivalently formulated to celebrate heterosexuality and to debase homosociality. If heterosexuality is to trump homosociality in this romance, if Palamon is to win Emily’s hand in marriage, the oath must be sacrificed. The potential queerness incarnated through the oath, in that two men united themselves to each other and then cohabitated in a prison where their only sexual releases could have been masturbatory or homoerotic, is then vehemently denied by their determined pursuit of Emily. As Bowers asserts, “Chivalric brotherhood of the sort idealized by the Knight came freighted with an unspoken and unspeakable anxiety that a same-sex pair might lapse into a homosexual bond, as Palamon and Arcite might have done during life-long imprisonment in their single cell.” 44 The satire of this narrative arises in that the brotherhood oath cannot escape the threat of queerness, no matter whether it is upheld or cast aside: maintaining the oath leaves Palamon and Arcite united in homosocial union and thus alienated from the heterosexual pursuits of courtly love, but breaking the oath detracts from their chivalric status as knights of honor. Interpretations of the Knight’s Tale frequently address the Knight’s ambiguous relationship to his tale, and this failed oath of brotherhood provides another example that Chaucer encodes a critique of chivalric values within this romance. 45

The Miller certainly sees queer potential in the Knight’s romance, as he debases and transforms it into his own fabliau, in which the rarefied
homosocial brotherhood of knights metamorphoses into a sordid sexual competition between clerks. At the conclusion of his tale, the hot iron with which Absolon penetrates Nicholas bears a historical forebear in regard to Edward II and Piers Gaveston, as the uneasiness that surrounded their homosocial relationship spurred accounts of Edward’s execution by means of a hot iron inserted in his anus. Historians disagree whether the story is true or apocryphal, but the factuality of the incident, in this instance, is secondary to its ideological import, in its lurid depiction of an anal punishment for a man united in brotherhood with another man. Absolon’s branding of Nicholas’s buttocks with a hot coulter in the *Miller’s Tale* ironically and violently indicts sodomy, as the Miller satirizes the Knight’s romance of homosocial brotherhood and courtly love by inverting its narrative status and meaning. Metamorphosing the Knight’s romance populated with courtly lovers into a fabliau of debased and predatory sexuality, the Miller deploys the hot iron to make explicit the possibility of anal intercourse between Palamon and Arcite and thus to deepen the satiric potential of both the *Knight’s Tale* and the *Miller’s Tale*. Within the *Knight’s Tale*, and within the Miller’s reconstruction of its amatory politics, homosocial union provokes Chaucer’s satire of men whose erotic pursuits are entangled with those of other men, even when such pursuits are entirely heterosexual in nature. The heterosexuality of these relationships cannot preserve them from the tinge of queerness latent possible in courtships predicated upon either homosocial friendship or male competition.

The men who swear fraternal oaths in the *Friar’s Tale*, *Pardoner’s Tale*, and *Shipman’s Tale* likewise break their promises almost immediately upon enunciating them, and Chaucer thus satirizes the aristocratic pretensions of these noncourtly men who perform chivalrous acts without the requisite social status to imbue the acts with appropriate meaning. When oaths of male brotherhood appear in these tales, they build humor through their merciless ridiculing of aristocratic pretension as enacted by characters of other social classes. In the *Friar’s Tale* the summoner’s venality, as evidenced by his work as a pimp (III 1355–62), encourages readers to view his actions suspiciously, and this vocational pursuit locates him on the fringes of society in regard to his sexually inflected identity. When he then pledges a fraternal oath with his new friend, readers should realize that it will soon be broken:

“*Depardieux*,” quod this yeman, “deere broother, 
Thou art a bailly, and I am another. 
I am unknowen as in this contree; 
Of thyn aqueyntance I wolde praye thee, 
And eek of brethrenede, if that yow leste. 
I have gold and silver in my cheste.”
“Grant mercy,” quod this somonour, “by my feith!”
Everych in ootheres hand his trouthe leith,
For to be sworne bretheren til they deye.
In daliance they ryden forth and pleye.

(III 1395–1400, 1403–6)

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

Queer edges to the Friar’s Tale satirically suggest that this summoner and his new friend might undertake a homoerotic relationship. The two men engage in “daliance” (III 1406), a word that carries a sexual undertone. That “daliance” is linked to “pleye” also hints at a muted sexual tension in this scene, since this word likewise carries sexual connotations. According to the MED, pleye can refer to ‘sexual play, sexual intercourse,’ as well as the ‘copulating of animals.’ Furthermore, the portrait of the devil shows him as somewhat of a medieval dandy, as he is described as

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

(III 1380–83)

The “brighte and kene” arrows indicate that this apparent yeoman does not use his equipment, as they register no telltale signs of wear and tear. The green “courtepy” (jacket) most obviously serves as part of the devil’s disguise as a woodsman, as this color also appears in the depiction of the Yeoman in the General Prologue (“And he was clad in cote and hood of grene” [I 103]). In addition to the overarching symbolism of the color green to denote a woodsman, the green jacket also bears numerous unsavory and sexual registers, as Laura Hodges elucidates in her explication of medieval color symbolism: “[green] was the color of love; it was a color ‘particularly suitable for the clothing of newly-weds’; it was
the most commonly worn color of church vestments. In addition, green carried negative connotations such as inconstancy. Each of these qualities of the color green queerly debases the character of the devil/yeoman and, by extension, the summoner: the greenness of the coat satirically casts the two as lovers; it positions them as “newlyweds” recently joined in bonds of brotherhood; it calls to mind the vestments of the clergy and thus satirizes the summoner’s failure to maintain the ideals of his church office; and it foreshadows the climactic fracturing of their brotherhood when the devil leads the summoner to hell by adhering to the old woman’s vow rather than to his oath with the summoner. In this remarkably detailed picture, the scene of homosocial union as enacted through a brotherhood oath sets the stage for the exemplum’s satiric message condemning religious hypocrisy and greed, and the implied homoeroticism between the summoner and the devil magnifies the enormity of their transgressions. Again, green primarily denotes the color of the woodsmen’s clothes in this tale, but Chaucer’s understanding of the color’s secondary connotation as inconstancy is evident in “Against Women Unconstant,” in which each stanza ends, “In stede of blew, thus may ye were al grene” (7, 14, 21).

Beyond the submerged eroticism of this brotherhood, such a relationship also corrupts the social class borders of Ricardian England in its intermingling of marginal men from ecclesiastical and courtly milieus. Summoners and yeomen serve in subservient positions to men of greater authority and prestige in distinct realms of spiritual and secular authority, and these two men thus violate the associative positions tied to their vocational identities by forming their friendship. David Wallace notes that the bond “is undermined from the start by bad faith: rather than the sharing of professional secrets (as encouraged in the guilds) we find a disguising of professional identities;” this bastardized commingling fractures the basic tenets of sworn brotherhood, in that such relationships should be based on friendship and social similitude. The devil tells the summoner that he assumes a pleasing form to expedite his nefarious intentions (“For we . . . wol us swiche formes make / As moost able is oure preyes for to take” [III 1471–72]), and, according to this logic, the similitude of their male bodies serves a seductive purpose. The summoner of the Friar’s Tale thus appears especially susceptible to the advances of a devil assuming the form of a male yeoman, with the lure of homosocial union proving more effective in seducing him than the lure of heterosexual passion. The summoner’s temptation is thus intrinsically different from the temptations offered to medieval saints such as Antony, who withstood the seductive enticements of the devil in female form.

Finally, it should be noted that the Friar is insulting his enemy the Summoner with this tale, and thus the queer edges to the friendship between
the summoner and the devil within his narrative comment metatextually on the rather queer friendship between the Summoner and the Par- doner on the pilgrimage, as evident in the General Prologue and the Par- doner’s sexually indeterminate body.

In regard to genre, the Friar’s exemplum teaches many lessons to the pilgrims about religious hypocrisy, as it also alerts them to the dangers of rashly swearing brotherhood oaths. In a similar manner, the Pardon- er’s sermon also teaches his audience about the moral turpitude associated with homosocial union. The morally bankrupt Pardoner recounts a morally instructive sermon during the Canterbury pilgrimage, and he structures his ethical lesson by depicting three riotous, dangerous, and stupid criminals. Numerous studies explore the satiric potential of Chaucer’s depiction of the Pardoner and his sexual ambiguity, primarily in regard to his interactions with the other pilgrims. By including a homosocial oath of brotherhood within the tale, Chaucer links the frame narrative’s concern with the Pardoner’s sexual indeterminacy—evidenced in descriptions of both his appearance and his enigmatic friendship with the Summoner—to his depiction of the rioters within the tale. The Pardoner is introduced through his connection to the Summoner: “With [the Summoner] ther rood a gentil Pardoner / Of Rouncivale, his freend and his compeer” (I 669–70). Although this friendship is not presented within the context of a brotherhood oath, it nonetheless sets the stage for the inclusion of a brotherhood oath in the Pardoner’s Tale, which exposes the faults of brotherhood as enacted by textual rioters and metatextual religious men. Chaucer’s description of the Pardoner’s sexual ambiguity makes manifest the sexual suspicions accorded to the friendship between the two men:

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

(I 688–91)

Given the questionable nature of the Pardoner’s gender and sexuality, it is perhaps somewhat surprising that he criticizes brotherhood oaths in his tale. But, at the same time, he lambastes numerous sins in his sermon to which he confesses in his prologue, and so we appear to have yet another example of this character making manifest his stunning hypocrisy.

After determining to kill Death (and thus laying the groundwork for their imminent demise), the three rioters in the Pardoner’s Tale undertake a fraternal vow to one another. The lead rioter exhorts his fellows:
“Herneth, felawes, we thre been al ones;
Lat ech of us holde up his hand til oother,
And ech of us bicomem othere brother,
And we wol sleen this false traytour Deeth.
He shal be slayn, he that so manye sleeth,
By Goddes dignitee, er it be nyght!”
Togidres han thise thre hir trouthes plight
To lyve and dyen ech of hem for oother,
As though he were his owene ybore brother.

(VI 696–704)

Approximating consanguinity through their vow, the three rioters affirm their fraternal union and thus their joint mission to conquer Death. Of course, the vow is then broken both when two of the three men decide to kill the third and when the third man likewise determines to poison the other two; however, even at the moment when the two rioters decide to betray their brother, the vow is not forgotten. Rather, the rioter who advocates fratricide ironically reminds his brother of their communal oath when pressuring him to conspire against their momentarily departed friend:

“How knowest wel thou art my sworen brother;
Thy profit wol I telle thee anon.
Thou woost wel that oure felawe is agon.”

(VI 808–10)

The exquisite irony of these lines, with the rioter reminding his “brother” of their fraternal vow while simultaneously cajoling him to murder their sworn brother, punctures any value accorded to homosocial oaths. The murder itself carries latent queer potential as well, as Steven Kruger observes: “At the heart of the Pardoner’s exemplum, we find a physical penetration, a violent parody of sexual intercourse, that leads not to renewed life . . . but rather to a stark and sterile death.”

In a world where oaths are uttered so promiscuously, they indicate little other than the depravity of the men who speak them. By including this scene in the Pardoner’s Tale, Chaucer adds yet another level of queerness to the Pardoner’s morally complex and sexually perplexing character.

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

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

(VI 952–55)

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

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

(VI 965–68)

As the clearest representative of aristocratic and courtly values, the Knight demands a kiss to soothe over the fractured social harmony of the pilgrimage. The final irony of the Pardoner’s Tale, then, is the reinstitution of a homosocial bond that can never withstand the animosity that it cloaks. Any sort of friendship between Harry and the Pardoner carries a latent hint of forced queerness, in that they are compelled to unite with each other due to the commands of a powerful and aristocratic man, not in response to their own sense of homosocial affection.

The Shipman’s Tale likewise deploys an oath of homosocial brotherhood to heighten the narrative’s satiric effect and to undermine narrative masculinity. In the carnivalesque environment of the fabliau, normativity as a social and ideological construction often establishes the inversionary grounds of the narrative, which is readily apparent in the genre’s thematic deployment of cuckoldry as a measure of masculinity. In this instance, the merchant wholly trusts his sworn brother, Daun John, because of their oaths of brotherhood, as well as this man’s vocation as a monk:

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

(VII 36–42)

The oath cements the merchant’s trust in his friend the monk, as it thus establishes the foundation for this fabliau’s satiric and humorous consideration of dishonest trade, religious hypocrisy, and adulterous marriage. As John P. Hermann notes, “The circulation of vows as defective signs in the tale takes place against the background of the marital vows of the couple and religious vows of the Monk.” No oath is sacred in this tale, which points to the dissolute state of the fallen world that provides an appropriate setting for a fabliau.

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

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

(VII 149–55)

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

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

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

(VII 406–10)

Due to the close relationship between the two men, the wife argues, it would be perfectly reasonable for the monk to show his affection for him through her as an intermediary figure. Queer theory asks readers to look at the diverse sexual energies circulating in a text, and in the Shipman’s Tale, we see the familiar structure of the erotic triangle, in which two men pursue the same woman. Adding perhaps an even queerer edge to this dynamic, however, is that the wife focuses her husband’s attention on the source of his betrayal, which is his own relationship with another man. Moreover, the wife’s erotic energies are focused more on her clothes and debts than on either of the men, who serve as conduits to pecuniary rather than sexual passions. Thus, at the end of the tale when the wife declares to the merchant, “Ye shal my joly body have to wedde; / By God, I wol nat paye yow but abedde!” (VII 423–24), the man is promised sexual pleasure but at the price of his masculine worth as a lover. In some ways, the merchant is saved from confronting his cuckoldry, as he never learns of his wife’s infidelity, and this moment raises a question of almost philosophical depth for a fabliau: if a man’s wife cheats on him, but he and no one else learns of the infidelity, is he truly a cuckold, if cuckoldry is at least partially determined by a concomitant sexual humiliation? Regardless of the answers posed to this question, readers see the merchant’s queered masculinity at the tale’s conclusion, which showcases yet again the disruptive erotic energies sparked by brotherhood.

These examples of sworn brotherhood from Chaucer’s diverse genres consistently proclaim the undesirability of such relationships. Different genres strive for various literary effects, whether entertainment (romance and fabliau), or spiritual enlightenment (exemplum and sermon), or a mixture of the two (dream vision). In Chaucer’s fictions, however, the entertainment of romance and fabliau contains a corresponding didactic aspersion against homosocial brotherhoods, and the hortatory impulse of exemplum and sermon is accompanied by satiric and amusing depictions of sworn brotherhood oaths failing to ennoble the non-aristocratic men who swear them. In Chaucer’s polygeneric play, the consistency with which he treats this theme argues for an overarching distrust of such
relationships despite the countervailing view promulgated in numerous contemporary texts. The historic and literary record documents that male oaths of friendship and brotherhood were often revered as enactments of the noblest virtues, but such was not the case for Chaucer. In each instance in his literature when men pledge brotherhood to each other, the oath is satirized, broken, and/or ridiculed. Speculations regarding the reasons behind Chaucer’s satiric disdain for such relationships aside, it is nonetheless clear that he found no opportunity in his vast literary canon to depict such oaths and the men who swore them in a positive light. Such an absence of positive depictions, contrasted with a plenitude of negative ones, is queer indeed.

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Notes


2. As will become evident in the ensuing analysis, I do not use queer as a synonym for homosexual, but rather as a term to capture the disorienting effect of nonnormative identities and their frequent clash with ideological power. Homosexuality and queerness are not intrinsically interrelated, yet they are often mutually implicated by ideological systems that link same-sex eroticism (homosexuality) with cultural disenfranchisement arising from sexuality (queerness). Recent studies of medieval sexuality, homosexuality, and queerness include James A. Schultz, Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality (Chicago, 2006); Susan Schibanoff, Chaucer’s Queer Poetics: Rereading the Dream Trio (Toronto, 2006); Karma Lochrie, Heterosynchronies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn’t (Minneapolis, 2005); Anna Klosowska, Queer Love in the Middle Ages (New York, 2005); William Burgwinkle, Sodomy, Masculinity, and Law in Medieval Literature (Cambridge, U.K., 2004); Glenn Burger, Chaucer’s Queer Nation (Minneapolis, 2003); Richard E. Zeikowitz, Homoeroticism and Chivalry: Discourses of Male Same-Sex Desire in the Fourteenth Century (New York, 2003); Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger, eds., Queering the Middle Ages (Minneapolis, 2001); Carolyn Dinshaw, Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern (Durham, N.C., 1999); Allen J. Frantzen, Before the Closet: Same-Sex Love from Beowulf to Angels in America (Chicago, 1998); Mark Jordan, The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology (Chicago, 1997); Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz,
eds., *Constructing Medieval Sexuality* (Minneapolis, 1997); and Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York, 1996). See also my *Queering Medieval Genres* (New York, 2004) and *Sexuality and Its Queer Discontents in Middle English Literature* (New York, 2008).


7. Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 96. In his analysis of “Opportunistic Brotherhood,” Strohm addresses the oaths of *FrT*, *SumT*, *PardT*, and *ShipT*. Although brotherhood is mentioned in *SumT*, the friar and Thomas are not depicted as united through a brotherhood oath to each other; therefore, I do not address this instance of brotherhood in this essay.


14. Biblical quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims* (New Hampshire, 2004). In some modern Bibles, 1 and 2 Kings are titled 1 and 2 Samuel.

15. For analysis of this passage, see Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions*, 135–37. For additional biblical passages describing the covenant and love between David and Jonathan, see 1 Kings 20.8, 20.16–17, and 23.18. For a recent study of David and Jonathan’s relationship, see Susan Ackerman, *When Heroes Love: The Ambiguity of Eros in the Stories of Gilgamesh and David* (New York, 2005).

17. All references to and citations of Chaucer are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987) and are noted parenthetically.

18. I address these romances in greater detail in *Sexuality and Its Queer Discontents* in the following chapters: “From Boys to Men to Hermaphrodites to Eunuchs: Queer Formations of Romance Masculinity and the Hagiographic Death Drive in *Amis and Amiloun*,” 101–21, and “Queer Castration, Patriarchal Privilege, and the Comic Phallus in *Eger and Grime*,” 123–44.


23. James Ralston Caldwell, ed., *Eger and Grime: A Parallel Text Edition of the Percy and the Huntington-Laing Versions of the Romance* (Cambridge, Mass., 1933), 222. Since the manuscripts of *Eger and Grime* date to the fifteenth century, it is difficult to ascertain whether Chaucer would have known this romance; however, given the oral nature of literary performance in the Middle Ages, the romance most likely circulated orally prior to being written down. Whether or not Chaucer knew this particular narrative, its existence points to both the longevity of sworn brotherhoods throughout the Middle Ages and their practice throughout the British Isles.

24. See Bray, *The Friend*, 153–54 and 167–68, for the social import of men sharing beds. Bray’s analysis ranges beyond the Middle Ages, but his admonition that “[t]he shared bed and the embraces of masculine friendship suggested the sodomitical no more than the conventions of the familiar letter” (167) is nonetheless applicable to the circumstances depicted in *Eger and Grime*.

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


33. Why might Chaucer avoid describing Troilus and Pandarus’s brotherhood as enacted through a chivalric oath? In *Amis and Amiloun, Eger and Grime*, and *KnT*, the many physical similarities between the two male characters underscore the appropriateness of their vows. Troilus and Pandarus, however, are never depicted as resembling each other, and readers have long wondered about their respective ages. Although Chaucer never answers this question, it nonetheless appears that Pandarus is somewhat older than Troilus. The following idea can only remain a conjecture, but it seems likely that Chaucer did not see Troilus and Pandarus as sufficiently similar to each other in terms of physical appearance and age to undertake such a vow. Certainly, their friendship is not explicitly predicated upon any likeness to each other, as is the case in *Amis and Amiloun, Eger and Grime*, and *KnT*. 


39. For Chaucer’s revising of “the love of Palamon and Arcite,” see Bowers, “Three Readings of the *Knight’s Tale,*” 287–91.


44. Bowers, “Queering the Summoner,” 305.


46. For a discussion of Edward’s demise in relation to a hot iron poker, see Boswell, *Christianity,* 300.


48. John S. P. Tatlock and Arthur G. Kennedy document that “brother” appears nineteen times in *FrT,* in comparison to its forty appearances in *Tr.* The other works in which the word “brother” most appears include *SNT* (ten times) and *KnT* (nine times). See Tatlock and Kennedy, *A Concordance to the Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer and to the Romani of the Rose* (Gloucester, Mass., 1963).


56. For the theoretical framework of the erotic triangle, see Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, 1985).