

MEDIEVAL ROMANCE, FANFICTION, AND THE EROTICS OF SHAME

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By

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This dissertation is dedicated in memory of my parents,  
who would have been both embarrassed by and very proud of my work.

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### **Abstract**

My dissertation uses fan studies theories of fanfiction to reframe later medieval romances as works that were not only reread and rewritten, but transformed through affective reading and rewriting strategies, especially through desire and shame. I explore the erotics of shame through fanfiction tropes seen in a variety of canonical and non-canonical medieval romances, both Arthurian and otherwise, from the twelfth century to the fifteenth. I use elements that function as major motifs in fanfiction, in spite or even because of their embarrassing nature, including fanfiction's predominantly female authorship and its catering to queer desires, the prevalence of male/male romantic storylines (slash), the focus on rendering male bodies vulnerable through hurt and comfort, and fanfiction's embrace of a variety of erotic kinks which may remain fantasy desires only. By locating fanfiction desires and shames in medieval romance, I reveal modes of resistance to structures of hegemony through the tactic of finding personal pleasure in the culturally shameful. The ways in which fanfiction challenges heteronormative ideologies of gender and sexuality highlights ways in which medieval romances press on these boundaries, too.

### **Introduction: Medieval Romance and Fanfiction Sharing a Bed**

From Marie de France's *lais* to Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, to Thomas Malory's redaction of the *Prose Lancelot* in his *Le Morte D'Arthur*, a scene that crops up again and again in medieval romance features two characters in the same bed while some external force complicates any potential sexual activity. Today, the existence of the tag "Sharing a Bed" on fanfiction web archive ArchiveOfOurOwn.org seems to indicate that the trope of getting fictional characters into a bed under complicated circumstances has not lost its erotic appeal over time ("Sharing a Bed"). "Sharing a bed" as a motif connects these two genres otherwise separated by hundreds of years, putting medieval romance and fanfiction "in bed" together through their similar strategies of negotiating desire and shame. Helen Cooper argues for reading the medieval romance *motif* as "a unit within literature that proves so useful, so infectious, that it begins to take on a life of its own....a meme, an idea that behaves like a gene in its ability to replicate faithfully and abundantly, but also on occasion to adapt, mutate, and therefore survive in different forms and cultures" (3). Where she introduces *The English Romance in Time* with a case study of the "exit, pursued by bear" meme (made famous to modern readers in *The Winter's Tale*), I present "sharing a bed" as a motif with erotic importance to both medieval romance and modern fanfiction as illustrative of a larger connection between medieval romance and modern fanfiction.

It is through this motif and others that I suggest, not a traceable survival of specific motifs from medieval romance to modern fanfiction (necessarily), but rather that the strategies of writing, reading and *rewriting* mutually inform the intersections of shame and desire for both medieval romance writers and modern fanfiction authors. Furthermore, I

argue that we should understand medieval romance motifs such as bed sharing in terms of *fanfiction* bed sharing, where the bed sharers are richly developed characters based on other canons or material, as opposed to, for example, the *fabliau*. Indeed, if, as Helen Cooper argues, literary motifs are “infectious,” how much more so might repeated and repeatable characters, relationships, and settings “take on a life of their own”? A motif, meme, or character that “infects” a reader, who then becomes a rewriter, demonstrates a sometimes intensely affective reading/rewriting of that motif. To make this argument, I explore the erotics of shame through fanfiction tropes (such as but not limited to bed sharing) seen in canonical and lesser-known romances, both Arthurian and otherwise, from the twelfth century to the fifteenth.

Particularly by locating fanfiction desires and shames in medieval romance, I reveal modes of resistance to structures of hegemony through finding personal pleasure in the culturally shameful. These personal pleasures, as fan studies reveals, are often feminine and queer, which I explore for their pressing on the boundaries of heteronormativity in my first two chapters. These are followed by more specific fanfiction tropes<sup>1</sup> that are particularly embarrassing for fans, namely the focus on vulnerability (“hurt/comfort”) and on kink in my last two chapters. These elements function as significant tropes and themes in fanfiction, in spite or perhaps because of their embarrassing nature.<sup>2</sup> Where it is easy to overextend the shame cast on erotic material in the Middle Ages, my attention to the genre of romance provides a lens through which feminine, masculine, queer, and kinky desires

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<sup>1</sup> While Helen Cooper uses “memes” or the more literary sense of the “motif,” I sometimes maintain fandom’s tendency to use “trope” to define units of commonly recurring literary elements.

<sup>2</sup> Archive of Our Own provides a tag cloud for the entire site, that shows more popular “tags” in a larger font than others (see Figure 1). Since all tags are user-generated and often individual and unique, anything that appears on this tag cloud is popular by some metric sitewide.

were read and re-written in medieval “fandoms” just as they continue to be today. I see diverse intersections with fanfiction as potentially visible in many medieval romances, but in this dissertation I examine *Lanval*, *The Prose Lancelot*, the *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*, the *Alliterative Morte Arthur*, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, and *Le Morte D’Arthur* as fanfictions engaging especially closely with shame and desire. By dealing with these texts as intentionally derivative, with clearly indicated source texts, I proceed by theme instead of in chronological order to support an intersection with fanfiction tropes as transcending chronological development.

As an illustration of one of these memes, “Sharing a Bed” is a fanfiction trope wherein two beloved characters who have not yet recognized their mutual love for each other (known as the One True Pairing or OTP) are tormented by circumstances that require them to share a bed, each pining unrequited for the other while in forced close physical proximity.<sup>3</sup> The objective in these stories is usually, though not always, to overturn “angst” into a happy ending where the pining is revealed to be mutual, and characters can admit their feelings for one another, but even in these cases, “slow burn” is as often the aim of the romance, and fans seem to enjoy relishing in negative feelings before a euchatastrophe. Here I borrow from J. R. R. Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy-Stories,” where Tolkien describes what he believes to be an almost universal desire in fantasy stories for a catastrophe’s reversal, yielding the consolation of a happy ending (135). There is an element of catharsis in this desire. According to Jacques Lacan, catharsis “has the sense of purification of

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<sup>3</sup> When this happens in mainstream fiction, TV Tropes describes it as “a source of embarrassment” that occurs when two characters “who aren’t in a relationship (at the time) have to share a bed, for whatever reason” and they “aren’t comfortable sharing it” (“There Is Only One Bed”).

desire,” though “purification cannot be accomplished...unless one has at least established the crossing of its limits that we call fear and pity” (323). In fanfiction, the trope of “sharing a bed” has no concluding payoff without the characters first experiencing discomfort.

To show the effects of this affect, I provide an example taken from the social network platform Tumblr, which shows an individual fan’s enjoyment (and shame) of this popular trope in fanfiction. Using a dialogic form to imagine the poster reacting to the story in real time, this-too-too-sullied-flesh gives the key “stage directions,” “\*the otp, on an unwilling adventure together, arrive at an inn\*” within the “fic I’m reading.” The poster’s intense desires for this story element are indicated by a repeated “please let there be” before following up with the fic granting that desire, a process which proves somewhat embarrassing:

me: please let there only be one room available please let there only be one room available

fic: “I’m afraid there’s only one room available”

me: please let it have only one bed please let it have only one bed

fic: there is only one bed

me: 🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺

update: there is actual bedsharing and I am on fire, why am I like this, why do I want to die every time I read the same fucking trope over and over and over and over (this-too-too-sullied-flesh, See Figure 2)

With ample use of multiple sobbing emojis to express uncontrollable emotions, “OK hand” emojis to indicate approval, and upside-down face emojis which reveal “silliness, sarcasm, irony, passive aggression, or frustrated resignation” (“upside-down face emoji”), and hyperbolically claiming “I am on fire,” this-too-too-sullied-flesh describes their emotional and potentially somatic response to reading affectively. In the midst of their obvious

pleasure, however, this Tumblr user also highlights their shame, not only in liking the trope in the first place with the unpunctuated query “why am I like this,” but also in enjoying reading “the same fucking trope over and over and over,” providing no concluding punctuation.

As in fanfiction, bed sharing is a trope which occurs again and again in medieval romances, a scenario often re-written and re-read, though rather than getting two characters together, the goal of sharing a bed in medieval romance is more commonly to test the knight, morally or physically. Aside from the important bedroom scenes in the loathly hag tales *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and the *Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* that I examine in Chapter 1, some of the more famous and well-studied bedroom scenes are Sir Gawain's three encounters with the Lady Bertilak in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK*), which I explore in Chapter 2, and the bed tricks played on Lancelot in the *Prose Lancelot* and *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Lancelot's bed sharing in particular emphasize the desires of the knight's bed partner, since Lancelot is the object of desire more often than the subject desiring, and his love for Guinevere is tested, as is her love for him: descriptions of tricking Lancelot into bed with Elaine so that he can sire the grail-finder, Galahad, are all about what Elaine wants, emphasized because of Lancelot's lack of desire (Lacy V.164). Lancelot is grieved when he discovers the trick, and doubly shamed because he cannot take vengeance on a woman (V.165). This places Lancelot's shame in opposition with the joy Elaine and her father feel when they learn she is pregnant (V.165). Twice in Malory's version, Lancelot is tricked into getting into bed with Elaine, thinking the bed to be Guinevere's (465, 471). His desire is for Guinevere, and simply his *belief* that he is in bed with his desired partner, even though he is not, is the source of his pleasure. When Lancelot

sees who he had been in bed with, he declares himself “shamed” (465). These bed-tests for Lancelot not only place shame and desire in conflict for the characters, but remind us that this motif, somewhat shameful (as a bed trick) must be desired by readers/writers because of its repetition.

In reading *SGGK*, Sharon Rowley argues that pleasure, and how it is experienced and theorized by and about men and women, “underscores the radical performativity of gender and identity” in the poem (173). Her reading builds on Geraldine Heng’s article “A Woman Wants: The Lady, Gawain, and the Forms of Seduction,” which calls the bedroom scenes in *SGGK* “quite literally a seduction *in* and *of* language, devising conditions in which desire can be most intensely actuated and sustained” (102-3). She argues that the Lady’s desire (her “want”) is what gives her agency and subjectivity. Megan G. Leitch finds “a recurring mode” in Middle English romance, but particularly in *Le Morte D’Arthur*, that “manipulations of space constitute [...] a way of arousing or articulating sexual desire” (40-1). Beds and bedrooms, then, have been recognized by medieval scholars as key spaces of exploring female desire and shame in medieval romances,<sup>4</sup> and the repetitions of bed sharing, both across works within the “Arthurian fandom” and within the same works, indicates the writers’ meditations on such scenarios, which I argue illustrates pleasure in rewriting them.

Fan studies, however, prompts us to read bed sharing not as an isolated trope but an often repeated one, one which brings the shame-desire tension experienced by the

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<sup>4</sup> As compared with the fanfiction bed-sharing trope, which functions as sexual tension, however, the “female desires” that it addresses are those of the fanfiction *author*, not the character(s). If 94% of fanfiction writers are non-men (DestinationToast), the question of *what women want*, as is famously asked in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, and which I explore at greater length in Chapter 1, can be answered by some metric in what women want to write and read in fanfiction.



characters into the reader and writer's experience, as well. In online fanfiction collections, tropes like "sharing a bed" are archived by searchable genres and tags, which, as an element a fan can intentionally select *for*, indicates the pleasure that fanfiction authors and readers take in mapping these emotional and sexual experiences onto already beloved characters. Repeated bed-sharing encounters not only allow for development of relationships, but also allow for intensification and development of the reader or writer's desire for such complex erotic entanglements. As Helen Cooper asserts, "the familiarity of the memes of romance [...] make possible a much greater and more concise subtlety of response than could be achieved by invention from scratch," to which, like a fanfiction author, "the originality lies in an author's handling of his materials" (21). What a specifically fannish element adds here is not just familiarity with the memes themselves, but a familiarity with, and desire to maintain the integrity of, beloved fantasy characters, relationships, and settings—a fannish desire that is sometimes embarrassing.

The biggest intersection fanfiction has with the premodern is in how highly "unoriginal" work is valued, which can be shameful in a post-copyright world but was a normalized mode of storytelling in the Middle Ages. Sheenagh Pugh begins her study of fanfiction by citing Robert Henryson's fifteenth-century "fanfiction" of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, explaining that "the idea that there is some intrinsic virtue in using an 'original' character or story would have puzzled most ancient or mediaeval writers" (13). Although not a medievalist, she picks up on and uses medieval examples to illustrate the impetus behind contemporary fanfiction. When discussing that the qualities that fanfiction writers value do not include "originality" (133), she describes them as that "using the talent they have [...] to extend, both in time and scope, a universe and characters they did not

want to come to an end,” making them no less “unoriginal” than Chaucer was in the first place (134).<sup>5</sup> Tolkien, who was a medievalist, would agree, explaining in “On Fairy-Stories,” that “it is precisely the colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details of a story, and above all the general purport that informs with life the undissected bones of the plot, that really count” in the face of someone arguing that medieval derivative works are just “the same story” (106). I have argued elsewhere that nothing prevents Tolkien’s sentiments on fairy-stories from applying to fanfiction as much as any literature that destabilizes the notion of originality (Abrahamson, *passim*). In this way, Anne Jamison argues, fanfiction is “trying to retake ground that was lost centuries ago. Before the modern era of copyright and intellectual property, stories were things held in common, to be passed from hand to hand and narrator to narrator” (Kindle Locations 228-233). The ways fans do that best, I argue, is through experiencing, negotiating, and often subverting the very shame that writing “derivative” work inspires.

The study of fanfiction is often concerned with defining fanfiction as a genre, usually in opposition to “other,” canonical, mainstream, or commercial literature.<sup>6</sup> Kristina Busse brings up the “embarrassing” nature of fanfiction, and the attitude in fandom that “we’ve all got this agreement to just suspend shame... [W]e can’t really pretend that we’re

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<sup>5</sup> For another example, Francesca Coppa in *The Fanfiction Reader* titles her chapters intentionally mimics Chaucer’s format in *The Canterbury Tales*: chapters such as “The Dwarf’s Tale” and “The FBI Agent’s Tale” provide a scholarly prologue before reproducing a fanfiction written by someone else.

<sup>6</sup> Sheenagh Pugh elects one of the more broad definitions of fanfiction as “writing, whether official or unofficial, paid or unpaid, which makes use of an accepted canon of characters, settings and plots generated by another writer or writers... One thing all fanfic has in common is the idea of ‘canon’, the source material accepted as authentic and, within the fandom, known by all readers in the same way that myth and folk-tale were once commonly known” (25-6), but other scholars limit the definition by compensation, such as Daria Pimenova, who defines fanfic as “non-profitable, non-commercial texts based on other fictional texts” (44). Carolyn Dinshaw offhandedly refers to fanfiction reading/writing in terms of compensation and amateurism: “[R]eaders can and do engage in amateur reading at some times and professional reading at other times—scholarly argument by day, say, and fan fiction by night” (*How Soon Is Now?* 24).

only trying to write for our readers’ most rarefied sensibilities” (Busse 55). In this vein, fan studies encourages us to focus on “the aspects that get lost in translation, the parts of fanfiction that are specific to its dialogic amateur community status,” or the parts that are embarrassing and need to be explained away (Busse 47). The primacy that the study of fanfiction gives to that which is derivative, queer, female, vulnerable, kinky—*embarrassing*, whether to medieval sensibilities or modern ones, or both—can, when applied to medieval literature, demonstrate tactics<sup>7</sup> of deviance from cultural norms.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, fanfiction asks us to view medieval romances as intentionally derivative fantasies, where the text’s relationship to writer and reader itself becomes nonheteronormative.

Loving something too much is the basis on which fandom is often derided, since, although the modern use of the word “fan” did not appear in English until it described nineteenth-century sports enthusiasts and female theater-goers, *fan* derives from a word that Latin-literate medieval readers would have known: the pejorative *fanaticus*, “of persons inspired by orgiastic rites and enthusiastic frenzy” (qtd. in Jenkins 12). One significant point of derision of fanfiction is that it is “all porn,”<sup>9</sup> and therefore a source of shame for its predominantly queer, female, or gender-nonconforming authors and readers.

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<sup>7</sup> I follow Michel De Certeau’s use of a “tactic” as a bottom-up practice for negotiating cultural hegemony (xix).

<sup>8</sup> Strictly speaking, in modern usage, shame and embarrassment are separate concepts, though as is clear throughout my project, they are often used interchangeably. Embarrassment is a feeling generated by something that is morally neutral but threatens our projected self, while shame is a feeling inspired by something that is morally wrong. This differentiation is, still, of course, variable today—as a result, translations of medieval works will sometimes reflect this conflation. Shame and embarrassment can both figure in the affective experience of fanfiction writers and readers, depending on the content of the canon or the fanfiction, a person’s degree of sex-positivity, their beliefs regarding the ethics and legality of fanfiction, and whether or not their involvement in fandom is known to their family, friends, or coworkers.

<sup>9</sup> I refer to Aja Romano’s influential fan essay that debunks the concerns of certain mainstream authors’ complaints about fanfiction in “I’m done explaining why fanfic is okay.”

But even fanfiction that is pornographic is not simply about inserting sex into texts that do not contain either, any more than it is for derivative medieval romances. As Francesca Coppa attests, fanfiction writers write about sex “because they’re looking for stories where sex is profound and meaningful,” and “unlike pornography, fanfic features characters we already care deeply about, and who tend to already have long-standing and complex relationships with each other” (95). In its ability to use erotic elements as a means for exploring characters and relationships, fanfiction has a tendency towards deeply affective, emotional, and vulnerable content, with certain branches of fandom co-opting psychoanalysis in the term “Id Vortex,” used to “describe the tailored and customized writing that caters to the writers’ and/or readers’ kinks, that creates stories that move us emotionally not only because we already care about the characters but also because they use tropes, characterizations, and scenes that appeal viscerally” (Busse 54). Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis cite fans’ description of their “most ‘guilty pleasure’ fics as Id!fic or drawerfic—fanfic that pushes the boundaries of believable far enough to feel like it’s tapping directly into one’s unconscious drives. The fannish terms acknowledge both the fans’ awareness that they’re plundering deep and possibly repressed psychological territory, and the simultaneous shame that makes them want to hide it away” (95). Hurt/comfort<sup>10</sup> and slash<sup>11</sup> fanfiction are of particular interest in terms of their attention to vulnerability and shame.

In the medieval context, shame and desire were such important concepts that even historical genres use (and re-use) elements of romance to do so. The Order of the Garter,

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<sup>10</sup> Fanfictions that explore character suffering, most often accompanied by an intimate friend or lover comforting the character’s suffering. See Chapter 3.

<sup>11</sup> Fanfictions that explore homoerotic relationships, most commonly male/male relationships. See Chapter 1.

for example, the famous chivalric order founded in the early fourteenth century by Edward III to promote his court and his war for the French Crown, incorporates shame prominently into its motto and its mythical origin story in a way that illustrates the erotics of shame.<sup>12</sup>

Polydore Vergil's sixteenth-century *Anglica Historia* records a chivalrous Edward III recovering a lady's dropped garter and wearing it as a badge of honor (Trigg, *Shame* 27).

In Vergil's version,

Fama tamen apud vulgus etiam nunc tenet Edouardum aliquando e terra collegisse reginae seu amicae tibi arum tegminis ligamen, quod forte resolutum ita, ut usu venit, ceciderat, et nonnullis heroibus id videntibus ac iocose cavillantibus, dixisse brevi tempore futurum ut eiusmodi cingulo etiam ab illis summus haberetur honor, atque non multo post istiusmodi ordinem instituisse, ac eum addidisse titulum, quo testaretur ipsos heroes contra quam erat de se iudicium fecisse.

[The popular tale goes that Edward picked up from the floor a garter that had loosened and dropped from the leg of the queen, or of his mistress, as sometimes happens. Some of his nobles saw this and made a joke at his expense, and he told them it would soon come to pass that such a garter would be held in the highest honor by them. Then not much later he founded this order and gave it this title to attest that his nobles had not judged him rightly.] (Vergil, XIX.24)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The Order's motto, which predates Vergil and appears on a badge from 1350-76 and a monumental brass of Simon de Felbrigg from 1416 (Boulton 152-5), celebrates the defiance of overturning a moment of embarrassment into one of honor. It boasts *Honi soit qui mal y pense*, "Shame on him who thinks evil (of this)" (Trigg, *Shame* 5).

<sup>13</sup> Text and translation for Vergil are by Dana F. Sutton.

Though this story is considered apocryphal by more sober historians of the Order (Trigg *Shame*, 96), the concept of the opposition of shame and honor, as well as the active defiance of erotic embarrassment as a potentially honorable act—at least in story if not in actual practice—are important to the concept of shame. Vergil speculates that the story was left out of the history books because “Atqui autores Anglici verecunde superstitiosi, fortetimentes ne imminutae maiestatis regiae crimen subirent si tale quid ut minus insigne prodidissent, maluerunt tacitum relinquere, perinde quasi nunquam alias visum esset, rem ab initio, a parva sordidaque origine ortam, magno esse incremento dignitateque aucta” [“English authors, bashful and perhaps afraid of exposing themselves to accusations of *lese majesté* for reporting something so undignified, preferred to let it pass in silence, as if it were never seen elsewhere that something has had a small and humble origin, and subsequently been greatly enhanced in its dignity”] (XIX.24). This reflection establishes the shame felt by *readers*, in this case, readers of the possible historical moment, who were at the time too ashamed to (re)tell the true story. The Order’s origin story presents a community—certainly imagined though very possibly mapped onto historical experiences—of aristocratic chivalry where shame and embarrassment, and how they are inextricably associated with honor and masculinity and, indeed, also the erotic, are crucial elements of its affective politics. In this way, as Trigg and others<sup>14</sup> have argued, shame can be a tool as much for social control as social defiance.

Arthurian romances feature this kind of chivalric shame, where repeatedly, shame

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<sup>14</sup> Anne McTaggart’s study of shame and guilt in Chaucer highlights the medieval relationship between shame and Christian penance, but explores how, in Chaucer’s works, shame “is a form of communication that establishes identity” and “grounds moral experience in the body and in human relationships” (124-5). Wary of the social and ethical consequences of shame, Chaucer understands the destabilizing force of shame as a rhetorical strategy (one he is happy to employ): “as a tool of the powerful, shame serves to maintain the social and political status quo” but “as a tool of the weak and oppressed, shame can bring down the powerful and corrupt even when the powerful and corrupt refuse to acknowledge their guilt” (127).

is positioned as the opposite of “worship,” or honor, and is an emotional experience elite knights generally want to avoid or hide from. Shame is a term that is used across medieval genres and defined by the *Middle English Dictionary* as primarily “the feeling of having offended against propriety or decency; the feeling of having done something disgraceful; an instance of such feeling; embarrassment or revulsion caused by awareness of one’s own behavior; remorse, contrition,” though usages vary (“Shame”). When describing the ranks of the Round Table in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, the poet describes shame as something to be dreaded, saying the knights were “Doughty in their doings and dredde ay shame” (20). Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* features Arthur’s knights swearing the Pentecostal Oath, which asks them, among other things, “never to do outrage nothir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfeiture of their worship and lordship of Kynge Arthure for evermore” (77). This is a guide that knights must adhere to under threat of “forfeiture of their worship”—in other words, at the risk of shame. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a text which has been closely, if not definitively, associated with the Order of the Garter, Trigg argues that “the girdle will always suggest these two meanings simultaneously: shame and honor” (“Romance” 264). As I will explore in Chapter 2, Sir Gawain’s shame as a result of his failure is evident in the text when he shows Arthur’s court the wound on his neck and the green garter he wears: he groans “for shame” (ll. 2502-4). But because “þe kyng comfortez þe knyȝt” [“the king comforts the knight”] (2513), and he and the court agree to wear green garters “for sake of þat segge” [“for the sake of that man”] (2518), Gawain’s personal embarrassment is reclaimed as honor by the community of the Round Table. I would add that because the Round Table members “Laȝen loude þerat, and luflyly acorden” [“Laugh

loudly at that, and lovingly agree”] (2514), the scene also figures *pleasure* as an emotion in tension with shame. While shame is generally an emotion aristocratic knights wish to avoid, there are intersections with pleasure that can make shame desirable.

But shame is not confined only to the characters in romance, as the rare windows through which we can see the production process behind these surviving works sometimes reveal. Extratextual reader/writer shame is indicated when William Caxton printed (and to a certain extent also rewrote) Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*: he recounts in his preface that some “noble jentylmen” asked him to do so because “there ben in Frensshe dyvers and many noble volumes of his actes,” but none in English, even though Arthur was “borne wythin this royaume” (Shepherd 815). Caxton further acknowledges that Malory “dyd take [the story] oute of certeyn bookes of Frensshe and reduced it into Englysshe” but that certain men think that “Arthur and...alle suche books” are but “fayned and fables” (815). Caxton’s failure to print Malory is embarrassing on a basis of lack on multiple levels. Arthur the character is an embarrassment in that his achievements “whyche *ought* moost to be remembred emongue us Englysshemen” are represented better in other languages and traditions than in English, which causes readers to consider him a potential fiction of fabulous romance without support in reliable “cronycles” (815). On another level, Malory’s dependence on French books to tell the tale of Arthur is another moment of embarrassing, derivative fanfiction (derived from the *French*, no less!), while Caxton’s claim that the English themselves seem not to care for Arthur points to another cause for shame. Even so, the very success of Caxton’s publication depends on the enthusiastic, fannish desire of English “jentylmen” for more Arthurian material, either as authors of adaptations like Malory himself, or as readers who purchase a book of



“wonderful...adventures.” Particularly in derivative texts, shame and desire continually intersect in both the story and metatextual level.

Fanfiction as a theoretical lens also reminds scholars of the important, if ephemeral, role that various communities, real and imagined, play in fandoms—like the readers alluded to by Caxton. Just as Barbara Rosenwein, in *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, argues for the existence of “emotional communities,” where groups of people “adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value—or devalue—the same or related emotions” (2), Stanley Fish’s “interpretive communities” is a useful concept for thinking about fans. While emotional and interpretive communities are byproducts of a whole range of social factors, fan communities are elective, but entering into a fandom or interpretive community is in some sense entering into what Rosenwein calls an emotional refuge from more hegemonic emotional communities (19-23). Fans group together not only by the texts they value (emotional refuges), but by their strategies of interpreting of them, which thereby become “in effect, community property. [...] It is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings” (Fish, *Is There A Text in This Class?* 14). This concept has been aptly applied to fans. Henry Jenkins, in *Textual Poachers*, defines fans as “spectators who transform the experience” of consuming media “into a rich and complex participatory culture” (23). Following Roland Barthes and reader-response criticism, Fish elides the difference between reading and writing, claiming that “interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties” (Fish, “Selections” 1990). “Fan-produced works” especially, according to Henry Jenkins, “respond to the perceived tastes of their desired audience and reflect the community’s generic traditions” (88). Just

as Fish describes “interpretive communities” as shaped by interaction of its members, fan communities do a great deal of self-regulation and norming of their readings<sup>15</sup> through emotional interaction and fanfiction production, though this process, too, can become its own form of hegemony.

Fanfiction provides a new lens through which the late medieval period is ripe for studies of affect and emotion. Stephanie Trigg has pointed out that the history of emotions “helps us understand not just medieval and early modern individuals but also the social, cultural, and political frameworks in which they experienced, performed, and narrated their emotions” (“Emotional Histories” 14). Shame/embarrassment and desire/pleasure are major affect categories that scholars have explored and upon whose work I rely,<sup>16</sup> but fanfiction brings some of the concerns of each together in order to uncover a particular relationship between desire, embarrassment, and textual reception in medieval writing. Toril Moi, in reading Andreas Capellanus’ influential *Art of Courtly Love*, discusses desire in terms of the “unfulfilled sexual desire” which “never ceases to torment the male lover” since “love is doomed to remain unsatisfied” (21). This medieval theory of love parallels fans’ desire for their objects of fandom, where desire has been theorized as a kind of Lacanian drive to possess the unattainable.<sup>17</sup> Because the fan object is unattainable—because the media is almost always controlled by a party other than the fan, and because

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<sup>15</sup> Even the notion of the “headcanon” (“a fan’s personal, idiosyncratic interpretation of canon”), by virtue of being shared in a public space within the community, can be picked up and shared by other members. Fans often *want* their own personal teasing out of subtext or filling of gaps and blanks to become a popular fan theory, and thereby both a personal and a group reading (“Head Canon”).

<sup>16</sup> See the works of Anne Baden-Daintree, Anne Callahan, David Boyd, Glenn Burger, Marilyn Desmond, Geraldine Heng, Robert L. Kindrick, Léglu and Milner, Anne McTaggart, Toril Moi, Barbara Rosenwein, Stephanie Trigg (*Shame and Honor*) in the Works Cited below.

<sup>17</sup> The lady can even be read as a text: “Desire in the *De amore* is not only a discursive enterprise but a hermeneutical challenge. The lover’s happiness depends on his ability to decipher the lady’s words and uncover their hidden meaning,” which makes desire into discourse: the Lover is interpreting, the woman interpreted (Moi 26).

the text is never realized in a fully satisfactory way for the fan<sup>18</sup>—this expression of desire, giving into this drive, activates a sense of shame for the fan. Fanfiction as an activity of textual reception then becomes the locus of that shame, of being emotionally vulnerable in one’s drive for the fan object, in needing to rewrite a fan object that is desirable but imperfect, and by inserting a heightened level of intimacy into the narrative that the fan desires but fails to find (enough of) in the source text. When the work of the fan is transformative in this way, fans enact Lacan’s theory of enjoyment (*jouissance*) obscenely, even transgressively. Erin Felicia Labbie writes of Lacan’s medievalism that by bringing desire to the fore, “knowledge becomes linked with proper manners, and desire, that which has been repressed and sublimated, becomes linked with the obscene text” (134). Although not bound by the shame of rewriting copyrighted texts as in a modern context, medieval authors of derivative texts, particularly romances, express shame when they rewrite something that maybe “should” not be rewritten at all.

While expressions of fandom today might be comparable to a secular religion and the devotional practices of modern-day fans might find very useful intersections with the devotional practices of medieval Christians—and I do, at points, compare religious devotion to fandom devotion—there is always a point where being a fan falls short of religious devotion, which I argue makes the comparison uneasy. This comparison can and has been well done by others,<sup>19</sup> and Anna Wilson’s dissertation on affective fandom argues for an important intersection between affective piety and fandom. She establishes that fanfiction authors and readers necessarily know their source texts intimately:

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<sup>18</sup> I refer here to Henry Jenkins’ concept of the fan’s meta-text, an ideal version of the fan text in the fan’s mind against which the actual text is compared (98).

<sup>19</sup> See the works of Richard Howells, Godelinde Perk, and Fiona Tolhurst.

This knowledge has an erotic inflection, as in some early English translations of the Bible, where to ‘know’ is to intimately penetrate; theorists of fanfiction often speak of fanfiction as “filling the gaps” in a source text, a phrase with its own sexual undertones that also accurately describes fanfiction’s self-assumed role as interlinear glossing of a source text, reading what is ‘between the lines’ and writing it down for all to see. (Wilson 59-60)

Fanfiction is an inherently desire-driven and erotic way of knowing, even in religious genres. Wilson’s concept of “fan hermeneutics” additionally argues that fanfiction is “a heuristic tool, a mental technology that facilitates understanding. The hermeneutics of fanfiction are, like the hermeneutics of Christian mysticism, [...] primarily affective” (60). The affects I focus on are, of course, shame and desire, rather than the many other possible emotions and expressions of fandom. I also shift away from religious genres (though not religious ways of reading) to focus on modern and medieval “fantasy” genres which are more completely divorced from material or spiritual concerns as well as from normative, “acceptable” cultural productions than more purely religious or moralistic genres usually are. Shame and erotic desire are particularly foregrounded in the romance in a way that makes this study effective. Mainstream science-fiction and fantasy media may be more likely to inspire fanfiction than other genres,<sup>20</sup> and therefore the comparably fantastical medieval genre, the romance, provides a better point of intersection. Because these stories are once-removed from material concerns by virtue of being about fictional and

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<sup>20</sup> “Fanfiction fandoms tend to be genre-based,” writes Anne Jamison (Kindle Location 3173). Just from a brief sampling, it appears that fandoms that get a lot of scholarly attention include *Star Trek* (Jenkins, Bacon-Smith), *Supernatural* (Larsen and Zubernis), *Harry Potter* (Tosenberger), *The Lord of the Rings* (Reid) *Twilight* and *The X-Files* (Jamison)—all in the SFF genre.

supernatural worlds, being overly-enamored of them may be embarrassing.

The Arthurian romance tradition was a popular one, even in the face of Christian ideological dominance that often dismissed it. Medieval romances and epics—the fiction categories of the day—could be considered unimportant by readers in the Middle Ages. We might think of Alcuin’s famous admonishment, “What has Ingeld to do with Christ?” (Levine 105), or Chaucer’s “Al that is writen is for oure doctrine” (1082), or Sulpicius Severus’ introduction to his life of St. Martin, where he asks “What benefit has posterity derived from reading of the battles of Hector or the philosophical treatises of Socrates?” (Stouck 138). I rest my case on these sentiments that religious orthodoxy of the day tended to have an unfavorable view of heroic and supernatural literature, favoring instead the notion that all (good) writing was doctrinal. Romances are, of course, vastly outnumbered in extant manuscripts by religious genres such as sermons, homilies, and hagiographies. Christianity, if read as a medieval “fandom,” would far outstrip any other “canon” in its sheer cultural impact. Even though aspects of desire and repetitiveness of fanfiction may be found in Christian texts, especially hagiographies whose practice of *imitatio Christi* might be read as the ultimate performance of Jesus fandom, I focus on the *shame* of erotic pleasure, where fanfiction becomes a method of counter-heteronormative storytelling. My definition of fanfiction requires, then, not just a retelling of a known story, but some element of counter-culturalism: it has to be written outside the culturally preferred standards of storytelling, whether that ideology is medieval Christendom or neoliberal capitalism. Just as a Church-approved saint’s life or meditation manual is *not* a fanfiction of the life of Christ, by this definition, neither is, for example, a Marvel Cinematic Universe film a fanfiction of a Marvel comic book character, because both stories and methods of

production exist under umbrellas of cultural, social, capital, and even political approval. While the romances I study here are not truly marginal, since they were obviously valued enough to be written down in manuscripts in the first place, nevertheless most of them exist in only one MS copy (*The Stanzaic Guy of Warwick*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Alliterative Morte Arthur*, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, and *Le Morte D'Arthur*), were written by female (Marie) or unpatronized (Chaucer) or imprisoned (Malory) authors if we know their authors at all, and all contain erotic elements objectionable to orthodox Christianity. To be “fanfiction,” for my purposes, a text must be not only derivative but to some extent marginal: in being counter to a dominant culture, fanfiction must also grapple with a certain measure of shame. And, as medievalists know well, what appears in the margins does important semantic work. Very often, as in the cases I explore here, this marginal work is erotic and exploratory—i.e., fantasy. It is not necessarily subversive, and very often fails to be progressive, but it is always personal.

Throughout this dissertation, it is important to recognize where fan and medieval studies have historically revealed an implicit bias toward privileged readers, so my study of “marginal” texts is only comparatively so. Of course, any desire that runs counter to dominant ideologies (such as the secular and supernatural frivolity of medieval romances and the anti-capitalist gift-culture of fanfiction) is naturally going to be transformative and subjectively relevant to its rewriter. In particular, however, the desires of marginalized groups are rendered doubly or even triply problematic to the dominant culture, because they demand recognition of non-dominant subjectivity. While fanfiction authors are literally amateurs who do work for love and do not control the means of textual production, within fan communities issues of gender, class, race, education, age, ability, and other

factors replicate hierarchies of hegemony in the dominant culture.

In much recent scholarship both in medieval studies and in fan studies, race has moved to the forefront as a critical category of analysis. In medieval studies several scholars have pointed out the extent to which medieval studies has assumed whiteness and ignored moments of racial formation and denigration. Key conversations about the construction of race in medieval romance in particular have been initiated by Dennis Austin Britton, Geraldine Heng (*Invention*), Jonathan Hsy, Sylvia Huot, Dorothy Kim, Sharon Kinoshita, Lynne T. Ramey, Cord J. Whittaker, and Helen Young. Similarly, in fan studies, Rukmini Pandee has recognized (along with others, such as Dayna Chatman, Sarah Gatson and Robin Anne Reid, Lisa Nakamura, and blogger Stitch), that “whiteness has been an unarticulated yet core structuring mechanism within both fan studies and media fandom communities that actively works to elide, erase, and excuse its operations” (Pandee xii). Both sets of scholars agree that the study of privileged authors and readers has excluded marginal texts and voices. In places where race seems absent in my present study, therefore, I recognize “whiteness” as a critically raced category that *must* be recognized as a category rather than assumed to be an unconscious default. Because I do not wish to suggest problematic analogies between different kinds of oppression, race is intentionally not a primary category of analysis for this dissertation. I recognize that the voices of people of color in particular continue to be marginalized in medieval studies, in fan communities and in fan studies, so I hope my focus on gender and sexuality (for all intents and purposes white and elite) which is more visible through the tropes I employ in both medieval and modern contexts will pave the way for more work in both medieval studies and fan studies to acknowledge and study more diverse groups and their particular experiences of

marginalization.

In Chapter 1, I address female desire in two Loathly Lady romances, Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, which I read as fanfiction because they are part of a recognized and common tale type with several analogues beyond each other. The desires of the female characters within these texts illustrate tactics that female fans still employ today to resist misogynist readings. In particular, I read the temporary loathly body as a fandom avatar as used in online spaces, which allows for a degree of anonymity and subjectivity not always afforded to women. This feminist resistance to misogyny remains unsuccessful in promoting equality, however, to the degree that it fails to be intersectional (Crenshaw, *passim*). In Chapter 2, I use queer theory to read the erotic potential of the canonical but single-manuscript *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the extensively influential French *Prose Lancelot* through the tropes of male/male erotic fanfiction known as "slash." I reconceptualize this genre as a writing process in which secondary authors rewrite a text queerly, treating the canon of Arthurian legend as a milieu they interact with rather than an authority. Because of the importance of character integrity to fans, however, a character must always be rewritten against their canonical heterosexuality, and so cannot exist "as" queer, only rewritten queerly.

Chapter 3 explores a converse response to queer rewriting of medieval masculinities in the *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick* and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, which mark contributions to popular canons even though they exist in only one manuscript each. In these texts, violence, when read through a comparison of medieval romance genre conventions and the fanfiction genre of "hurt/comfort," becomes an appropriate narrative tool to explore intimacy between heterosexual men. Such a reading reveals texts where



keeping the masculine body “safe” from queer erotics may be more important than keeping the physical body safe from harm and injury, as well as how intense descriptions of physical and mental hurt (and its consolation) reduces the aesthetic distance between reader and text as a hermeneutical tool. After covering these aspects of gender and sexuality, my final chapter revels in the non-heteronormativity of medieval romance in Marie de France’s *Lanval* and Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*, where fantasy desires for kink are very evident in the erotic exchanges of pain, power, and humiliation in these contributions to the Arthurian canon. It is easy to imagine Malory compiling Arthurian stories into one *Arthuriad* as an attempt to bring joy to his life as a prisoner; and while Marie is the one author in my study who was patronized by a royal court (Waters 20), making her less “amateur” than my other authors, we also know she was a woman, which may position her closer to modern fanfiction authors in another way. Kinky titillations from the dominatrix to the rape fantasy, enacted through beloved fictional characters, are not bound by the rules of “safe, sane and consensual” BDSM practices but are nevertheless governed by the “rules” of courtly love, and therefore I read both fanfiction authors and medieval romance authors as indulging in true “fantasies” that may be entirely divorced from real life relationship desires and adherence to heteronormative structures. To this end, I conclude with a discussion of humiliation kink in fanfiction as an illustration of and a resolution to this complicated intersection of shame and desire.

What I find to be an important element of fanfiction’s erotics throughout this study, which has hitherto been under-examined by medieval scholars, is the desire to rewrite as a nonheteronormative pleasure drive itself. I argue that this drive is not only to rewrite plots or “memes,” as Helen Cooper finds, but a drive to enjoy, through the process of rewriting,

what are in fact very particular settings and characters and relationships that already give the writer, or someone in their community, pleasure as readers. Reading medieval derivative works as fanfictions makes their medieval authors and readers into fans who desired to explore fictional relationships, characters, circumstances, intimacies, and fantasies, sometimes, perhaps, simply for the pleasure of it.

## Chapter 1. Feminine Erotics:

### What Loathly Ladies Want in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* and *The*

#### Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle

*The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* by GeoffChaucer  
Arthurian Mythology & Related Fandoms, Loathly Lady

Rated: Explicit

Warnings for Rape/Non-Con

Relationships: Alisoun/Variou, Knight/Maiden, Knight/Loathly Lady

Tagged: Romance, What Women Want, Rape/Non-Con as Plot Device, Long Author's Note

*The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* by Anon  
Arthurian Mythology & Related Fandoms, Loathly Lady

Rated: Mature

No Warnings Apply

Relationships: Gawain/Ragnelle, Arthur/Guinevere, Arthur & Gawain

Tagged: Romance, Magic, Top!Ragnelle, Mean Girl Guinevere, What Women Want

In *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World*, Anne Jamison positions fanfiction as a mode of storytelling humans have always practiced in the pre-copyright world. One of her illustrations features a translation and adaptation of Chrétien de Troyes' preface to the *Knight of the Cart*, which she describes in fanfiction terms impenetrable to the average medievalist, even though she is writing about a medieval text. She claims Chrétien's preface is a "writer's note" from "the 'Arthur material' kink meme" which "announces itself as a fill for Countess' prompt, apparently a request for Arthur/Lancelot/Guinevere with a cart (the exact wording of the request has been lost)" (Kindle Locations 671-674). Jamison here postulates fannish desires in Marie de Champagne, in requesting the subject matter for a romance (posting a prompt to the "kink meme" or call board for a fanfiction writing event—somewhat misleadingly named, as these fanfiction prompts do not always include kink) which Chrétien "fills" (writes the

fanfiction including all of the requested elements). Jamison uses a medieval story to illustrate the ephemeral circumstances behind how and why fanfictions are (or have always been) written. It is in this vein I wish to provide the epigraph above, and the epigraphs beginning each of my subsequent chapters, where I present my primary texts as though they were fanfictions posted to a modern-day internet archive such as ArchiveOfOurOwn.org, as arguments in themselves. They position elements important to my reading of these texts as significant to the story, as something worth “tagging” for or including in a summary of a fanfiction, to help fans be guided by their desires and dislikes as they select a text for reading. The epigraphs may also contain one or two fandom in-jokes, references to niche memes, and subjects designed to make a modern reader laugh as they consider this way of reading, indeed, *re-reading* these very old texts. For those conversant in fan culture, who might have written or read fanfiction summaries and tags similar to these, I intend these “jokes,” while speculative, to provide a kind of shorthand, an emotional vehicle for an instantly intimate understanding of a medieval author or work that non-medievalists might feel so distant from.

### **Loathly Lady Tales Fandom**

The story of a knight on a quest to find out what women want and finding the answer from a loathly hag whom he is forced to marry is repeated throughout the Middle Ages, with insular versions of the tale especially concerned with female choice and sovereignty. There are several related versions of this tale in English which feature the loathly lady’s transformation into a beautiful maiden upon the knight’s absorption of some lesson, among which I focus on Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*

and the anonymous *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* for their especially intimate attention to female desire and shame located in the question *what do loathly ladies want*. Based on the repetition of this tale-type, we might conceive of such a thing as a “Loathly Lady tales fandom” in the Middle Ages made up of “fans” who enjoy reading, rereading, and, as in the case of fanfiction, rewriting these texts. After establishing the Loathly Lady Tales as fandom analogues, however, I focus intranarratively on the fannish desires of the Loathly Ladies themselves. In these stories all about transformation, I emphasize the transformative potential of “female fan desire” whereby female fans assert their personhood by means of their desires. The Loathly Lady, usually cursed with ugliness, but by no means passive, must employ tactics of female fan desire to reconcile the desires of her society against her personal desires. The Loathly Lady wears her ugliness like a fandom avatar, which removes her need to experience shame, and which allows her to desire another but not herself be the object of desire, so she can antagonistically rewrite the object of her desire against others’ desires to control her behavior. Like her loathly body, however, which she ultimately submits to heteronormative standards of beauty and behavior, this transformation is so intensely subjective it is only ever personal, without any appreciable destabilization of wider gender politics.

While studies have suggested that heterosexual women make up the majority of fanfiction authors,<sup>21</sup> more recent studies indicate that more people of LGBTQ+ identities are writing (or being recognized as writing) fanfiction—a subject I explore further in Chapter 2. Fandom statistician Toast finds in a 2017 study that “94% of fanfiction authors are non-male and that 71% of them are non-heterosexual” (DestinationToast). Scholarly

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<sup>21</sup> See Walker 363; Hellekson and Busse 6; Jamison Kindle Location 547/8476.

attention to fanfiction has focused on its “femaleness,” with cisgender heterosexuality almost universally (but often invisibly) implied. Keeping in mind these problems of intersectionality, I wish to call attention to this concept of “female fan desire,” which I define as an insatiable pleasure drive for the imperfect fan object. It is visible in the practice of reinterpreting and rewriting against the dominant culture’s policing of women’s desire. I argue that “female fan desire” is resistant on an individual level but not progressive against hegemonic heteronormativity, often because it is so personally-focused that it leverages intersecting privileges against other subordinated identities. These problems map “female fan desire” onto the medieval Loathly Lady romance, a fantasy motif that I argue is resistant to (because it privileges explicit female desire in the question “what women want”) but ultimately maintains kyriarchal<sup>22</sup> hegemonies (because marriage maintains heteronormativity, prescriptive femininity, *and* is ironically still what the woman wants). In pursuit of their desires, female fans employ the avatar, which allows them some measure of concealment that disrupts the problem of female bodies as the objects of male desire; however, as fanfiction fandom illustrates, where “non-men” become the dominant group (or, where loathly ladies exercise sovereignty over men and the court), other methods of hegemonic control may exert themselves more drastically (Stitch). Reading the Loathly Ladies of *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* as expressing female fan desire reveals new tactics by which fans and Loathly Ladies alike may leverage their personal desires into a maintenance of heteronormativity that reflects

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<sup>22</sup> I use Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s “kyriarchy” to “redefine the analytic category of patriarchy in terms of multiplicative intersecting structures of domination” and emphasize lack of intersectionality as a failure of antipatriarchal feminism. Schussler Fiorenza defines kyriarchy as “a socio-political system of domination in which elite educated propertied men hold power over wo/men and other men. Kyriarchy is best theorized as a complex pyramidal system of intersecting multiplicative social structures of superordination and subordination, of ruling and oppression” (211).

the critical shortcomings of non-intersectional feminism.

Feminine modes of reading have been recognized by scholars as responding to historic and systemic inequalities in acknowledging female desires. Such rereading practices are not limited to female readers but rather are a product of a desire to rewrite dominant ideologies, whether or not they are always successful in that goal. Reshaping a narrative to fit an individual's desired metatext is a particularly fannish intervention into the medieval romance genre. Understanding medieval romance as rewritten according to reader/writer desires in the same way fanfiction is puts reader and (re)writer and text into close conversation with each other. At its more irreducible level, of course, the tactics these *Loathly Ladies* are employing come from their authors: Chaucer is obviously a male author assuming a female avatar to rewrite an "imperfect" fan text—the loathly lady story that he felt he could retell better—and the anonymous *Wedding*-author is involved in the same process, rewriting the fan text about female desire in the precise terms they desired or else thought their audience would desire.<sup>23</sup> By locating a great deal of agency in their loathly hags, these authors (at least one of them male) unsettle dominant ideologies that seek to control women's desirous behaviors, but will ultimately submit the women to the romance paradigm of objectification and marriage because simply reversing female subordination with sovereignty maintains the same hegemonic structures that dominated her in the first place.

However, since desire is important to both creator and text, and because these *Loathly Lady* tales are ultimately authored by men (certainly in one case, and probably in

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<sup>23</sup> Virginia Woolf's admonition that "Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman" aside, I use "they" as the gender neutral singular to avoid the clunky "he or she" of the anonymous author, and also to acknowledge gender as not contained within a binary (Woolf 41).

the other), I focus less on the surface authors (as male authors impersonating female characters) emphasize the story itself as illustrating common female fan rewriting practices. The Loathly Lady's desires are embodied because of her status as a woman, and shameful because of that body's loathly appearance. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is even further complicated by the fact that Alisoun the tale teller expresses many of the same desires of the Loathly Lady in her story. Interpreting Alisoun, Alisoun's unnamed Loathly Lady, and Dame Ragnelle in terms of their "female fan desires" offers a new way of understanding how they "read" their objects of desire (the bachelor knight and Gawain, respectively) critically as fans. I argue that these Loathly Ladies, in constraining the knight to grant them sovereignty, exercise fannish rereading/rewriting (transformative) practices such as de-emphasizing male authority, emphasizing personal relationships, and reclaiming their desires from male desires, which reclaim female sexual subjectivity in the face of shame, unapologetically yet not necessarily subversively. Because shame is a social emotion to the extent that, as Sara Ahmed points out, "I may be shamed by somebody I am interested in, somebody whose view 'matters' to me" (105), a discussion of shame must necessarily take into account those before whom the loathly ladies *do* seem to feel shame and by whom they ultimately want to be desired: the same bachelor knights over whom sovereignty was so critical. This reading highlights the issue of narrative agency from a feminist perspective, as fannish modes of rewriting continue to be deployed in the face of kyriarchal media, but when the emphasis is placed on the subjectivity of individual aristocratic women above other women, this feminist resistance fails to present a challenge to kyriarchal hegemony. A study of medieval texts through this paradigm of female fan desire reveals a desire to subvert patriarchy that is essentially unsuccessful even within the narrow bounds



of the medieval romance world.<sup>24</sup>

Because the Loathly Lady motif was popular outside the versions I am studying here (John Gower, for example, wrote another popular one in the *Confessio Amantis*), and there may have been common sources which are no longer extant, a useful view of these texts is as analogues to each other, meaning their relationships are more complicated than a one-way direction of influence. If, as happens in fandom, communities coalesce around interpretive and affective engagement with texts, we might look at these texts not only as analogues but as belonging to a community of readers and writers who were aware of (and perhaps even “fans of”) the Loathly Lady motif.

Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* was completed before 1400, and the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale* remain popular for scholarly investigation and as a teaching text. In the *Wife’s* prologue, Chaucer takes on a hyper-sexual female persona named Alisoun who is only too happy to express her desires and chronicle her sexcapades with her five husbands. Her tale follows an unnamed knight who rapes a woman and, instead of being executed for his crimes, will be pardoned by the queen if he can solve the riddle of what women want. A loathly hag promises him the correct answer (sovereignty) in exchange for marriage, to which the knight agrees. In bed together on their wedding night, the loathly hag expresses her desire for the knight in contrast to the knight’s desire to be anywhere else. The hag grants her reticent husband another boon, asking him to choose whether she

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<sup>24</sup> At this point in the discussion, it will be useful to synchronize my employment of a few terms. I rely on the work of Sara Ahmed, particularly in how she discusses the relation between emotions and sensations (and affects) as “a form of company: pleasure and pain become companions of love and hate, for example” (6). This is a useful method for considering my primary category of desire and terms I will use as near-synonyms such as pleasure and joy or even actions such as kisses and embraces (which inspire or register as a temporary fulfillment of desire), etc. Shame and embarrassment, too, function as companions for each other in my study; as do emotion, feeling, and occasionally affect. I intend to be explicitly trans-inclusive in my use of the terms woman, feminine, and female.

will be an ugly but loyal wife, or beautiful and promiscuous. Having perhaps learned his lesson about female mastery, or possibly not liking either option, he leaves the choice to her, and she transforms into a woman both beautiful and good, and the Wife concludes her tale by praying for Jesus to send all women “meeke” husbands (1259).

*The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* is an anonymous poem written probably within a century after Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale*. In this iteration, the knight is given the name Gawain, and perhaps because of his name, as I will argue, behaves more chivalrously than in Chaucer’s version. Here it is King Arthur who gets himself into trouble, losing a fight to the otherworldly Sir Gromer Somer Joure, who sets him the challenge about what women want. Arthur encounters the loathly hag, who will give Arthur the answer but demands Gawain’s hand in marriage as her price. Despite the misgivings of Arthur and the rest of the court, Gawain marries her gladly, and this time the choice she gives him is whether he wants her to be beautiful by day and ugly by night, or the other way around. When he says the choice is hers, the spell on her is broken and her 24/7 beauty is restored. John Bugge suggests the *Wedding of Sir Gawain* is a story “about the validity of female sexual desire,” and he claims survival of this theme from Old Irish fertility myths to the fifteenth-century English version (212).

The supernatural Loathly Lady is purely “a creature of the imagination,” in contrast to many other literary motifs that have equivalents in the material world, such as kings, emperors, and knights (Passmore and Carter xiii). This helps us to view her as a fictional character more comparable to one that a modern fan might want to write about.<sup>25</sup> Sigmund Eisner writes that “the merry tale” of the transformed Loathly Lady “was told again and

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<sup>25</sup> Real-Person Fiction does exist (“RPF”), but it remains outnumbered by fanfiction based on purely fictional texts.

again in the Middle Ages” but Chaucer in assigning it to the Wife of Bath “found the perfect narrator” (7). Chaucer’s tale was an amalgam of versions of a popular tale told again and again, but Eisner cannot resist claiming that Chaucer did it best.<sup>26</sup> He qualifies this by claiming that “Chaucer’s genius lay not in creating incidents but in shaping incidents already known to him” (51-2), much like a fanfiction author. Even as reductionist as it is, locating Chaucer’s genius in “shaping” rather than “inventing” is illustrative of fandom’s natural impulses to exert narrative control over stories they enjoy. These borrowings are always intertextual: fan writers do not work in a vacuum with only themselves and their source text, but within a horizon of expectations from other fans and a greater field of intertextuality—that is, fandom communities. Since fandom communities surround texts, fans inevitably engage with more than one fandom and more than one community, so that in-jokes, tropes, and genres may cross fandom boundaries, and single fanfictions may even “Crossover” between two unrelated texts,<sup>27</sup> just as the Loathly Lady tale can be told in different settings.

Setting is why I have so far been referring to a “Loathly Lady tales fandom” rather than an Arthurian one. Gower’s version of the tale reminds us that the Arthurian court is not requisite, and while the Wife of Bath’s version ostensibly takes place in an Arthurian court, where “In th’olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour, / Of which that Britons speken greet honour,” King Arthur is the only character named in it (Chaucer 857-8, 883)—the queen,

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<sup>26</sup> Eisner even goes so far as to suggest “the Wife of Bath’s Tale is so well dovetailed into the Canterbury Pilgrims’ lively discussion of marriage, that, had the story no analogues, we might be justified in surmising that Chaucer invented the tale for the occasion” (7). Frederick Biggs has more recently explored how the narrators were assigned to the tales in the *Canterbury Tales*, however, showing that the Wife of Bath’s Tale originally belonged to the Shipman.

<sup>27</sup> “A crossover is a fanfic in which two or more fandoms are combined in some way. [...] Crossovers may take place in many ways. In the most common form, characters from Fandom A may meet characters from Fandom B (i.e., a *Stargate Atlantis* story in which The Doctor visits Atlantis, perhaps with a Companion or two in tow).” (“Crossover”).

the knight, the raped maiden, and the Loathly Lady all remain unnamed, rather than engaging more with the Arthurian world. We are additionally transported to a specifically supernatural world, blended with fantastic elements: “Al was this land fulfild of fayerye. / The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye, / Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede,” of which the Loathly Lady is just one element (859-61). *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* has a similar setting, beginning, “In the tyme of Arthoure thys adventure betyd” (4). The whimsy of the Wife’s tale’s setting is replaced with courtly emphasis and a stronger sense of an Arthurian world: “In his contrey was nothyng butt chyvalry / And knyghtes were beloved by that doughty, / For cowardes were everemore shent” (10-12). Into this world, the supernatural Gromer Somer Joure and the Loathly Lady are intrusive—Sir Gromer must be defeated, and the Loathly Lady must be married, transformed, and subsumed into the Arthurian court (and dead after five years of marriage to Gawain [820]). In Chaucer’s setting, however, magic is more commonplace, and indeed, by its power even reforms the court (Passmore and Carter xv). The what-women-want question is posed to the knight by an internal character, Arthur’s queen (lines 902-12), and the Loathly Lady’s knowledge saves the knight’s life, so the magic of her existence never threatens anything but the knight’s personal pride in being married to an ugly woman (1078-82). Although both the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and the *Wedding of Sir Gawain* have ostensibly the same setting, they are in fact two very different worlds. This is why I position them as engaging a “Loathly Lady fandom,” and not an “Arthurian fandom,” though the “Arthurian fandom” may still have intertextual implications for these texts. Fan communities coalesce and even define themselves around texts or groups of texts—something like a “Loathly Lady tales fandom” was made up of people who enjoyed reading, and in some cases rewriting, these

texts in which they or their audiences were interested. That Chaucer and the *Wedding*-poet interacted or even read each other's work is purely speculative: all we know is that they both, in some sense, participated in the same fandom.

### **Female Fan Desire in Fan Studies and Medieval Studies**

When people deride fanfiction today, they often do so in part because it is the production of women, and medieval philosophies, too, claimed that derivative writing was essentially feminine. Anne Jamison reminds us that it is not strictly women who write fanfiction, but still focuses on the role of gender, finding that

those who are less shut out from established systems of economic and cultural credit and prestige turn less often to a cultural form that has been not only unpaid, but actively stigmatized. I know many men who write fic, but I know even more men who write fic-like stories, in fic-like ways. When they do it, though, they sell it, get written up in the *Times*, call it *postmodernism* or *pastiche* or simply *fiction*. (Kindle Locations 547-553)

Jamison points out the “economic and cultural” advantages that power and masculinity plays in whether a writer writes (or considers themselves to write) *fanfiction* or simply *fiction*. Today, gender seems to be a determining factor in determining whether or not a derivative text *is* fanfiction (i.e., what men write is hardly ever called fanfiction). In the Middle Ages, of course, the concept of originality was hardly something to argue about: *inventio*, which Rita Copeland defines as “a ‘coming upon,’ a discovery of that which is there, or already there, to be discovered,” had very “little to do with originality or with creation *ex nihilo*” (151). Roland Barthes declares that the “genius” Author is strictly “a

modern figure,” “emerging from the Middle Ages” as “the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology” (1322).<sup>28</sup> However, Patricia Ingham points out that this did not mean that medieval audiences were uninterested in innovation: they could, in fact, value both authority and novelty (6). And they could devalue derivation, which could be theorized as synonymous with femininity. Medieval philosophy and misogynist readings of Scripture underly theoretical understandings of woman as inherently “derivative,” i.e., coming from Adam, and in language “translation, transfer, metaphor, trope” are characterized as feminine, a sentiment that R. Howard Bloch and Frances Ferguson argue survived throughout the Middle Ages (11). Jane H. M. Taylor and Lesley M. Smith in their compilation of *Women and the Book in the Middle Ages* find “surprising” how “perennially problematic were the relations of women and the book... [W]omen write themselves, and men rewrite women, with surprising homogeneity across the centuries and continents,” up to and including the modern era (ix). Women’s historical reality as more often property than property-owners is reflected in their relations to texts and their textual representation.

A fan’s re-reading of a text which engages their emotions is comparable to “the typical late-medieval reader” who “worked through [a] book more than once and with the care and intensity appropriate to devotional reading and seeing” (Brantley 10-11). Although discussing religious texts, Mary Carruthers shows how medieval readers could and did read meditatively and affectively. She cites Francis of Assisi’s biography as valuing an almost fannish rumination: ““having heard something once he took it in not idly, but with continued

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<sup>28</sup> Of course Barthes tells us this only to immediately correct this common delusion: “a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (1324). Popular notions of the “Author-God” still exist for contemporary literature, particularly when dismissing fanfiction, but scholars familiar with medieval writing will find the notion of a variety of writings blending and clashing apt.

devout attention his emotion-memory [*affectus*] chewed on it” (217). The best medieval readers, like Francis, had the best memories, and “*Affectus* in this description is the agent by means of which rumination and memorization take place; in other words, remembering is an activity in which the emotions must be engaged in order for it to occur at all” (217). Few, if any, modern readers have the memory capacity of medieval readers, since modern fans and readers have exponentially more technology supports for texts we wish to read and re-read. In studies of popular culture fans, the media of rereading have changed—Henry Jenkins makes much of the VCR enabling fans to re-view their fan text, and today graphics interchange formats (or “gifs”) enable fans to re-view a short film clip on endless loop—but the intensity of reading and seeing has remained. Jenkins claims that “rereading is central to the fan’s aesthetic pleasure,” but it is also the basis of fan interpretation and analysis (69). Repetitive viewing “extend[s] the fans’ mastery over the narrative” (73) and, key for Jenkins, makes the fan text “not simply something that can be reread; it is something that can and must be rewritten to make it more productive of personal meanings and to sustain the intense emotional experience they enjoyed when they read it the first time” (75). Re-reading is key to fans’ interpretation and (re-)production.

*The Wife of Bath’s Tale* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain*, taken together with a backdrop of other analogous tales, form a repetition and opportunity for rumination which fulfills reader/writer expectations not limited by its own text—acknowledging its intertextuality. Within these Loathly Lady romances, we see a familiar pattern from studies of female fans today: the female fan’s desire evokes societal shames that she must negotiate carefully, sometimes by antagonistically rewriting the misogynist treatment of women as objects of male gaze. To do so the female fan must retreat to spaces and even bodies that

are “safe” for expressing female desire, and she asserts her subjectivity and identity through her personal desire in spite of social shame. Geraldine Heng’s “A Woman Wants” argues for reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in a way that gives primacy to feminine desire, not in the “closed circuit of an infamous question in contemporary critical theory, the Freudian-Lacanian conundrum, *What does woman want?*” (103) but rather an answer that is alluded to in her title: a woman (a subject) wants (desires).<sup>29</sup> Heng’s use of Lacan also establishes language as an idealized experience of desire which can both replace sexual fulfilment and perpetuate it, providing a way to read not only the desire of the Lady in *SGGK*, but feminine desire more broadly. As Helen Cooper argues, female subjectivity is associated with sex in the early romances where “a sense of women as ‘subjects’ in the full modern sense of the term, as unique individuals with a self-conscious awareness of their own place in the scheme of things, first begins to develop. This self-awareness is linked to the awakening of their sexuality” (Cooper 219-20). Desire is a primary category of fan re-reading and female fans asserting their subjectivity.

I understand desire and this repetitive impulse through Jacques Lacan’s theory of the “pleasure of desiring,” which must be sustained because “desire” is, for Lacan, something that must always be sought but can never be perfectly satisfied (152). Drawing from Sigmund Freud’s pleasure principle, Lacan notes the “optimum tension” is in the “state of wishing for it and waiting for it” (52), where “it” is “a point of imaginary fixation which gives satisfaction

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<sup>29</sup> “The enunciation of desire, explicitly and in a first-person female voice, at once acts to establish certain stakes. First, women are claimed as the subjects of desire (rather than masculine desire’s objects) in the courtly relationship—as agents with a volition and a desire of their own that can be specified, witnessed, urged, and thus legitimized. Second, the Lady’s account of the ideal knight as one who is bound by the objectives of and dictates of feminine desire polemically locates the woman at the center of the courtly relationship, and describes the knight’s place as adjunctive” (Heng 113). Incidentally, this question seems disproportionately more of a concern in Gawain romances than those of any other knight, but *SGGK* itself does not even formally ask this question, while the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and the *Wedding of Sir Gawain*, of course, do, so Heng’s focus on desire and language is even more crucial to reading these texts.



to a drive in any register whatsoever” (113). Erin Felicia Labbie elaborates on this in her investigation of Lacan’s medievalism, saying that “the need to *see* manifested as an involuntary scopophilic drive also exhibits an ambivalent desire to control that which one sees” (84), but that “the ‘desire to know’ continually turns the dialectic into a loop” (144). While Lacan discusses and ultimately dismisses the possibility of satiation of that desire (“the pleasure principle governs the search for the object and imposes the detours which maintain the distance in relation to its end” [58]), there is certainly no other state for the “fan,” for whom the fan object is an unobtainable point of reference that lures the fan toward it, both in repetitive viewing and the desire to control. This construction of desire is illustrative of fanfiction writers who literally produce their desire to control what they see (the fan object) through language, in some sense answering the question of “what women want” every day by writing it and sharing it in fan spaces.

What women want often conflicts with kyriarchal concerns about women’s desire. Concerns with women’s reading desires were commonplace in Western historical and intellectual writing and continue to the present day. Dennis Green in *Women Readers in the Middle Ages*<sup>30</sup> and Anne Berggren in “Reading Like a Woman”<sup>31</sup> chart this concern historically, and Berggren in particular emphasizes a difference between reading *like* a woman and *as* a woman. Reading as a woman is always reading against kyriarchal and

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<sup>30</sup> Literacy was, at least pre-Chaucer, considered by scholars to be often exclusively determined by the ability to read in Latin: it was a privileged skill which lay people rarely possessed, though this narrow view (which “continues the polarity between literate clergy and illiterate laity which it was in the clerics’ interest to maintain”) “hampers our assessment of the most important development in this period: the rise of written literature in the vernacular for laymen” (3). Green pushes for a wider understanding of literacy in the contexts of: “social status (layman and cleric), educational status (illiterate and literate), language (vernacular and Latin) and means of communication (oral and written)” which is, I think, helpful to my discussion (4).

<sup>31</sup> Although Berggren says that “the practices of women readers have been belittled since at least the sixteenth century, by which time women readers were sufficiently numerous to influence the writing and publishing of books,” there are in fact many even earlier examples of disparaging female readership, such as Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (Berggren 168).

societal concerns with the very act of reading. Reading *like* a woman employs various tactics for coping with a woman's marginalization in everyday life. Even though Berggren's research is on historical women after the Middle Ages, because of her focus on women in positions of relative disempowerment to men, her claims are, in her own words, still applicable to earlier points in history when women were also disempowered. "Certainly other women, in previous eras, enveloped in similar historical and cultural situations," she argues, "have done the same," that is,

We who read like women have been 'naughty' and 'sensitive' and 'impressionable' and allowed ourselves to be 'nouseled' by the practical and emotional experience we needed to compose lives and relationships we could imagine only through reading. In favoring 'unsettled' reading methods over more academic, structured ones, we have absorbed knowledge that wasn't available through established knowledge systems.  
(Berggren 185)

Not only is reading *as* a woman dangerous to the kyriarchal status quo, giving disempowered women access to knowledges they might not otherwise have, but reading *like* a woman, particularly in emotional, sensitive, and subjective ways, is its own method of particularly feminine interpretive power. While men can and do read in this way—as they can and do write fanfiction—the danger to kyriarchal control is in women subjects doing it.

Studies of fan reading (and viewing) practices have revealed how female fan desires may tend to skew toward different interests than the desires of male readers. Female fan reading tends to be more personally and intensely inflected than casual reading practices

or masculine reading practices, because female fan reading strategies tend to lean into these desires rather than try to claim an unbiased (masculine) view of the text. Henry Jenkins, relying on a reader response survey conducted by David Bleich and on his own observations of majority-male *Twin Peaks* fans and majority-female *Star Trek* fans noticed the tendency for men to perceive “a ‘strong narrational voice’ shaping events” and for women to read as though they “entered directly into the fictional world, focusing less on the extratextual process of its writing than on the relationships and events” (108). To be fair to Jenkins, he steers clear of the suggestion that these different reading tendencies are biological imperatives or universal to all men and all women. Instead, what he sees as “feminine” reading tactics are responses to fan objects constructed in, by, and for, a kyriarchal society,<sup>32</sup> which reflect “ways women have found to circumvent male-centered narratives” and he argues that “these approaches are born of alienation and discomfort rather than closeness to and acceptance of narrative priorities” (Jenkins 113). While this claim still might stand to guard further against essentialism, since his argument assumes homogeneity among the women who practice these “feminine” readings, it remains true that dominant kyriarchal texts for women to read against—in order to “reclaim their own interests from the margin” (114)—are as much a reality today as they were in the fourteenth century. I argue, and throughout this chapter I will show, that Alisoun and Dame Ragnelle use tactics similar to the tendencies found in female fan readings today in their successful reading and re-writing of their own stories: de-emphasizing male authority, emphasizing

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<sup>32</sup> Jenkins refers of course to patriarchy specifically, emphasizing that in modern as well as premodern media, “both the teller and the tale are often ‘radically other’ for women within a world where publishing, broadcasting, and the film industry are all dominated by men; where most narratives center upon the actions of men and reflect their values; where most existing generic traditions are heavily encoded with misogynistic assumptions; and where educational institutions reward masculine interpretive strategies and devalue more feminine approaches” (112). Of course, as Reid argues, saying that all women are the same because of social constructions is still, at the heart of things, essentialism (473-4).

personal relationships, and reclaiming their desires from male desires.

Another aspect of fandom that tends to be fairly clearly gendered is enthusiasm or even desire for fictional characters (from simply wanting to hear more about them, to sexual interest) rather than caring about larger story structures, which I see in the Loathly Ladies' desire for the knight. This is related to the issue of character integrity which I discuss at more length in Chapter 2, where fans, in fetishizing a favorite character, find keeping his characterization consistent to be important. As Sheenagh Pugh points out, fans can be "character junkies," where their enjoyment of a fan text is based on a character more than the text or world, and no fan enjoys reading fanfiction where a beloved character is "made substantially different" from the "original" (36). Jenkins finds that fans will even criticize a television show itself for not being "true" to a character's identity (98). And scholarly studies have shown that it is primarily women who participate in this kind of fandom. Cynthia Walker's study of *The Man from UNCLE* television show fandom notes men and women's differing interests in different elements of the show, with women more likely to list the characters as the main appeal of the show.<sup>33</sup> This supports Jenkins' theory that the nearly universal privilege that men have to see themselves *in* the story allows them to focus their engagement elsewhere,<sup>34</sup> while the inability for women to see themselves in the story allows them to view the heroes as objects of desire.

Both *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain* claim that women

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<sup>33</sup> Surveys of fans in 1996 and 2014 (this article was published before Guy Ritchie's feature film exploded the fandom anew), found that "while female fans liked the series for the characters, male fans pointed to the overall concept of the U.N.C.L.E. organization, along with the 'cool' 1960s style and stories" (Walker 359) and in the latter survey, "Ninety-two percent of the female fans said what they liked best about U.N.C.L.E. was the characters" while "the majority of male fans, some 69 percent, were split between liking the concept of the U.N.C.L.E. organization and the style, and plots and gadgets in the series" (Walker 364).

<sup>34</sup> Additionally, when asked in both surveys which character they preferred, men were more likely to choose Napoleon, the lead character (or Napoleon and Illya equally), while women overwhelmingly valued the secondary lead Illya.

desire sovereignty, but the Loathly Ladies themselves specifically desire personal sovereignty over one knight. Sir Gawain is a popular star of the English branch of Loathly Lady tales, though the knight is of course not named in all versions, and he is not the only knight to be entangled in these romances. Whether or not the knight in these two analogues is Sir Gawain of Arthurian legend is a question to which the fan concept of “character junkies” provides a possible solution, since—at least in the two data points of this chapter—the version of the knight who is near-perfect is named Gawain, but the knight who is more ignoble remains perhaps conveniently unnamed. The most positive representation of the knight among extant Loathly Lady tales is in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, where our hero Gawain remains chivalrous and blameless throughout the narrative, and desirable to all parties. It is King Arthur himself who is caught by Sir Gromer Somer Joure—admittedly by treachery, though the way he begs for his life to be spared is not precisely chivalrous (Hahn 80). Sir Gromer accuses Arthur of having “gevyn my landes in certain / With greatt wrong unto Sir Gawen” (58-9), but in setting Arthur the “whate wemen love best” question (91), he embroils Sir Gawain in both his sister’s and his own desires: his for Gawain’s land, and Ragnelle’s for Gawain’s person. Arthur too becomes desirous of Gawain, or at least of his assistance, calling him “Gawen the good” when Gawain selflessly offers to help him (192). Gawain’s goodness makes him an object of desire for most of the major characters.

Dame Ragnelle articulates her desire for Gawain quite clearly. When Arthur first encounters Dame Ragnelle and asks her, “Whate is your desyre, fayre Lady?” (273) he ironically repeats Sir Gromer Somer Joure’s request of him, and her answer, “Gawain,” could stand in for what all women desire (Hahn 273). Indeed, twice when the “what women

want” question is answered, “rewlle of the manlyest men” is the specific desire voiced (438, 470). When Arthur protests this arrangement, he and Ragnelle actually barter for Gawain’s hand in marriage (291-302). The “bartering” between Ragnelle and Arthur further objectifies Gawain, who becomes, as ladies so often are in romances, a reward or prize. Arthur is admittedly unwilling to force his best knight to marry Ragnelle, but she makes it clear that the only way to save Arthur’s life is to give in to her desire. She asserts her right to choose her desired mate, not on the merit of saving Arthur’s life, but because “Choyse for a make [mate] hathe an owlle” granting herself basic marriage autonomy (310). Arthur recognizes her desire as sexual, telling her when Gawain has acquiesced that “your desyre nowe shalle ye have, / Bothe in bowre and in bed” (400-1). Her desire for Gawain could almost make her a “fan,” as she knows and chooses Gawain presumably by his “manly” reputation alone (438, 470), asking for him and none other by name, and calling him “a fulle gentille knyght” (502). The Loathly Lady is a motif this author reworks so that at every turn Gawain is presented as the pinnacle of courtesy: the word “corteys” is used to describe Gawain several times (630, 685). In the *Wedding of Sir Gawain*, Gawain is objectified through his desirability.

Although the Wife of Bath tells of a very different knight, using a fan community theory of composition reveals a more subtle connection to Gawain. Eisner uses *Gawain and the Lady of Lys*, *The Knight and the Shepherd’s Daughter*, and *The Life of St. Cuthbert* as analogues to the Wife’s *Tale* to suggest that there must be “a traditional story of a rape, that its hero was Gawain, and that this story was assimilated into the Arthurian loathly lady tradition. Accordingly, it is probable that Chaucer was writing within such a tradition when he included a rape in his version of the loathly lady tale” (57). Bartlett J. Whiting argues

for less specificity, saying, “clearly enough of the English poems have a common ancestor, but their relation to that ancestor is by no means clear nor, for that matter, is their relation to one another” (224).<sup>35</sup> But whether we accept Eisner’s claims or not, if Chaucer, or by extension, his frame-narrative author, Alisoun, is modeling the story on a Gawain-narrative, why is the knight not named Gawain, or named at all? One answer might be found in thinking about the pilgrimage as a fan community. The Squire, at least in his own tale, considers Sir Gawain positively, comparing a wondrous knight to “Gawayn, with his olde curteisye, / Though he were comen ayeyn out of Fairye” (95-6). If the Squire, as a fan in community with others, recognizes Gawain’s core character as a “courteous” knight, which is just as the author of the *Wedding of Sir Gawain* will later describe him, then it seems that Alisoun might, too. If we agree with Eisner, that Gawain was the rapist knight of at least one of Chaucer’s sources, then we might see Chaucer—or Alisoun—as *preserving* the “good” character of Gawain by *not* making him the rapist-knight of the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, which is a very fannish interest. By this argument, Alisoun is to some degree personally invested in the “curteisye” of Gawain (i.e., to some degree “a fan” of Gawain), which requires her to “protect” his name and his character.<sup>36</sup> It might be too much of a stretch to consider Chaucer in terms of the “character junkie” of fan studies, since Gawain

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<sup>35</sup> A further connection of these tales requires a brief discussion of John Gower’s Loathly Lady tale in the *Confessio Amantis*. Though his version stars a hero named Florent, not Gawain, Gower’s knight is described as the “nevoeu to th’emperour” (1409), which is a staple of Gawain’s character description if we allow that the “emperour” could be King Arthur. Of course, King Arthur does obtain the title of emperor in such versions as the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, where also, interestingly, “Florent” is the name of Gawain’s son. Field has noted these connections (71), citing Gawain as beloved of English audiences as the reason—also why in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain*, King Arthur is captured and requires Gawain’s rescue, rather than simply entangling Gawain directly (62).

<sup>36</sup> At his best, of course, the knight in the Loathly Lady tale type still has problems. Ragnelle’s Gawain is interested in the marriage only out of his political duty to Arthur. Both knights are prepared to sleep with their wives out of marital obligation and only ever express desire to do so when presented with appealing visual stimuli.

only gets one actual mention in his entire corpus, so Dame Alisoun might have to be “fan” enough.

One reading of the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* is that the characters from her prologue correlate with the characters in her *Tale*—this is one of the reasons it makes such a good teaching text.<sup>37</sup> Alisoun, like many fanfiction authors after her, may arguably be reflecting herself in the Loathly Lady, even as a self-insert.<sup>38</sup> Her fifth and most beloved husband Jenkyn then might be reflected in the bachelor knight, since both are violent lovers reformed by their wives: the rapist knight by submitting to the sovereignty of his wife, and Jenkyn by being guilted into it after hurting his wife. Alisoun describes Jenkyn as “hende” (628) which the *MED* glosses for this line as “handsome.” It can also mean “courtly,” which could be a very oblique reference to Gawain (as in the Squire’s description, “with his olde curteisye”) (“Hende”). Whether the knight is a Gawain or an anti-Gawain, it is clear that he is desired by the Loathly Lady, and by extension, by Alisoun. After all, as a Tumblr post by romansleftshoulderpad declares, the fan interest in “shipping”<sup>39</sup> is ruled by the following doctrine:

No one admits [it] but everyone’s REAL favorite ship dynamic is just:

Person A: Character you can project onto

Person B: Your type. (“Ship Dynamics”)

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<sup>37</sup> See Martin Puhvel, “The Wife of Bath’s Tale: Mirror of Her Mind” for one such reading of the Alisoun reflected in her *Tale*.

<sup>38</sup> “Self-insertion is a practice by authors of writing themselves into their own stories, either explicitly or in thinly-disguised form; in a fannish context this most often means fan writers writing themselves into their favorite source material so that they can interact with canon or its characters.” (“Self-insertion”)

<sup>39</sup> “Shipping in fandom is the act of supporting or wishing for a particular romantic relationship — that is, a het (different-sex), slash (male/male), femslash (female/female), or poly (three or more partners) ship — by discussing it, writing meta about it, or creating other types of fanworks exploring it. Fans who have and promote favorite ships are called shippers. They might assert that the relationship does exist or will exist in canon, that they would like it to exist, or simply that they enjoy imagining it.” (“Shipping”)



By this fan theory, the Loathly Lady as Alisoun's self-insert certainly makes the most sense, as she can be understood as desiring her own transformation into the beauty of her youth again, perhaps to match her "coltes tooth" (602). And if Jenkyn is any indication, the knight in her tale is certainly her "type."

Feminine reading practices and female fan desires are useful categories, but only in how they differentiate from the practices of men, not in how they might claim to categorize all women. I explore "female fan desire" precisely as desire that inspires rewriting against kyriarchal narratives, but it is a concept that is too easily essentialized. "Poaching" media that is nearly universally controlled by men and reading it in ways that de-emphasize narrative authority but privilege desirable elements such as character or relationship integrity is a common tactic of female fans in their engagement with fan texts. We can infer these reading tactics writ large in many authors of derivative texts in the Middle Ages, but by locating these tactics in the fictional female characters whose narrative arcs revolve around their desires and how they re-inscribe their desires on their narrative universes, I argue that these reading practices, the insatiable desire for the imperfect fan object, reveal female agency most clearly.

### **Alisoun and Ragnelle's Tactics of Shame**

The way the Loathly Ladies' desires are constructed in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain* should be understood as "female fan desire," which I characterize as desire for an imperfect fan object that the Loathly Lady reinterprets and transforms into her desired metatext. The female fan's desire runs counter to social conventions and "correct" female behavior that she must negotiate carefully, sometimes

through direct opposition, by antagonistically rewriting the object of her desire in a personally meaningful way. This specific tactic is more easily seen in Alisoun's "rewriting" of not only the Loathly Lady narrative but her own narrative into one that suits her desires, but Ragnelle, the Loathly Lady of *The Wedding of Sir Gawain*, also wields her shame to rewrite the desires of others (her brother, King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, and even Sir Gawain).

The threat that female erotic desire posed to heteronormative cultural in the Middle Ages is something modern cultures still grapple with today. It is easy to find examples of this fear in the medieval antifeminist tradition—Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* provides a good starting list of mostly clerical concerns with women (715-85) and women's desires more specifically (736, 737, 743, 752, 767). Karma Lochrie calls the *Wife of Bath* "less the poster girl of heterosexuality that scholars have almost universally assumed her to be, and more a masculine woman" whose "vernacular of female desire" is "perilously independent not only of reproduction but of heterosexual erotics as well," which characterizes her sexual desires as a threat (90). In a fandom context, Larsen and Zubernis illustrate women's desire being shamed by cataloguing and analyzing reactions to "Twihard moms"—the non-teenaged women who constitute a significant portion of the fandom for the book and film series *Twilight*, derided even among other *Twilight* fans for being too old for expressing certain desirous behaviors. Larsen and Zubernis find the major source of shame at play here to be "the culture's containment of and discomfort with female sexuality," especially when expressed by older women, like the *Wife of Bath*, or even in the aged appearance of the *Loathly Ladies* (62). Concerns with female sexual desire in fandom have been noted in nineteenth-century opera fans (Cavicchi), Beatlemania and boy band fans (Duffett), and

even female fans of professional sports teams and athletes (Gosling), and women have often been made to feel ashamed of public expressions of their desire. Sara Ahmed theorizes shame as “an intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body” which then desires “concealment” (103). Though for her shame “requires a witness” and is experienced socially when we fail to live up to an ideal in the estimation of another, Ahmed does allow that a subject can feel shame “when it is alone” because “it is the imagined view of the other that is taken on by a subject in relation to itself” (105). In this same way Larsen and Zubernis speak of “internalized shame” especially of (and because of) female fans whose internet anonymity is carefully maintained (228).

Neither the Wife of Bath nor either of the Loathly Ladies try to hide their desires or their appearance: in a sense, they do not register shame as a desire to conceal themselves or their appearance. I argue that this is because they use their status as not physically desirable as something *like* internet anonymity in order to exercise their own desiring and critical interpretive power over others. Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, does not hold back when describing her desires in her prologue, which are expressed antagonistically against the desires of men and the kyriarchy. If we are meant to understand that her personality colors her tale, then we have an interesting example of fanfiction in (fictionalized) action, as the Wife of Bath forcefully positions herself both as reader and author. In her prologue she is a reader, but she is, in her tale, an author in her own right.

One of Alisoun’s primary motivations, I argue, is what she loves to hate, as her anti-antifeminist prologue suggests. Derek Johnson’s study of “fan-tagonism” describes anti-fans as audiences who “approach texts in negatively charged, uninterested or irritated

ways” (Johnson 293). We might think this would be a small group of people, since an anti-fan of a text may choose simply not to engage with the text at all, but this is not always the case. Alisoun can hardly escape misogynist interpretations of Christian doctrine—she *is* on a pilgrimage—and in particular her fifth husband, Jenkyn, so loves his “book of wikked wyves” (685) that “gladly, nyght and day, / For his desport he wolde rede alway” (669-70). One way of understanding Alisoun’s interpretation of her husband’s book is through the love-hate relationship fans may have with texts called anti-fandom, since it is this book that, though hated, allows her to achieve an outcome she desires. “Fan-tagonism,” then, is “antagonistic competition between discourses of interpretation and evaluation”; essentially, fan-tagonists are fans who resist a given presentation or reading of a text in favor of their own desired “meta-text”<sup>40</sup> (Johnson 286). Research has shown that fandom, rather than a sycophantic following of a text, will often critically interpret, criticize, and question their object of fandom, as well as expand upon it in fanfiction.<sup>41</sup> Alisoun, though clearly capable of intellectual debate, here only describes her emotional and physical distress listening to her husband read the book and her violent reaction:

Who wolde wene, or who wolde suppose,  
 The wo that in myn herte was, and pyne?  
 And whan I saugh he wolde nevere fyne  
 To reden on this cursed book al nyght,

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<sup>40</sup> The meta-text appears throughout fan studies, but Johnson defines it as a “tertiary, fan-made construction—a projection of the text’s potential future, based on specific fan desires and interests” (286).

<sup>41</sup> Even the most positive fanfiction has an element of critique, since the act of rewriting by definition changes the fan object into something closer to the desire of the fan writer and thus reveals a lack in the original text. See especially Goodman, “Disappointing Fans: Fandom, Fictional Theory, and the Death of the Author”; Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, “Fan Critics” 86-119 and “Scribbling in the Margins: Fan Readers/Fan Writers” 152-84; Pugh, *The Democratic Genre*, “A Good Reader Also Creates” 218-41. But neither is fan critique always negative, as such a fan might simply stop interacting with a text altogether.

Al sodeynly thre leves have I plyght  
 Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke  
 I with my fest so took hym on the cheke  
 That in oure fyr he fil bakward adoun. (786-93)

The woe and pain in Alisoun's heart are not precisely directed at these antifeminist writings, but at *Jenkyn's consumption of them*, since she names the cause of her pain that "he wolde nevere fyne [cease] to reden." *His* desire to read this nonsense is what she desires to control in order to put a stop to, not the writing itself. Though she engages in vandalism, taking three leaves from his book, she does so "right as he radde," unashamedly interrupting his consumption rather than hiding or destroying the book in secret.

Although the immediate consequences are dire—her husband retaliates by beating her so hard that she loses hearing in one ear—after they kiss and make up, in the end the Wife gets

the bridel in myn hond,  
 To han the governance of hous and lond,  
 And of his tonge, and of his hond also;  
 And made hym brenne [burn] his book anon right tho. (813-16)

The burning of the book is literally an afterthought, a symbol of her newfound control over her husband. Anne Laskaya has argued that even the Wife's deafness is a means by which she can now ignore and therefore subvert the very texts she rails against: "If she is struggling against the discourse of a patriarchal culture, what better defense than an inability to hear?" In this way "her deafness becomes, potentially, a sign of her resistance" (181-2). Indeed, she resists kyriarchal discourse and reinterprets even the Bible into her

preferred “meta-text” by quoting Scripture selectively, as when she cites Paul’s command that husbands love their wives (781) or uses Abraham’s and Jacob’s polygamy as sanction for her five husbands (57).<sup>42</sup>

For all her supposed hatred of men and what we would today call the kyriarchy, the Wife of Bath sure has had a lot of husbands. If we might characterize the Wife of Bath as someone who loves to hate, then she seems to love to hate men the most. She loves most the men that she can control most, that she can *reinterpret* and assign value to as though they were texts themselves, like her husbands: “As thre of hem were goode, and two were badde. / The thre were goode men, and riche, and olde” (196-7). The good, old, and rich husbands were easy for her to manage, she explains, by using an apparently rehearsed diatribe that lasts over one hundred lines, where she accuses her current husband of not treating her as she deserves, of being unfaithful to her, and of accusing her wrongly of unfaithfulness (235-378). By reinterpreting her “Ful giltelees” (385) husbands as terrible husband material through this lecture, she is able to manipulate them into submission. Flipping the narrative of female worth based on virginity and chastity, for Alisoun men are dispensable commodities with returns that diminish, since she says about her husbands “I have pyked out the beste, / Bothe of here nether purs and of here cheste” (44a-b). Her older husbands, whom she could easily control, she works to death sexually (211-16), while her fourth husband, who is unfaithful to her, she can only “get even” with by also being unfaithful to him (481-94). But the Wife’s description of her fifth husband is truly contradictory, alternating in one passage language of both desire and danger:

“That thogh he hadde me bete on every bon,

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<sup>42</sup> This is, of course, something that clerics also do, and Chaucer calls them on it.

He koude wynne agayn my love anon.

I trowe I loved hym best, for that he

Was of his love daungerous to me. (511-14)

In line 511, she describes the pattern of physical abuse, but in the next two lines she describes how he is fantastic in bed, culminating in an assessment that because of his “love” he was “daungerous” to her. Her “last words” to her husband after the book and spousal battery incident also mix negative and positive language: “Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee” (802). Even dying at his hand, she seems to say, she desires him. Her perhaps exaggerated account of her imminent death gets her what she wants: she makes him burn his book and give her “maistrie” and “soveraynetee,” reshaping her husband into an ideal mate for her (818).

The way Alisoun exercises her interpretive power over men, reinterpreting them to suit her desires, is borne out in her tale. The Wife states outright her authorial metrics when she declares:

if wommen hadde writen stories,

As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,

They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse

Than al the mark of Adam may redresse. (693-6)

Reading Alisoun as a fanfiction author, we can understand this dictum as her explicitly pointing out the double-standard of kyriarchal textual production, and declaring her intent to write “of men moore wikkednesse” in direct opposition to male-produced literature. The knight is therefore portrayed in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* as a “lusty bachelor” (883)—not necessarily a negative term, as the Wife calls herself this, too (605)—whose quest is

prompted when he “saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn, / Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed, / By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed” (886-88). Though brief, the sexual predation of the unnamed knight is clearly nonconsensual as well as violent, since it is against all the maiden can do (“maugree hir heed”) and by “force.” Sexual violence recalls Jenkyn, who is characterized by his sexuality (“in oure bed he was so fressh and gay,” line 508) and his violence (“And yet was he to me the mooste shrewe; / That feele I on my ribbes al by rewe” lines 505-6). Before we think that Alisoun might condone these actions or even desire this kind of relationship,<sup>43</sup> we read on to find that Alisoun’s narrative condemns this behavior by threatening the knight with death for his actions:

For which oppressioun was swich clamour  
 And swich pursute unto the kyng Arthour  
 That dampned was this knyght for to be deed,  
 By cours of lawe, and sholde han lost his heed. (889-92)

By calling the rape “oppressioun,” Alisoun claims not only that the maiden was “pressed” or forced (as in rape), and possibly beaten, but she also engages the sense of the modern reflex, “oppress,” with its political and hegemonic implications (“Oppressioun”).

When King Arthur would rather execute the knight, or figuratively erase him, it is only women who are interested in reforming, or figuratively rewriting, the knight. What women want then becomes a desire to rewrite (or retell) men. The queen and her ladies pray for King Arthur to put the knight’s life in her hands, and it is the queen who sets the knight the challenge in find “What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren. / Be war, and keep thy nekke-boon from iren!” positioning his reformation as a prerequisite for his

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<sup>43</sup> S&M is a topic that has come up in relation to the Wife of Bath (see Marilyn Desmond), but I explore the erotics of kink with different characters in Chapter 4.



continued existence (905-6). Arthur, who seems to have already learned the lesson of female sovereignty, is ruled by his wife: he “yaf hym to the queene, al at hir wille, / To chese wheither she wolde hym save or spille” (897-8). It is therefore the queen’s interpretation of him and his deeds the knight must now submit himself to. Because the queen sits “as a justice” (1028) she literally and figuratively reads him, analyzing and judging him by the veracity of his answer. Reforming the rapist knight may be the women’s ideal goal, but they also exercise power over him through judgment, a kind of interpretive power. By telling a tale of female characters who exercise interpretive and physical power over hateable male characters, the Wife of Bath locates desire in a kind of “fan-tagonism,” where the object of her desires (the knight, or even Jenkyn) is so imperfect that he requires reinterpretation to suit her desires.

The Loathly Lady in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* is, within the fictional and counterfactual confines of the tale where ugliness means safety from a rapist knight, safe from male desire, allowing her to focus on her own desire. Because she is “a fouler wight ther may no man devyse” (999), the Loathly lady is in some effect protected by her ugliness. Within her text, this paradigm works out well, though it has fantasy ramifications only and illustrates the problems of feminisms that benefit only one woman (or only one group of women). The Loathly Lady declares that “filthe and eelde, [...] Been grete wardeyns upon chastitee” (1215-6), in effect weaponizing ugliness and old age, which literally guard her chastity. The knight confirms he is totally uninterested in sex with his hideous wife because ““Thou art so loothly, and so oold also, / And therto comen of so lough a kynde, / That litel wonder is thogh I walwe and wynde”” (1100-1102). His “litel wonder” makes his reticence a truism, as it becomes “obvious” that he tosses and turns in

bed with her, wishing he didn't have to have sex with anyone so ugly and old and poor. The knight's lack of desire not only foregrounds the Loathly Lady's desire for the knight, it turns the rape narrative back onto the knight, in a manner meant to be either amusing or didactic, or both. The Loathly Lady demands the knight's hand in marriage publicly, refusing his offer to "Taak al my good and lat my body go" in favor of her desire for his body (1061). Although for over one hundred lines the Loathly Lady lectures him on *gentillesse* is as *gentillesse* does (1106-1216), it is the knight's squirming and complaining at being "constreyned" (1071) first to marry and then to have sexual intercourse with someone he does not desire that the narrative repeats and returns to (1058, 1067, 1085, 1102, 1228). The rape narrative turned on him objectifies the knight and makes the Loathly Lady's desire predatory. This is to some extent played for laughs: "He walweth and he turneth to and fro" is followed by "His olde wyf lay smylynge everemo," juxtaposing his revulsion with her obvious pleasure (1085-6). The knight is only joyful when she appears beautiful, after he has passed the test: "And whan the knyght saugh verrailly al this, / For joye he hente hire in his armes two" (1250-2), but the Loathly Lady's desire for the knight is clear from the moment he first attempts to buy her off instead of marrying her:

"For thogh that I be foul, and oold, and poore  
 I nolde for al the metal, ne for oore  
 That under erthe is grave or lith above,  
 But if thy wyf I were, and eek thy love." (1063-1066)

She wants *him*, very specifically, indicated in the "nolde" what she does *not* want in place of him. And what she wants is ironically what she does not have, his love, his desire for her in return. The Loathly Lady's old and ugly body precludes her from desirability and

therefore objectification in a kyriarchal society, while *her* desire for the knight makes her the desiring subject. The catch is that because of this loathliness, she cannot satisfy her desires. Alisoun's tactic for negotiating the shame of her desires is a literal rewriting of a story, motivated by fan-tagonism against imperfect readings (of herself, of women, of men).

In contrast, Ragnelle's tactic of re-interpretation is using the shame of her desires and her appearance to make others ashamed. Unlike Alisoun's Loathly Lady, Ragnelle has a name, and in many ways has clearer desires more akin to Alisoun's herself. Her desires are, I argue, realized as fannish because of her lack of shame. As mentioned in my introduction, fans may describe "guilty pleasure" fanfictions as "Id!fic" or "drawerfic," expressing shame that they are tapping into unconscious pleasure drives (Busse 54; Larsen and Zubernis 95). But in spite of the shame of it, fans will still talk about and even share such works, and if they apologize for them, they only do so in a way to seek validation through sharing their communal illicit desires. Ragnelle's re-interpretive and fannish power is her continued insistence on her desire being more valuable than any aspersions of shame that everyone else in the narrative casts on her. Because she refuses to conceal her desires, even though they are seen as illicit or shameful by others, she asserts the legitimacy of them and transfers the desire for concealment onto others.

For Ragnelle, who has a good knight in her sights (unlike her counterpart in Alisoun's tale), her ugliness is literally a curse (691) and not a protection from the predations of a rapist, but she weaponizes her ugliness as an opportunity to shame the Arthurian Court for its embarrassment *of* her. This secondhand embarrassment is at Ragnelle's refusal to correctly practice the shame that everyone but she thinks she should

feel for her hideous appearance. Several times Arthur tries to get Ragnelle to reconsider her demands, but she stands firm, declaring, “Openly I wol be weddyd” and forces him to ride with her publicly into Carlisle (507). While King Arthur and the court regularly express their embarrassment at Ragnelle’s appearance, Ragnelle asserts again and again her right to her desires and refuses to be quiet about it: “Of no man I wolle shame,” she tells Arthur as they ride to Carlisle, warning him that if he fights with her on this, “ye be to blame” (511, 514). And even though “The Kyng of her had greatt shame, / Butt forth she rood, thoughe he were grevyd” (515-6), for “no man wold she spare, securely” (519). Here, “shame” is what the *King* feels when he is associated with her, exacerbated by her refusal to be hidden. Ragnelle’s refusal to do anything privately is her refusal to engage the appropriate processes of shame: ugliness is not a “bad feeling” she internalizes in herself (Ahmed 104). “Shame is about appearance, about how the subject appears before and to others” (104-5) but Ragnelle does not live up to the bodily ideal of anyone in the Arthurian court and does not care. Her lack of shame in the face of everyone else’s embarrassment for her ugliness re-interprets the source of shame as not in herself but in anyone who is embarrassed of her.

Ragnelle’s refusal to practice shame “correctly” extends to the wedding itself and her conversation with Guinevere, where “correctly” seems now to indicate “as a woman.” Just as the sexual desires of female fans are policed, so too does the court attempt to control Ragnelle’s expressions of desire, for everything from the spectacle of a wedding, to Gawain, to food. The Queen asks Ragnelle “To be maryed in the mornyng erly, / As pryvaly as ye may” (570-1). Ragnelle’s response is a triple-negative that she will do no such thing, declaring her desire (“woll”) instead to “be weddyd alle openly” (572-5).

Ragnelle and Guinevere's conflict over a private or open wedding shows Guinevere's response to her future niece-in-law as ashamed, because she wants the whole thing hidden as much as possible. Guinevere's response is tellingly gendered, for though she agrees to these terms, she says she is only thinking of "your worshypp moste" (583). Ragnelle, Guinevere thinks, *should* be dishonored by appearing in court so hideously. But Ragnelle refuses to accept this shame by keeping her appearance and marriage private for her "honour" or "worshypp," telling Guinevere, "'Ye, as for that, Lady, God you save. / This daye my worshypp wolle I have, / I telle you withoute boste'" (569-86). Repeating her desire as what she "wolle," Ragnelle exercises narrative power over the events of the day and even the Queen. Ragnelle is confident that the fulfilment of her desire, her marriage to Gawain, is her source of "worshypp," to which her appearance is hardly relevant. Because Ragnelle refuses to practice feminine shame correctly, which is to say, at all, that shame is (humorously) transposed onto the court, who "mervaylle" at her appearance and behavior (606, 612), expressing shame (515), sadness and pity (544, 567), and even wish her death (616-8). Her bad table manners and massive appetite only further demonstrate her lack of interest in correctly performing habits of femininity (613-21). But the court can do nothing but sit there and *be embarrassed* at her tusks and her eating habits, and because she refuses to express any feelings of shame, she forces those feelings upon them, as the court is embarrassed by and for her, instead. Because Ragnelle refuses to conceal her shame herself, the viewers around her become embarrassed for her.

There is only one person for whom Ragnelle would change her appearance, and the only person whose gaze might cause her shame, and that is Gawain, the object of her desire. Unlike in Chaucer, where the Loathly Lady's didactic speech on *gentillesse* demands noble

behavior from the noble-born knight in asking him to do his marriage duty, here Ragnelle seems to *want Gawain to genuinely like her back*: ““God have mercy!”” she tells him directly, ““For thy sake I wold I were a fayre woman, / For thou art of so good wylle”” (536-8). It isn’t that she doesn’t recognize that her appearance is socially problematic, but that “the other can only elicit a response of shame if another has already elicited desire or even love” (Ahmed 105). Put another way, Ragnelle only comes close to wishing she looked differently when her viewer is someone whose gaze she wants turned back on her favorably. She asks King Arthur to “...fayre wordes speke to Sir Gawen” (298), asking him to woo him for her, and describes other qualities besides her appearance to focus on: ““Thoughe I be foulle, yett am I gaye”” (300).<sup>44</sup> At the integral bedroom scene, we have a problem of manuscript, where a leaf is missing that might reveal a crack in the otherwise unrealistically perfect Gawain’s armor, but we’re back to the story in time to see Ragnelle complain when Gawain fails to show her his “cortesy in bed,” emphasizing her desire (and his courtesy again) (630). She admonishes him, “And [if] I were fayre ye wold do anoder brayd,” in effect shaming him and reminding us that she considers her physical appearance to be everyone else’s problem but hers (633).

When Ragnelle demands Gawain “kysse [her] att the leste” (635), Gawain and Ragnelle are rewarded for his lack of hesitation. Gawain’s declaration that he will go above and beyond the call of duty—“I wolle do more / Then for to kysse, and God before!”—is met with her transformed appearance (638-639), after which he embraces her with “greatt joye,” marking the fulfillment of his desire (655). It is only after he fulfills *her* every

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<sup>44</sup> Arthur of course does not woo Gawain on her behalf, but bemoans her ugliness, to which challenge Gawain responds as though marriage to this woman, “Thoughe she were a fend” (344), is just another challenge to defeat, “To save your lyfe, Lorde, itt were my parte, / Or were I false and a greatt coward; / And my worshypp is the bett” (351-3), something he does for love of Arthur, not Ragnelle (371).

fantasy, by desiring her as much as she desires him, by giving her the “choyse” to decide when she is ugly and when she is beautiful, and by also granting her “Bothe body and goodes, hartt, and every dele” (681-2), that she considers herself “worshypped” properly (687) and the spell is broken. Wanting Gawain to find her beautiful is a desire that makes her subject rather than object, which is what she might have been reduced to in an always beautiful body. But her desire to be wanted also imbues Gawain as a subject with desires, desires on her terms, as her desire lies in wanting to be wanted.

Unlike Alisoun, whose story is *about* a Loathly Lady, Ragnelle’s re-interpretive power over the story she is a part of, *as* a Loathly Lady, is its strongest narrative force. We witness her desire to reinterpret her fractured world into a unified one, both in her interpretation of King Arthur’s conflict with her brother Gromer Somer Joure and also her desired union with the most eligible bachelor knight and object of her very clear desire, Sir Gawain. Sir Gromer accuses Arthur of having “me done wrong many a yere” (55), though he later declares, “I wolle nother lond ne gold, truly” (85) in exchange for Arthur’s life. He sets Arthur the “whate wemen love best” question (91) as an unsolvable riddle, meant to bring about Arthur’s death as his revenge. Gawain and Arthur write the answers they find in books (190, 208), and at the end of their quest, “eyther on others pamphlett dyd loke” (211). Ragnelle reinterprets their answers when her correct answer supersedes the wrong answers they attempt to encode through writing. Not only that, but she rewrites their books through her own desire, through “whate wemen love best,” and antagonistically to the desires of her brother. When Arthur reveals to Gromer ““Wemen desyre sovereynté,”” as answer to his riddle, he adds, ““Thus they me dyd ken / To rule the, Gromer Syre”” to emphasize the fact that a woman has “ruled” or governed him (“Reulen v.”). Gromer’s

response “God geve her shame,” becomes an empty threat because it’s clear at this point she either doesn’t have any, or won’t practice it correctly, anyway. Against her brother’s negative and antagonistic interpretation, Ragnelle’s “reading” of the Arthurian court is not only antagonistic to her own brother over an issue of land—which, through marriage to Gawain, she wins in the end—but antagonistic to the Arthurian court through Gawain as the object of her desire.

### **Loathliness as Fandom Avatar**

When faced with shame for expressing desire, it is perhaps no wonder that female fans move their expressions of fandom to online, private, or at least anonymous spaces among mostly other women. This is not only a modern experience, for Christine de Pizan responded to the question *What do women want?* with a clear answer in her *Book of the City of Ladies*—a city where praiseworthy women are to be protected from the slander of men (Book I.3; Brown-Grant 11). Though more ambitious in space than, say, Virginia Woolf’s demand for merely a room of one’s own, Christine’s city is of course an allegory and not a physical city at all, one that will only shelter those deemed worthy (III.19). Pizan, within the pages of her book, creates a *virtual* city for women to inhabit. Fandom, in going virtual, purports to allow women a space where they are divorced from their objectifiable bodies where they are free to express subjective desires. But just like Christine’s city, it does not shelter all, but *only* elite women who have proven themselves worthy. An important intersectional critique of such female virtual spaces from Christine de Pizan to today is when they only shelter individual woman.

Fandom is increasingly dependent on communities and tactics made possible by



social media and digital technologies, which not only allows fans to interact with other fans, but also allows fans to read, re-read, and re-write their fan objects in meaningful ways—though we will see also how these are not utopic spaces. Of particular interest to female fan’s freedom to express their desires is the anonymity of the internet. As Larsen and Zubernis explain,

the perceived safety and anonymity of online fandom encourage the lifting of constructed ‘socially acceptable’ facades, thus providing a medium for expression and validation. At least within the fannish space, the need for concealment disappears. Fans openly proclaim their appreciation of sexually explicit fanworks created for the enjoyment of other women in a way that rarely happens in ‘real life’ social interaction, [which they see as a] challenge to the authorized discourse. (67-8)

The “need for concealment,” at least in terms of the concealment that shame inspires, disappears in virtual space enough to allow women to express their desires. This is still only a space of “perceived safety,” however, as Lothian, et al. refer to such spaces as “pseudoanonymous” (104). It is in these spaces that the desires of individual elite women can become their own form of dominance.<sup>45</sup> Lisa Nakamura further points out that “the very same interactivity that allowed for more gender-balanced participatory media cultures like fan and slash fiction also enabled right-wing meme culture” (20). Like Christine’s literary-city-space, not “all” women’s desires are catered to, or even permitted, in these

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<sup>45</sup> It is in these spaces that the desires of white women in particular can become their own form of dominance, as blogger Stitch describes in “What Fandom Racism Looks Like: Weaponized White Womanhood Featuring the *Star Wars* Fandom.” Perhaps not so accidentally, the graphic header designed for this article uses a rusted “medieval” sword stuck into a stone, even when the iconic *Star Wars* lightsaber might make more topical sense (Figure 3). Whether intentional or not, this imagery evokes not only white supremacist misappropriations of medieval imagery but also ongoing problems of racism in the medieval academy.

virtual fandom spaces.

We might, for example, theorize Alisoun herself using the pilgrimage as a “virtual space” full of people she never has to interact with again, where she can express her sexual desires in a way she probably ordinarily cannot, using her expression(s) of desire proudly in an effectively anonymous space to point out double standards of shame for women. Like a fan in an online space, she deals with trolls (as when the Pardoner, the Summoner, and the Friar interrupt her in her own prologue), asserts her identity through her desire, and uses the pilgrimage of strangers as a safety valve more than a stimulus for social change. Dame Ragnelle, too, can desire as she wants and eat as she wants when inhabiting the avatar of an ugly hag—nothing is said of her poor table manners when she is returned to her *actual*, beautiful shape, since, “Att every greatt fest that Lady shold be / Of fayrnesse she bare away the bewtye” (802-3). This suggests, in the same way as the virtual nature of online space does, that the self is not equal to or contained within the loathly body.

One strategy for anonymity especially in (though not limited to) fan spaces is the creative play that happens with the icon or “avatar” in social media, which I argue provides a theoretical model for the Loathly Lady’s loathly body. It is “an image chosen to represent oneself” but “fans rarely use their own images. Instead, they choose actors or scenes that comment on the show or fannish debates” (Hellekson and Busse 12). Lothian et al. argue for the icon as containing its own semiotic utility when they point out the limitations of print and the decontextualizing that occurs when fan comments are taken out of their online space without their “personal icons (100 by 100-pixel images), which many use to supplement their arguments” (109).<sup>46</sup> The body of a Loathly Lady is itself safe from male

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<sup>46</sup> One iconic example of this is found in fan artists drawing or manipulating flower crowns on images of beloved male characters, which may simply render them objectively more beautiful, but in some cases makes

desire, and because it is (through magic) inhabited temporarily as a kind of avatar, it grants the Lady concealment (against shame?), since it is not her “true” form. A loathly body prevents Dame Ragnelle and Alisoun’s Loathly Lady from being objectified for their beauty, indeed, like an icon, it deflects the objectifying gaze onto male bodies, and this concealment allows them the freedom to suspend shame and assert, instead, *their* desires, and their subjectivity.

In a kyriarchal society, women’s attempts to assert their subjectivity can be a tactic of resistance, problematizing the culture that wants to undermine their personhood. Fan studies has long charted how feminine desire, particularly for fandom objects, is shamed by the dominant culture: we need only compare media representations of boy band fans (mainly young women, whose desires have been policed since the screaming fans of Elvis and the Beatles) and professional sports team fans (popularly believed to be mainly men, and therefore treated with more cultural respect). Larsen and Zubernis describe how women’s subjectivity in desire is a hard-fought battle, fraught with societally induced shame:

Women continue to struggle to create a healthy sexual identity for themselves in a society still filled with mixed messages, double standards, fear and exploitation. Their experience as objects of desire—instead of subjects of their own desire—complicates their ability to connect with their own bodies and their own sexuality. Discomfort with impossible standards of physical attractiveness can leave women divorced from any positive

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a visual argument against a character’s canonical representation, such as when fans famously photoshopped flower crowns onto images of Hannibal Lector enough that the producers and actors in the 2013 TV series *Hannibal* noticed (“Flower Crown”). Putting a flower crown on a cannibal serial killer demonstrates the fans’ altered interpretation of him into something softer and more desirable than his canonical presentation.

feelings about their bodies and disconnected from their own sexual desire.

(62)

The power of the male gaze in popular media fandom texts (and medieval romance) always already divorces women's bodies from their sense of self. Fanfiction, as texts that rewrite female desires from female perspectives, seeks to resist this, and using avatars that stand in for themselves allows fans the concealment they need to not feel ashamed. Larsen and Zubernis see fandom as one response to societal impositions, concluding that "Fandom is something to be indulged in. Something that makes us feel good. Therein lies both the appeal and the problem" (64). The fannish desires of *Dame Ragnelle*, the *Wife of Bath's Loathly Lady*, and even *Alisoun* herself illustrate various feminine responses to shames imposed upon them by the dominant culture, which ultimately culminate in an "owning" of shame.

Online anonymity has been explored as having some potentially liberating factors,<sup>47</sup> but more often than not it replicates hierarchies and hegemonies of face-to-face discourses. In fandom discourse, as Johnson reminds us, "the struggle to legitimate competing knowledge claims" is done by having the best interpretation of the fan text, in being "a true fan," a category which implies the existence of "fake fans" (298). Andrea MacDonald's study of fan computer communication assumes that the "probability of anonymity" and "the lack of physical demarkers" online "allows a user to be measured on the basis of their quality of communication, not automatically discounted due to race, gender, or class" (133) but found in practice that, among other problems, "cultural conversational norms that denigrate women's talk appear to be winning out in cyberspace"

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<sup>47</sup> Social media can give "the once voiceless [...] an arena to be heard" which "leads to empowerment" (Kishonna Gray 97).

(151). While the virtual and the avatar have the potential to maintain safe spaces, they are just as susceptible to hegemonic power structures and the implicit biases of participants.

Women in male-dominated spaces may “employ gender strategies essentially for survival” as Kishonna Gray explains happens in video game fandoms. She locates three of these strategies for survival as “(1) engaging in masculine practices to mimic men, (2) downplaying or ignoring sexual harassment, and (3) distancing themselves from emphasized femininity” (87). We might credit Alisoun and both Loathly Ladies’ successes to their deployment of these tactics, especially of engaging in masculinity and eschewing femininity: they both embrace their predatory sexuality just like the knight in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and assert their right to lecture those around them instead of remaining silent. Ragnelle’s dining habits intentionally distance her from emphasized femininity, to such an extent that both men and women are disgusted by her. And finally Alisoun, both in her prologue and tale, de-emphasizes sexual violence, glossing over the rape of the maiden and praising Jenkyn in spite of his violent nature. On some level, too, we must acknowledge that the “avatar,” at least in the case of *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, though likely in the case of *The Wedding of Sir Gawain*, too, hides a male author who is imbedded in kyriarchal structures of textual production.

Even within these texts, where we accept that women are the ones assuming avatars, the Loathly Ladies *are* in practice objectified for their hideousness as much as women in romance more often are for their beauty, so the loathly body is of course not a perfect avatar. Female fans have been found to use social media resistantly, and Gray urges “the privileging of women’s perspectives and ways of knowing the world because race, gender, class status, immigration status, disability, sexuality, and a host of other identifiers generate

knowledge about the world” (95). Like Alisoun’s claim that “Experience, though noon auctoritee...is right ynogh for me” (1-2), however, the privileging of women’s perspectives too often focuses only on one woman (or only women of a certain class, or race, or sexuality, or standard of beauty). Significantly, in both *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, heteronormativity and appropriate female behavior and appearance are all maintained in the end, without any appreciable disruption to gender practice or heteronormativity, precisely through this limitation inherent in all non-intersectional feminist resistance.

### **Conclusion: The Transformative Potential of Fandom**

The point of fannish resistance, as illustrated most vividly in avatar deployment, is not always subversive, but more about individual resistance. As Larsen and Zubernis point out, and as is particularly relevant in a medieval romance context, “fandom is not only, as is often theorized, about subversive and societal change—but also about pleasurable and individual change, with challenges to existing norms and power relations more a by-product than the source of fans’ motivation and satisfaction” (85). This may be part of larger change, but fandoms are ultimately narrow subcultures with little societal impact, after all. The Wife of Bath’s diatribe against antifeminist rhetoric is then perhaps less about encouraging social change and more about letting off steam. Her reformation of Jenkyn is a personal restructuring of heteronormative structures rather than an intentional challenge to the norms, since he is only one husband. The bodies of Loathly Ladies do not challenge the kyriarchal hegemony of the male gaze, but rather allow an individual elite woman, through a temporarily-assumed avatar, to focus on her own desires without worrying about

anyone else's desire for her, and of course a "happy ending" is only one where she does not remain ugly. Larsen and Zubernis do, however, suggest that there is something subversive in "owning" such desires, in claiming, "I am emotional, intellectual AND sexual and that's okay" (101). For a medieval woman, asserting her intellectuality is indeed subversive, as is a woman asserting emotionality and sexuality in any time period, but as long as any gains in these kinds of movements are reserved only for individual women, little real social progress can be made.

Fandom's power, for good or ill, is in transformation. As illustrated by the analogous *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, fans re-read and re-write motifs and scenarios featuring beloved characters, and female fans in particular, to whom the vast majority of mainstream media is not catered, transform those motifs and characters to suit their personal reinterpretations. Female fans in particular have a tendency to assert their sexuality and thereby their subjectivity by desiring instead of submitting to objectification—they often do so in virtual fandoms since they have no acceptable outlets in the material world. Ultimately, fans transform the shame of their desires into personal enjoyment, whether or not they strive for social transformation, too. Understanding how female fans express their shameful desires provides insight into the Loathly Lady's agency that goes beyond desire alone to asserting her personhood—her right to express her desire, no matter how shameful. Transformative works, whether stories in the medieval Loathly Lady tale tradition or online fanfiction, are always engaged in a process of perpetuating and fulfilling desires through a transformation of shame into pleasure.

## Chapter 2. Queer Erotics:

### Slash Fanfiction Practice in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Prose*

#### *Lancelot*

*The Prose Lancelot* by CistercianMonk

Fandom: Arthurian Mythology & Related Fandoms

Rated: Explicit

Warning for Graphic Depictions of Violence

Relationships: Lancelot/Galahad, Lancelot/Gawain, Lancelot/Guinevere

Tagged: M/M, M/F, Dubious Consent, And They Were Tombmates!, Pining, Dying for Love

Part 2 of *The Lancelot-Grail Cycle*

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by PearlPoet

Fandom: Arthurian Mythology & Related Fandoms

Rated: Teen

Warning for Graphic Depiction of Beheading

Relationships: Gawain/Bertilak, Gawain/Lady Bertilak

Tagged: M/M, M/F, Boys Kissing, Gift Exchange, Dubious Consent, Alcohol

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK*), Morgan le Faye has a potentially feminist role in initiating Gawain's adventure because of her hatred of Guinevere, making this one of the few medieval romances where the major action is a plot that occurs, technically, between women.<sup>48</sup> In her role as a woman who orchestrates circumstances that end in two men kissing, Morgan is illustrative of a fanfiction writer, engaging a fanfiction genre known as slash, where women regularly (re)write erotic male/male relationships. It is Morgan who, the Green Knight explains to Gawain at the end of the tale, “wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wyne halle / For to assay þe surquidré, 3if hit soth were / Þat rennes

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Susan Carter, “Trying Sir Gawain: The Shape-Shifting Desire of Ragnelle and Bertilak”; Sheila Fisher, “Taken Men and Token Women in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”; Joseph Turner, “Lady Bertilak and the Rhetoric of Women in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” Colleen Donnelly provides a strong counter-argument asserting that Morgan's role is only important in a strictly technical sense and that the major action of *SGGK* is still driven by men.



of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table'” [“sent me in this form to your joyful hall to test your pride, to see if it were true how the renown of the Round Table goes”] (2456-8). The test may be of the Round Table’s pride and the goal may be to frighten Guinevere, but if we allow that Morgan set in motion the entire plan, with the interlaced exchange, contests, attempted seductions, and inviting the potential for a male/male sexual encounter between two otherwise ostensibly heterosexual characters, Morgan, as the “author” of these events, can be read as a “fanfiction author.”

Morgan is not the only character who breaks the fourth wall in this way, however, as both the Green Knight and Lady Bertilak also “read” Sir Gawain in such a way that implies knowledge of his deeds that must necessarily come from other works of Arthurian fiction. Both Lady Bertilak and the Green Knight question whether Gawain *is really The Gawain*, positioning us in a story-world where other stories exist—in some sense, reminding us that we are in a fanfiction, as far as we are in a story based on a known fictional setting with familiar characters. Lady Bertilak, when she steals into his bedroom the first time and is rebuffed, asks, ““Bot þat 3e be Gawan, hit gotz in mynde” [‘But I wonder whether you are Gawain’] (1293), since the Gawain she has heard about ““Couth not lyztly haf lenged so long wyth a lady, / Bot he had craued a cosse, bi his courtaisye,”” [“Could not have stayed so long with a lady without craving a kiss, by his courtesy”] (1299-1300). Gawain, forcing an attempt to be “true” to his canonical self, grants her the kiss she wants.<sup>49</sup> The Green Knight in the fourth fitt similarly mocks Gawain to get the reaction he wants from him: ““Ðou art not Gawayn,’ quop þe gome, ‘þat is so goud halden, / Ðat neuer ar3ed for no here by hylle ne be vale”” [“‘You are not Gawain,’ said the man, ‘who is held

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<sup>49</sup> Geraldine Heng even argues that the Lady’s speech about who Gawain should be “works to *produce* that Gawain” (114).

so good, who never feared any army on hill or in valley”] (2270-1). Being told who Gawain should be, according to tales about him, firms Gawain’s resolve to not flinch as the knight raises the axe the second time. Since the Arthurian court here is coded so young,<sup>50</sup> we can hardly believe *this* Gawain has done these things, and so the Bertilaks must be referencing an Arthurian canon outside of this story. Like fanfiction authors and readers who are always already aware of both the source text canon and other fan creations, the referential nods to who Gawain “should” be not only illustrates the medieval poet’s recognition of an Arthurian canon outside his own story, but shows an explicit interest in maintaining character integrity across texts. The Gawain-poet’s illustrated awareness of the veritable multiverse that is the Arthurian romance tradition, and the importance of Gawain’s Gawainness, shows that medieval writers may already have been thinking about their (fan)fictions in the same way fans do in modern fan culture.

In this chapter I provide a fanfiction reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Prose Lancelot* that understands the male/male erotic potential in these texts as “slash.” The *Fanlore* wiki defines slash as “a type of fanwork in which two (or more) characters of the same sex or gender are placed in a sexual or romantic situation with each other” (“Slash”). A major challenge to this line of inquiry that must be addressed is that slash fanfiction rather infamously makes homoerotic subtext in the canon explicit in ways that medieval romance simply does not. Conversely, what a modern (especially Anglophone) audience might read as homoerotic (e.g., men exchanging kisses) would not be viewed as such in the Middle Ages, so it is important to understand the medieval romances in their own cultural context. However, while medieval culture might be

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<sup>50</sup> The Green Knight calls the Arthurian court *berdlez chylder* [“beardless children”] (280).

differently sexualized than our own culture, both still associate the erotic with the shameful, to varying degrees, and male/male desire in many parts of the West ranges from somewhat stigmatized to physically dangerous, and is therefore marginalized. The particularly fanfiction-flavored queerness that I call *slash* is illustrated in Gawain's queer potential in both medieval romances as well as Lancelot and Galehaut's unparalleled love in the *Prose Lancelot*. I define slash by the ways in which secondary authors do not just make subtext (and intertext) into text, but rewrite a source text queerly, treating canon as a milieu they operate within rather than an authoritative source they are beholden to, while maintaining character integrity. Slashed ways of writing can include: an appeal to female or, more properly, queer tastes; the singularity—even anomaly—of these queer encounters which do not threaten a male character's canonical heterosexuality or masculinity; the titillation of relationship inequality when the two members are otherwise ostensibly equal; and, of course, the shame that swirls around the enjoyment of a text where potential didacticism is threatened by its eroticism. Separated by almost two hundred years and a language barrier from each other, much less from contemporary fanfiction, both *SGGK* and the *Prose Lancelot* nevertheless illustrate queer expressions that are close to fanfiction's expressions of male/male relationships, and reading them in this way reveals these relationships as rewritten to appeal to nonheteronormative, shameful pleasures, adding to our notion of the romance genre as one that is potentially culturally subversive.

The Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Old French *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* come from very different historical and cultural contexts, though they feature similarities of composition besides their similar source canon. The *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* was both huge and hugely influential (Lacy). Composed in the first half of the thirteenth

century, this work proved “monumental, owing in equal measure to its enormous length, its complexity and literary value, and its influence” says Norris J. Lacy in the prefatory material to the text (ix). The section of particular interest to my present study, the *Lancelot* (the *Prose Lancelot*, or the *Lancelot Proper*), was composed first and takes up a full half of the entire cycle. Its impact on the literary landscape can be seen in its own spin-offs and continuations as well as its influence on Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*, a text I discuss in Chapter 4. The *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*’s prefatory material claims it was written by contemporary historian Walter Map, but as he was dead by the time of earliest possible composition, this is speculated to be a ruse or even a joke, according to E. Jane Burns (xxii). I would put forth the possibility of *shame* being one reason for the fabricated author standing in for what were probably multiple composers. Because the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* is not always successful in refocusing the Arthurian story in a Christian direction, the possibly Cistercian authors may have had reason not to claim this work as their own. The *Prose Lancelot* covers the rise to preeminence of Lancelot, but also features the continuing adventures of other knights of the Round Table. The segment in particular that I focus on—between Books II and III—is the war with Galehaut, who ultimately gives up his war on King Arthur for Lancelot’s love. My discussion includes the death of Galehaut, which comes as the result of a broken heart in response to hearing false news of Lancelot’s death. Book II also features a queer declaration of love for Lancelot by Sir Gawain, so Galehaut—along with Guinevere, Elaine, and other women—is hardly alone in his desires.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* exists in a single copy dated to before the year 1400. Its linguistic forms place its author (and probably its scribe) in the Northwest Midlands, but the manuscript’s provenance is virtually unknown before Sir Robert Cotton

acquired it (Tolkien and Gordon xiii). Despite its popularity as a teaching text today, and its possible historical connection with the Order of the Garter, *SGGK* was probably an obscure addition to the Arthurian cycle outside its immediate influence, very much unlike the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*. In *SGGK*, a mysterious Green Knight challenges the Arthurian court to a beheading game. When Gawain accepts and beheads him, the supernatural man picks up his severed head and asks Gawain to visit him in a year to accept the same blow. On his way to find the Green Knight, Gawain stops at the castle of a Sir Bertilak, who offers lodging and directions to the Green Chapel where this knight lives. While enjoying his stay, Gawain is plied with another game of exchange: this one between his host and himself. While Sir Bertilak goes hunting for the next three days, his wife (unnamed, though I refer to her as Lady Bertilak) accosts Sir Gawain in his bedchamber, making progressively more obvious sexual advances on him, which he rebuffs, always courteously. The homoeroticism is in the exchange game, since, if Gawain were to “fail” the wife’s seduction test, he would potentially be expected to “exchange” the sexual favors he gained from Bertilak’s wife in return for the spoils of Bertilak’s hunts. The extent of it is that the men exchange erotically charged kisses. When Lady Bertilak finally urges Gawain to take and conceal a gift of a green belt whose magic will protect him from harm, Gawain keeps the gift, failing to render this to Bertilak at their evening exchange. After Gawain leaves Bertilak’s castle and meets the Green Knight, the beheading game and the exchange game with Bertilak are revealed to be interlaced, and the Green Knight is Sir Bertilak in disguise. Personally disgraced at his failure to give up the belt, though he passed every other part of the test and the Green Knight praises him, Gawain returns to the Arthurian court wearing a belt as a badge of shame—a “slash,” if you will, of green across his chest—which the

court adopts as a badge of honor.

### **Queer Theory and Slash Practice**

Before I proceed to a discussion of slash, I want to establish the definition of *queer* used throughout this project. Alexander Doty in *Flaming Classics* has marked several usages of “queer/queerness” (6-7), from which I proceed with the most straightforward definition of *queer* as an umbrella term for non-straight sexualities, genders and positions. Since I am speaking primarily of male/male relationships in the present study, “homoerotic” might (and sometimes will) suffice as a definition. However, in describing fanfiction authors as a group which contains many individuals who may identify somewhere along the spectrum of queer, I particularly identify “queer” as representing a larger umbrella term denoting not-cisgender/not-heterosexual or heteronormative behaviors and identities. This project relies heavily on the work of queer theory and in particular on scholars who have used a variety of non-normative theoretical positions to great effect in exploring medieval culture and literature.

Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* provides a key definition for queer pleasure that directly presses on the boundaries of hetero-capitalist culture. Because pleasures in general “can distract you, and turn you away from obligations, duties and responsibilities,” Ahmed argues that the “bodily and social practices of queer pleasure might challenge the economies that distribute pleasure as a form of property” (162). This positions queer pleasure as potentially shameful (162). However, she suggests not only that queer moments happen in “the enjoyment of the negativity of shame, an enjoyment of that which has been designated shameful by normative culture” (146), but also that the “hope”

of queer pleasure “is that the reshaping of bodies through the enjoyment of what or who has been barred can ‘impress’ differently upon the surfaces of social space, creating the possibility of social forms that are not constrained by the form of the heterosexual couple” (165). It is through the shame from heteronormative culture that queer pleasure has the potential to impact that dominant culture. In her introduction to *Queer Love in the Middle Ages*, Anna Kłosowska also addresses queer pleasure, answering the question why some modern readers would not want to see same-sex pleasures in medieval texts in terms of shame and pleasure: “I suspect it is because one would like to reserve the Middle Ages for the type of chaste reading that procures no pleasure, or procures the ‘right kind’ of professional pleasure, one that is not embarrassing or personal” (5). Against this notion Kłosowska pits Barthes’ invocation that a queer reading is in fact “a deeply ethical approach to the text, in that it takes the text beyond itself in a necessary way. A personal pleasure in the text implies the reading is not less, but more ethically engaged” (6). The “right kind of professional pleasure” is further pitted against fan reading/viewing practices, where desire is a necessary component of fan hermeneutics (whether ethical or not). Fanfiction, and particularly slash, is a practice that takes this idea into the realm of text, where the pleasure of a queer rewriting is in some sense precisely in its defiance of a given canon or culture. If queer readings are still somewhat marginalized in dominant cultures (both in modern culture broadly and how modern scholarship understands the premodern), the affective engagement in a queer reading—the personal pleasure of non-heteronormative reading—is even more so.

Though its terms are anachronistic to the Middle Ages, queer or homoerotic desire is of course no stranger to premodern applications. The homosocial ideal of the chivalric

romance in the Middle Ages meant that medieval audiences certainly would not read homoeroticism in the same way a modern audience might: medieval men seem to be depicted as enjoying greater freedom of emotional attachment and very often, for example, kiss, embrace, and share beds in ways not necessarily sexual.<sup>51</sup> But it is easy to go too far with this sentiment, assuming therefore that *none* of the kisses, embraces, and bed sharing between men in the Middle Ages was erotic or sexually charged. John Boswell said it best that “there is no reason” for a contemporary researcher or reader to assume that close male-male friendships in the Middle Ages might not also contain homoerotic elements, and his stance that there *is* “much reason to be suspicious of the absence of any discussion—pro or con—of this subject in the majority of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature on the subject” still rings true today (274). Just as Boswell responds to a historical lack of attention to the possibility of queer historical people, fans famously respond to lack of both queer and female characters in popular culture media by rereading canonically platonic relationships between male characters as queer, because “there is no reason” to assume compulsory heterosexuality for fictional characters, particularly not ones that fans (who may themselves be queer) have a personal interest in.

Neither should we go too far in *this* direction, as David Clark points out the danger of doing:

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<sup>51</sup> While I explore homosociality in the Middle Ages further in Chapter 3, it is worth mentioning here the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Between Men*. She explores eighteenth and nineteenth century novels’ depictions of “male homosocial desire,” which show that an “emerging pattern of male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry, and hetero- and homosexuality was in an intimate and shifting relation to class; and that no element of that pattern can be understood outside of its relation to women and the gender system as a whole” (1). Richard Zeikowitz’s more recent study of homosociality examines “late medieval normative homoerotic desire, which is *today* considered queer” (2, emphasis added). Ultimately, the homosocial is only relevant to this chapter at the point where it becomes (in a revision of Judith Bennett’s terms, see below) “queer-like.” Queer scholars have also pointed out how normative heterosexuality itself requires queer “perversion” to define itself and its boundaries against in medieval discourse (see Glenn Burger 1152; Tison Pugh, *Sexuality and its Queer Discontents*, and Tison Pugh, *Queer Chivalry* 15).



A caricatured queer reading might say, ‘They describe intense physical and emotional intimacy between men, therefore these men must have been lovers and we can reclaim them as our ancestors in gay history.’ Conversely, a caricatured traditional reading might say ‘Nonsense—these passages describe the brotherly bond that has always existed between warriors, sex has nothing to do with it.’ (3)

Neither approach can come close to presenting the full range of human interactions, contemporary or historical. Recreating the queer sexual practices of fictional characters who were written a thousand years ago is even less possible, especially in comparison with certain ratings of fanfiction that can be quite explicit, leaving little to the imagination of characters’ sexual contact.<sup>52</sup> Here, Judith Bennett’s employment of the term “lesbian-like” to identify “women whose lives might have particularly offered opportunities for same-sex love; women who resisted norms of feminine behavior based on heterosexual marriage; women who lived in circumstances that allowed them to nurture and support other women” (110), is particularly compelling and has been picked up in idea if not precise terms in the scholarship of Tison Pugh and others. Bennett’s assumption that we can only ever come close to an approximation, a suggestion of lesbianness, when studying historical people is generally agreed upon by scholars, though many scholars tend to imply or assume the “-like” is added to all their uses of queer terms to avoid “clunky neologisms” (Tison Pugh, *Sexuality* 10).

Adding the “-like” to queer expressions in the medieval romances that I am treating

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<sup>52</sup> I use “ratings” here in the sense of content ratings: in addition to being archived by character, relationship, and genre tags, fanfiction archives can allow readers to filter for or exclude, for example, as on ArchiveOfOurOwn.org, Mature (roughly equivalent to R-rated films) and Explicit (roughly equivalent to NC-17-rated films).

as medieval fanfiction is perhaps at the same time more and less necessary. How do the sexual expressions of fictional characters impact our understanding of the medieval past? On some level, as Harrison Ford's advice to the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy actor Oscar Isaac purportedly went, "It's fake and in space, so none of that [actual piloting] applies, really," we might question the payoff for acknowledging the "queer-like" in fictional characters, much less fictional characters in fantasy settings (Hegarty). On another level, textual evidence such as romances provides a significant portion of the information that we *do* have about the sexualities of this time period.<sup>53</sup> As Geraldine Heng theorizes for *SGGK*, speech "occurs not *in place of* sex but in *the* place of sex, in the sexual position, and acts as the form and medium of the sexual relation" (104). There is, therefore, I argue, some intellectual payoff in written words that survive today, if not for what medieval people *did*, then at least for what they wrote about, and through writing, desired.

*Queer* in this usage may describe a sexuality, gender expression, or theoretical reading model. Because "slash" is falling out of use in fandom, I wish to present it as a theoretical concept: *a practice of queerly rewriting a fictional narrative*. This makes *slash* a verb, a practice of including queer elements in a story, identifying authorial drives (queer pleasure, found in maintaining character integrity despite queering them) and recognizing the impediments (cultural shame, in places where eroticism outweighs other moral lessons) against which a story is queerly re-produced. The term "slash" arose from homophobic backlash in the earliest modern fandoms such as *Star Trek* ("Slash"). So named for the "/" symbol to indicate the partners in a relationship, which still could be heterosexual, "slash" emerged as a term as much to differentiate objectionable fanfictions from "het"

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<sup>53</sup> See Tison Pugh, *Sexuality* 15-18 and David Clark, 5.

(heterosexual relationships) and “gen” (material thought to be suitable for “general” audiences) as to identify it for those who actively sought it out. Today, slash is dying out as a fandom term, perhaps as fandoms or society become more accepting of LGBTQ+ relationships, or as fanfiction archives such as ArchiveOfOurOwn.org move to using category tags such as M/M, M/F, F/F to help readers locate more specific tastes (Sheenagh Pugh 99). Fans and scholars have even debated whether writing fanfiction about a canonically queer couple “counts” as slash; Catherine Tosenberger warns, however, “the insistence that slash must transgress the existing canon rather troublingly assigns to the canon a heteronormativity it may not necessarily possess” (188). In light of this history, I want to theorize slash as a practice.

Slash fanfiction, though not necessarily the most popular type of fanfiction, has been the most consistently studied, because of, as Robin Anne Reid suggests, “a type of fascination with perceived perversity,” which she theorizes as “women writing erotic/pornographic texts” (466). While slash’s importance to understanding fandom can be easily overemphasized in scholarship, it nevertheless remains a significant subset of fanfiction. As Jamison argues, “slash isn’t just about making porn out of things that weren’t already porn. It’s also about prosecuting fanfiction’s larger project of breaking rules and boundaries and taboos of all kinds” (Kindle Locations 215-216). Scholars have often assigned to slash writing a measure of resistance, as a variety of potentially marginalized writers (whether women, people of color, or members of the LGBTQ+ community) have the freedom in slashed fanfiction to write the kinds of relationships that they want to read. Tosenberger argues, however, that it is easy and problematic to overemphasize slash’s role in fandom resistance: “in a homophobic culture that attempts to police or censor

expressions of non-heteronormativity, any depiction of queerness, especially a positive, sympathetic depiction, qualifies as such” (188). As queer narratives, written in a “queer space,” as Tosenberger defines fannish spaces, these texts possess transgressive and subversive potential, whether or not it is possible to overemphasize that potential. What Reid and Tosenberger primarily caution against is overgeneralizing the purported impulses behind queer desires in fanfiction.

Though not universally applicable to all fanfiction, fan scholars (and fans themselves) debate the degree to which slashed characters are removed from the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people. Sheenagh Pugh describes slash, despite “whatever other political or literary goals it may have,” as “a genre which aims to do something in a way that pleases women. In this it differs from fiction aimed at gay men, being generally far more character-driven and circumstantial” (110). Elizabeth Woledge uses “intimatopia” to discuss fanfictions whose “central defining feature is the exploration of intimacy” (99). Using the term specifically to describe slash fanfiction, Woledge argues that intimatopia “is a world separate from our current realities, a world defined and shaped by its own rules and codes—a world of male intimacy, yes, but not the world of the modern homosexual” (103). At the same time, conflict has arisen around heterosexual female fans writing (appropriating, fetishizing) male/male relationships and around how “slashed” characters do or do not fit into LGBTQ+ lived experience. While certainly the bulk of fanfiction authors are “non-men” (DestinationToast), recent evidence in fact points to a majority of writers of slash identifying as queer, too (“Slasher Demographics”). As more queer characters appear in mainstream media and more LGBTQ+ authors write fanfiction (or perhaps as formerly straight-identified fanfiction authors come out as queer), the difference

between “slash” (defined as rewriting queerly), and “LGBTQ+” (what I refer to as “queer”) remain distinct topics of discussion.

A perhaps important component of slash is that it is written by women to appeal to feminine tastes, but this may be impossible to prove on the one hand and too vague to nail down on the other, for “female taste,” as I began to explore in Chapter 1, is obviously not monolithic, biologically imperative, or culturally static, and the genders of fanfiction authors, mediated by technology, are as ephemeral as medieval ones. The tendencies of “feminine taste” may be impossible to address, since the authors of the medieval romances I study here were probably not women, but this discrepancy is solved, as I will show, by replacing “feminine tastes” with queer or nonheteronormative tastes. Sheenagh Pugh defines appealing to feminine tastes as a goal of fanfiction rather than a product, and even fan scholars identify the influence of courtly genres on fanfiction through their appeal to women. Camille Bacon-Smith’s inquiry into slash leads her to claim that “The homosocial partnership has been a staple of Western romance tradition for at least two thousand years, as compared to heterosexual romance, which did not arise in Western culture until the Age of Chivalry” (234).<sup>54</sup> At the same time, she also recognizes the appeal of gay men to straight women, as the only way women can “in fantasy...*be* the one and *have* the other” (Bacon-Smith 239). Medieval romance may have had a similar goal, as the literature of the court would have been crafted to appeal to both men and women. D. H. Green’s study of *Women Readers in the Middle Ages* highlights Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughters Marie and

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<sup>54</sup> Anne Callahan’s survey of Francophone scholarship on medieval courtly literature draws on René Nelli’s theory that posits courtly love as the “homoeroticization of heterosexuality,” where for the first time strong emotional investment that was already commonly portrayed in male-male relationships was newly transplanted into male-female relationships (2). This may further explain the survival of homoerotic elements in male-male relationships.

Mathilda as “the most important example we have of ‘matrilineal patronage’ on an international scale” where “all three can be seen as actively promoting the beginning of the courtly romance and the genesis of literary fiction in the vernacular” (217). Green provides this as evidence of women’s literary tastes for romance at this time. Green’s concluding question, “In view of the predominance of religious literature for women, what lies behind their encouragement of the romance?” indicates that there *was* encouragement of this genre by women (217). What constitutes “feminine taste” may simply be most clearly indicated by what men did not want women to read: E. Jane Burns tells us that part of the Arthurian reception included “Lady readers,” who were “exhorted after 1200 to abandon the deceptive tales of Arthurian knights in favor of texts that would provide a more accurate and edifying truth” (xvi). So, medieval women may have expressed an inordinate interest in romance, specifically of Arthurian varieties, so that such interest was noted by men enough to be deemed aberrant. These “feminine tastes” may have been especially erotic, and therefore dangerous to medieval writers, according to Burns.

Additionally, we know also that, as in linguistic development where female speakers are more likely to be innovative in speech patterns,<sup>55</sup> feminine literary tastes may be seen as avant-garde to the masculine controllers of literary production. Mafalda Stasi heralds slash fanfiction’s “noncommercial conditions of production and distribution” as the components which “make it an intensely innovative, potentially oppositional phenomenon” (129-30). Green sees this innovation as a female impetus in Marie de Champagne’s famous request to Chrétien de Troyes for the story that will become the *Knight of the Cart*, where she asks him to write a text he clearly does not feel comfortable

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<sup>55</sup> As William Labov’s study of social determinants on language change in 1927 discovered, “young females are often the prime agents of change” (Brinton and Arnovick, 65).

finishing, since he leaves Godefroi de Leigni to complete the work (215). While not in opposition to commercial concerns, as with modern fanfictions, there seems to be some moral opposition from the male author to the Countess's request. *SGGK*'s innovation may have had something to do with its relative obscurity, since, while the source for the beheading game can be easily traced and has many analogues, Tolkien and Gordon claim that "No such clear descent can be found for the theme of the temptation of a knight by a lady" (Tolkien and Gordon xvii).<sup>56</sup> Indeed, "it is the linking of the two main themes, by means of the exchange bargain, which expresses the moral of the poem" so "it may well be to [the poet's] own ingenuity that we owe the superbly successful interlocking" (xx). However successful this "interlocking," it might have been *too* innovative, as it did not appear to have much impact on the medieval Arthurian literary scene, just as slash hardly impacts mainstream media today.

Part of the "female interest" in slash romance may be explained by what Anne Callahan calls the "troubadour effect." Here she is speaking of premodern literatures, describing this effect as "neither a troubadour, nor a lady, but a representation of the pleasure of giving voice to the troubadour's creative impulse" (9), or, in simpler terms, "male appropriation of the voice of a woman" (15). This appropriation makes romance texts both interesting to and still alien from female readers—and writers. Because "nonpresence [...] continues to be the role of the women in Western narratives of heterosexual romance," women writers in particular are unmoored from either the subject or object position and become literary *vagabonds* (7-9). Rather like Henry Jenkins' famous

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<sup>56</sup> In the temptation tale-type Lancelot is as common among the list of knights who can be tested as Gawain, and these knights either yield to temptation, attempt to yield but are prevented by magic or trickery, or react violently to the woman (xvii-xix). *SGGK*-Gawain appears to be something of an anomaly in surviving versions of this tale-type.

description of fans as “poachers,” both terms recognize a hierarchical, and perhaps queer, power structure regarding women’s writing. While scholars of fanfiction may have presented slash as appealing to specifically feminine tastes in the past, we are learning more and more that these desires are queerer than originally thought, and fans are recognizing this faster themselves than scholars are. The very least of these discoveries may be that cisgender heterosexual women can have queer desires, and probably they have always had them.

As explored in Chapter 1, one way of understanding feminine tastes may be through character integrity, which is always important to fanfiction writers, but it is all the more crucial for slash writers who reinterpret the characters’ given heterosexuality (Sheenagh Pugh 110). Gawain and Lancelot are among Arthur’s core knights whose sexual activity is most integral to their character (except perhaps Arthur, or Galahad’s asexuality). Lancelot is that magnet of everyone else’s love, while Gawain is defined by his role as the Ladies’ Knight,<sup>57</sup> so sexual in his core character that he can be “shipped” with anyone in any given text, from someone else’s wife or paramour (in the present chapter and in Chapter 4) to an ugly hag (in Chapter 1)—so why not another man? As Stasi has noticed, “Indeed, beyond the bare factual minimum, canon constitution and interpretation are a highly debated and controversial critical activity in the fannish milieu. Far from being a fixed and unproblematically shared set of references, the slash canon is based on a collective interpretive process. It is not monolithic, even within a given fandom” (120). Arthurian stories are already working in and from an intertextual canon, as Burns reminds us in the introduction to the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*:

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<sup>57</sup> Or, the Knight of the Goddess (John Matthews).



The Vulgate Cycle then provides us with a text that is not a text in the modern sense of the term, a text that is always fragmentary but always a composite of more than one text, a text located somewhere and uncertainly in the complex relation between many narrative versions created by many authorial if not authoritative hands. [...] Signaling us at every turn not to look for textual unity or single authorship among these pages, the cycle offers numerous literary signposts to guide our path in other directions.

(Burns xx-xxi)

The interpretive work by which fanfiction authors read characters as queer necessarily takes place in an intertextual canon, just like the Arthurian one, where characters may be understood as having core or “canonical” characteristics, but where everything else can be up to interpretation.

The Arthurian romance tradition is made up of individual works that are always connected to a larger whole, no matter how far from the “source” they stray. Gawain’s behavior in one story colors our perception of him in another, as illustrated at the beginning of this chapter with both Sir and Lady Bertilak wondering if the man who stands (or reclines) before them is the Sir Gawain they’ve heard so much about. One aspect especially of early fanfiction, but which can still be seen today, is the various strategies of asserting, either explicitly or implicitly, the heroic male characters’ continued heterosexuality in spite of their homoerotic romances. At its most problematic, slash writers may write, say, Starsky and Hutch explicitly stating that they are “only gay for each other,” which, while problematic, importantly lends itself to a more closely canonical interpretation, since both men experience regular on-screen heterosexual romances. Sheenagh Pugh refers to “a not-

uncommon theory...that properly speaking slash is about heterosexual males having sex with each other, so by definition they don't come out to themselves, much less other people" (101). Perhaps less homophobic strategies focus on the "first time" the characters engage in a same-sex relationship in a desire to preserve the canonical heterosexuality otherwise attested throughout a given canon: the movie ends, and so does a character's textually purported heterosexuality. In their respective individual stories, Lancelot and Gawain have only one homoerotic encounter each (per text), and these can easily be "explained away" for the knights to continue to fulfill their heterosexual roles in future texts: Lancelot is irresistible, so it's not his fault (nor Galehaut's, arguably, nor Gawain's) that women *and men* throw themselves at him. Gawain's near-homoerotic encounter is brokered between women, so he is "safe,"<sup>58</sup> and anyway the entire production only exists to *test* his morals. Obviously.

Although slash fanfiction can do a lot that is not admirable,<sup>59</sup> by and large, its authors tend to aim to present queer relationships positively—or at least something approaching representative of both the positivity and negativity of real human relationships, whether those look like the real-life relationships of gay men or not. One element of slash fanfiction's popularity may stem from wanting to rewrite power imbalances prevalent in heterosexual relationships and explore a relationship between equals. The writing of slash is potentially transgressive in rejecting the unequal power

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<sup>58</sup> At least in the sense of "it's not gay if it's a threeway" (The Lonely Island).

<sup>59</sup> In my reading, I have found that slash fanfiction can support hegemonic structures of heteronormativity by encoding masculine and feminine roles on two male characters, and it can marginalize female characters by privileging only male-male relationships, two problems I discuss at more length in this and in the next chapter. Other problems with slash are that it can be written about very close friends, which may reinforce that men *cannot* be close friends without it being seen as gay, especially when the characters express, as they often do, that they are only gay for each other ("Buddyslash"); it can also re-code problematic paradigms of they only seem to hate each other because they secretly love each other found in representations of heterosexual relationships ("Enemyslash").

dynamics in heterosexual relationships. This would be a tidy explanation for heterosexual women's interest in slash, but in fact scholars find quite the opposite is true: Bacon-Smith argues that "[In] spite of the community's own rhetoric to the contrary, many of the homoerotic stories describe unequal relationships" (246). Woledge also notices a pattern of "equality based on difference" in slash fanfiction, postulating that in these imbalanced relationships, "perhaps hierarchies actually enhance intimacy" (109). I agree with Woledge, Bacon-Smith, and others, and find that, in spite of the opportunity for more equal relationship dynamics, slash authors often intentionally explore relationship power inequalities. Because they explore relationship inequalities for reasons other than gender, however, slashing is still very often culturally transgressive.

Lancelot, Galehaut, Gawain, and Bertilak are all of the same knightly class, and all are men whose relationships nevertheless still manage to skew unequally, rendering one partner in an erotic situation more dominant than the other. In fandoms, "Personality attributes displayed in canon (or fanon) are often used to determine whether the character is a top or a bottom in sexually explicit fanworks" ("Sex Positions"). Because male/female relationships are automatically coded with the male as penetrative, assertive, or dominant, which partner is "on top" can be a topic of lengthy discourse in slash relationships where both partners are male. Because Top- or Bottom-coding can influence a slashed character's personality even *beyond* sexually explicit fanfictions, I read unequal relationships among the knights (and occasional lady) in question as the authors revealing a character's "preference" for sexual positions they do not explicitly participate in in the medieval stories. This interest in Top- or Bottom-coding a character is a subject of much discourse which may reflect on cisgender women's "obsession" with penetration ("Sex Positions").

However, I also recognize the need for fans and fan scholars to “explain” fan interest in sex positions as itself adding to the environment of shame that medieval and modern Anglophone and European fanfiction writers operate under: women using queer imaginations on fictional characters inspires shame and in many cases guilt unless or even because of how it is “explained.” If modern fanfiction authors experience less shame than medieval authors might have in their approach to sex, they only push the boundaries of queerness further.

Within these stories as without, shame is a necessary component, heightening the titillation, eroticism, and enjoyment for the readers and writers in the same way that one fan describes her reaction to discovering the existence of slash as ““embarrassment conflicting with sheer delight”” (Bacon-Smith 241). Whether explicit or not, whether written by or for men or women, what is erotic in both medieval and modern fanfictions, it appears, is counter-culture, erotic within in its own intertextual culture, a meta-text above the rules governing the author’s own society. Studied almost exclusively in terms of male/male slash, fandom’s approach to sex actually runs a gamut of queer relationships, from lesbian, bisexual, and transgender characters and relationships, to pansexual or xenophilic characters who enjoy intercourse with aliens, or exploring the sexuality of characters who are asexual or aromantic altogether. Modern and medieval fanfiction authors may transgress boundaries of heteronormativity at different points, but all of them negotiate the potential shame in the non-normativity of queer relationships through pleasure by rewriting the queer sexualities they want to see in their fiction. There is of course transgressive and resistant potential in any queer relationship in a heteronormative context. However, in reading characters like Gawain, Bertilak, Galehaut, and Lancelot as

“slashed,” or, as queerly rewritten from an existing narrative, that fandom tension between enjoyment and shame bears out in necessarily, even incidentally, resistant queer desire. The queer desire of the author/reader is then enacted by the characters. A slash practice of rewriting an established canon recognizes the source text as inspiring but not controlling how a text is read and rewritten, particularly by and for nonheteronormative desires.

### **“The Company of Such an Excellent Knight”**

In the *Prose Lancelot*, Sir Galehaut’s love of Sir Lancelot, when read as slashed, shows a queer rewriting of the Arthurian story that values character integrity, plays with inequality, and represents the shame in the composition of the entire *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, showing that it is an ultimately futile attempt to imbue an erotic story with a Christian interpretation. As an introduction to a slashed reading of Lancelot and his ability to inspire queer desire in others, I wish to start with a queer reading of a wounded Sir Gawain talking with Arthur, Guinevere, and Galehaut in Part II of the *Prose Lancelot*. Gawain’s physical pain is more a plot point than it is responsible for inspiring pathos among the characters or the narrative, as Lancelot is the chief topic of conversation. All are unaware, however, that the subject of their conversation *is* Lancelot, since he is in disguise as a *bel inconnu* and referred to only as “the good knight” who has brokered peace between Galehaut and King Arthur. The company, having gone around the room to share what each would do or sacrifice in order to have the company of such a “preudome” [“excellent knight”], poses the same question to Gawain:

Et mesire Gauvain pensa un petit comme chil qui ne quida jamais santé avoir. “Se Diex me doinst, fait il, santé avoir, je voldroie orendroit estre la plus bele damoisele del mont saine et haitie, par covent que il m’amast sor

toute rien toute sa vie et la moie.” “Chertes,” fait Galahos, “assés i avés offert.” (Micha VIII.94)

Then Sir Gawain thought a little, like a man who believed he would never be well again. “If God were to grant me my health,” he said, “I’d immediately wish to be the most beautiful maiden in the world, happy and healthy, on condition that he would love me above all others, all his life and mine.”

“Well,” said Galehaut, “you have offered a lot!” (Lacy II.140)<sup>60</sup>

On the heels of this, we may read Guinevere’s response to the question to be a bit tongue in cheek: ““fait ele, mesire Gauvain i a mis quanque dame i puet metre, ne dame ne puet plus offrir”” (VIII.94) ““Sir Gawain has proposed all that a lady can give, and a lady can offer no more”” at which “they all began to laugh” (II.140). While the laughter may call the seriousness of the entire conversation into question, there are several different meanings this passage suggests, all of which interlace shame, love, and queer desire. If we begin by understanding the laughter as rendering the entire conversation “merely” a joke or a thought experiment, then in the jest or derision (the joy or shame) of Gawain’s inordinate love of Lancelot, the group is also implicitly shaming Galehaut and Guinevere for loving him, too. Love of Lancelot is a driving problem throughout the text, so this concept of love shamed but still eroticized is a perfectly satisfactory reading that fulfills heteronormative expectations.

Any other reading—where the laughter allows for, or even hides, at least some

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<sup>60</sup> French text is from the Alexandre Micha edition. Translations are from the Lacy edition, cited by Book number in Roman numerals and Lacy’s page number in Arabic numerals. These page numbers come from the 5-volume Garland edition.

degree of “true” desire in Gawain’s statement—introduces some measure of queerness to the relationship between Gawain and Lancelot or, indeed, Gawain and his own gender expression. Though Gawain’s health is an important condition of his “wish” (perhaps giving the statement a kind of “when pigs fly” quality), the fact that his ultimate fantasy of “the company of such an excellent knight” includes gender transformation and a relationship with another man suggests a queered Gawain. At its most heteronormative, this fantasy includes Gawain’s perfect transformation into a female body whose existence is predicated upon a heterosexual union with Lancelot. But even this heterosexualizing reading is slippery, since we who have read the *Prose Lancelot*, or any other version of the Arthurian story, know that Gawain has enjoyed female sexual partners before—and is presumably unlikely to lose the desire for future female sexual partners<sup>61</sup>—rendering his fantasy female existence as something approaching what we might refer to as bisexuality on the queer spectrum.<sup>62</sup> On some level, too, Gawain’s fantasy must speak to direct male/male homoerotic desire for Lancelot, for which his fantasy female body merely represents an excuse. Add to this that even in acceptably homosocial contexts, Gawain hardly ever fails to notice Lancelot, and we have a pattern of interest. When Lancelot rides into battle wearing Galehaut’s armor, for example, Gawain instantly recognizes him, as the mysterious *bel inconnu* who fought them previously: ““Che n’est pas Galahos, ains est li noirs chevaliers qui avant ier porta les noires armes! Jel connois bien”” (VIII.83) [“That is not Galehaut, but the Good [Black] Knight who wore the black armor, two days ago! I

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<sup>61</sup> His stipulation, after all, is that the good knight “love *me* above all others,” and says nothing about his own loyalty.

<sup>62</sup> Because the mind and body have separate desires, Gawain’s body could interact with Lancelot sexually, but his mind could still be his own, i.e., male, further queering himself and his relationship with Lancelot.

recognize him!”] (II.137).<sup>63</sup> If Gawain is not specifically interested in Lancelot, at the very least the unnamed Black Knight has consumed his attention, providing for queer potential.

Putting Gawain aside, the male/male relationship that has garnered the most scholarly attention as queer is Galehaut and his love of Sir Lancelot, for whom Galehaut becomes a vassal to King Arthur instead of Arthur’s conqueror, and dies of a broken heart when he hears exaggerated reports of Lancelot’s death. Gretchen Mieszkowski calls Galehaut “one of the great homoerotic portraits of medieval literature” (21). While Richard Zeikowitz asserts instead that Lancelot and Galehaut’s love is “‘not really that extraordinary’ when one considers classical and medieval discourses of intimate male friendship,” what he describes as remarkable “is that the *Prose Lancelot* offers such a vivid dramatization of a same-sex amorous relationship in a genre that generally reserves excessive displays of love for partners who are of the opposite sex” (42). Samuel Rosenberg defines Galehaut as “unquestionably the richest creation in the narrative’s immense cast of characters” who “gives profundity and complexity to the work’s attempt to grapple with the meaning and expression of love, with its obligations and its consequences,” and ultimately refers to Galehaut’s invention as “the unknown author’s greatest act of genius” (246). The editors of the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* go even further, noting a reduction of the intensity of Lancelot’s canonical relationship with Guinevere as a result, as pointed out in the introduction:

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<sup>63</sup> Malory takes this even further, where Gawain recognizes a disguised Lancelot at a joust and says, “‘I wolde sey hit were Sir Launcelot, by his rydyng and hys buffetis that I se hym deale; but ever mesemyth hit sholde nat be he, for that he beryth the rede slyve uppon hys helmet—for I wyst hym never beare tokyn at no justys of lady ne jantillwoman” (602). Gawain knows his fellow knight intimately, by his movement and martial skill, and, here, is simultaneously betrayed by his intimate knowledge of Lancelot. Because he knows Lancelot would never wear (and indeed, *has* never worn, until this point, and only in order to better disguise himself from those who know him well) a lady’s token—which is itself a rejection of performed heterosexuality.



Lancelot's interest in the queen appears at times to be more political than personal. If he is attracted to Galehaut emotionally, and perhaps sexually, he favors Guenevere as a conduit to another powerful man, the king. When Chrétien's phrasing about mutual love and enjoyment between Lancelot and the queen is replaced by a discourse of explicit seduction between Lancelot and Galehaut, the classic configuration of courtly love takes on new dimension. As Galehaut transforms his original plot to steal Guenevere from Arthur into a plan of capturing Lancelot's love and attention, he invokes the standard discourse of courtly love to express undying affection for another knight, not a lady... (Burns xxvi)

Since, as E. Jane Burns argues, the narrative and emotional connection between Galehaut and Lancelot is stronger than that between Guinevere and Lancelot, I argue that Galehaut represents a slashed addition to the Arthurian story. As an invention for the *Prose Lancelot*, Galehaut's character integrity is not as important as Lancelot's to maintain, but Galehaut's story is one that represents a kind of queer experiment in the canon of Arthurian romance (as Rosenberg argues), and in combination with Gawain's queer desire, presents Lancelot as someone whom both men and women fall heedlessly in love with. Other elements common to slash appear in the relationship, such as shifting inequality in the relationship of otherwise social and physical equals. Later versions of the Arthurian cycle that include Galehaut will excise this shameful element, further marking the *Prose Lancelot* as a slashed rewriting. It is singular also because Lancelot's heterosexuality is maintained even within the narrative through killing Galehaut off to focus on Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship and return the character to his narratively necessary heterosexual—but still

non-normative—relationship with a married woman. Such a reading reveals authorial knowledge that they<sup>64</sup> are contributing queerly to a canon larger than their own text, with intention evidenced by what they change and expand from their source texts. This intention is so strong it may even have overridden other intentions, as the author’s attempts to Christianize the Arthurian story are briefly, at least at the moment of Galehaut’s death, complicated by queer love rivaling the message of Christian salvation.

As my Introduction provides a discussion of Lancelot sharing beds with various female partners and the importance of female desires in those encounters, I would add that Lancelot does not *only* share beds with women, and the man he most significantly, and often, shares a bed with is Galehaut. In the war between Arthur and Galehaut, Galehaut is immediately smitten with and praises Lancelot, begging: “Et encore vous pri je por Dieu que vous herbergiés anuit o moi, par covent que je fache a devise quanke vous m’oserés requerre” (VIII.74) [“Again I beg you, for God’s sake, to stay with me tonight, on condition that I’ll do whatever you ask of me”] (II.135). Just in case we are tempted to read no erotic desire into the request of spending the night with him, Galehaut adds, “je voeil anuit mais avoir vostre compaignie, et se plus le puis avoir, je la prendrai” (VIII.75) [“I wish to have your company this night; and if I can have more of it, I’ll take it”] (II.135), prompting the reader to wonder what “more” Galehaut would want from Lancelot’s company. Galehaut’s longing for Lancelot is constantly emphasized, and “consummated” in a bedroom scene, where Galehaut causes four beds to be prepared for Lancelot, himself, and his two knights: when invited to do so, Lancelot, embarrassed by the lavish treatment, at first refuses to sleep in the nicest bed which is prepared for him, saying, “Ha, sire, fait

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<sup>64</sup> I use “they” for the *LGC* author(s) both as a move towards a gender-neutral singular and to reflect the likely corporate authorship of the many-part text.

il, por Dieu ne me faites jesir plus haut des autres chevaliers qui compaignie me feront, car tant ne me devés vous mie avilenir” (VIII.80) [“For God’s sake, don’t make me lie higher than the other knights who are to keep me company; you mustn’t disgrace me so”] (II.136), bringing shame into play, at least from Lancelot’s perspective. But when Lancelot consents, Galehaut lays down beside him along with two other knights and “car il ne dormoit gaires, ains pensa toute nuit a retenir le chevalier” (VIII.80) [“scarcely slept at all, but spent the time thinking of a way to retain the knight” (II.137)]. Lest we think two (or, four) men sharing a bed in medieval romance is a situation of “just knights being knights,” we might recognize Galehaut’s shame in bed-sharing, evidenced by his deception about where he says he will sleep, and waiting until Lancelot falls asleep before joining him in bed (VIII.80; II.136) and sneaking out of bed in the morning before Lancelot awakens (VIII.80-1; II.137). After Lancelot’s identity is revealed, he and Galehaut share a bed knowingly, and during this time they do not sleep, but speak “parolent toute nuit de ce dont lor cuer sont moult a aise” (VIII.118) [“speak all night about what brought joy to their hearts”] (II.147). These repeated instances of bed-sharing between the two men (and one more below, when Lancelot hears of accusations made against Guinevere) demonstrate growth from Galehaut’s longing that he feels the need to conceal by sneaking into and out of bed with Lancelot, into a relationship where the two men share great emotional experience and vulnerability when they share a bed, becoming open to each other as though to mimic, or even render unnecessary, explicit sexual contact.

Lancelot and Galehaut’s relationship must negotiate shame and pleasure from the very beginning. Galehaut falls into what can only be termed love at first sight with Lancelot, since after he has seen Lancelot in battle he has messengers tell Arthur, “et

sachiés qu’il avra au chief de l’an, coi qu’il doie couster, le boin chevalier de sa maisnie, chelui as armes vermeilles qui l’assamblee a vencue” (VIII.30) [“Then be assured that at the end of the year, whatever the cost, he’ll have the good knight in his forces, the one with the red armor who carried the day in the battle”] (II.124). The cost ends up being his sovereignty and his victory over Arthur, as Lancelot asks him, “Sire, je vous demant que si tost que vous serés au deseure del roi Artu, que devers lui n’avra mais nul recovrier ; mais si tost com je vous en semonrai, que vous li ailliés crier merci, et vous metés outreement en sa manaie” (VIII.81) [“My lord, I ask you that as soon as you overcome King Arthur, and his forces are totally unable to recover, as soon as I summon you, you are to ask him for mercy and put yourself entirely in his power”] (II.137). Galehaut concedes to this little game with only one stipulation:

“Sire,” fait il, “ja ne m’aït Diex se vous n’avrés le don, que je ne poroie riens faire por vous ou je puisse honte avoir, mais je vous pri que vous ne me tolés vostre compaignie por autrui doner, puis que je feroie plus por vous avoir que nus.” (VIII.82)

[“My Lord,” he said, “may God never help me if you don’t receive this gift, for I could do nothing for you that would bring me shame, but I beg you not to deprive me of your company, since I would do more to have you with me than any other.”] (II.137).

For Galehaut, the normal rules of honor and shame are suspended in his dealings with Lancelot, replaced with a *fin amor* metric where experiencing shame *for* love is key to the relationship. Lancelot is “Si en a si grant pitié que il en souspire del cuer aval et pleure des iex de la teste sous le hiaume et dist entre ses dens: ‘Biax sire Diex, qui porra ce deserver?’”

(VIII.84) [“So moved that his sighs came from the bottom of his heart; tears ran from his eyes, and he said between clenched teeth, ‘Blessed Lord God, who can be worthy of this?’”] (II.138). Their erotic encounters in beds only add to the vulnerability of emotion these men already experience for one another, and Galehaut openly admits that Lancelot’s is the name of the person he loves most (VIII.93; II.140). Gender and shame are irrelevant before the strength of Galehaut’s desire.

Several times in conjunction with his relationship with Lancelot, Galehaut mentions shame, but always as a shame he is willing to endure for the love of Lancelot—not an uncommon trope in heterosexual courtly love, as I conclude with in Chapter 4. Galehaut seems to acknowledge that Lancelot’s affections for him are not quite so secure as his are for Lancelot in the line “‘j’en vaudroie avoir tournee ma grant honor a honte, par si que je fusse a tous jors ausi seurs de lui comme je vaudroie que il fust de moi”” (VIII.94) [“it would be worth having my great honor turned to shame, if I could be as sure of him as I would wish him to be of me”] (II.140), but it is obviously not an insurmountable problem for Galehaut. In their briefly “happy” conclusion, where Galehaut and Lancelot ride off into the proverbial sunset together, Galehaut is “liés et dolens: liés de ce que ses compains s’en vet avec lui, et dolens de ce qu’il est remis de la maisnee le roi Artu, kar parce le cuide il avoir perdu a tos jors” (I.1) [“both happy and unhappy: happy that he had his companion with him and unhappy that he had become part of King Arthur’s household, for he was sure that he would thereby lose [Lancelot] forever”] (III.241). The shame of yielding his supremacy to Arthur is eclipsed by the embarrassing realization that by joining their kingdoms, Lancelot’s loyalties to Arthur and Guinevere are stronger than Lancelot’s loyalties to him. Rosenberg describes this as a surrender: “Just as he has surrendered to

Arthur, he will give way before Guinevere, yielding the young Lancelot to her in one of the most memorable scenes in the whole romance” (246). In spite of these shames, however, Galehaut’s actions seem to indicate loving Lancelot is still “worth it.” Galehaut’s negotiation of shame and desire is similar to a fan’s desire for their fan object: since that desire is often ridiculed, the desire must always be strong enough to overcome shame.

Lancelot and Galehaut’s relationship in the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* is one which is most consistently made intimate through extreme suffering, to such an extent that the characters actually share their suffering in a way that recalls Wolledge’s intimatopic sense of “psychic oneness” (105). When both are captured by Saxons, Lancelot is

laiens tex conreés que il ne boit ne ne menjue por nul confort que l’en li face et fait tel duel a jornee que nus ne le puet conforter. Et il ot la teste wide, si li est monté une folie et une rage el chief si durement que nus ne puet a lui durer, ne n’i a nul de ses compaignons qui il n’ait fait .II. plaies ou .III. (VIII.452)

[in such a state that no one could encourage him to eat or drink, and all day long he grieved so bitterly that no one could comfort him. His head was empty of thought, and a rage and a madness [that] arose so violently in his head that no one could withstand him, and he had inflicted two or three wounds on every one of his companions.] (II.230).

Because of his violent madness he is separated from the other prisoners. Galehaut begs their jailer to house them together in spite of this, saying ““car miex voldroie que il m’ocheist qu’il se departesist de moi”” (VIII.452) [“for it would be better for him to kill me than to leave me”] (II.230). The wicked jailer refuses, and when Lancelot is later

released, Galehaut's "si en ot si grant doel que par .I. poi que il n'errajoit vis et est si atornés qu'il ne boit ne ne menjue" (VIII.453) ["grief was so great that he was nearly out of his mind, and in such a state that he could neither eat nor drink"] (II.230). Their parallel suffering (grief, madness, neither of them able to eat or drink) is the link through which their relationship is explored by mutual suffering. It comes up again when Lancelot and Galehaut are, in a kind of tragedy of errors, equally melancholy because of the other's sadness. At finding out that Guinevere is in trouble, Lancelot demonstrates his grief physically, and Galehaut joins him:

A cest mot s'escrieve a plorer que plus ne pot dire, si joint ses mains et se met devant Galehout a genois. Et quant Galehout le voit, si ne puet plus endurer, ançois l'en lieve entre ses bras et plore trop durement : si font tel duel ensamble qu'il chaient andui en une coche pasmé et jurent longuement en tel maniere. (I.35)

[With these words, he broke into tears and could say no more; he clasped his hands and fell to his knees in front of Galehaut. Galehaut, who could not bear what he was seeing, put his arms around him and raised him as his own tears flowed; and the two were so wracked by their common pain that they fell onto a couch and lay there in a faint for a long while.] (III.249)

It is not mutual joy, but mutual pain, felt at least in part each for the other, that brings them closer together and expands the intimacy between them. Woledge argues that "hurt/comfort can also be used to create a world in which...sex is far from the only way of expressing intimacy" (111). Lancelot and Galehaut's shared vulnerability in pain leads to more intimate experiences and closeness. Though I explore the role of hurt/comfort in Chapter

3, it is relevant here as part of the discussion of Galehaut and Lancelot's erotically charged relationship because of how pain translates to intimacy. Whereas in Chapter 3 I argue that the intimacy between men that is negotiated through pain and consolation can be a strategy to distance the relationship from a queer reading, because the shared emotional and physical intimacy of Lancelot and Galehaut is joined by other acts of intimacy, the intimacy or hurt and comfort actually enhances a queer reading here.

Relationship equality is malleable through the fantasy of King Arthur's court just as it is in modern fanfiction. Though heterosexual power imbalances that favor the male partner are the norm, courtly love sometimes reverses this inequality as an erotic game, which I explore in Chapter 4. By comparison, Galehaut's power, which can rival King Arthur's, is brought to Lancelot's level by Galehaut's desire for him, and each knight cedes power to the other in what results in a very vulnerable relationship. Indeed, Galehaut makes himself so vulnerable to Lancelot that Lancelot has the power to kill him, as indicated in his supernaturally prophetic dreams where he and King Arthur are lions, and Galehaut, "li lions qui tant avoit force et qui s'estoit humiliés vers le petit" ["the lion who was so powerful and yet humbled himself before the smaller one"] took the leopard (Lancelot) away with him, just as Galehaut takes Lancelot away to his kingdom. When the leopard left the lion, the dream interpretation continues, "li lions si corociés que il enfloit tos, si qu'il en prenoit la mort" ["the lion was so distraught that he swelled up and died"] (I.45, III.251). Merlin's version is even more explicit about the intensity of their relationship, where this time Galehaut is a dragon, and Guinevere a snake:

"Et quant il vendroit el Regne Aventuros et il avroit pres de tot conquis, si le detendrait li merveillos lieupars et le boteroit arriere et le metroit en la



merci de cels qu'il avroit si aprochiés de conquerre ; apres s'entrameroient tant entr'els deus qu'il se tendraient tot une meisme chose, ne ne porroit mie li uns estre sans l'autre, quant li serpens al chief d'or trairait a li le lieupart et li toldroit sa compaignie por lui saoler. En ceste maniere, fet Merlins, vendra li grans dragons..." (I.57)

[“He would reach the Adventurous Kingdom after having conquered almost everything, but the wondrous leopard would stop him and push him back and put him at the mercy of those he had just been so close to defeating. Afterwards, the two would love each other to the point of considering themselves a single thing, each unable to live without the other; but the golden-headed serpent would come draw the leopard away and take him from his companion and besot his mind. Merlin says that this is how the great dragon will die.”] (III.253-4)<sup>65</sup>

Galehaut is warned repeatedly that the “leopard” (Lancelot) will cause his death, and that “kar de la volenté del cuer ne vient pas la garisons, mais de la bone medicine” (I.50)

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<sup>65</sup> The use of animal metaphors, interestingly, is another trope that slash fanfiction also employs, with which the *Prose Lancelot* and even *SGGK*, to a lesser extent (with the three hunts equating Gawain to a deer, a boar, and a fox), engage. A variety of fanfiction tropes exist that allow exploration of what is effectively bestiality but among consenting (sentient) adults, from Werewolves, Alpha/Beta/Omegas, Merpeople, Sentinel AUs and Daemon AUs which represent human souls as animals (<https://fanlore.org/wiki/Bestiality>). As is made clear in Jamison’s *Fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World*, this is not merely counter cultural but avant-garde: “At this late date, fanfiction has become wildly more biodiverse than the canonical works that it springs from. It encompasses male pregnancy, centauration, body swapping, apocalypses, reincarnation, and every sexual fetish, kink, combination, position, and inversion you can imagine and a lot more that you could but would probably prefer not to. It breaks down walls between genders and genres and races and canons and bodies and species and past and future and conscious and unconscious and fiction and reality. Culturally speaking, this work used to be the job of the avant garde, but in many ways fanfiction has stepped in to take on that role. If the mainstream has been slow to honor it, well, that’s usually the fate of aesthetic revolutions. Fanfiction is the madwoman in mainstream culture’s attic, but the attic won’t contain it forever” (Kindle Locations 216-222). Although not necessarily limited to slash, and therefore outside the purview of this chapter, these elements are nevertheless non-heteronormative ways that fandom makes sexually explicit the prophetic or metaphorical animal elements that medieval romances used, too.

[“healing comes not from the heart’s desire but from good medicine”] (III.252). But Galehaut is confident that the prophecy is incorrect, for he claims that Lancelot could not bring about his death “par la soe mort ne le prenoie. Mais après sa mort ne cuit je pas que je vesquise, kar il ne me remaindroit en cest siede nule autre rien qui puist estre a mon plaisir” (I.58) [“unless he were to die himself. After his death I don’t think that I could live, because I would have nothing left in this world that could bring me any pleasure”] (III.254). Of course, that is exactly what happens. These premonitory visions do more than just predict the future, however: they describe the intensity of Galehaut’s love for Lancelot.

The narrative even as good as says that Lancelot and Galehaut’s relationship did not need to be explicitly sexual to be complete, allowing for a reading of them as “queer-like.” With great sympathy for Galehaut’s unequally requited love, the author tells us “et il avoit mis son cuer en lui outre ce que cuers d’ome pooit amer autre home estrange de loial compaignie. Et de ceste chose ne covient pas tesmoing avoir, car bien i parut en la fin que la dolor que il en ot li toli tote joie tant que mors en fu, si com li contes meismes le devisera ça avant” (I.1) [“and he had given him his heart with a love greater than loyal companionship alone could make a man feel for someone outside his family. But no proof of this is needed here, for in the end, as our story will go on to show, it was clear that the grief it caused him swept away all joy and brought him death”] (III.241). In this, the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* is unique, as no other depiction of Galehaut is so painstakingly empathetic, and no other male character is as completely and undeniably in love with Lancelot to the point of not needing further “proof.”

This intensity is all the more striking for its singularity in the Arthurian canon. Rosenberg attributes Galehaut’s singularity in the Arthurian imagination to a variety of

reasons, chief among them his homoerotic ties to Lancelot: “it was a remarkable undertaking” for the author to “explore the implications of such love in the early thirteenth century. It would hardly be surprising if subsequent writers found it a venture better left unrepeated, or simply one of little interest to them” (255). Like Boswell, Rosenberg argues for a “sweeping under the rug” theory of queer desire in perceptions of the Middle Ages that is hard to argue with. Malory’s Galehaut pales in comparison,<sup>66</sup> a Galehaut who is certainly impressed by Lancelot enough to suit Malory’s plot, but who also, without reason, later attempts to destroy Lancelot (Rosenberg 251). What is interesting, then, is the “remarkable undertaking” of the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*’s queer Galehaut, and its singularity: if the “brilliant, nuanced creation of an exemplary prince and a tragic lover” is singular, his queerness must be understood as embarrassing to the authors that follow, and not enjoyable enough to be “worth it” (255).

In regard to what is “worth it,” Galehaut’s dream, love-sickness, and death, though only a small section of the sprawling *Prose Lancelot*, nevertheless reserve a great deal of narrative attention and sympathy to his tragic end that is almost in conflict with the purported Christian message.<sup>67</sup> The interpretation of Galehaut’s dreams is public, with Lancelot present for long enough to be “qu’il sospiece bien que Galehout n’atent a morir se par lui non” (I.51) [“quite sure that Galehaut expected his death to come through him”], and become distraught over this (III.252). But once Lancelot is sent away, a Master Elias

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<sup>66</sup> If potentially embarrassed by the Galehaut of his French source, I would not argue that Malory is afraid of male-male friendships. For example, Sir Gareth’s devotion to Lancelot certainly celebrates the homosocial, though without as much of the pathos we see in Lancelot’s interactions with Guinevere. And as Mieszkowski notes, Malory’s Lavain can be read queerly.

<sup>67</sup> Compared to other erotic scenes, such as Lancelot’s encounter with Elaine the mother of Galahad (V.164-5), or even with Guinevere, which are soundly shamed from a Christian moralist perspective in narrative asides even though they are narratively important, Galehaut’s love gets something of a pass, or is even praiseworthy.

can speak frankly with Galehaut, coming as close to recognizing a sexual consummation of Galehaut and Lancelot's relationship as we ever get: Master Elias tells Galehaut that Lancelot will not achieve the Grail because "Cist ne porroit recovrer les taiches que cil avra qui l'aventure del Graal achevera, kar il covient tot premierement qu'il soit de sa nativité jusqu'a sa mort virges et chastes si entierement qu'il n'ait amor n'a dame n'a damoisele. Et cist nel puet ore avoir, kar je sai greignor partie de son conseil que vos ne cuidiés" (I.53) ["he cannot regain the qualities needed by the one who will complete the Adventure of the Grail. Above all, that man must be, from birth to death, so utterly virginal and chaste as never to feel love for a woman, married or not. For your companion it is too late, for I know more about what goes on in his mind than you think" (III.252). Though Elias speaks explicitly about desire for a woman, Galehaut's reaction is telling, for "si rogi de honte et dist al mestre" (I.54) ["Hearing that, Galehaut turned red with embarrassment"] (III.252-3), which may refer to his role the trysts he orchestrates between Lancelot and Guinevere, or could refer to his own relationship with Lancelot. The figural representation of their relationship, Lancelot's future failure of the Grail quest, and an emphasis on Galehaut's shame as though this were his fault all suggest an erotic entanglement between the two knights.

Elias and Galehaut's theological discussion turns to the time of Galehaut's death and how he can be absolved of his sins before then, showing a concern for Christian salvation that matches the seeming goals of the entire *Lancelot-Grail* project (III.254-6). However, Galehaut's prophesied death caused by his very secular and very erotic love of Lancelot is taken as a matter of course. Even in the moment of his death, Galehaut's Christian salvation is very much at odds with his earthly love:

Tant fist de la mort Lancelot que il fu, ce dist li contes, .XI. jors et .XI. nuis que il ne menja ne ne but, et tant que les gens religieuses qui sovent le veoient li distrent que s'il moroit en tel maniere il avroit s'ame perdue. Si le font mengier a force, mes ce n'ot mestier, que li lons jueners li fist trop mal. Et si li revint uns autres encombriers, que la plaie qu'il avoit eue quant il conquist l'escu li sorsama, kar ele avoit esté malvaisement garie : si li porri la chars. Et lors li avint une maladie dont tos li cors li secha et tuit li membre. (I.388-9)

[Lancelot's death, says the story, made him go without eating or drinking for eleven days and nights, to the point where the men of religion who often came to see him claimed that, if he died as a result, his soul would be damned. So they forced him to eat, but it was to no avail, for too much harm had been done by the long fast. Besides, another problem arose, in that the wound that he had received when fighting for the shield, having been poorly treated, festered and made his flesh rot. And then he fell into an illness that made his body and all his limbs turn dry.] (III.332).

His intense love for Lancelot is what kills him, if helped along by a hunger strike and an infected wound. Somehow, in all this, his queer love still matters more than his damnation. As Galehaut is dying, "Mais tant de confort com il avoit si estoit li escus Lancelot qu'il avoit tot adés devant ses iex" (I.388) ["Whatever comfort he had came from Lancelot's shield, which he kept at all times before his eyes"] (III.332), in the place of any more Christian meditative image. In spite of what is essentially, arguably, a suicide, Galehaut is still praised after his death, as "plus preudom" ["the worthiest man"] about whom "Mais

les grans almoines qu'il fist ne seroient pas legierement acontees" ["It would not be easy to recount all his deeds of charity"] (I.389; III.332). He is even rewarded after death with Lancelot being buried in the same tomb next to him (Lacy, *The Death of Arthur* 159). This highlights the ongoing conflict between the ostensibly religious message and the strong romantic one in this text.

One of the explicit goals of the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* appears to have been to "Christianize" it. However, "If the Christianization of Arthurian legend was encouraged by Church officials who, in the spirit of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* later in the century (1274), sought to harmonize the sacred and the secular worlds within totalizing systematic interpretations," Burns argues, "what the Vulgate charts more than synthesis is the ongoing struggle of an impossible task" (xvi).<sup>68</sup> Just as William Blake declared John Milton to be "of the Devil's party without knowing it," the author(s) of the *Prose Lancelot* make explicitly erotic and intensely emotional the very reasons for which Lancelot is not allowed to achieve the Grail. Read as a slashed narrative, Galehaut's love of Lancelot shows a queer rewriting of the Arthurian story that values character integrity, plays with inequality in otherwise equal relationships, and illustrates the biggest shame in the composition of the entire *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*: the authors' ultimately futile attempt to reconcile such an erotic story with an effective Christian interpretation.

### **"Now I Know Well Your Kisses"**

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<sup>68</sup> She continues: "Through its seemingly endless proliferation of chivalric adventures, its repeated narrative expansions and extensions, its elaborate genealogies of ancestors, origins, and putative authors, this wandering, disjointed narrative records a struggle without resolution, a struggle—characteristic of many literary and philosophical texts of the thirteenth century in France—to give a comprehensive account on an enormous scale, the very size of which might somehow tie competing and disparate elements together" (xvi).

Many scholars have commented on the homoerotic potential of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where key portions of the plot revolve around the exchange of kisses and the possibility, or perhaps the threat, of sexual contact between two men. David Boyd argues that *SGGK*'s goal is to defend against critiques of chivalry by blaming chivalry's decline on the external forces of "queer male behavior that derives from the deceits and wiles of women" (77). Susan Carter addresses the destabilization of heterosexual gender roles in *SGGK*, compares elements of Sir Gawain's "sexual trade with the monstrous" in *SGGK* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, and equates Ragnelle's desire for Gawain with both Bertilaks' and the Green Knight's desire for him (30-1). Richard Zeikowitz uses Gayle Rubin's theory in "The Traffic in Women" that kinship systems which involve the exchange of women as "a conduit of a relationship [between men] rather than a partner to it," to argue that *SGGK* offers an "odd dramatization" where "the exchange partners are Bertilak and the lady, and Gawain is the exchanged gift" (Zeikowitz 62). And Carolyn Dinshaw reads *SGGK* in the context of the other works of the same poet (*Cleanness*, *Pearl*, and *Patience*) as a narrative that "has thereby precluded the consummation of homosexual sex even as it produced the possibility" (222). However, she also reminds us, "When, then, Gawain kisses Bertilak we ought not allow the heterosexual ideology of the poem to render unintelligible to us the fulfillment of their exchange bargain, a fulfillment that is right before our eyes: two men kissing feelingly, solemnly, seriously" (223). Dinshaw is correct in seeing eroticism in their kiss, but where I diverge is that, by understanding the homoeroticism of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as slashed, we read the text against its Arthurian canon as a part of a fandom. As part of a larger canon, then, we see where a heterosexual Gawain has been rewritten as a queer version of the character

previously written by others. I argue, therefore, that Gawain has more in common with other Arthurian works than with the moral message of *Cleanness*. Dinshaw, I suspect, would not disagree with this, as she notes that we modern readers, like fanfiction authors, also read from the perspective of alternate Arthurianisms:

...we have a much clearer prospect; when we read the lips of Gawain and Bertilak we read that text from a new perspective and contribute to a more accurate history, one we need: a history of the production of heterosexuality in Western Christendom via the containment of the deviant, and the concomitant history of various strategies deployed to resist that containment. In this discussion of *SGGK*, such resistance is enacted in the practice of reading, in constantly queerying [sic] the text. When, after all, is a kiss ever just a kiss? (223)

Our reading matters, Dinshaw asserts, and so, too, does the slashing of this text in its own time—or rather, in its own intertextual, inter-fandom milieu, which is in some sense out of time<sup>69</sup> in its embeddedness in its fandom.

The homoeroticism in the romance in *SGGK* is magnified by the always-possible and the potential. Always potentially erotic double entendres aside,<sup>70</sup> desire is not merely

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<sup>69</sup> Also an important concept to Dinshaw, who, in studying amateur medievalism in *How Soon Is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* argues that amateurism “bears on their affections, their intimacy with their materials, their desires. These readings clarify that intimate longings—desires for authenticity, for origins, for meaning, for connection—motivate all turnings toward the past, however austere impersonal the studies eventually become, however much such longings might themselves protect against more threatening psychic dissolution. Amateur medievalist readings bring out of enact temporal multiplicities found in the medieval texts that are the foci of their affections: they make manifest that in the present we have not left the past entirely behind” (29). I would apply her claim more broadly not only to professional medievalists but to medieval writers themselves, as part of a larger argument about medievalism as always impacted by a desire for re-writing the past.

<sup>70</sup> The Green Knight’s challenge in Arthur’s court is laced with erotic imagery, if we wish to read it this way, of striking/stroking and nakedness, as the knight asks for one who “dar stifly strike a strok for an oþer...And I schal bide þe fyrst bur as bare as I sitte” [“dares stiffly strike one stroke for another...And I shall await the first stroke as bare as I stand”] (287, 294). When Gawain goes to strike the first axe-blow, the Green Knight



assumed to be in the author or reader (though it is there, too), but is legible in the text. Gawain's first kiss to his host is given with the declaration that "I wowche hit saf fynly, þa3 feler hit were" ["I wish that I had something better to deliver well to you"] (1391). Gawain's wish that he had something better to exchange is, because of its vague longing, already possibly homoerotic. He *could* be wishing for a deer carcass of his own to give Bertilak just as Bertilak has given him, as much as he *could* be wishing for the sexual relations that he nearly had with Bertilak's wife. He could be wishing he were merely a better kisser. The possibilities, while not limitless, are bound by an interchange of desires between men—Gawain's desire to give Bertilak what he desires, something "better."

When it comes down to the kisses exchanged between the two men, we must remember that medieval men in fiction kiss each other all the time, so our modern (Anglo-American even more so) lens might too easily suggest queerness when kissing is in fact heteronormative for the culture. For example, Arthur kisses Gawain upon his return from his quest: "þe kyng kyssez þe knyzt" ["the king kisses the knight"] (2492). This kiss is, however, one half-line, free from all other descriptions as to *how* he kisses him, and therefore easily skipped over. When it comes to Gawain honoring his exchange with Bertilak, however, we are treated to much more descriptive passages where Gawain's body language seems to be indicating an entirely different kind of kiss. Gawain "haspez his fayre hals his armez wythinne, / And kyssez hym as comlyly as he coupe awyse" ["clasps his fair neck within his arms, and kisses him as courteously as he surely knew how"] (1388-9). Zeikowitz notes a parallel here in how the Lady kisses Gawain being intentionally replicated (62). We are not only imagining a Gawain who throws his entire arms around

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kneels and "Let þe naked nec to þe note schewe" ["Allowed his naked neck to show"] (420), and although an axe is not particularly phallic, Gawain pauses and "his ax he strokes" (416).

the knight's neck to exchange the kiss, in the exact same manner that Lady Bertilak kissed him earlier, but there is also a "queer" mistake in the manuscript. This is corrected in modern editions, where "he" in line 1389 actually appears in the manuscript as "ho" ["she"]. While I agree that it is most likely a scribal error, it does allow alternative readings which still make sense. At most, this allows reading a gender-fluid Gawain, like in the *Prose Lancelot* where Gawain expresses a desire to be a woman in order to be loved by a man. Another explanation for the "error" suggests a more direct reference back to Lady Bertilak as the "she," rendering a translation more along the lines of "he kisses him as courteously as she [the lady] knew how [to kiss Gawain]," bringing the lady and her kissing skills (and Gawain's potential desire that his kisses were more like hers?) into the comparison. Read this way, the kiss between knight and lady, and the kiss between knight and knight, are rendered with similar erotic charge. Sure, Gawain hardly puts on a negligée and asks Bertilak to disrobe and lay in a bed for the kiss, but if equal exchange is the aim of the exercise, it is reasonable to assume that the kisses carry similarly erotic weight, completely unlike the kisses we might expect two medieval knights to exchange otherwise.

Gawain is not the only one who expresses some longing for the other man. Zeikowitz recognizes that Bertilak's "desire and that of his wife compete with each other; they are both directed towards the same object" (63). We are treated to Bertilak's longing for Gawain when he eagerly returns from hunting the second day:

Til he seȝ Sir Gawayne  
 In halle hym poȝt ful longe;  
 He calde, and he com gayn  
 His feeȝ þer for to fonge.

[It seems a long time to him until he saw Sir Gawain in the hall; he called, and Gawain came again to take what he is given] (1619-22).

Here we are presented an image of the two knights looking for each other, longing for each other, one calling out for the other, and when they see each other from opposite ends of the hall they run to each other's arms. The language of the first kiss returns, with Gawain grabbing Bertilak by the neck: "He hent þe haþel aboute þe halse, and hendely hym kysses, / And eftersones of þe same he serued hym þere" [He took the knight around the neck, and courteously kissed him, and then served him there again the same"] (1639-40). The two kisses this time prompt the knight to reply "'Bi saynt Gile, / 3e ar þe best þat I knowe!'" [By Saint Giles, you are the best that I know!"] (1644-5). Best at *what*, we might ask, with another potentially erotic answer: the best kisser? On the third night, when Gawain kisses the host for the third time, he kisses him "As sauerly and sadly as he hem sette coupe" ["As sweetly and soberly as he could do"] (1936). This time, the host considers *his* hunt—the pelt of one particularly tricky fox—to be "'ful pore for to pay for suche prys þinges / As 3e haf þryzt me here þro, suche þre cosses / so gode'" ["quite poor repayment for such prize things as you have pressed to me, three such good kisses"] (1945-7). We have come full circle with the host desiring something "better" to give his guest. Describing the kisses as "prized" and "good" seems to embarrass Gawain, whose "'Ino3'" ["Enough"] cuts off the knight's praise. The knights are ashamed by their lack, and in some sense, ashamed by their desire for more.

As in the *Prose Lancelot*, the Gawain-poet transforms ostensibly equal relationships into unequal ones, which I understand in terms of fans' interest in sexual positions. Sir Gawain, Sir Bertilak, and Lady Bertilak are all members of the same social

class, but in the text they are not always positioned as equals. Lady Bertilak's status and power are not measurably reduced by her being a woman (Turner 57), but *Gawain* "acts like a woman," Dinshaw argues, especially since "in the bedroom Gawain is the hunted, the object of the feminine gaze" (211). Joseph Turner agrees that Lady Bertilak's "ultimate success derives from her careful manipulation of romance gender roles" (62). It would be easy to assume in slash fanfiction, as some scholars do, that women or queer authors writing about heterosexual men in homoerotic situations are written as feminized men, that "what authors are describing is female" (Bacon-Smith 245). Sheenagh Pugh's closer look explains, however, that feminizing the characters is actually "deeply deplored, both because fanfic readers feel it to be untrue to the characters and, I think, for political reasons" (110). Slash fans may still use a variety of tactics to unsettle ostensibly equal partners to "envision an unequal [relationship] without revealing [their] personal need to feel dominant or submissive in a relationship" (Bacon-Smith 246). Instead, fans determine or debate who is the "Top" and who is the "Bottom" in their slash pair of choice, settling or obscuring this issue of (possible) feminization and (fantasy) hyper-masculinization of characters. These preferences of sexual position, whether or not the actual sex occurs, will even influence the personality and physical traits of the Top-coded and Bottom-coded characters, which may be one way to read how the characters deviate from their "canon."

In this case, Bertilak de Hautdesert is described in hyper-masculine idealized physical terms in both his form as Bertilak and as the Green Knight, as what slash fans may call the "Top." The Green Knight's form is described as

Fro þe swyre to þe swange so sware and so þik,

And his lyndes and his lymes so longe and so grete,

Half etayn in erde I hope þat he were,

Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene

[From the neck to the waist he was so large and so thick, and his loins and limbs so long and great, half-giant on earth I would say he were, but at least I would say him to be the largest of men]. (138-41)

While the Green Knight sports “A much berd as a busk ouer his brest henges” [“A beard large as a bush that hangs over his breast”] (182), he derides the entire Arthurian court (including Gawain) as “berdlez chylder” [“beardless boys”] (280). In slash fandom, fans usually determine that the Top is the “taller, or older,” which is one way of reading the height and prominent beard of the Green Knight that by comparison feminizes the other characters (“Sex Position”). Presenting him as intensely, physically masculine also inflects his character as “assertive but caring.” In combining the bed test and the beheading game, and in combining the physical masculinity of the Green Knight with the dominant but generous character of Bertilak, the *Gawain*-poet re-presents a stock character as a fan might, as ripe for pairing with another, weaker character.

Meanwhile, of course, Gawain’s weakness is emphasized: Gawain declares himself to be “þe wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest,” [“the weakest, I know, and of wit feeblest”] of Arthur’s knights, and claims to be only praiseworthy by his association with Arthur (354-7). When Gawain meets him as Bertilak, they “Ayþer oþer in armez con felde” [“took each other in their arms”] (841), and the lord of the castle is described in a blazon that emphasizes his broadness, strength, his enviable facial hair, and other manly attributes (843-9), while the inhabitants of the castle look on Gawain as “lufly” and comely (868-70). Indeed, it seems that the entire Hautdesert court is interested in Gawain—including

the men: “alle þe men in þat mote maden much joye / To apere in his presense prestly þat tyme” [“all the men in that place made much joy to appear in his presence quickly at that time”] (910-1), and furthermore,

Vch segge ful softly sayde to his fere:

“Now schal we semlych se sleȝtez of þewez

And þe teccheles termes of talkyng noble, [...]

I hope þat may hym here

Schal lerne of luf-talkyng.”

[Each man whispered to his fellows, “Now shall we see seemly displays of manners and hear noble talking... I hope that we may learn from he who is here about the language of love.”] (916-27)

Because the men are interested in learning Gawain’s purported skill in “love-talking,” Gawain is associated with women, in whose company he spends much of the narrative, since he stays at the castle while the men go out and hunt. This Bottom-coding of Gawain juxtaposes with the hyper-masculinization of Bertilak/the Green Knight, and, I argue, more accurate than “feminization,” because feminization more obviously heterosexualizes the relationship.

Furthermore, in both personas, Bertilak and the Green Knight, the knight calls Gawain “Sweet,” as a term of endearment, diminutive but not necessarily feminine. The first use of the nickname is when Bertilak initiates the exchange game: “Swete, swap we so, sware with trawþe, / Queþer, leude, so lymþ, lere oþer better” [“Sweet one, let us swap, swear to it, whatever gain or loss the other has”] (1108-9), and again when the Green Knight greets him in the Green Chapel: “Now, sir swete, / Of steuen mon may þe trowe”

[“Now, Sweet sir,<sup>71</sup> you have kept to your word”] (2237-8). The repetition might read as a hint to his true identity, or from an established relationship perspective, it becomes the knight’s nickname for Gawain. In this light we might read Gawain’s dream about the Green Knight on the third night of his stay at Bertilak’s court as one of interest that is not only martial but also erotic (1750). When the Green Knight kneels for Gawain, “graythely hym dresses/ A little lut with the hed, the lere he discoverez, / His longe lovelych lokkez he layd over his croun, / Let the naked nec to the note schewe” [“readily assumes the position, bows his head, uncovers the flesh, and his long lovely locks he laid over his head to show his naked neck”] (417-20), he does so performatively, for the entire Arthurian court, demonstrating and living up to his bravery. Gawain practices the same movement, but privately, intimately, with the Green Knight. He not only flinches at the first blow (2265), but is forced to endure three axe-strokes (all of which the Green Knight stops short of giving him). He therefore has an entire conversation on his knees, remaining there for over one hundred lines (2255-2316). The context in which the two men kneel (performatively, briefly, showing bravery vs. privately, flinchingly, for an extended time, while a weapon is thrust repeatedly at him) for each other further codes the men as either dominant and in control or submissive and not at all in control. Top- or Bottom-coding can be a useful way of reading Bertilak and Gawain, because though Gawain’s masculinity is called somewhat into question, his maleness is not. He is still, after all, interested in and interesting to the women of Bertilak’s court, including the Lady of the house.

Gawain and Bertilak both clearly still exhibit textually evident interest in women; in fact, the erotic potential in the story only works with a Gawain who is capable of sexual

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<sup>71</sup> Nothing prevents a translation here as “Sir Sweet.”

desire for both men and women—as he appears to be represented as bisexual in the *Prose Lancelot*. Gawain only kisses his host because he first allows and desires the lady of the house to kiss him. “The fact that Gawain is passing on to Bertilak the essence of the kisses he received from the lady,” Zeikowitz claims, “renders these kisses *both* heterosexually and homoerotically charged” (64). Further “Bottom”-coding Gawain, the young knight remains the passive partner in his dealings with both Bertilak and Bertilak’s wife, as Lady Bertilak steals into his bedroom and aggressively pursues a sexual relationship with him. Gawain, though “schamed” when he realizes she has snuck into his room on the first morning (1189), seems to otherwise enjoy the lady’s temptation. When she offers, plainly, ““Ȝe ar welcum to my cors,”” [“You are welcome to my body”] (1237), Gawain’s response is to deem himself fortunate for the offer, even though he says no (1241). The lady shows genuine interest in Gawain, too, as we learn that “þe lady for luf let not to slepe,” even if she is also still thinking of the trap for Gawain: “Ne þe purpose to payre þat pyȝt in hir hert” [“the lady because of love could not sleep, nor part with the purpose that stuck in her heart”] (1733-4). Although the implication is always there—the wager demanding that the extent of Gawain’s relationship with Lady Bertilak be exchanged with Sir Bertilak as well—we only learn at the end of the story that the host knew each night what he was getting himself into, and what would happen if Gawain failed the moral test but kept his word in the game of exchange. “I wroȝt hit myseluen / I sende hir to asay þe,” [“I wrought it myself. I sent her to test you”] Bertilak admits (2361-2). All his eagerness is, then, as much a test of Gawain as an *interest* in Gawain. He even declares a sort of voyeuristic involvement in his wife’s wooing of Gawain, declaring “I wot wel for soþe. / Now know I wel þy cosses, and þy costes als,” [“I know well the truth. Now I know well



your kisses and your actions also”], as his wife presumably shared every detail with him (2359-61). Rather than angered at all by the kisses, the Green Knight’s entire speech is delivered “muryly” [“merrily”] as he gleefully reveals the punchline of the joke to Gawain (2336). He explains with relish how his wife reported back to him on all that she and Gawain did together, but of course he knows Gawain’s kisses just as personally as his wife does.

Gawain, certainly, experiences shame for his deeds and mis-deeds throughout the narrative, but the calculated introduction of alcohol at key moments in the exchange game adds a further veneer of shame to the men’s actions, which seems to have escaped scholarly attention—because, admittedly, wine is not at all an unusual beverage for the knightly class to enjoy.<sup>72</sup> Wine is mentioned twice in Arthur’s court and five times in Bertilak’s, reflecting that more of the narrative is spent with Bertilak. What is significant is that the story consistently and intentionally mentions the consumption of wine as part of the host’s process of getting Gawain alone and exacting a promise of exchange out of him for the next day—*each night*. Medieval drinking culture was different from our own, but still shares some aspects. Robert Fossier indicates that excessive drinking (or drug use) could result in “dishonorable conduct,” a sentiment we still hold today (23). And although studying late antiquity, Lisa Bailey highlights clerical concern with the “effeminizing consequences of excess” in Caesarius of Arles’ sermons (24). Excessive drink, it was believed, not only made men more susceptible to lust (i.e., like women, 33), but the excess

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<sup>72</sup> According to Fossier, “the wine of the Middle Ages was not the wine we know. Its alcohol content, thanks to still rudimentary wine-making processes, was at best from 7 to 10 percent. Kept (but not more than one year, after which it would turn) in barrels made of resinous wood, it must have recalled the ancient wine of the amphoras, with a spicy and somewhat bitter flavor. On the other hand, and this is an essential point, the volume of wine that was consumed was enormous. From one to three liters per day per person, women and monks included. This was a prodigious amount of wine to absorb, but its effect was lessened by its modest alcohol content” (52).

itself was challenging to stable notions of masculinity because it robbed a man of his ability to reason. According to A. Lynn Martin's study on alcohol, sex, and gender, drunken behavior is learned socially, so her study of 1300-1700 French, English, and Italian cultural norms reveals that "the association of consumption of alcohol and sexual activity has remained constant in Western culture" from the Middle Ages to today (9). Women, especially, who drank too much, "gained a reputation for unbridled sexuality" (38), but men were warned, as well, that "drink led to sex" and "alcohol was the dangerous agent that could challenge virtue" (57). The text of *SGGK* provides its own theory of alcohol consumption when we are told "men ben mery in mynde quen þay han mayn drynk" ["men are merry in mind when they drink"] (497). The narrator later defines the effects of alcohol as mimicking the effects of great joy *and* great foolishness, describing the knights at dinner, "so glad were þay boþe / Bot if þe douthe had doted, oþer dronken ben oþer" ["they were both as glad as though they had either become dolts, or else were drunk"] (1956-7). The host, whose ulterior motives are of course to disgrace Gawain with the exchange game, requires Gawain to be in a vulnerable state (alone and tipsy) so that he may successfully be taken advantage of. In the context of such a drinking culture, where wine consumption is normalized but crossing the line into *too much* consumption could be hazardous to one's sexual purity, I read these scenes of alcohol consumption as deliberately "flirting" with that line. In terms of slash, the alcohol not only ascribes more power and control of the situation to Bertilak, but also functions to reduce Gawain's responsibility for the situation, helping him, after all this, to maintain a veneer of canonical heterosexuality in this very queer encounter.

Wine is mentioned twice upon Gawain's arrival to the castle, and each time implied

to be in just enough excess as to create pleasure and enjoyment, “Þat mon much merþe con make, / For wyn in his hed þat wende” [“That man made much mirth because the wine went to his head”] (899-900). In particular it sets the mood of the late night festivities: “Forþy wonderly þay woke, and þe wyn dronken, / Daunsed ful dreȝly wyth dere carolez” [“They stayed up late and drank wine and danced continuously to the sweet carols”] (1025-6). The reduction of inhibitions then directly leads to Bertilak and Gawain alone, as “þe godmon hym lachchez, / Ledes hym to his awen chambre, þe chymné bysyde, / And þere he draȝez hym on dryȝe,” [“The good host latches onto him, and leads him to his own chamber near the fireplace, and there he draws him aside”] (1029-31). In *this* context, full of wine and drawn aside privately, Gawain first tells his host of his errand and the knight encourages him to stay until the morning of his trial. Gawain, who at this time declares himself “wyȝe at your wyllle to worch youre hest, / As I am halden þerto, in hyȝe and in loȝe,” [“pledged to your will, to do your bidding, as I am held thereto, in big and small matters”] (1039-40), agrees to sojourn here “ful glad” [“happily”] (1079). As though Gawain’s joyful acquiescence is “asking for it,” the host then presses further, inviting Gawain to enter into the game of exchange: ““Quat-so-euer I wynne in þe wod hit worþez to youreȝ, / And quat chek so ȝe acheue change me þerforne”” [““Whatsoever I win in the wood is yours, and what you achieve you will exchange with me””] (1106-7). They go back to the festivities at this point, where still more wine is consumed, as the host asks Gawain to seal the agreement with a drink (1112), and the narrator also tells us they drank and dallied together (1114). Though there are, by this point, women present again, too, the use of “dally” (“daylyeden”) takes on, if not quite its explicit meaning, something that hints perhaps at (drunken) flirting.

This scenario repeats on the second night, where Gawain and the host are isolated from the rest of the court (1402), wine is brought (1403), and their promise of exchange renewed (1405) within just a few lines of each other, so we really can ascribe causation between the privacy, the wine, and the promise: Bertilak's intention seems calculated. On the third night, again the host draws Gawain aside: "To chambre he con hym calle, / And to þe chemné þay past" ["To his chamber he called him, and to the chimney corner they passed"] (1666-7), and again plies him with wine (1668) before Gawain agrees to the exchange again (1669). Only once, and only after they pledge to each other in private, do Gawain and Bertilak make their exchange game public (1408), so we read a deliberate break from John Grigsby's noted pattern of drinking and public vows,<sup>73</sup> a break that mingles shame (in secrecy) and pleasure (in the game). The repeating pattern also demands the question to what extent all parties involved are allowing or inviting this to happen. On the third night, knowing what challenges await him in the morning, Gawain puts forth a token protest, and "craued leue to kayre on þe morn" ["craved leave to ride out in the morning"] (1670). However, the host does not take no for an answer and brings out still *more* wine as part of his insistence (1684). The host's insistence is potentially predatory here, even before we know that he is in on the test with his wife, since he instructs Gawain to "lye in þy loft and lach þyn ese" ["lie in your bed and take your ease"] (1676), unsettling for those who know that this sets Gawain up so Bertilak's wife has the best opportunity to seduce him. It is with full knowledge of the imminent seduction of his guest that the host reminds Gawain of the significance of their third exchange: "Now "þrid tyme þrowe best"

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<sup>73</sup> John L. Grigsby's study of cultural drinking and boasting in the Middle Ages firmly states that "a drink might seal a vow" (1), but the motif he explores (the "gab") has a more rigid structure including elements such as "drinking, perhaps a banquet setting, the presence of adversaries, a journey to a foreign land, and the risks of bragging in unsure territory" (4) that don't appear as parts of these scenes in *SGGK*.

penk on þe morne” [“Think in the morning how ‘best throw the third time’”], or, “third time’s the charm” (1680). We even get at least one early indication at this point that Bertilak is planning something, as the narrator juxtaposes Gawain sleeping soundly with “Þe lorde þat his crafterz kepes, / Ful erly he watz diȝt” [“The lord that keeps close his crafty thoughts was dressed early”] (1688-9). Knowing what the host is expecting—or hoping for—definitely eroticizes this interaction further than merely wanting to test a member of the Arthurian court.

Wine continues to be worthy of comment at their meeting the next day, when Gawain declares “I schal fylle vpon fyrst oure forwardez nouþe, / Þat we spedly han spoken, þer spared watz no drynk” [“I shall first fulfill our agreement that we spoke of before, when the drink was not spared”] (1934-5) before kissing the knight three times. Hardly accusatory, Gawain uses the wine drinking as, perhaps, a time marker, but its mention, and in notably large quantities (which, for a medieval drinker, would have to have been truly prodigious), suggests that neither of them need be blamed fully for the game that ends in kisses. Fossier argues that because of the social prevalence of wine, drunkenness could be “attributed to weakness of character and [was] deplored with a smile,” rather than viewed as an illness needing treatment, as we might today (23). Massimo Montanari agrees that drunkenness was a crime that should be admonished gently, with differentiation between occasional and chronic drunkenness (148); he points out in a note that Thomas Aquinas even claimed “drunkenness is an extenuating circumstance compared with the sins it provokes ‘because of the ignorance that accompanies it’” (Montanari 181). Bertilak’s insistence on giving Gawain a notably large amount of alcohol need not be sinister (though it could be, at least as sinister as the entire test of his moral and sexual purity is), but it also

provides a kind of “no homo” escape clause. The wine which lowers both the knights’ inhibitions enough to engage in a potentially homoerotic game is the same wine that is semantically coded as both pleasurable and rendering them fools (i.e., is shameful). This “excuse” is precisely what makes “queer” a less satisfying description of the relationship than fanfiction’s “slash,” not only because it normalizes situations of dubious consent which I would rather ascribe as titillating in slash fiction than a part of queer reality, but also because it indicates authorial concern for characters existing intertextually alongside all other versions of the character, both straight and not.

Gawain’s antifeminist rant—a fifteen-line tirade against “wyles of wymmen” [“womanly wiles”], which problematizes Gawain as a model knight in this text (2415)—is uncharacteristically uncourteous at the least, and at most something readers who understand Sir Gawain as an intertextual character would not expect from a knight so often in the service of ladies. I argue that the problem of Gawain’s character integrity is answered by understanding this as a reaction to shame. Colleen Donnelly claims Gawain’s rant against women is “to deal with his wounded pride,” and thus Gawain’s complaint “says far more about his own character than that of women” (286). Certainly true, but *what* does it say about his character? Gawain stands “So agreued for greme he gryed withinne; / Alle þe blode of his brest blende in his face, / Ðat al he schrank for schome þat þe schalk talked” [“so aggrieved and hurt that he shuddered within; all the blood of his breast rushed to his face so that he shrank for shame at that which the man said”] (2370-3). It is *shame* that Gawain burns with, not pride, or hatred of women, and this reading enriches our knowledge of Gawain as a trans-textual slashed character. He shrinks and shudders from the feeling of shame, because, as Ahmed theorizes, “in shame, one desires cover precisely because

one has already been exposed to others” (104). In refusing to return to the castle and see Lady Bertilak (or even Sir Bertilak) ever again, Gawain is shrinking from further exposure even as he shrank from the axe-blow (which also brought him shame). It is this same impulse that makes him want to hide his transgressions by shifting the blame for his misstep onto Lady Bertilak, and women more broadly. What scholars often fail to add to a discussion of his denouncement of women is that he *also* denounces Bertilak himself—asking for the chance to regain his trust but saying “efte I schal be ware” [“next time I will beware (of you)”] (2388)—and the belt—throwing the now hated object on the ground and saying “þer þe falssyng, foule mot hit falle!” [“There is that false thing, may foulness befall it!”] (2378). Rather than a character-shattering or even character-defining moment, viewing this diatribe as a reaction to his shamed state keeps Gawain more in line with his trans-textual characterization. And of course, in the end, Gawain keeps the belt, not for its magical properties but as a reminder of his failure. As the Green Knight tells him, “hit is grene as my goun, / Sir Gawayn, 3e maye þenk vpon þis ilke þrepe” [“since it is green as my gown, Sir Gawain, so you may remember this meeting”] (2396-7). Gifted in some sense like a love-token from a lady, in the Green Knight’s colors and kept as a remembrance (of the Green Knight/Bertilak, and so, too, of Lady Bertilak), Gawain reclaims the girdle as a badge of shame. In this way, both men’s intentions for the belt, love and shame, are interlaced within it.

Rather than reading the *SGGK*-Gawain and his antifeminist rant as an “outlier” against other Gawains, we can read this incident as a slashed Gawain, whose shame is made even more acute by the potential eroticism that existed between himself and both Bertilaks. “If we feel shame,” Ahmed writes, “we feel shame because we have failed to

approximate ‘an ideal’ that has been given to us through the practices of love. What is exposed in shame is the failure of love, as a failure that in turn exposes or shows our love” (106). Gawain, Ahmed might argue, feels shame most acutely because he fails to live up to the expectations of the knight (and lady) he loves. Indeed, at his most queer we can understand Gawain taking pleasure in the attentions of both Bertilak and Lady Bertilak, only to have their desire for him turn out to be part of a test of the Arthurian court that had little to do with *him*. If we agree with Ahmed, Gawain’s shame at his failure to uphold a chivalric “ideal” in front of Bertilak in some sense indicates his love for him, and if that shame registers as an attempt to deny responsibility for his actions, as antifeminist, or even as anger, is the Gawain in this textual moment really so un-Gawain-like? Few, if any, Gawains are known for their restraint when they feel slighted, after all.

The eroticized elements in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are certainly queer, and have been understood so by many scholars. I argue, however, that reading this queerness *as a rewriting practice*, as slash, with its own tropes, goals and constraints, reminds us that the poet *knows* they are writing a new, queer contribution to an old and beloved story. Gawain’s homoerotic encounters, his kisses and even martial interactions with Bertilak and the Green Knight, are full of feeling but nevertheless show authorial concern for maintaining the character’s canonical traits: his masculinity to some extent, his interest in women, and sexual freedom once this story concludes. The excess of wine, associated with sexual transgression in immoderation, provides just one possible “excuse.” While the test with the girdle has been recognized as juxtaposing shame with honor, the belt is picked up as a literal “slash” worn by the entire Arthurian court. In the kiss exchange, however, shame is more clearly in tension with erotic desire, where the desire for better



and more, as a recognition of lack, is itself a source of shame.

### **Conclusion: A Slashed Space**

This shameful desire for *better* and for *more* is the shame of the fanfiction author. It acknowledges the source text's inadequacies as well as the author's own, while at the same time necessarily admitting to the pleasure the fanfiction author locates in these fictional worlds. Slash fanfiction authors experience queer pleasure, described by Sara Ahmed as "the enjoyment of the negativity of shame" in queerly rewriting. Slash's various tropes—appeal to non-normative pleasures, maintaining character integrity despite deliberate queering, playing with relationship inequality in ways other than (further) subordinating women, and reveling in the tension between shame and pleasure—all signal the slash author's recognition of their source text as much as they privilege their own reinterpretation of the canon. Queerly rewriting a fictional text is acknowledging that enjoyment of these pleasures is counter-culture, even anti-didactic. Like fanfiction's marginalized production and comparatively minimal reach, there may be something to conclude about these texts' minimal survivability and influence. The innovatively queer and critical *SGGK* survives in only one copy and had no measurable influence on the broader Arthurian cycle: meanwhile, the *Prose Lancelot's* survival through Malory and other authors featured a reduction of Galehaut, who was perhaps too problematically queer. These texts may therefore be somewhat atypical of medieval romance writings, though, as I explore in Chapter 3, medieval romance authors could still safely flirt with the boundary between homosocial and homoerotic under culturally permissive circumstances. I argue that we must understand the slash rewriting practices that yielded the *Prose Lancelot* and

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as creating texts which are hardly secular or anti-Christian but which simply operate under different rules than their dominant cultures, and whose authors attempt to “‘impress’ differently upon the surfaces of social space” (Ahmed 165). And while that social space may “just” be the Arthurian multiverse, it still seems to be a limitless space.

### Chapter 3. Masculine Erotics:

#### Violence, Vulnerability, and “Hurt/Comfort” Fanfiction in the *Stanzaic Guy of*

#### *Warwick and the Alliterative Morte Arthure*

*Stanzaic Guy of Warwick* by StanzAnon

Fandom: Guy of Warwick (Legend), *Gui de Warewic*

Rated: Teen

No Warnings Apply

Relationships: Guy & Tirry, Guy/Tirry, Guy & Herhaud, Guy/Felice

Tagged: Hurt/Comfort, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Crusades, Christianity, Friends to Lovers, Saracens, Vikings, Monsters, Oh my!

*Alliterative Morte Arthure* by Anon

Fandom: Arthurian Mythology & Related Fandoms

Rated: Mature

Warning for Graphic Depictions of Violence

Relationships: Gawain & Priamus, Gawain & Mordred, Arthur/Guinevere,

Guinevere/Mordred

Tagged: Battles & Warfare, Everyone Dies, Hurt/Comfort, All Hurt No Comfort, Incest, Rape/Non-Con, Dub-Con, Monsters, Grimdark, No Avalon We Die Like Men

In medieval romances, violence plays a major role in defining masculinity.<sup>74</sup> The *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick* and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (AMA) are two popular Middle English romances in which violence and its resultant effects are particularly crucial to the narrative. Both are derivative texts from established canons of widespread material that enjoyed prominent afterlives: the c. 1330 *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick*'s source is the Anglo-Norman *Gui de Warewic* while the later fourteenth-century AMA is part of a long Arthurian tradition traceable to Geoffrey of Monmouth. I read these romances in conversation with the fanfiction genre “hurt/comfort,” where the physical pain or emotional distress of one character is comforted by another, and pain becomes a narrative tool for literary men to

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<sup>74</sup> For an illustrative rather than exhaustive overview of this idea: see my discussion below as well as the work of David Burnley, Robert Mills, Ruth Mazo Karras, Derek G. Neal, Dawn Hadley, and Anne Baden-Daintree.

express emotions and develop relationships that may otherwise not be appropriate (i.e., shameful) for manly men. My reading of violent medieval romances as containing elements of “hurt/comfort”—*requiring* excessive violence, pain, injury, and recovery to allow men to be intimate with each other while still maintaining their masculinity and heterosexuality—eroticizes the shame against which martial masculinity is positioned in these texts, and thereby unsettles how we understand male homosociality within medieval heteronormativity. I consider whether hurt/comfort fanfiction is a kind of secularization of the culturally pervasive narrative of the passion of Christ, and ultimately frame this as the heteronormative element against which we understand secular hurt/comfort narratives. Furthermore, the visceral bodily reactions readers (and writers) can have to hurt/comfort fanfictions, as noted by fandom scholars, prove a productive intervention to understanding how medieval readers and writers may have experienced the emotional and even somatic impact of hurt and comfort in these romances (and perhaps others) because of the reduced aesthetic distance to the art they produce and consume.

In this chapter I examine how violence, pain, and recovery impact masculine relationships in the *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick* and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. The *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick* translates and retells only about one-third of the sweeping epic that is the Anglo-Norman version, focusing on the last half of Guy’s life, where he is at first happily married, but is remorseful for his past violent deeds, and leaves his wife to go on pilgrimage to atone for said violent deeds. Because he is in a romance, however, he keeps getting embroiled in the problems of other men and committing more violent deeds to solve them. After defeating several semi-monstrous enemies along his pilgrimage route, Guy returns to England and lives his life out in a hermitage and dies. The future daring

deeds of his son are hinted at in the narrative but covered in a separate text. The surviving copy of the *Stanzaic Guy* exists in the 14<sup>th</sup> century Auchinleck Manuscript (NLS Adv. MS 19.2. 1), but the legend of Guy of Warwick is one of England's most successful medieval romances, enjoying retellings well into the eighteenth century. I compare this to another Middle English poem, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, which appears in the Thornton Manuscript (Lincoln Cathedral Library MS. 91), and is part of an even larger canon of Arthurian legend. It has been called one of the best and most important Middle English Arthurian romances, second in formal execution only to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* among late medieval alliterative poetry (Benson and Foster 1). It covers the military exploits that lead up to the death of King Arthur: in this poem, King Arthur ransacks his way through Europe on the way to defeat the Emperor of Rome and was about to get away with it, too, if it weren't for that meddling Mordred, who usurps his crown, forcing Arthur to return and fight him, whereupon they kill each other.

Both of these poems are retellings of "popular" medieval romances, one inroad to allowing me to talk about them as fanfictions and therefore engaging in fanfiction tropes. When introducing the tale, the *AMA* poet indicates recognition of the vast corpus of work he draws from, asking

Ye that lust has to lithe or loves for to here  
 Of elders of olde time and of their awke deedes [...]  
 Herkenes me hendely and holdes you stille,  
 And I shall tell you a tale that trew is and noble  
 Of the real renkes of the Round Table (12-17).

Immediately invoking audience desire, the poet asks only for those who "lust" or "love" to

“herkenes” to his story, a story which is also “trew” and assumes preknowledge of the Arthurian world since the tale begins midway through Arthur’s reign. The *Stanzaic Guy* poet does the same thing, beginning “God graunt hem heven-blis to mede / That herken to mi romaunce rede” before giving a quick overview of Guy’s exploits, including extensive travel, feats of arms, and killing a dragon, all in just a few lines (1-2). While this functions as something of a “last time on” that we might see in a serial television program, several references throughout the poem (how he and Felice met, the future exploits of Guy’s son), require knowledge of the story outside the immediate text, or even that there is a story outside this text. The introduction to the *AMA* even more so demands audience foreknowledge of and desire for their contribution to the Arthurian tale. The poet, in this way, makes the same assumptions a fanfiction author does: insofar as fanfictions are archived by source text or fandom, allowing readers to search for fanfictions of texts, characters, relationships, and tropes that they want to read, a fanfiction author will share their stories assuming audience awareness of and interest in their source text (and therefore openness to their fanfiction). This allows the fanfiction author, just as the *AMA* poet and the poet of the *Stanzaic Guy*, to begin *in media res* with characters and situations we—author and audience—all already care about (are “fans of”). Though not limited to romance genre, this expected knowledge immediately reduces the aesthetic (or even affective) distance between the reader and author, and reader and text.

I place these two texts in conversation with each other and this genre of fanfiction for their similarities as much as their key differences: both of these texts are part of longer, larger traditions, their retellings emphasizing, like a fanfiction, what a particular author is most interested in. Though both are from popular traditions, the *Stanzaic Guy* was a popular

romance whose multiple versions from the later Middle Ages are reiterated well into the Early Modern era, while the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* is a comparatively obscure contribution to the (otherwise popularly retold) Arthurian legend. Guy's pilgrimage is a romance of a personal, religious quest, while Arthur's romance is more epic and imperial (and no Grail in sight). Both texts are more martial and less concerned with heterosexual relationships than they are with homosocial bonds, compared with what we might think of as a "quintessential" Middle English romance which might feature quests and violence on a much smaller scale and where courtly love and female characters tend to figure more prominently. What I argue is that both texts can be read as containing elements of "hurt/comfort," or as engaging violence and pain in almost fetishistic ways to do two things: textually, to eroticize male/male relationships to the detriment of male/female relationships (but not quite to the extent of queering them), and metatextually, to engage the reader affectively through a shared experience of pain via tragedy and comfort via catharsis. Both narratives I explore here do this as a matter of course, with many character interactions establishing violence, pain, or comfort as the primary *appropriate* currency for masculine relationships as well as priming the reader to be sensitive to violence, pain, and injury.<sup>75</sup>

Because readers of hurt/comfort fanfiction are invited to observe and participate in feeling these tragedies, physical pains, and their relief viscerally, the relationships between fictional men involve the audience, as well. The relationships between former comrades-

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<sup>75</sup> The hurt/comfort tag in fanfiction can be employed to mark a story as depicting any number of story elements from violence, torture, emotional or physical pain, injury, death, grief, fainting, trauma, emotional or physical comfort, recovery, or healing. As a result, rather than consider each of these as separate affects, I consider them as functions of one genre of fanfiction, and so these otherwise different story elements are all subsumed under "hurt/comfort."

in-arms Guy and Tirry in *The Stanzaic Guy*, and the three very different relationships that Gawain has with Priamus (as antagonist-turned-comrade-in-arms), Mordred (as comrade-in-arms-turned-antagonist), and Arthur (as king and uncle) in the *AMA*, engage the reader in this “close” way. Tirry and Guy’s relationship is one of longed-for intimacy and mutual knowing through pain that draws the reader in, but it is something Guy must ultimately deny himself in his quest for personal atonement; Guy only finds ultimate comfort in his death and ascension directly to heaven, which necessitates separation from earthly relationships (but a perfected relationship with the Divine). In the *AMA*, Gawain first fights, wounds, and is wounded by Priamus before they share an extended healing scene in an almost classic “hurt/comfort” narrative. But it is Gawain’s death that inspires visceral language from the poet and from the characters alike, as first Mordred and then Arthur both become so emotionally compromised by their pain that they question their political roles and choices as a result of his death. “Hurt/comfort” is a genre of fanfiction that many fans are ashamed of enjoying precisely because it invites the reader to observe and participate in feeling these tragedies and their relief viscerally. Therefore, understanding these medieval romances through this fanfiction genre suggests that the *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick* and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* were not merely read but felt.

### **Hurt/Comfort and the Reduction of Aesthetic Distance**

“There is a connection between the over-representation of pain and its unrepresentability,” Sara Ahmed declares in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, situating pain as a socially complex affect that is both pervasive and under-examined (22). Though it crops up in other medieval texts and professional fiction all the time, suffering—from



pinning to physical pain—tends to be literally over-represented in fanfiction, appearing more often in fanfiction than in the canonical works that inspire them as many fans’ favorite way to explore their favorite characters. This is evidenced by the genre and tag called “hurt/comfort,” where a significant element or the entire point of a text may be to explore a beloved character’s suffering, sometimes to the point of fetishizing it. Jenny Alexander claims that “the fetishism of the vulnerable male body” has at least some degree of universality, and “the torture of the hero is not new”—and is not limited to the Middle Ages or to modern fanfiction:

We have only to think of the naked torso of Saint Sebastian pierced by arrows or the endless suffering of Prometheus, his liver ripped out night after night by the wrathful eagles of Zeus to be certain that the heroic figure bowed, bruised and bloodied has held a fascination for eras previous to our own. As Aristotle observed in tragedy, catharsis and the physically suffering hero’s body has provided a representational point for the collective experience of (displaced) suffering and endurance, from Beowulf to Buffy. (Alexander 131)

Alexander’s article explores a particular but not at all uncommon subset of fanfiction that combines and compounds various levels of fetishized masculine vulnerability in what she calls sadomasochistic fanfiction, or fanfiction that includes representations of BDSM, a category I address in Chapter 4. Ingrid Hotz-Davies observes that in “even a cursory sampling” of fanfiction, “undisguised power fantasies of triumphant glory are very rare,” and in fact,

many stories seem instead to live in a realm of perpetually heroic self-

sacrifice where subjects love eternally and without reward, where the pains of separation are ubiquitous, and where a chance word from a beloved appears to be all that may be hoped (and lived) for. This is true for any number of stories on FanFiction.Net, and [...] specific genres such as angst or hurt/comfort, which focus on a protagonist's anxieties and sense of imperfection or end up torturing a character whom we identify with in order to eventually make him better... (91)

Focus on suffering, particularly undeserved, is a trademark of fanfiction, and especially certain genres of fanfiction. While hurt/comfort and its related concepts are not uncommon elements of mainstream literature throughout the ages, hurt/comfort is central to fanfiction and therefore more thoroughly theorized for application elsewhere.

The history of hurt/comfort fanfiction reveals its role in enabling authors to explore male vulnerability and intimacy. Fanfiction archives are organized by searchable "Genres" or "Tags" to allow fans to narrow in on their specific interests, from their preferred relationship pairings to the length of the story. *Fanlore*, a wiki dedicated to recording both the history and current state of fan communities, describes hurt/comfort as "a fanfiction genre that involves the physical pain or emotional distress of one character, who is cared for by another character. The injury, sickness or other kind of hurt allows an exploration of the characters and their relationship" ("Hurt/Comfort"). From this point, however, scholars and fans alike have recognized the role that "hurt/comfort" can play in *establishing* a "slash" relationship: "Hurt in first time slash stories generally exists to make one the caretaker of the other (often isolating the two of them together), which breaks down both physical and mental boundaries between them, which leads to realizations about each other,

which leads to slash” (“Hurt/Comfort”). Many would go so far as to argue that “the intimacy of close body contact and comfort in H/C gen stories can be a substitute for sex” (“Hurt/Comfort”). In its role as wiki, *Fanlore* gives all sides of the argument without analysis or concrete answer, but the scholarship on hurt/comfort, and why it exists, and whether it can be problematic or resistant, does not exactly agree, either.

Much of the scholarship on hurt/comfort will agree that, by and large, the purpose of hurt/comfort is to orchestrate events such that hyper-masculine characters demonstrate vulnerability, often in the presence of or directly to equally hyper-masculine characters, placing them in the role of caregivers. Beyond pointing out the fan interest in “appropriate” male vulnerability, scholars diverge, often to avoid totalizing generalizations about the genre or the authors who write it. Camille Bacon-Smith’s early attempts to define the genre, from a position as a researcher finding “hurt-comfort the most difficult form to study” and claiming that the “community seemed to support my negative judgments about the genre,” fall into this trap (255). Her work has since been criticized both for her “overly privileged positioning” of hurt/comfort resulting from her ethnographic approach (Hellekson and Busse 19) and her simultaneously “narrow view of it, understandable when one considers the date of her work and the small range of material she had to analyze” (Fathallah 3.2). However, she began the scholarly conversation, and argued rather astutely about the ways that the predominantly female authorship of fanfiction shaped the genre, especially in regard to the relationship between hurt/comfort and slash fanfiction:

Sex and pain are the two situations in which masculine culture allows physical and emotional intimacy between adults of the opposite sex. If sex is prohibited by the social constraints under which the writer works, either

because the participants are not of opposite sexes or because the writer feels constrained to limit sexual material of any kind in her work, she may substitute the only symbolic alternative to sexual intimacy available to her.

(Bacon-Smith 256)

Though certainly a product of its time in regards to the acceptability of same-sex relationships or sexually explicit material, Bacon-Smith's overarching premise about intimacy in many respects still holds true for masculinity decades later. As *hurt/comfort* shows, sexual contact is only one path, and may not be the ideal path, to male/male intimacy.

Perhaps in response, Green, Shoshanna, and Jenkins' study of the "Normal Female Interest in Men Bonking" collected fans' auto-ethnographic descriptions of their experiences with fanfiction, and their study reveals personal insights into why fans seem to collectively be so interested in male vulnerability—or whether the desire to read and write *hurt/comfort* might arise from another desire altogether. One of the authors, Cynthia Jenkins, in her role as fan, reflects on the relationship between *hurt/comfort* and slash (which she speaks of as related) as not an exploration of vulnerability but a *means* to explore vulnerability:

Hurt/comfort stories often contain enough gore to send shivers down the back of activists concerned with the conflation of sex and violence... How can anyone get off on seeing a character suffer from gunshot wounds or auto accidents?... It is as if the vulnerability of the physical body is being used to symbolically illustrate the vulnerability of the emotional makeup of men. The breakdown of the physical body leads to a breakdown of personal

barriers, of emotional defenses... (33)

What is emphasized here is that the tropes or formal structures within the genre are the method whereby intimacy and vulnerability are unlocked. When fans find the levels of intimacy between close male characters to be never quite close enough in the source text, they may inflict extreme physical vulnerability on beloved characters in order to intensify emotional vulnerability in the characters and result in intense, often erotic, intimacy between the two characters, through crying, touching, examining or tending wounds, bearing unconscious bodies, and expressing pain to another. Cynthia Jenkins' argument that "the hurt is not so much directly erotic as it is the means by which a sufficient degree of vulnerability and openness is achieved that an intimate relationship can develop" is not new, and it does not account for all of the fanfiction of its kind, but it is a good starting point (34). Elizabeth Woledge's term "intimatopia" defines this landscape of male/male intimacy in fanfiction—particularly slash, though she focuses a good deal of time on the prevalence of hurt/comfort within intimatopic slash. Reflecting on Mirna Cicione's argument that hurt/comfort represents fan interest in "the eroticisation of nurturance," Woledge argues that hurt and comfort are "used to enhance the eroticization of intimacy. Hurt/comfort provides a plausible way for any author to depict increasing closeness between two men, because when the hero is hurt, he is at his most vulnerable" (110). Hurt/comfort may be a component of slash only as a means to engender intimacy between male characters, but hurt/comfort and slash remain separate categories. Whether sexually explicit or not, hurt/comfort fanfictions are written to explore male/male intimacy.

More recent studies of hurt/comfort fanfiction, perhaps reflecting changes in the hurt/comfort genre as much as theorization of it, focus on the ways and reasons the pain

itself is eroticized, outside of its connection to slash. Rather than arguing that hurt/comfort allows for male intimacy, some scholars position the “hurt” as containing meaning beyond what it may lead to or allow. Judith May Fathallah’s “H/C and Me: An Autoethnographic Account of a Troubled Love Affair” argues that hurt/comfort “taps a fantasy: the empathetic, nontransmittable understanding of pain” (3.2). The key comfort, for her, is the witness of suffering, which begins to connect the reader and writer of the fanfiction to the characters in a personal, emotional, and even ungendered way. Rachel Linn focuses on what she calls “horrifying h/c,” where the hurt is taken to grotesque levels that she calls “embarrassingly excessive” and “out of control” (7.9).<sup>76</sup> Horrifying h/c presents a theater where fans can “revel in the dissolution of boundaries, and they write characters who experience this dissolution at its most extreme where they dare not go, then draw those characters back from obliteration through the anchor of language” (7.3). At the same time, however, some fans have learned (or allowed themselves) to relish in a focus on the body in pain at a much less cerebral level. Chera Kee reads the scene of interrogation and torture of Poe Dameron in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* as inspiring “a fetishistic gaze” that fans intensify in fanfiction<sup>77</sup> in ways that “critically reassess narratives of male bravado that would celebrate the spectacle of torture as a rite of heroism, insisting instead on highlighting the realities of pain and torture. In many ways, they are reclaiming this torture to bring it back into the province of ordinary, everyday people, closing the gap between Poe and his audience” (Kee). Hurt/comfort fanfiction takes its inspiration from the source text, but fans ascribe new, occasionally fetishistic, meanings to both hurt and comfort when

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<sup>76</sup> Even though, she argues, “Narrative art almost always involves the witness of suffering” (4.1)

<sup>77</sup> Because fanfictions containing Poe Dameron “opt to move beyond highly aestheticized torture, not by necessarily rejecting it, but rather by adding to it, deepening it, and making it much more visceral,” the maximized hurt and comfort both maintain and subvert Poe’s masculine characterization (Kee).

they rewrite the canon material. The author transmitting an understanding of, or even desire for, the character's pain yields a sympathetic, interested, and closer reading from the audience. If it is "only" sympathetic, only felt by the reader in response to something read, this serves to perpetuate desire for this "pain."

Where scholars of hurt/comfort agree most is that fans, both readers and writers, are ashamed of the existence of the genre and certainly their enjoyment of it. Critics of slash can be condemned as prudes or homophobes, but critics of hurt/comfort may be right to do so: as Cynthia Jenkins asks above, "How can anyone get off on seeing a character suffer?" Implied to come from an outsider point of view, or from a fan questioning her own motives, the disdainful question suggests the masturbatory pleasure of something that a reasonable person should not enjoy—hence, the shame. Jenkins' entire claim then becomes a justification for this path to intimacy, but one that remains a transgression of societal norms. Woledge describes authors of intimatopic texts as "willing to do *anything* to engender intimacy, including depicting the extreme suffering of their heroes" (110, emphasis added). As Camille Bacon-Smith points out, and Robin Anne Reid emphasizes, no matter who or what is hurting the characters in the fanfiction, ultimately "the author is creating the pain for her characters" (Reid 476).<sup>78</sup> The shame of hurt/comfort does not remain solely with the author, however, as readers, too, experience the same shameful desires.

Because fans often write about their shame in reading the hurt/comfort genre,

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<sup>78</sup> In an attempt to mitigate the shame of fans enjoying the effects of violence on a character, some researchers and fans alike claim that the tropes of hurt/comfort are in fact themselves just a substitute for slash or a way of recreating the intimacy of sex in an inexplicit story. One fan quote on the "Hurt/Comfort" *Fanlore* Wiki declares, "In my opinion, H/C, after all, is just socially acceptable S&M." This premise is questioned by Woledge, Reid, and others, and particularly because of the variety of motivations behind the writing of fanfictions it cannot be held as universal, it nevertheless brings up an important trope with which I will conclude in my final chapter: the *intentional* combining of sex and suffering.

scholars know a great deal about how this genre works to reduce aesthetic distance between reader and fanfiction. Cornell Sandvoss argues as a matter of course that fans seek to eradicate aesthetic distance (the distance that “enables the reader to engage with the textual Other”) between themselves and their fan text, which they desire to draw close and integrate into their sense of self (145-6). One way that fans do this is by meditating on strong emotional beats in the fan text and revisiting them in fanfiction—these powerful emotional beats are very often moments of sadness and pain. After reading Bacon-Smith, Fathallah writes that “elements of her theory strike a half-embarrassed chord with me. I want the characters I identify with to be made vulnerable, because that is something I cannot afford.” She concludes that “[P]erhaps h/c fic is my little pressure valve—when the irrational, embarrassed part of myself that feels unfairly wounded and wants to be comforted lives vicariously through a character for a moment” (3.1). For Fathallah, desire for and shame in reading hurt/comfort is made immediately personal, as the reader puts herself into the position of the characters, doubly-reducing aesthetic distance between herself and the fan text. Linn asks of Fathallah’s account directly, “What, then, drives h/c readers to fear their own pleasure?” and answers, “Since much narrative art features pain, it is not taking pleasure in observing pain but in observing a certain kind of pain that causes reader anxiety” (2.4). Linn relies on film studies to conclude that

The same fears about emotional excess that Linda Williams (1991) says plague body genres in film can be found in h/c readership as well. Just as film body genres ignite fears that the clear boundaries between spectators and filmed bodies have been breached, excessive bodies in h/c obscure boundaries between h/c bodies and readers. As the line between character



and reader emotions is perceived to diminish, this blurring creates anxieties that readers are sadistic or masochistic.... The perceived loss of aesthetic distance, coupled with the body in pain's excessive and overwhelming presence, creates the anxieties that swirl around h/c, especially horrifying h/c. (7.2)

The closeness between viscerally embodied fanfiction genres like hurt/comfort and their readers is their ultimate source of shame. Even Bacon-Smith argued similarly that hurt/comfort is a genre that closes the gap between the reader/writer and the characters: the writers make themselves vulnerable to their readers in the same way they write one character being vulnerable to another. Bacon-Smith concludes, "at least one level of meaning, and often many levels, lie close to the raw-nerved living surface of the writer and the reader" (270), and it is only "In her fan fiction" that "the woman hurt-comfort writer can both give and receive comfort" (272). That very "closeness" that renders writers and readers vulnerable and therefore produces shame, is the same closeness and vulnerability for which they write hurt/comfort in the first place. Just as for the masculine character, for whom "the element of hurt permits him to share intimacies that would otherwise be kept private" (Woledge 110), the author of hurt/comfort is also admitting, if not their own pain, then at least their shameful desires for the closeness that hurt/comfort engenders. The reader's enjoyment of the story fulfills that fantasy of understanding and of witness: I argue that this should be applied to how medieval audiences may have responded to these texts, too.

Hurt/comfort fanfiction readers and writers may be comforted to know that recent studies of affect, erotics, and the body in medieval writing have already framed a

conversation around pain and consolation in fiction and in everyday experience. Marla Carlson in *Performing Bodies in Pain* contends, “Because pain so powerfully solicits the spectator’s engagement, aestheticized physical suffering plays a vital role in creating communities of sentiment” in the Middle Ages and Early Modern periods, emphasizing the role of spectatorship and community in theorizing pain (2). Sara Ahmed’s chapter “The Contingency of Pain” emphasizes the sociality of pain, too, and the involvement of the reader in the politics of pain. In a close reading of how pain is transferred through a Christian Aid letter, Ahmed demonstrates how pain is

not about the other, but about the reader: the reader’s feelings are the ones that are addressed, which are the ‘subject’ of the letter. The ‘anger’ and ‘sadness’ the reader should feel when faced with the other’s pain is what allows the reader to enter into a relationship with the other, premised on generosity rather than indifference. The negative emotions of anger and sadness are evoked as the reader’s: the pain of others becomes ‘ours’, an appropriation that transforms and perhaps even neutralises their pain into our sadness. (21)

Even when communicating about real experienced pain, the reader is the subject on whom “pain” acts, inspiring emotions such as anger and sadness as a response. But the ethical problem of neutralizing real pain that Ahmed notes, obviating it into Western “sadness” that can be acted upon (by, in this case, donating), is less relevant to obviously fictionalized characters. The pain of fictional characters is even more so “about” the reader (and the writer), whose resulting sadness can only be felt, not acted upon, except by re-reading (or re-writing) the pain, or imagining (or writing) a “comfort” to that pain.

The editors of *Sex, Violence, and the Body*<sup>79</sup> hint at the potential for comfort in the desirability of wounds, since the “wounded ‘hero’, the damaged victim, the wounded self may be or in turn may become desirable” or fetishized (Viv Burr and Jeff Hearn 4).<sup>80</sup> Both hurt and comfort, respectively, complicate subjectivity, since “attending to wounding, breaking skin and injuring bodies, along with their erotics, impels clearer confrontation with embodiment,” even when violence is not always physical (3). Consolation, on the other hand, is distancing and even disembodiment. As editors Catherine Léglu and Stephen Milner ask in their introduction, “Does consolation bring individuals together, or does it remind them that they are apart and do not know each other at all, merely bridging the gap through a fantasy of union and common experience?” (1). Particularly for medieval audiences, intellectually Platonic and spiritually Christian, consolation was a process of “distancing of the ‘victim’ from the cause of the upset as a necessary prequel to reestablishing their psychological well-being” (11-12). Even when affirming embodiment and subjectivity, hurt and comfort are both illusive affects and necessarily textual. Burr and Hearn claim that “violence and wounding are both simultaneously material and discursive: simultaneously painful, full of pain, and textual, full of text... Talk and text about wounding is not just representation, it is also (creation of) reality in its own right” (11). Consolation, on the other hand, “is always an illusion built from words and gestures, one that attempts

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<sup>79</sup> 2008 seems to have been a good year for scholarship studying the affects of hurt and comfort with the publication of *Sex, Violence and the Body: The Erotics of Wounding*, edited by Viv Burr and Jeff Hearn, and *The Erotics of Consolation: Desire and Distance in the Late Middle Ages*, edited by Catherine Léglu and Stephen J. Milner, both by Palgrave Macmillan. Though one emphasizes film and media studies and the other is centered around late medieval interpretations of Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, both collections dovetail the erotics of hurt and the erotics of comfort separate from a discussion of fanfiction (except for Jenny Alexander’s chapter in Burr and Hearn), and thus provide a neutral proving ground for these concepts.

<sup>80</sup> They add, in comparison to my following chapter, that “This is not necessarily a masochistic position or identification; rather it may draw on associations of care, comfort and sex, and in that sense it can be compatible with non-violent sexualities” (4-5).

to present the loss that has been suffered in a light that makes it, if not palatable, then less unbearable than it might otherwise have been” (Léglu and Miller 14). While violence and wounding emphasize the body and the text together, consolation, an attempt to understand another’s pain, is more illusory and difficult to pin down. This does not keep fanfiction authors from trying, however.

Finally, how do the Middle English terms “hurt” and “comfort” compare to modern usage, or, more specifically, to how they are used in fanfiction? For example, In the *AMA* just as in modern usage, “hurt” can be used as a noun, to refer to “a wound, an injury,” though it is occasionally a verb: *hurten*, as in, “to injure (sb., a part of the body), wound, hurt” (“Hurt”). The *Stanzaic Guy* does not use the word “hurt,” preferring to use “wound,” mostly in the noun and sometimes the verbal form, but it functions the same way and boasts a usage modern readers would recognize. Fanfiction genre tags may differentiate between “hurt” as being physical and “emotional hurt” as being psychological, but though I found no medieval examples where “hurt” referenced anything mental or emotional (as in “hurt feelings”), this hardly indicates that medieval writers were uninterested in what we would call emotional pain. Instead, Middle English might use “soren” to mean to “feel mental anguish; cause mental anguish,” a word which does appear throughout the *AMA* and *Stanzaic Guy* (“Soren v.2”).

As far as “comfort” is concerned, although intimacy seems to be a key function of the fanfiction expression of “comfort,” in the Middle English usage it is often a very public affair. Of the appearances in the *AMA*, most recognizable uses of “comfort” are rather more an encouragement for a person to comfort oneself, or a leader (usually Arthur) comforting his knights or his people. “Comfort” is often used as “encourage,” as when Arthur is giving

his knights their final pep-talks before the battle with Mordred, he travels to each ship to “comfort his knightes,” praising ““These good mens bodies!”” (3634-6).<sup>81</sup> But comfort in the Middle English is still a means to recovery, as it is in fanfiction, as the French messengers beg King Arthur, “But [unless] thou comfort them, Sir King, cover [recover] shall they never!” (1246). “Comfort” appears only once in the *Stanzaic Guy*, by comparison, and only toward the end of the poem when the angel comforts King Athelstan in a dream: “Hider me sent thee King Jhesu / To comfort thee to fond” (2909-10). Again, no actual relief is administered to Athelstan, only encouragement, as Guy will soon arrive to solve his problems. Comfort is something that is necessary for recovery, but is usually for groups, and does not necessarily invoke interpersonal intimacy. It may be better translated as our modern “encouragement,” though the sentiment behind physically or emotionally comforting another is not absent from this term in Middle English. After their battle in the *AMA*, fellow knights “comforthed þer hertes” of Gawain and Priamus while they are physically tending their wounds (2712). So while the terms “hurt” and “comfort” have been subject to semantic shifts since Middle English, the concepts, and affects, are absolutely relevant to a study of Middle English romance.

It is with a theory of hurt/comfort fanfiction that I suggest we read medieval concerns about masculinity. Fanfiction, in singling this trope of hurt/comfort out, helps us examine male vulnerability that is not limited to its various expressions (e.g., fainting, crying, wounding) as has already been examined in the scholarship. The male/male relationships presented here are made, through hurt and comfort, something more than homosocial: they are eroticized, but the hurt and comfort function crucially as a “substitute

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<sup>81</sup> See, for example, David Burnley, “Comforting the Troops: An Epic Moment in Popular Romance,” in Mills, Fellows, and Meale, pp.175-86.

for sex.” While they may have not used the same words that fanfiction authors use today, medieval readers and writers expressed a keen interest in violence, pain, and their affects in ways recognizable to readers and writers of hurt/comfort fanfiction. Romances such as the *AMA* and the *Stanzaic Guy* in particular show interest in how this can deepen a relationship between men, and that the intense emotionality and physicality they express while vulnerable can reduce the aesthetic distance between reader/writer and text.

### **Constructing Men and De-emphasizing Women: Fanfiction’s Homosociality**

Perhaps not uniquely among medieval romance, the *Stanzaic Guy* and the *AMA* work especially hard to de-emphasize heterosexual romances in their quests to explore male/male relationships. And while scholars have established the role of violence in constructing masculinity and masculine relationships in the Middle Ages, few have attended to how it might play a role in altering those relationships, especially when the male-female relationships have less narrative impact. Gender is a key variable in understanding the concepts of wounding and consolation. As Léglu and Miller argue, consolation “had an intimate function for both men and women” (6). But scholars have been specifically interested in the wounds that men sustain as integral to understandings of masculinities. Violence has been studied in terms of the gaze upon men to reveal that the “naked and wounded (generally male) body is offered as ‘spectacle’ and carries sexual/gender meanings” that construct masculinity (Burr and Hearn 8).<sup>82</sup> Burr and Hearn conclude their introduction by saying, “the gendered/sexual/violent relations of talk/text

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<sup>82</sup> Scholars concur on the topic of men being “damaged, wounded, by gender arrangements or patriarchal relations” and there may be “a subversive potential of masochistic wounding, through a fragmentation of the dominant male subject” (8), perhaps even to the extent that “penetration of men is key for ‘anti-patriarchal’ identity and social change” (9).

on wounding and actions on wounding and the body...do seem especially persistent in critically studying men and masculinities, where close relations of sexuality and violence often seem to inhabit the same bodies, times, and places” (12). While violence and wounding are crucial to constructions of masculinity, consolation and comfort have been understood as ungendered, or indeed, as un-gendering, despite what we might readily assume about the role of gender and nurturance.

There is an obvious connection between violence and aristocratic masculinity in medieval literature that scholars have taken note of. Andrew James Johnston locates a definition of not just masculinity but class being encoded through male violence in the Middle English *Gamelyn*, arguing that “medieval masculinities are always determined by power relations” (52). Ruth Mazo Karras in *Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* argues that violence was “the ultimate means of maintaining [honor]” (60). Ilan Mitchell-Smith’s study of *Sir Gowther* and *Libeaus Desconus* reveals “a construction of ideal chivalric masculinity complicating the way in which scholars have viewed knightly violence” (148). Derek G. Neal argues throughout *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England* that even masculine relationships are structured through violent acts. Masculinity and violence are intrinsically linked in late medieval romances, and earlier,<sup>83</sup> so it comes as no surprise that violence and its effects are how male relationships

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<sup>83</sup> Scholarship about earlier periods makes similar claims: Victor Scherb’s examination of the Old English “*eaxlgestealla*” [“shoulder-companion”] compound finds that the word “connotes trust, intimacy, and even pleasure,” providing “an emotional context for masculine heroism” (31). Shoulder-companions and even shoulders, the bodily, physical metonym for a loyal companion, but which can represent “either a joint or a rupture” (43), adds to the poem’s “thematic and emotional depth,” particularly at points of mourning (44). David Clark’s survey of gender in the Scandinavian Eddic poetry reveals that male “bonds of loyalty are predicated on martial dominance” (50). At the same time, however, the sagas are clear that “the worst insult one man can level at another in the Icelandic laws is to call him *sannsorðinn* or *ragr*—that is, to state that he has been penetrated by another man, an issue which still causes anxiety (and sometimes violence) today in men insecure in their own sexual identity. This kind of insult, known as *níð*, is considered to be so heinous

are negotiated.

Anxieties about *appropriate* male relationships are as evident as anxieties about masculinity in medieval martial romances. As in modern fanfiction, where close masculine relationships are depicted as homoerotic, medieval writers noticed when battlefield relationships got a little too friendly. William Burgwinkle's study of sodomy and masculinity in France and England establishes "how crucial the invention of sodomy was to the institution of a new model of heroic and highly monitored masculinity in the twelfth century," implicating martial masculinity with concern about appropriate and inappropriate male-male relationships (2). In particular, he finds that in Chrétien's *Perceval* and Gerbert de Montreuil's *Continuation*, a concluding message is that "sodomy is a scourge which is never far from the excesses of competitive violence" (136). Anne Baden-Daintree's study of the intimacy of grief (an affect that demands comfort) in the *AMA* argues that "grief, and specifically weeping, is figured as feminine, but the enactment of revenge is considered 'manly'. However, the temporal gap between loss and revenge allows the opening up of a feminized space, enabling the expression of emotion as a precursor to vengeance," showing how violence, though wrapped up with masculinity, can also be associated with emotions that are gendered feminine in the text ("Kingship," 88). "Middle English romance, with its heroic archetypes, is a rich source of idealized values around medieval masculinity and masculine culture more generally," argues Rachel Moss in her study of fainting and masculine emotion in Arthurian works (103). Fainting may be one of the results of violence, whether that is in reaction to physical injury or being emotionally overwhelmed. Moss follows Gretchen Mieszkowski, who reminds us that "it was in the eighteenth and

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that it justifies the recipient in killing his taunter," which even more so associates violence and male/male interactions (Clark 51).



nineteenth centuries that fainting became specifically considered a feminine bodily act” and argues that “in Middle English romance, when men faint in front of other men, they are providing a physical manifestation of affective, social, and political ties that together form the foundations of a homosocial society” (102-3). Indeed, this “celebration of behaviors and qualities coded as masculine, an emphasis on the value of male bonding, and the public celebration of those ties, are part of a wider cultural discourse of what we have now come to call ‘hegemonic masculinity,’” which Moss uses in the most precise sense as “an ideal set of prescriptive social norms” for men (103).

Romance has been understood as one of the first medieval genres to include female characters in a major way in order to appeal to mixed company,<sup>84</sup> so the *reduction* of female characters and lack of emphasis on heterosexual relationships in these two texts, while not unusual, especially in military romances, is perhaps still notable. Heterosexual unions are ignored or dissolved in order to make way for the more noble expressions of love between men, and the female characters and their roles and agency are marginalized, even more than we might expect. What may be more surprising to note is that the same thing happens frequently in fanfiction, where a male/male romance or relationship may be focused on to the detriment or removal of female characters—this, in a genre written primarily by women.

The various reasons why women enjoy reading male/male romance with a deliberate removal of female characters, whether in fanfiction or in published gay romance, is nicely summarized by Kacey Whalen, who cites several primary sources and studies to address the range of reasons. Certainly, internalized misogyny is one culprit, but this hatred

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<sup>84</sup> See earlier discussion of female readers in Chapters 1 and 2; see also Jennifer Goodman.

may be as much of women as it is disappointment with badly-written women in source texts (19). Other reasons point to the perceived equality between two male lovers (or at least the lack of concern over gendered subordination) (20), and the simple explanation that straight women may “find two men doubly attractive” (22). Because fanfictions have clear source texts where mainstream gay romance does not, it is easy to pinpoint where fans intentionally remove or de-emphasize female characters that “get in the way” of the male/male relationships they are really interested in exploring. Aja Romano<sup>85</sup> was asked to address this prevalent issue in a segment of “The Shipping News” by a reader who states: “I understand slash is about a male relationship, but the female characters that are important for the show’s dynamics or just have a close connection to the male characters (sister, best friend, etc) are sidelined to an outrageous degree” (Romano). Romano’s response agrees with the reader, detailing how a combination of cultural misogyny and internalized misogyny have female writers replicating or even exacerbating in fanfiction the same antifeminisms that already exist in the source texts:

I think fandom makes it all too easy to hate female characters from the moment we set foot in it ... Women often get written as competitors, vying for the love of one half of a male/male pairing. Sometimes they’re clingy, catty best friends, or loveless, emotionally frigid partners who can’t give the man what he ‘deserves’ the way another dude can. Often women are slut-shamed and presented as cheaters or as emotionally unfaithful in other ways.

Her op-ed then becomes mostly a call to action for (female) fans to write compelling female

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<sup>85</sup> Author of “I’m done explaining why fanfic is okay.” <https://bookshop.livejournal.com/1044495.html>

characters. Nonetheless, the ways in which female characters are “sidelined” in many fanfictions reveals why female characters who are comparatively “sidelined” in medieval derivative romances may indicate an interest in privileging male/male interactions.

While Guinevere is hardly a prominent character in the *AMA*’s most direct source, Geoffrey of Monmouth, the *AMA* was nevertheless composed in the milieu of Chrétien de Troyes’ *Knight of the Cart* (c. 1181) and the courtly *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* (fourteenth century) which both feature Guinevere in a comparatively huge role with a great deal of agency in her choice of Lancelot as lover. The *AMA* poet, revealing more interest in the fractured relationship between Arthur and Mordred, reduces Lancelot’s role and Guinevere’s agency, and the bulk of the narrative takes place on various battlefields where women are invisible at best or victims at worst. The *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick*, too, covers only one part of Guy’s life—the part where he rejects his wife and his marriage in favor of cultivating his relationship with Christ and, along the way, several other men. The *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick* is in fact never so fannish, so interested in referencing its sources, as when it is about Felice. The phrase “In gest also we rede” (216), referring to the consummation of Guy and Felice’s marriage, is curiously repeated in 3339, “In gest as we so rede,” where the narrative tells us “In this world was non better wiman” than Felice (3338). In some sense, the poet seems to use the source text as a deflection: “if you want to read more about Felice, look elsewhere, because that’s not what we’re focusing on here.” Uninterested in Guy’s performance of heterosexuality once he has produced an heir, the poet instead focuses on Guy’s relationships with other men. Both the *AMA* and the *Stanzaic Guy* de-emphasize or erase altogether the male/female relationships of their source texts in order to maximally explore relationships among men.

In spite of a few moments of love declarations between Guy and Felice, we have several clues early on that heterosexual relationships are not to feature prominently in this romance. In the middle of one such love declaration, for instance, Guy tells Felice, “I no schal never spouse wiman / Whiles thou art olive” (59-60). Presumably he means, and she certainly takes this to mean, that he will marry no *other* woman but her, at least while she is alive, but compared with her love declaration, “And bot ich have thee to make / Other lord nil Y non take” (70-71), his declaration is very clearly lacking any mention of *her*. Even when Guy does say he wants her, “Ich hadde lever hir bodi alon / Than winnen al this warldes won / With ani woman o live,” he juxtaposes his desire with material wealth—something else we find is very easy for him to give up later on (148-50). It hardly helps matters that Felice’s father Rohaud details Guy’s history as a heartbreaker, telling his daughter that “He hath ben desired of mani woman / And he hath forsaken hem everilcan” (115-6). This is an early clue to Guy’s performance of heterosexuality and to the narrative as a whole: he consistently forsakes women.

Guy abandons Felice quite easily when it comes down to it. A mere fifteen days after Guy and Felice’s marriage, “her joie turned hem into care” (227). The *moment* Guy has satisfied his heterosexual duty—impregnating his wife with a male child (225, 362)—he is overcome with “sorwe and sikeing sare” (226). He turns deliberately away from *fin amor*, indicating that his problem is on some level Felice’s fault, since he claims to have done his wicked deeds, for which he must atone, to win her affection (295) and bemoans ever meeting her:

‘Sethen Y thee seyge first with ayn—

Allas the while Y may sayn—

Thi love me hath so ybounde

That never sethen no dede Y gode.’ (280-4)

He emphasizes that he cannot right his wrongs while in heterosexual union with her, and by repeating “sethen” (since), he blames her (and the violence he did for her) for keeping him from salvation. Sarah Gordon argues that this blame is more prominent in the Middle English than its source: “Blaming his love and his lady for his murderous acts and for his neglect of God is also amplified by additions to the English version, lending a misogynistic tone to his regrets” (Gordon 325). When he declares his intent to go on an endless pilgrimage for his sins, Felice counters with a perfectly reasonable suggestion: “Chirches and abbays thou might make / That schal pray for thi sake” (331-2). It being a well-established method for the nobility to secure their salvation through patronage of the Church, her suggestion is far more orthodox than Guy’s desperate measures, but he refuses to entertain the idea. Instead, his atonement, according to no one but him, requires both the sacrifice of giving up his love of Felice as well as the sacrifice and suffering of pilgrimage. When presented with an option that allows him to atone *and* maintain his relationship with his wife, Guy chooses the option that will effectively dissolve his heterosexual union.

The reactions to witnessing pain differs drastically along gendered lines in both texts. Since women do not often experience physical injuries in medieval romances, it is difficult to compare the responses to physical pain, though I discuss a notable exception, the Duchess of Brittany, below. However, both men and women cry, in equal measure, and have the opportunity to be comforted. The *Stanzaic Guy* establishes a double standard for how men respond to female and male grief: men respond to the sorrow of other men with action, while ignoring the sorrow of women. While Guy responds to his wife’s tears with

sympathy, he is actually moved to action by the tears and sadness of other men. When Felice learns of his plans to leave on a pilgrimage until the end of his life, she weeps and pleads with him to do anything else. While they do mourn together at their parting (385-7), Guy tells his wife “Lete ben alle this reweful cri; / It is nought worth thi tale” (338-9). Guy does not comfort his wife, instead telling her to stop crying and not doing anything to help her. When Guy first meets the Earl Jonas, however, he is witness to Jonas’ sadness and immediately moved to pity by it: “So gret sorwe ther he made / Sir Gii of him rewthe hade / He gan to wepe so sare” (541-3). Rather than telling him to stop crying, as Guy tells Felice (and, indeed, as Arthur will tell Guinevere in the *AMA*), Guy is moved to pity and sadness himself, asking for his story so he can of course offer his help (887-9). So, too, when Guy is back in England, it takes the king and all his barons falling on their knees and begging Guy to intercede for them to move him: “Sir Gii biheld the lordinges alle / And whiche sorwe hem was bifalle, / Sir Gii hadde of hem care” (2962-4). It is specifically masculine sorrow that moves him to care.

At every turn throughout the *Stanzaic Guy*, male-male relationships carry more emotional weight than male-female relationships. It is not just an accident of Guy and Felice, but other moments that remind the reader that this is a story between men. When Guy is finally back in England at the end of the narrative, he asks after Herhau and Rohaut instead of Felice (2833-44). Guy also resists potential heterosexual temptation when the Sultan’s daughter bathes him and attends to him before his battle against the giant Amoraunt. She attempts to dress him in silk clothing, “ac therof was nothing his thought;” and he asks only for good armor and remains utterly uninterested in the daughter otherwise (2158). Guy’s good friend, Tirry, has his own heterosexual relationship temporarily

dissolved, too (1824), which only advances his closeness with Guy. Tirry's wife returning to him (2650-2) along with the return of his wealth and status prompts Guy to be on his way again (2660). Making the same moves that a fanfiction interested in relationships among men does, the *Stanzaic Guy* minimizes the role of and even the existence of women to focus on men.

The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* also reduces the importance and agency of women who are otherwise significant to the narrative, in order to emphasize male/male interactions. When King Arthur is departing to fight Emperor Lucius, he leaves Mordred in charge, handing off his wife from his own care to the care of another man. Arthur spends about thirty lines (649-678) instructing Mordred how to care for the kingdom, with only seven of them (652-59) ensuring Guinevere is kept in the manner to which she has been accustomed, which has the effect of channeling his concern for his wife through another man. His words to Guinevere directly mostly ask her to stop crying, and, though he does admit “Thy wandrethes and thy weeping woundes mine herte,” admitting to a transference of pain, he also tells her he cannot do anything to help her before he proceeds to spend half his speech to her talking about how Mordred will take care of her—again emphasizing the exchange as occurring between two men (705-12). Arthur does not react when Guinevere “Sways in swooning, swelte as sho wolde!” but “pressed to his palfrey, in presence of lordes,” and is on his way without acknowledging her sadness (716-17). Like Sir Guy, at this point Arthur remains unmoved by the queen's tears, and says nothing to try to comfort her. Even when he is moved, he is never moved to action, to comfort or solve the problem causing her sadness: an obvious double-standard, as we will see men respond with action and sympathy to the pain of other men.

Guinevere's agency is so reduced that she seems to function as merely a body through which Arthur and Mordred's regnal dispute is enacted—not a body whose pain matters. We are told twice that Mordred has wedded Guinevere and impregnated her (3550-2, 3575-6), and at neither point is Guinevere's desire either way made clear, whether she is loyal to Arthur or happy to betray him for a younger and clearly more fertile man.<sup>86</sup> The only moment we have that might indicate any kind of subjective desire on Guinevere's part is when she receives word from Mordred that Arthur is coming back: "Then sho yermes and yeyes at York in her chamber, / Grones full grisly with gretand teres" and flees to Caerleon to become a nun (3911-18). Though her tears might indicate remorse for her part in Arthur's betrayal, they could just as easily be distress at Arthur's return ready for war, or concern for Mordred's life, or her own: the lack of narrative explanation leaves the reader to guess at whether she feels guilty, is in love with Mordred, or simply afraid for her own life. Fear of Arthur is the only specific motivation for fleeing both Mordred and Arthur and cloistering herself in a convent. Rather, Guinevere's role in the betrayal is kept vague, and she is conveniently written out of the end of the story, which the narrative is uninterested in and to which it does not return.<sup>87</sup>

Not only Guinevere, but other women are also rendered objects in the *AMA*, such as the duchess of Brittany, whose fate is particularly gruesome, or even sensationalized. We can easily assume her fate from the words of the Templar who tells Arthur of the problem, that the giant kidnapped the duchess "To lie by that lady ay whiles her life lasts"

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<sup>86</sup> In analogues such as Malory, of course, Guinevere objects to union with Mordred and locks herself in the Tower of London to avoid becoming his pawn. This is also a rare version where Guinevere can even become pregnant and Arthur is clearly indicated to be the sterile one in the relationship.

<sup>87</sup> Only in versions when her relationship with Lancelot is prominent is it narratively important to return to the nunnery after Arthur's death to learn what becomes of Guinevere.



(855), and we are further treated to the knight's description that "sho cried so loud / The care of that creature cover shall I never," where the suffering of the woman is turned to pain for the knight (858-9). Luckily, if lucky we want to call it, a "woful widow" is a witness to the murder so that the poet can supply us with every gory detail how the giant "forced her and filed and sho is fey leved; / He slew her unslely and slit her to the navel" (978-9). Her pain is not comforted, and here a woman functions merely as a spectacle for violent consumption and impetus for further violence, rather than someone who can be comforted.

Arthur's stoic reaction to the duchess of Brittany's death, where he focuses on declaring revenge against the giant, contrasts with how he and others respond to the deaths of fellow men in these narratives. A comparison of these reactions shows that men are quicker to show emotion over the injuries of other men. In the battle between Gawain and Mordred's forces, for example, Gawain is so grieved by the death of Chastelayne, a youth who was Gawain's ward (2953), that he is moved to tears (2962) and then moved to violent revenge, declaring "I shall wage for that wye all that I weld, / But I be wroken on that wye that thus has him wounded!" (2967-8). Arthur, too, weeps when Sir Idrous refuses to go to his father Ewain's aid in favor of staying by and protecting King Arthur (4135-56)—though nothing compares to his reaction to Gawain's death, which I explore later at length.

Even as both narratives actively de-emphasize the roles and emotional interactions between men and women, these particularly martial romances show equal and opposite concern with men and men's relationships. As Moss argues, "in romance, the battlefield should be the ideal homosocial space, where individuality is sublimated into a collective

elite identity... This homosocial space offers a physical and emotional unity rarely replicated elsewhere, because it offers ‘a group communion of authorized violence’” (105). On some level, it is true, the relationships presented are battlefield relationships because this is the primary theater for *any* character interactions. The *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick*, though a pious text that sets its hero on a pilgrimage to atone for his sins of violence, nevertheless remains a journey from battle to battle, forever mirroring Guy in continuing the very activity he is trying to atone for spiritually. Guy’s adventures center around battles: against Amoraunt in the East, with Berard in Germany, and with Colbrond at Winchester, before he finally returns home and lives out his life in a hermitage. The one constant is Guy’s experience of pain and suffering, as he travels barefoot,<sup>88</sup> is often hungry and without shelter, at one point is marooned at sea, and is wounded in his various battles. Guy’s physical suffering has been understood as penance for his sins on the battlefield (Wiggins 9), but reading Guy’s suffering in conjunction with his relationships through the fanfiction genre of hurt/comfort reveals an intensity of male-male intimacy that actually centers around suffering and violence.

The *Alliterative Morte*, too, is obsessed with violence and how pain opens up possibilities of interaction between men. In fact, I argue, we learn about the emotional landscape of the *AMA*’s male characters *only* when they are in pain. Because these poems also intentionally downplay the importance of male/female relationships, they allow interactions among men to flourish in ways we might call queer. But neither queer nor slash have quite the same function here, where pain is so crucial and sex so unerotic. Therefore, I will borrow Christopher Vaccaro’s coinage *homoamory* to describe these relationships,

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<sup>88</sup> Sarah Gordon points out that Guy being barefoot is an addition from the Anglo-Norman text, one which “emphasizing his devotion, poverty, and *physical suffering* on the spiritual journey” (326, emphasis added).

which, he defines against “homo-sexuality or homo-eroticism” as

not yet anchored to and burdened by signification; it implies something different, a something in the overlapping of friendship and *eros*. This something is not already understood and known as “sex” nor as “friendship.” “Love” may be the more precise term; yet “homoamory” gives space for a reader to supply the dimensions of this love. (2)

Vaccaro’s medieval examples are Anglo-Saxon, and he makes stable connections between Old English male-male relationships and those depicted in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. In the same way as Vaccaro, I recognize similar generic patterns in medieval and modern works, but unlike Vaccaro’s example of Tolkien, I cannot chart the “survival” of these tropes from medieval romance to modern fanfiction. If anything has survived, it is the association of masculinity with violence, which has implications far beyond literary depictions. I do employ homoamory to in some sense simplify the discussion of male-male relationships in ways that do not hinge on being either homosocial or homoerotic: what is important is how men express love (of whatever kind) for other men through hurt and comfort.

I present readings of significant male-male relationships here, but it is worth noting that while certain relationships may be read as more emotionally intense than others, the *Stanzaic Guy* and the *AMA* are texts that emphasize relationships between men at every available point. Guy and Tirry’s relationship, or Gawain being an emotional focus for other men, both exist within narrative worlds where homosocial relationships are celebrated, especially in martial contexts. In this way, limiting men to emotional expressions only under extreme duress, neither medieval romance nor hurt/comfort fanfiction are precisely

subversive of heteronormative expressions of masculinity. However, as fanfiction scholars have pointed out, if discourses of power, such as the male-dominated film and television industries which inspire so much fanfiction, claim that masculine hurt and comfort allow for male-male vulnerability safe from homoerotic subtext, fanfiction (as written by the disenfranchised) insists upon rewriting that erotic subtext and making it text.

### **“The Mortifying Ordeal of Being Known”: Guy and Tirry**

The stories of Sir Guy of Warwick have been called penitential romances (Andrea Hopkins) and ancestral romances (Domenica Legge, David Wallace), as well as being given a host of other labels: pious romance, secular hagiography, religious romance, etc. (Gordon 330). As a translation, much of the scholarship on this poem focuses on its transmission, likely patronage, and reception. Gordon, following William Calin, notes that the narratorial voice is stronger in the Middle English than in the source (328). Some studies of Guy have paid attention to affect, however: Judith Weiss uses scenes of fainting in the Anglo-Norman *Gui de Warewick* to mark out her claims about how swooning is theorized in a medieval romance: that it is appropriately masculine, a mark of “emotional refinement that they feel so intensely for each other,” and a shorthand for a variety of emotionally intense experiences, from happiness to sadness to recognition. “Deep feeling manifests through faints” she argues, and the swoon, therefore, “has the function of both exhibiting and inspiring fine feeling” (128-9). But in the Middle English version, Sarah Gordon notes the greater emphasis on suffering, as “references to a five-year absence are not present in the source and serve to expand the length and gravity of Guy’s penance and to emphasize his separation from loved ones in the Middle English” (Gordon 324). I would

agree, especially in the reduced narrative of the *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick*, that in fact the strongest expressions of emotion in the Middle English version are tinged with pain, loss, or sadness (i.e., various expressions which in fanfiction are lumped together as “hurt”), and that this is crucial to understanding emotional currency between men in this text. Put in the words of a 2013 *New York Times* author turned meme and used to explain the goals behind hurt/comfort narratives: “if we want the rewards of being loved we have to submit to the mortifying ordeal of being known” (“The Mortifying Ordeal of Being Known”). The appropriate way for martial men to “know” each other is through violence and its effects, which is even at the best of times, a mortifying process.

One way that violence and pain in hurt/comfort narratives present opportunities for male/male interaction is in allowing narrative space for men to visually focus on, and thereby interpret, the bodies of other men. It is through gazing on men in pain or men enacting violence that men know each other better. Zeikowitz argues that “male-male gazing blurs the distinction between activity and passivity” (85), because “in claiming that a model knight demonstrates admirable physical strength and prowess—undoubtedly more than many of his male spectators do—chivalric texts suggest that he attracts and captures the gaze of his male spectators” (86). In opposition to film theory, then, which sets up an active/passive binary between observer/object, in the medieval theory of male-male gazing, “neither the observer nor the observed object occupies an exclusively active or passive position” (89). Zeikowitz calls this “visual intimacy with another man” (99), but when that male gaze is on another man’s pain, as it functions in hurt/comfort fanfiction, I argue that this intimacy is intensified because it directly prompts a reaction from the observer. Whether an attempt to comfort or simply comprehend the other’s pain, this is the process

by which romance narratives permit masculine, martial men to come be “known” to each other more intimately and tenderly. As in hurt/comfort fanfiction, the intimacy may stand as a substitute for sex, as a pure expression of homoamory.

Notably, it is Guy who is repeatedly the object of the male gaze, and only once the object of female gaze.<sup>89</sup> King Triamour comments antagonistically on Guy’s pilgrim’s trappings, asking ““Whi artow thus ivel ydight / And in thus pouer wede?”” but rather than pitying Guy, he uses this to assume ill of him (1004-5). The Earl Jonas, however, looks on Guy kindly. He

beheld [Guy’s] fot and heved.

Michel he was of bodi pight,

A man he semed of michel might

Ac pouerliche he was biweved. (891-4)

It is through Guy’s generally poor appearance that Jonas reads him, and Guy’s well-built body under poor clothes and unkempt beard arrest Jonas’ focus as he tries to reconcile the obviously inherently noble body clothed in a poor man’s rags. It inspires concern in Jonas, a concern for Guy greater than his own troubles, since he tries to talk Guy out of helping him (901-12).

Tirry also has an extensive reading of Guy’s appearance, and his gaze also juxtaposes Guy’s apparently miserable state with his obvious strength. When watching Guy in battle, in a situation where he both causes pain and feels his own, Tirry says to himself, ““this is nought the pilgrim Y met yesterday,”” since ““He was a feble pouer body,”” and the Guy he sees now is ““of michel might”” (2282-6). Tirry even suspects him

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<sup>89</sup> Wiggins 12.

of being an angelic being the longer he gazes upon him (2287). But Tirry has the advantage of having known Guy before, so the pilgrim's strength and skill prompts Tirry to reflect, "On Gii Y thenke when ichim se" (2288). The performance of violence so transforms Guy that his close friend Tirry recognizes him better in full armor and from far away than he does face to face dressed as a pilgrim.

Guy gazes upon Tirry closely, too, in light of how Guy remembers Tirry, who "whilom was so noble a knight" (1851). His gaze compares Tirry to his former stature and greatness, so this close view implies previous male gazes. Especially in the great physical detail Guy remembers about Tirry's legs, "His legges that wer sumtime hosed wel," compared to the agonizing state they have become, "Tobrosten he seighe hem everidel," Guy's focus on Tirry's fallen state is very much a bodily one, where pain and injury are the focus—and also his attractive legs, apparently (1855-6). Guy is affected physically by the sight of Tirry's bodily injuries, as he swoons (1860) and tells Tirry that nothing else in his life has ever affected him so greatly: "sethen that Y was first man / Nas never sorwe on me cam / That greved me so sare" (1870-2). Here, witnessing the body under pain or stress provides an appropriate excuse for manly men to not just see each other, but learn more about each other, allowing intimate familiarity.

Guy and Tirry share other intimate moments because Tirry is vulnerable, but these never go "too far." Being weak from hunger and exhaustion allows Tirry to require comfort and support from his companion. As they head to court, Tirry declares he needs to rest or he will die. Guy responds by asking Tirry to

'Ly doun and Y schal sitt thee bi  
And feir thine heved up kepe.'

And when he hadde thus yseyd  
 On Gyes barm his heved he leyd,  
 Anon Tirri gan slepe. (1928-2)

This physical closeness in response to physical weakness is made even more intimate by Guy's response, which is to weep with sympathy after Tirry has gone to sleep in his lap (1934-5). As if we can't get any more homoamorous here, Tirry dreams of Guy—his old friend whom he does not recognize as being with him—telling Guy when he wakes up that, “me thought Gii sat at min heved / And in his lappe me biweved / Astow dest me biforn” (1963-5). But as in hurt/comfort fanfiction, this relationship remains appropriately homosocial and heteronormative, in spite of the growing closeness and intense intimacy that otherwise threatens to suggest something more.

Guy and Tirry are closely connected as witnesses to the other's sorrow. When one of them is sad or in pain, the other shares it, so pain becomes the means by which men know and know about each other. When Guy first meets Tirry, who

wrong his honden and wepe sore  
 And curssed the time that he was bore,  
 ‘Allas!’ it was his song.  
 ‘Wayleway,’ he seyde, ‘that stounde!  
 Wickedliche icham brought to grounde  
 With wel michel wrong.’ (1705-10)

Guy approaches him immediately, asking ““whi thou makest thus gret pité,”” and establishes empathy by adding, ““Me thenke thi paynes strong”” (1715-6). Hearing of Tirry's physical and mental anguish, Guy is again moved to “pité” (1740) for his old friend,



even before he learns that they were old friends (1758). Here, because Tirry is in trouble for a murder Guy committed, it is possible that Guy intervenes out of a sense of duty rather than out of pity, as he does with Jonas, but the narrative repeatedly returns to Tirry and Guy's mutual concern for each other. Tirry, for example, refers to the predicament as one in which they are mutually embroiled, since he seeks Guy to defend "ous of that felonie" (1835, 1891). For his part, Guy describes the battle as undertaken "For no cité no no castel— / Bot for mi felawe Y loved so wel" (2359-60) when he prays to God, and again to the fisherman as "For Tirri the hendi knight" (2391). Again we are reminded that Guy's violence for his male friend Tirry is acceptable, while Guy's violence to gain his wife Felice, is something he must atone for. Tirry, for his part, is also moved to action for his concern for Guy's wellbeing, too. Although he stays behind initially in fear for his own life, Tirry overcomes his fear when he "herd telle that the pilgrim / Faught ogain the douke Berardin / To help him at his nede" (2263-5). In spite of his fear, "natheles he ros up tho / With michel care and michel wo / And thider he went wel swithe" (2269-71). When a male viewer witnesses another man "hurt" (whether sad, wounded, sleeping, or otherwise vulnerable), I argue that he reads him with greater intensity and therefore his knowledge about the other man becomes more complete.

The *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick* continually returns to violence and the suffering male body, and how witnessing it is theorized, and through which it asks to be read both by the characters and the audience. Guy declares the theme of his story when he says, "That ich have with mi bodi wrought, With mi bodi it schal be bought" (346-7). It is by means of violence that Guy avenges Tirry, and through his brutal slaying of Berard that the emperor tells him "Gret honour thou hast him [Tirry] don" (2522-3). Literally, Guy executes

violence *for* Tirry, and is honored for it. When Guy tells Tirry of his victory, Tirry first assumes betrayal rather than the death of Berard. Tirry was “glad and blithe” (2563) in direct response to Guy’s claim that “‘Y slough him with min hond’” (2562). Guy supports Tirry and literally makes him happy through the only possible medium of male exchange—violence. Even Amoraunt, the giant Saracen, is granted intimate knowledge of Guy through viewing him enacting violence. When they are in the middle of their extended duel, Amoraunt is so impressed by Guy’s martial skill that he wonders at the false name “Youn” that Guy had originally given. For no other discernable reason except that they have shared a battlefield, and though it will prove problematic for Guy later, Guy gives Amoraunt his true name (1492) before he gives it to anyone else (1648).<sup>90</sup> The exchange of violence is here a kind of masculine intimacy. In fact, pain becomes the currency for emotional closeness between men. Sometimes this is negotiated through hurts such as sorrow or physical wounds, and most often this is enacted through violence.

Although Tirry cannot recognize Guy for certain until Guy reveals himself, Tirry comes closer to that knowledge through scrutinizing the pilgrim. When Guy finally reveals himself to Tirry, he is perhaps understandably accusatory, telling him “‘Thou art unkinde so thenketh me / For Gii thi gode fere’” (2678-9). He relates his past exploits—all of them violent—asking Tirry to recognize him by his violence, concluding with, “‘And now Y slough Berard the strong. / Icham Gii, thou hast wrong. / Why niltow me nought knawe?’” This of course sends the fragile Tirry into tears and a swoon, and he begs Guy’s forgiveness for “misknowen” him (2711). And now it is Tirry’s turn to develop a leg fetish, for he

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<sup>90</sup> This is a common enough trope in *bel inconnu* situations of medieval (often Arthurian) romance. In the *AMA*, too, the very same trope occurs, as when Mordred tries to hide by changing his arms and banner, Arthur still “knew him full swithe” (4187).

“seyghe his legges brosten ich del / That whilom wer yhosed ful wel” (2716-7), mirroring Guy’s earlier view of an impoverished Tirry. Again, sorrow through physical pain is the metric through which men can show each other unbounded affection, since

More sorwe made never man.  
 Sir Gii went to him tho -  
 In his hert him was wo -  
 And in his armes up him nam.  
 Atuix hem was gret diol in that stounde,  
 Bothe thai fel aswon to grounde  
 For sorwe thai wex al wan. (2718-24)

All this swooning, according to Moss, is “shorthand, allowing us in only a few lines to understand the virtuous qualities within a character” (107), but the triggering emotion, “sorwe,” inspires other signs of physical affection that close the distance between the two men, such as kissing, twice (2770, 2774). After exchanging promises and kisses, they part ways, and Tirry mourns the loss for several days.<sup>91</sup> The male-on-male gaze in the *Stanzaic Guy* is the means by which men such as Guy and Tirry initially submit themselves to being known.

Medieval Christian audiences may have been especially primed for hurt/comfort readings. The hurt/comfort narrative runs deep, its ultimate expression in the Middle Ages being of course the *passio* of Christ, a narrative about Christ’s extreme suffering and His perfect relief from that suffering after his ascension. Meditation on Christ’s wounding, suffering, and death was a popular form of piety, since after suffering the penalty for human

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<sup>91</sup> Tirry is also scolded by his wife for letting Guy get away from him, which Fewster has read as another humiliation and occasion for Guy to rescue him (note 2779 in Wiggins).

sins, Christ is reborn, divinely healed, and returns to heaven enthroned. Indeed, if the definition of fanfiction were expanded beyond the scope of this dissertation, the hagiographic tradition of *imitatio Christi*, where saints and those who imitate Christ's suffering are rewarded with eternal comfort in heaven, would arguably be the most popular and most sanctioned genre of "fanfiction."

But a Christian reading also emphasizes another important male-male relationship in the *Stanzaic Guy*. Guy's initial conversion, where he experiences remorse for past sins, is entirely for the sake of the Savior, who Himself suffered "with grimly woundes sare" (291). Guy regrets his violent deeds and decides "For His love ichil now wende / Barfot to mi lives ende / Mine sinnes forto bete" (304-6), emphasizing his suffering for Christ. Guy's death completes this medieval trope, as his suffering finds total relief in his direct access to heaven. In his hermitage, Guy is visited by the angel Michael, who first in a dream and again when he awakes tells him that when he dies in eight days, King Jesus will "deliver thee out of thi sorwe" and "To Heven thou schalt com Him to / And live with ous evermo / In joie withouten care" (3404-8). It is no surprise that this important revelation is brokered between men, as well, and Michael's promise that Guy will "live with ous" is so intimate and casual that it might almost read as an invitation for Guy to be roommates with him and Jesus.

Guy's submission to being known by the Divine and the reward of being loved is reflected in his chivalric relationships. The conversation with Michael, repeated both dreamt and awake, recalls the close intimacy of Tirry sleeping in Guy's lap, with one important difference: by heavenly entities, Guy is immediately recognized, no matter how thoroughly he is disguised. Having most recently come from the court where he did not

wish to be spied, even by his wife (3355-7), “Ac ther was non so wise of sight / That him ther knowe might / So misais he was and lene” (3358-60), Guy is finally, immediately, and perfectly known. If a hurt/comfort fanfiction’s appeal for the reader is in the witnessing of pain, the only entity able to fully understand his pain and perfectly comfort Guy would be Christ. Readers, too, take part in Guy’s relationships as witness to them, and may be encouraged to submit themselves to their own such relationship with Christ. It is the longing for that perfected, Christian, hurt/comforted, known/loved relationship that inspires a version of it between fictional chivalric men.

### **Gawain and the “Hurt” Body as Text**

Shifting to the *AMA*, I argue that a focus on the narrative importance of male vulnerability from hurt/comfort fanfiction reveals Gawain to be the emotional center of the *AMA*, as his interactions with men center around vulnerable expressions of pain, both physical and elegiac. In spite of extrinsic evidence making a “noble audience seem very improbable” for the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, Jutta Wurster argues that “intrinsic information in the poem does not suggest an audience that was provincial and uncultured, but rather one that was intellectually active and educated” (54). While this discrepancy may account for its comparatively low impact on the Arthurian cycle, the poem was certainly composed for an audience who understood warrior culture. Anne Baden-Daintree has noted a critical focus on the violence of the *AMA*, and with good reason: “Authors such as Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace and *Lazamon* were unflinching in enumerating acts of violence, but they did so with little attention to specific descriptive detail; the *Morte Arthure*, in contrast, provides many set-pieces that display an intimate engagement with

wounded bodies and the wielding of weapons” (“Visualising War,” 56). Elsewhere she describes the *AMA* as “obsessively interested in physicality, in physical prowess and wounding. The narrative involves extremes of violence and injury, but also superhuman achievement in overcoming the limitations of the human body. Blood is central to its operation, both in terms of the physical realities of the battlefield, and in terms of lineage, inheritance and loyalty” (“Kingship,” 89). Christine Chism calls war a “chivalric sacrament” in this poem, “where surpassing violence intersects with the structured materials of knightly display: insignia, armor, and body” (189). Scholars have also noted Sir Gawain’s importance to the narrative, unattached to the role of violence. Wolfgang Obst argues that Gawain’s adventures are structurally important to the formal center of the poem, while Christopher Dean places Gawain second in importance only to Arthur, but as a crucial foil, revealing what is admirable in a knight but unsuitable in a monarch.

Though Gawain’s relationship with Priamus begins antagonistically, it ends in friendship, and it begins by emphasizing Gawain’s first sight of Priamus, again engaging the male-on-male gaze. But the world of the *AMA* seems to purport a very different theory of male/male gaze: compared to the *Stanzaic Guy*, the gaze of man on man here is usually antagonistic (though it remains the means by which men come to know each other). Arthur’s view of the giant of Mont-Saint-Michel, for a prominent example, achieves a kind of anti-blazon, both in what he says to the giant in a threat (1059-73) and also the poet’s description of the despicable giant (1074-1103). Although we are treated to an extensive description of what Gawain sees when he first sees Priamus, and we are told that “Sir Gawain gliftes on the game with a glad will” (2525), this nevertheless results in a fight. It seems that, at least at first, Gawain and Priamus can only interact through violence,

antagonism, and wounding. Key to this interaction is how the text pays special attention in their violent exchange to the destruction of their protective garments. Gawain “Clef the knightes sheld clenlich in sonder” (2559) and Priamus

An alet enameld he oches in sonder,  
 Bristes the rerebrace with the brand rich,  
 Carves off at the coutere with the clene edge  
 Anentis the avawmbrace vailed with silver (2565-8).

Here the knights literally cut through each other’s defenses to where they are physically vulnerable to weapons (in their flesh). Without this violence, the knights have physical barriers between them, through which they are unable to be vulnerable enough towards each other to come to know the other: they do not open a dialogue until each is wounded by the other. It is the seriousness of these wounds that will cause them to rethink their antagonistic positions and come to know each other intimately through an extended healing scene.

Gawain and Priamus engage in dialogue only after they have mutually wounded each other, and when they return to Arthur’s camp, because of their wounds the other knights are tender with them and with each other. Gawain comforts his men:

‘Greve you not,’ quod Gawain, ‘for Goddes love of heven,  
 For this is but goesomer and given on erles;  
 Though my shoulder be shrede and my sheld thirled,  
 And the weld of mine arm workes a little,  
 This prisoner, Sir Priamus, that has perilous woundes,  
 Says that he has salves shall soften us bothen.’ (2686-91)

Beginning with a classically macho “I’m fine,” before he faints straightaway, Gawain is collected along with Priamus, and both are cared for by fellow knights who swoop in. What follows is a thorough description of how Gawain and Priamus have their injuries cared for and ultimately cured with Priamus’ vial of magical paradise water—and here the word “comfort” is used (2712). While Gawain is able to remove his own armor (2692-5), Priamus must be helped down from his horse by knights who “hentes him in armes” (2699) and remove his armor (2700-3). Some attention is given to the suffering of Gawain (“In all the body of that bold is no blood leved!” [2697]) but most of the passage is focused on tending Priamus, who of course wears on him the magical salve that has the power to cure them (2705-9). The language where their wounds are tended to is intimate and rich with description, relishing in focus on the results of their mutual violence:

They uncover that corse with full clene handes,  
 With clere water a knight clenens their woundes,  
 Keled them kindly and comforted their hertes;  
 And when the carves were clene they cledde them again. (2710-3)

The “corse” is further uncovered, rendered naked, with attention to clean hands and clear water used to wash the body. Describing Priamus and Gawain as bodies removes their agency here, leaving them literally at the quite tender mercies of the fellow knights—not healers, nurses, or medical professionals, but fellow knights, their martial equals—who care for them. Both of them are mortally wounded and their pain is taken seriously, and so is their healing, but because the narrative needs them to be healthy, they are healed immediately by Priamus’ magic waters, and after eating they arm themselves and make plans to attack the Romans again (2716). As Chism remarks here, the “battle results not in



mutual death but, miraculously, in chivalric solidarity,” in effect replacing Priamus’ envenomed sword with his magical healing remedy (222). The result of Gawain and Priamus’ battle and mutual injury, and mutual comfort and healing, results in Priamus’ conversion and means that Priamus is on Arthur’s side in the next battle (2745-6). Chism sees this as the “dangerous allure” of battle: offering the “possibility of a constructive transformation that draws the knights together as members of a warrior class” (222). Chivalric brotherhood, she argues, requires ongoing war, but I argue that what this scene makes clear is as much the battle as the wounds resulting from the battle. The injury and healing is what allows Gawain and Priamus to grow intimately closer together, even if it is the violence and martial prowess that allows men to recognize each other as equals. In this case, their shared vulnerability as much as their shared violence allows Gawain to recognize Priamus as a potential ally.

Reading violence as the currency of masculine intimacy establishes Gawain’s fights as emotional centers of the poem. The physical closeness of his fight with Mordred may or may not reflect the closeness of their relationship, but Mordred’s mourning of Gawain’s death afterwards certainly reveals the pattern of violence, vulnerability, and a deepened relationship found in hurt/comfort fanfiction. Mordred’s betrayal is personal, so Gawain seeks out Mordred single-mindedly, “among all his bernas” (3772), and addresses him vehemently, ““Thou shall be dede and undone for thy derf deedes, / Or I shall die this day, if destainy worthe!”” (3778-9). So personal is this battle that Gawain is enraged to the point of tempting fate, which fate answers as an army of sixty thousand surrounding Gawain and his men, cutting him off both from personal vengeance on Mordred and protection from the rest of Arthur’s army (3787). As Gawain is wounded fighting this army, we are treated

to a rare gnomic passage from our narrator, declaring “Ich a wye may be ware by wreke of another!” [“Each man must beware of vengeance wreaked on another”] (3839). Gawain and Mordred’s battle is a knock-down, drag-out one, as each wounds the other seriously—Gawain gets in one hit with erotic significance, cutting Mordred “on the short ribbes a shaftmond large,” which is glossed as “six inches deep” (3843). But their entire fight is very physically personal and very ugly: “they shift and shove” (3847) and Gawain “gird to the gome” “[leapt on the man]” (3850); they attack each other, in the end, with a “short knife” (3852) and a “trenchand knife” (3856), weapons which require them to be within intimate striking distance of one another. This is not the only fight that happens so closely and so viscerally, as Arthur’s fight with Mordred after Gawain’s death—inspired by this as much as Mordred’s betrayal—is equally close.<sup>92</sup> While the intimacy of this violence is reflective of the fractured intimacy between the characters, which the hurt/comfort narrative utilizes to render characters vulnerable to each other and to the reader, it is not until Gawain is dead that we truly see Mordred and Arthur grieving, weeping, and “hurt.”

For both Arthur and Mordred, mourning Gawain is presented as the truly painful experience they each undergo, as violence inflicted upon a loved one’s body is given more narrative weight than even their own physical wounds. Death, for them, is the only comfort—and not the Christian comfort that Sir Guy experiences. Vaccaro’s term

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<sup>92</sup> When Mordred’s treachery is revealed, Arthur’s reaction is full of violent emotion, “for brethe at his herte / And for this booteless bale all his blee changed” (3557-8) and he swears revenge while weeping (3561). The fact that he is betrayed by “the man that I most traisted” is of course the worst part (3569). Arthur’s address to Mordred, ““Turn, traitour untrew, thee tides no better; / By grete God, thou shall die with dint of my handes! / Thee shall rescue no renk ne riches in erthe!”” has Arthur demanding that Mordred make eye contact with him, and he desires enough physical proximity that he can kill him with his own hands: a closeness which mirrors the nearness of their relationship and the nearness of the betrayal to Arthur (4227-9). “A shaftmonde large” is repeated to tell us how Arthur stabs Mordred in the shoulder six inches deep, and straightaway Mordred gets him back, as Arthur is “fiched in the flesh an half-foot large”—another six inches (4232, 4239).

homoamory is particularly useful here to discuss the nature of these close male/male relationships. As Vaccaro reminds us, “the powerful and intimate love between two men appears in a multitude of texts as far back into the deeps of time as we can glance and often at the moment of a hero’s final departure,” and he notes that love between men is most often, or perhaps best, depicted at a moment of mutual pain, “at the moment of a hero’s final departure,” presumably, from the object of his homoamorous affections (2). While permanent death is not usually an element of hurt/comfort fanfictions,<sup>93</sup> the use of pain as an inspiration for male characters to reexamine their relationships with other male characters and thereby grow closer together, as well as to inspire the reader to experience that shared pain viscerally and cathartically with the writer and with the characters, remains relevant here. If Arthur’s mourning of Gawain, canonical and even canonizing, is not exactly unusual in the medieval Arthurian context, Mordred’s certainly is, as Gawain’s death causes him to question his entire betrayal alone among the medieval Arthurian canon, but both engage with the tropes of hurt/comfort fanfictions and can be read as such.

If the function of “hurt” (the experience of pain) allows two men to exchange intimate knowledge of each other, in the *AMA*, this is taken to the logical extreme of character death before anyone has a change of heart. While Mordred’s motives for betrayal are hardly ever clear beyond a desire for power, in the *AMA* they are even muddier, as Mordred clearly articulates his love for the very people he fights against. Mordred’s reaction to killing Gawain is the most surprising burst of emotion in the entire poem, which lends it a certain kind of emphasis. Indeed, Gawain’s death is the most widely mourned in

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<sup>93</sup> Such a work might be tagged with something like “death fic” or feature a Warning for a Major Character Death, in addition to being tagged for “hurt/comfort,” which might explore other characters’ reactions to the death. An author might riff on the well-known fandom concept of “hurt/comfort” by tagging such a piece “all hurt no comfort.”

the *AMA*. When Gawain, in a small boat with a small troop, forces the beach, even the narrator gets involved, commenting “my sorrow is the more!” (3729). In his speech about Gawain, Mordred tells a companion, ““Had thou knowen him... Thou wolde have dole for his dede the dayes of thy life”” (3882-5). This indicates he knew Gawain well enough to mourn him, and even love him, since he praises him thoroughly. The narrative names them “of sib-blood” (3891), but is diplomatically unspecific about whether the two are brothers, cousins, or both: the closeness of Mordred and Gawain’s relationship is more important here than Mordred’s possibly incestuous conception. Mordred’s violence results in sadness: “teres let he fall,” and he “Went weepand away and weryes the stounde / That ever his werdes were wrought such wandreth to work! / When he thought on this thing it thirled his herte” (3888-90). Like the comforter in a hurt/comfort narrative, Mordred experiences emotionally the physical pain Gawain felt in death, so that pain is “shared” between them as he meditates on Gawain. Mordred is indeed so distraught by his actions here that he begins to regret the betrayal and political coup in the first place: “When that renayed renk remembered himselven / Of reverence and riotes of the Round Table, / He romed and repent him of all his rewth works” (3892-4). Violence here forces Mordred to acknowledge his meaningful relationship with Gawain, the Round Table knights, and Arthur himself, and in response he flees. Just as in a fanfiction hurt/comfort narrative, Mordred uses the shared pain and his newly vulnerable relationship with the dead Gawain to re-examine his relationships with other men: with Gawain, with Arthur, and with the knights of the Round Table. We might argue he learns something and even has a change of heart, like Priamus—but unlike Priamus, his knowledge comes too late.

Gawain’s death triggers a change in Arthur’s attitude towards him, as well. The

sight of “Sir Gawain the good in his gay armes” lying dead, with “His banners braiden down, beten of gules, / His brand and his brode sheld all bloody berunnen,” devastates Arthur, who before has not shown any signs of shrinking before the effects of violence (3943-6). The narrator tells us that *this* death is the worst thing he has ever felt—this of a man whose nephew betrayed him and stole his wife: “Was never our seemlich king so sorrowful in herte, / Ne that sank him so sad but that sight one” (3947-8). Arthur’s great sadness prompts physical interaction with Gawain, as he

Kneeles down to the corse and caught it in armes,  
 Castes up his umbrere and kisses him soon,  
 Lookes on his eye-liddes that locked were fair,  
 His lippes like to the lede and his lire fallowed. (3951-4)

Arthur then kisses Gawain until his own beard is “bloody berunnen” (3971). By repeatedly insisting on the physicality of Arthur’s process of mourning, referencing the blood, kissing, and embracing, the poet draws the reader in to the experience as well. Additionally, Arthur ascribes such importance to Gawain that every success is attributed to Gawain having been with him, and ultimately, Arthur knows he will be unsuccessful against Mordred now that Gawain is dead. Arthur’s men urge him that it is unfit for him to “weep als a woman” (3978), but Arthur insists on his right to experience and show this emotion: “Was never sorrow so soft that sank to my herte” (3983), he says, and “Down kneeles the king and cries full loud” (3987). He insists Gawain is “sakless” (innocent) twice (3986, 3992) and describes Gawain’s death as “full sib to myself,” or close to him (3984), occurring as a result of Arthur’s own sin, perhaps referring to Mordred’s birth (3986). Arthur collects the blood-soaked dirt beneath Gawain’s body and places it in a helmet like a holy relic (3993-

6, 4009-10). Arthur even makes a vow that he will never allow himself to rule again until “thy dede, my dere, be duly revenged!” speaking directly to the dead Gawain and calling him “dear” (4006). Baden-Daintree reads this scene as a common motif, as “the movement from notionally private weeping to public revenge is marked by an intimate engagement with the dead body which is to be avenged. In the heroic tradition, battlefield deaths often involve a disturbing tactility whereby the bloodied corpse becomes not only an emblem for the enactment of vengeance but also the means of continued intimate interaction” (“Kingship,” 88). But, in a way, Arthur revises his knowledge of Gawain as a result of his pain. While Gawain is certainly significant up to this point, it takes his violent death for both Mordred and Arthur to recognize his personal importance to them—and to the narrative, for of course Arthur is unsuccessful without Gawain, and Mordred and Arthur do both join him in death. The transference of pain from Gawain’s physical wounds to Arthur’s emotional distress does inspire a reexamination of their relationship, as Arthur suddenly magnifies Gawain’s importance to him.

### **Conclusion: A Theory of Hurt/Comfort Hermeneutics**

Christianity figures as a backdrop to the hurt/comfort expression in medieval romance, as the perfect representation of ultimate suffering and ultimate comfort are expressed in Christ’s death and resurrection, which are appropriate for the medieval Christian audience to glorify and map onto vulnerable male relationships in the romance genre. Guy and Gawain are both saint-like, because Guy is rewarded for his suffering with the comfort of Heaven, and Gawain’s body and blood are treated as holy relics by Arthur after his death. For a Christian audience, then, there is less shame in emphasizing or even

glorifying earthly pain and suffering. Scholars such as Jessica Brantley and Mary Carruthers have established that medieval monastics read devotional texts personally and closely, using reading as a focus for religious affect. Anna Wilson's dissertation has connected medieval devotional reading with fandom practices and argues for the "affective hermeneutics" of fan readers to be understood on the same terms as medieval affective piety. The *Stanzaic Guy* and the *AMA* represent not only fanfictions of their respective romance canons, but also derive elements from the most important story to Christian audiences. Perhaps hurt/comfort fanfiction is a kind of secularization of this culturally pervasive narrative, a familiar anchor through which the reader can feel viscerally and intimately connected to the text. More likely it is just one approach to injecting homosocial masculinity with intimacy and eroticism as written for "feminine tastes" but maintaining appropriate expressions for characters defined by their masculinity.

While hurt makes the body textual, comfort, as an attempt to understand another's pain, is more illusory and disembodied, drawing the reader's feelings into the affective economy. Hurt/comfort narratives repurpose masculine tools of violence to reshape male characters through their intimate interactions with other men in an appropriately masculine way—often as a substitute for otherwise desired homoeroticism, which might therefore better be understood as homoamory. This is channeled into the shameful but pleasurable, even cathartic, witnessing of pain that fanfiction readers experience when reading hurt/comfort, whose emotional closeness is traceable to how medieval readers experienced the same kinds of narratives and hints at a secular version of medieval affective piety. As with affective piety, that reduced aesthetic distance between reader and text becomes a hermeneutical tool for understanding texts.

By way of a conclusion, I argue that reading medieval romances as hurt/comfort fanfiction reveals two readings: The first, not exactly new, is that intimate, physical, and erotic relationships between men are acceptable and even exemplary within structures of masculinity and homosociality, but only through an economy of hurt and comfort as we see in fanfiction. Second, I argue that the aesthetic closeness seen between readers and writers to the characters in hurt/comfort fanfiction (where fans feel intense emotions, sympathetic pain, and experience their own desires to be comforted), should be applied to the medieval readers and writers of texts like the *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick* and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, who ascribe such emotional intensity and meaning to violence and pain experienced by fictional characters. These very violent, martial texts, therefore, which modern readers are sometimes tempted to distance themselves from, become texts about intimacy and vulnerability that were read intimately and vulnerably by their target audiences, for the emotional and even physical reactions they inspired. This theory of hurt/comfort does not replace conventional ways of reading masculine martial relationships in romance—through feudalism, Christian duty, or through family, for example—but it intensifies them.

Read as fanfictions that alter their source texts in a personal way, the *Stanzaic Guy* and the *AMA* poets take the heteronormative, homosocial culture of appropriate male-male interaction through violence and use it to emphasize intimacy and mutual knowledge among men. The martial Guy's disguise as a humble pilgrim is all but impenetrable to his friend Tirry except in moments of violent exploits or mutual suffering and comfort. Gawain and Priamus change from enemies to allies as a result of shared violence, wounding, and healing, and of course Arthur and Mordred question everything as a response to Gawain's



death. A hurt/comfort reading highlights cases where violence, pain, and reactions to the pain (or death) of another increases knowledge of each other between men, which allows an exchange of intimate knowledge not only between the characters but between the authors and readers, as well.

## Chapter 4. Erotics of Kink:

### BDSM Fanfiction and the Rules of *Fin Amor* in Marie de France and Malory

*Le Morte D'Arthur* by [knightprisoner1473](#)

Arthurian Mythology & Related Fandoms

Rated: Mature

Warnings for Rape/Non-Con, Canon-Typical Violence

Relationships: Lancelot/Guinevere, Guinevere/Arthur, Lancelot & Guinevere & Arthur,  
Lancelot/Elaine, Lancelot/Angst, Gawain/Various

Tagged: Modern AU, Battles, Lancelot Apologism, BDSM, Longfic, Pining, Unhappy  
Ending, Top!Guinevere, Non-Con, Everyone Dies, I'm Going To Hell For This

*Lanval* by [Marieismoi](#)

Arthurian Mythology & Related Fandoms, Breton Lais

Rated: Teen

Relationships: Author Chose Not to Use Warnings

Lanval/Lady, Lanval/Guinevere, Arthur/Guinevere, Lanval/Misery

Tagged: Angst with a Happy Ending, Poetry, Light BDSM, Humiliation, Bottom!Lanval,  
Pining, Magic, Commissioned Work, Threat of Dub-Con

When in the *Prose Lancelot* Sir Lancelot thinks he has offended Guinevere, he says, “My lady, I beg your mercy; punish me as you will,” introducing and even inviting sadomasochism into the context of courtly love. The narrative emphasizes Guinevere’s control over Lancelot even as she forgives him when she replies “as though she were sure that he could not escape being hers” (II.143). This scene is important to establishing Lancelot as her knight, a kind of possession which she will in a later scene transfer (temporarily) to Sir Galehaut: “Galehaut, I give you this knight forevermore, except for what I have previously had of him.” (II.146). Ownership of Lancelot is emphasized through transaction, as Guinevere gives “this knight” to Galehaut: not his service, his loyalty, or any one part of him, but his whole self. The “except for what I have previously had of him” is ambiguous, but might refer to the kiss they shared, or Lancelot’s love more totally. In this power move, Galehaut and Guinevere, who share a desire for Lancelot, broker an exchange of him between them, but only Guinevere has the power to keep him

or give him away.<sup>94</sup> Guinevere exercises other powers over Lancelot, as he submits to physical pain, jealousy, rebukes, and humiliation from Guinevere throughout the *Prose Lancelot*.

It is not only in the *Prose Lancelot*, however, that this relationship dynamic occurs, since Lancelot and Guinevere's illicit relationship is key to much of the romance Arthurian tradition. Lancelot's pining and his vulnerability to Guinevere's jealously motivated rebukes are accompanied by a clear power inequality expressed in, and in some ways key to, their relationship. Indeed, the element of the relationship that is most consistent across these versions is the inherent power imbalance between them. Guinevere's total control over Lancelot may read as embarrassing or even "ugly,"<sup>95</sup> but I argue that the relationship imbalance is what makes the story of Lancelot and Guinevere all the more titillating for its readers. An example of medieval audiences loving the Lancelot/Guinevere story with, or even because of, all of its problems, is found in Dante Alighieri's story of Francesca, the woman in the *Inferno* who relates how reading the tale of Lancelot with her lover led to her adultery. In the same way that "love overcame" Lancelot,

"Per piu fiata li occhi ci sospinse

Quella lettura, e scolorocci il viso;

Ma sola un punto fu quell che ci vinse.

Quando leggemmo il disiato riso

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<sup>94</sup> This reflects the motif of the exchange or gift of (female) lovers or wives is a trope that appears in medieval stories of perfect male friendships, as pointed out by Kłosowska. Even though Kłosowska argues that Lancelot and Galehaut are the "perfect male friendship," and I would hardly disagree, this particular trope interestingly allows for a reading of Guinevere and Galehaut as the heterosocial friends who exchange between them the sexual partner, Lancelot (143).

<sup>95</sup> While Sianne Ngai's work on *Ugly Feelings* tackles very different emotions than I explore in this chapter, I take as foundational her claim that those feelings which are deemed "ugly" or "problematic" in a society, particularly by capitalist processes which they have the power to harm, have wider political implications (3-5).

Esser basciato da cotanto amante,  
 Questi, che ma da me non dia diviso,  
 La bocca mi bascio tutto tremante.  
 Galeotto fu 'l libro e chi lo scrisse:  
 Quell giorno piu non vi veggemmo avante.”

[“And time and time again that reading led / our eyes to meet, and made our faces pale / and yet one point alone defeated us. / When we had read how the desired smile / was kissed by one who was so true a lover, / this one, who never shall be parted from me, / while all his body trembled, kissed my mouth. / A Gallehaut indeed, that book and he / who wrote it, too; that day we read no more.”] (V.128-138)<sup>96</sup>

It is literally the book, acting as “A Gallehaut” between them, which “led” Francesca and her lover’s eyes to meet. Once they “had read how the desired smile / was kissed” in the story, they translate the kiss into action, into a kind of roleplay. Francesca and her lover thereby enact the reader/writer elision<sup>97</sup> as they turn from reading and enjoying the French *Prose Lancelot* to rewriting it through their enjoyment of each other. Though physically enacted, I understand this as a kind of fanfiction, especially since it is ultimately figured in the writing of Dante. As Francesca is moved by the noble, lustful, yet tragic love story of Lancelot and Guinevere (matching the descriptions of love that can wind one up in the second circle of hell, V.100-7), so in turn the narrator is moved to “pity” (V.72, 117, 140) for the lovers, demonstrating sympathy for them in spite of their obvious condemnation.

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<sup>96</sup> Mandelbaum’s translation.

<sup>97</sup> As I have discussed in the preceding chapters, I follow Barthes, Fish, and others who theorize reading and writing as part of the same processes.

The narrator immortalizes the tragedy of the lovers rather than condemns them, at least from a secular perspective, because though the narrator pities them they are still in Hell, and this passage locates the emotional fascination with the problematic<sup>98</sup> love of Lancelot and Guinevere in reader/authors both real and imagined.

Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship is shameful because it is unlawful, but clearly enjoyable to read about because it is so consistently rewritten. This relationship is arguably the driving conflict in the Arthurian canon since Chrétien de Troyes, and because it is popularly continued, it is therefore a conflict that many Arthurian narratives (via their readers/authors) seem to enjoy throughout the later Middle Ages. In works such as Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, the focus on Lancelot outstrips that of other characters, even King Arthur himself, and though Chrétien, the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* author(s), and Malory ultimately condemn Lancelot and Guinevere's adultery from political and religious perspectives, Lancelot's love of Guinevere remains a beautiful, noble love, worth rewriting and rereading. While Lancelot and Guinevere may be the gold standard for "courtly love," they are not its only representations.

In this chapter I compare Malory's Lancelot and Guinevere with Marie de France's Lanval and his Lady to explore the medieval romance interest in courtly loves that contain a decidedly kinky element. I recognize these relationships as adhering to a script, indicated by the *fin amor* guidance of Andreas Capellanus and Geoffroi de Charny, which in a modern BDSM context would be called a scene. The courtly "scenes" presented by Marie and Malory are structured by elements of dominance and submission where the male partner's role is one of submission to the desires and demands of his female lover. It is

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<sup>98</sup> In the sense of literally problem-causing, from the fall of the Round Table to the death of Arthur, not to mention opening up the possibility of the damnation of its readers as in Dante.

important to the continued existence of these relationships that they be concealed from public view, which recalls Sara Ahmed's definition of shame as that which desires concealment (103-4). The dominant woman is a key feature of this kinky heterosexual relationship, which may have been read as especially transgressive—and especially kinky—in the Middle Ages because of how it reverses kyriarchal power structures. These issues of power and consent sometimes play out in rape fantasy, an element of BDSM which, in *Le Morte D'Arthur* and *Lanval* as in fanfiction, threatens the sexual integrity of male characters, further positioning them as under the control of dominant female forces. I conclude with a discussion of how humiliation is integral to the *fin amor* script, and especially to Lancelot's and Lanval's service to their respective lovers. Humiliation figures here as a liberation from shame, putting a “kink” in heteronormative sexualities.

Scholarly attention to the sadomasochistic in medieval literature tends to focus on hagiographic texts and has not been applied to romances in the same way fanfiction theory highlights elements of fantasy BDSM in the genre of romance. While it may be tempting to generalize medieval ideologies as sexually prescriptive,<sup>99</sup> reading *Le Morte D'Arthur* and *Lanval* as engaging with fanfiction BDSM reveals medieval enjoyment of kink, at least when safely contained within *fantasy*, or imaginative spaces such as romance. A kinky fanfiction reading of Marie de France's *Lanval* and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* positions courtly love as fantasy kink, unsettling our own understandings of heteronormativity, erotics, and shame in the Middle Ages. In the imaginative space of

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<sup>99</sup> Albrecht Classen's introduction to the tome *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times* uses as his own starting place the “entire penance system of the Catholic Church” which “powerfully illustrate[s . . .] what people did in private and what their fantasies aimed for, at least according to the clerical writers who labored hard on the topic of sexuality as a human vice, or rather sin that deserves to be punished as soon as it was practiced for any other purposes but to create a child” (2).

fanfiction, the elements of *roleplay*, of literally performing a role as either submissive or dominant in a scene, which are important to BDSM in modern practice, shift to the author/reader. The characters in kinky fanfiction are, or at least, can be, utterly serious in their dominance or submission: Lancelot and Lanval are hardly “playing” a submissive role. This leaves the author, reader, and rewriter to “play,” to negotiate erotic power throughout the text and through the very activity of rewriting. In this final chapter, therefore, I argue that fanfiction itself figures a kind of power exchange similar to kink.

In exploring *kink* I refer mostly to *BDSM*, or encounters that include some component of bondage and discipline (BD), dominance and submission (DS), or sadism and masochism (SM). Although commonly used by scholars and theorists, I try to avoid the term “sadomasochism” as representative of all of these elements, as much to avoid the specificity to the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century origins of the term as to provide for a broader understanding of kink that does not always or necessarily involve an erotic exchange of pain. The key practice of BDSM includes a mutually agreed-upon kink between partners, often referred to as a scene, though it may extend beyond the confines of one performative moment. To differentiate BDSM from abuse, torture, or coercion, all parties must consent to their involvement and recognize the scene as bounded by a script or rules, usually predetermined, and their role as performative.

In the Middle Ages, proponents of courtly love such as Andreas Capellanus and Geoffroi de Charny propose structured rules of *fin amor* which at least conceptually bear some resemblance to the structured guidelines of “safe, sane, and consensual” BDSM. Kink expressions in fanfiction (as opposed to in actual practice) emphasize even further that the exercise is an erotic fantasy, positioned against the material world and enacted through

beloved characters: because the world and characters are fantastical and already known to their audiences, the fanfiction author can focus on constructing complex erotic encounters. The “dominatrix” who is interested in the control and often the suffering of her partner and the erotics of his humiliation are uncomfortable but titillating “fantasies” that are enjoyable to read, write, and re-write. An important caveat is that these “kinks” do not necessarily translate to interests in real life, for which the clearest example is rape fantasy, a kink that may fall under the subcategory of BDSM. While medieval sources reveal definitions of rape that differ from modern ones, it has always been a criminal offense, but sadly remains a subject with a great deal of potential for ambiguity.<sup>100</sup> Imaginative media, whether medieval romance or fanfiction, is one place where writers can play with these gray areas while exerting control over them, and some even revel in the exploration of sexual violence that remains safely in a fantasy realm.<sup>101</sup> While medieval authors and readers would not have used the terms *kink* or *BDSM*, their culture’s sexual practices and fantasies about sex were more variable and at times subversive than standard penitential views on sexuality may allow. By viewing medieval romance texts through the lens of kink, then, I see how both medieval and modern fanfiction authors queer, or “put a kink in,” widely held beliefs about heteronormativity when the focus is on their kinky scenarios.<sup>102</sup>

The practice of fanfiction—of rewriting beloved canons, whether medieval or

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<sup>100</sup> In the Middle Ages the crime of *raptus* was largely about seizure of property, among which women were considered. See, in addition to further discussion below, Catherine Batt, “Malory and Rape”; Suzanne Edwards, “The Rhetoric of Rape and the Politics of Gender”; Alison Gulley’s collection on *Teaching Rape in the Medieval Literature Classroom*.

<sup>101</sup> Compare, for example, the wildly popular fanfiction-based *Fifty Shades of Grey*, whose portrayal of fantasy rather than real BDSM includes elements of consent violation that BDSM communities disavow as unsafe (Harman and Jones).

<sup>102</sup> Here kink almost takes the position of queer desire, as in Robin Anne Reid’s “Slashers’ Queer Practices” where she argues for “considering queerness in opposition to normativity rather than homosexuality in opposition to heterosexuality” (463). I explore queer in opposition to heterosexuality in Chapter 2, but here, that which is not-straight becomes “kinked” rather than “queered.”



modern—is already a kind of power exchange. Individual medieval authors, including Marie de France and Thomas Malory, often found success in obscuring their innovative tactics through claiming inspiration from and deference to another authoritative text—such as Marie’s Breton *lais* and Malory’s “French book,” but their own innovations make clear who is *really* in charge of the scene. Marie de France’s twelve surviving Breton *Lais* were composed in the last half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Written in Anglo-Norman, most likely in the court of Henry II Plantagenet, the *Lais* are considered a single collection today because of their compilation in British Library Harley MS 978, though they were probably composed separately and over some length of time. As a singular work, *Lanval* may have been the most popular, as four French manuscript versions of it survive (more than any of Marie’s other *lais* except *Yonec*), and two in Middle English (Waters 25). Scholars have searched exhaustively for sources and analogues of Marie de France’s *lais* and have been mostly successful, and even Marie greatly de-emphasizes her role in tale-invention: “L’aventure d’un autre lai, / Cum ele avient, vus cunterai,” Marie begins her tale [“I shall tell you the adventure of another lay, / just as it happened”] (1-2).<sup>103</sup> But in the Prologue to her *Lais*, Marie de France paradoxically points to the *innovation* inherent in her practice of working from an authority:

Pur ceo comencai a penser  
 De aukune bone estoire faire  
 E de latin en romaunz traire;  
 Mais ne me fust guaires de pris:  
 Itant se sunt alters entremis.

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<sup>103</sup> I use Claire M. Waters for the Old French text and translations of Marie, unless otherwise indicated.

Des lais pensai k'oï aveie.

[“...I began to think / of making some good story / and translating from Latin to French. / But it would hardly be worth it to me: / So many others have undertaken it. / I thought of the *lais* that I had heard.”] (28-33)

Because “so many others” had merely translated from Latin to romance languages, the best way to make storytelling worth her while, and ironically, to be innovative, was to transmit the otherwise unknown *lais* of the Bretons that she had received aurally. Hanning and Ferrante, in pointing out how Marie constantly reminds us that her works “are stories she has heard and recast,” indicate that an appeal to an authoritative text was a way to stress difference and innovation (21). They also tell us “[i]t is not unusual for medieval writers to call attention to themselves and to the authority of their versions...because for the most part they were dealing with material that existed in other versions, and they were anxious to have their audience appreciate what they had brought to it” (21). This seems to be the closest medieval romance comes to the modern concept of originality: the knowledge of authoritative texts that yields an innovative retelling can be something “original enough” to put one’s name on.

All we know for certain about Sir Thomas Malory is according to what he tells us in his authorial inscriptions: he finished the Middle English *Le Morte D’Arthur* in the ninth year of the reign of Edward IV (c. 1470) and was a prisoner who wanted his readers to pray for him. In some sense, Malory is the fanfiction poster-boy, who reminds us of his authoritative sources while fundamentally undermining them at every turn to emphasize his own interests. Fans often rewrite or expand upon their object of fandom in the same ways Malory redacted the Arthurian legend in *Le Morte D’Arthur*, so Malory’s *Morte* is

an obvious choice to discuss in terms of “medieval fanfiction” more than simply because he is working from a large body of already popular tradition. As Dorsey Armstrong explains, “While Malory often closely paraphrases or, on some occasions even almost directly translates his sources into fifteenth-century English...he also makes important additions and revisions to the source material. What he chooses to omit from his sources seems in some instances more significant than what he chooses to retain” (3-4). Malory’s is a quest to re-codify the Arthurian legend personally, to redact what he considered to be irrelevant components and expand others in ways that demonstrate his control over the material.<sup>104</sup> Marie, too, was writing in a romance tradition using often well-established characters, plots, and scenarios, and contributing her desired aesthetics to this tradition. The practice of negotiating a scene in BDSM, where, as Sarah Salih reminds us in her discussion of medieval marriage as sadomasochistic, the submissive partner “takes responsibility for staging his or her domination” (134), figures as an illustration of this kind of rewriting, as both Marie and Thomas Malory are submissive to the dominant writings upon which their own texts are based, but they also control the limits to which those texts exercise authority over their own retelling.

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<sup>104</sup> What he considered to be important was Lancelot. Where most other characters and events are redacted from Malory’s several sources, Sir Lancelot’s heroism and dramatic impact are expanded by Malory, according to editor Stephen H. A. Shepherd (Malory 703). Lancelot’s difference, and applicability to fanfiction, is not that he is perfect, desirable, and virtuous—as almost all romance heroes and heroines are—but that he is all these things and linked to the author, as Malory’s clearly favorite knight. John Steinbeck, even going so far as to refer to Lancelot as “Malory-Lancelot” (305), believed that Lancelot was a “self-character” for Malory, a character with whom he identified: “All of the perfections he knew went into this character, all of the things of which he thought himself capable. But, being an honest man he found faults in himself, faults of vanity, faults of violence, faults even of disloyalty, and these would naturally find their way into his dream character” (Steinbeck 304). Lumiansky’s source study again and again emphasizes Malory’s preferment of Lancelot, particularly by taking notable exploits and characteristics of Sir Gawain and giving them to Lancelot (6, 87-8).

### **Kinky Fantasy in Medieval Romance**

Elements of kink are all over medieval romances. Though I contend they are more consistently integral to the Lancelot/Guinevere relationship and Lanval's relationship with his unnamed Lady, titillating BDSM elements are not confined to these stories or these characters. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, of course, features a married woman preying sexually upon a recumbent Sir Gawain, even declaring that she will tie him to the bed and have her wicked way with him if he does not surrender: ““Bot true vus may schape, / I schal bynde yow in your bedde” [“Unless we form a truce, I shall bind you in your bed”] (1210-1). Far from shocked or confused, Sir Gawain's reply, ““Me schal worpe at your wille, and þat me wel lykez”” [“I shall yield to your will, and I like that a lot”], suggests he is amenable, at least as far as he is happy to submit himself to the proceedings in general (1214). Of course, this is only a part of the verbal sparring that marks all of their bedroom encounters, and the narrative even indicates that they are joking (1217), since their sexually explicit discussions are never realized beyond the kisses they exchange. The fact that it remains an imagined or fantasy potential—even within a fantasy work—shows medieval authors recognizing fantasy kink.

Malory also provides other kinky relationships aside from Lancelot and Guinevere's. While most appearances of “shame” in *Le Morte D'Arthur* are a “forfeiture of worship” from the Pentecostal Oath (77), shame also figures as an emotion one actively chooses to experience, usually for something (or someone) that one loves. For example, the knight Pelleas endures “the most shamfullyste wyse” that his lady, Ettard, can think of to bring him to her only so she can scorn him (102). Their relationship cycle of desire and rebuke recalls Lancelot and Guinevere's, and features Pelleas even offering to “be her

prisoner...for I wolde desire no more, what paynes that ever I had, so that I myght have a syght of hir dayly” (103). Ettard indicates her lack of interest in Pelleas by sleeping with Gawain,<sup>105</sup> so Pelleas goes to his deathbed. The lady Ettard is condemned by the narrative for this, when the Lady of the Lake Nyneve tells her, “ye oughte to be ashamed for to murther suche a knyght” (106). We might expect an imbalance of love to be embarrassing, since the woman Pelleas loves most sleeps with the man she thinks has killed him, illustrating the love as clearly not reciprocated, but, as in Pelleas’ case, defying that embarrassment for love—or, as we will explore at the end of this chapter, embracing humiliation as a demonstration of love—is an effective enough strategy that Ettard is the one upon whom shame is ultimately heaped.

Another place to find medieval kink is in artistic representations of the “mounted Aristotle,” where the great intellectual Aristotle is figured as being literally ridden (on all fours, as a horse) by the seductive Phyllis (see Figures 4 - 6). Drew Daniel describes the medieval portrayal of Aristotle in these images as an “S&M bottom engaged in a brisk session of pony-play with a rampant Phyllis” (173). Susan Smith explains the mounted Aristotle, and themes like it, as the *topoi* of the Power of Woman: cautionary tales that warn against said power and revel in, if anything, the carnivalesque of the reversed “natural” order of male supremacy. Marilyn Desmond even goes so far as to argue that “the ‘mounted Aristotle’ requires no narrative explanation to operate as an erotic image” (15). Patricia Ingham, in her consideration of how the many artistic versions of the mounted Aristotle image represent that copies of copies could in fact qualify as “new compositions in all their adulterated glory,” shows

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<sup>105</sup> Compare Gawain’s canonical interest in women that is integral to his character as discussed in Chapter 2.

how rapidly the creative adulterations of poets and artists venture beyond the proscribed limits of art... The insistence that human compositions constitute ‘adulterated’ productions...enables as much as it limits... And yet...no amount of contempt for perverse productions could stem the tide. (Ingham 85)

It is in terms of these “adulterated” and “perverse”<sup>106</sup> productions that I wish to discuss medieval romance composition and consumption. Viewing a scene like this as fan-produced, as intentionally and appreciably derivative, reminds us that medieval people continued to get some enjoyment out of these images that was more than just a joke at the inversion of power or a caution against women in general. There’s definitely something erotic in these images, something desirous and even titillating—in a fantasy context—that marks a specifically erotic humiliation, in the way her hand rests on his backside or in the riding crop she holds. Is Phyllis enjoying herself? Judging by her little smile, probably. Is Aristotle? Hard to tell with the bridle in his teeth. Are we, the viewer, supposed to enjoy this image, or just laugh at it (nervously, shamefully) and recognize that women are dangerous when holding the reins? At least in courtly love, as especially Andreas Capellanus will tell you, women in power *are* dangerous—but therein, perhaps, lies the appeal, as Kristina Hildebrand argues: “Power, in a patriarchy, is sexy” (138). Phyllis certainly ticks all the boxes of what modern practitioners would call bondage, dominance, pain, and humiliation, whether or not all medieval artists and viewers considered these to have erotic connotations. Whatever terms we might use to describe it, and to whatever

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<sup>106</sup> I follow not only Ingham here but also Romana Byrne’s use of “perverse” to refer “not to a pathological status but to a celebration of the intentionally non-normative” (14).

degree medieval viewers considered images like these to be erotic,<sup>107</sup> that BDSM piques some interest in medieval romance is relevant to how BDSM appears in the niche genre of modern fanfiction.

“BDSM fanfiction” as an idea might be as far from the medieval imagination as internet social media. But scholars have used theories of sadomasochism to great effect in exploring the pleasure-in-pain experienced by martyrs and saints in the medieval hagiographic tradition.<sup>108</sup> Tison Pugh has argued that in *SGGK*, the poet plays with genre and sexuality “as a queering strategy designed to trap Gawain and the reader sadomasochistically into a renewed relationship with Christianity [...] as a disciplining and disciplinary text that demands readerly abandon rather than resistance” (*Queering Medieval Genres*, 106). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s reading of Chrétien de Troyes’ *The Knight of the Cart* describes an author and a main character in a masochistic relationship with a powerful woman (Marie de Champagne, who subjects Chrétien to writing this shameful material, and Guinevere, who subjects Lancelot to humiliations) (232). Cohen asks if it “Is it possible for Lancelot’s embrace of adultery to be seen as an act transgressive not because it violates the sacred dicta of the Bible and its exegetes, but because it sexualizes the very foundations of courtly power relations, and loves them, fetishizes them, for their excess”

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<sup>107</sup> Figures 5 and 6 are particularly encouraging for the present study, as they feature two images of a fourteenth-century wedding casket depicting a number of Arthurian scenes where knights must suffer particularly for a woman (such as Lancelot crossing the sword bridge and Gawain’s dolorous bed adventure. The mounted Aristotle is on the front of the casket. Some wedding gift!

<sup>108</sup> See, for example, Robert Mills, who suggests that “Pain, experienced as delight by saints, is a symbol of their ultimate triumph over the body,” demonstrating “masculinity’s ultimate stake in masochism” (33). Emily Hunter McGowin demonstrates that in the writings of Mechthild of Magdeburg, “pain is cast in the role of a courtly intermediary between Christ and the soul” (607). And, while not strictly working in religious genres, Sarah Salih notes the martyred undertones in how medieval married women could use their displeasure in the “marriage debt”: “performance of conformity is masochism as theater, a ‘lived fiction’ constructed by and starring the ostensibly dominated party” (145-6). These are only a sampling, and, as I will argue, have ramifications to the material world for medieval audiences; therefore they provide a background to my theory of purely fantasy (imaginary, literary) BDSM relationships as appear in medieval romance.

(235). I would say yes to Cohen, but would take his argument even further: that these courtly power relations *are already* sexual and fetishized.

While Tison Pugh links this sadomasochistic impulse back to a disciplinary Christian relationship between sinners and God in *SGGK* (130), and Cohen understands Lancelot's masochism in Chrétien as *generating* fantasy (231), I want to explore precisely that fantasy, the desire for purely imagined kink scenes, certainly influenced by Christian martyrdom, but secularized. Saints and martyrs had real implications for a medieval Christian's salvation, just as BDSM is for many modern people a real-world practice that can range from recreational to integral to their relationships; in the same way medieval romances are imagined genres, written and read at least partially for pleasure, my theory of kink is a specifically (fan)fictional model. In this model, fanfiction BDSM is informed by the structures and practices of real-life BDSM, but because it is fantasy, it is unlimited by concerns of the material world (things like safety, sanity, and consent).

Lancelot's relationship with Guinevere is a source of pain and anguish (masochism) for Lancelot, and Lanval's relationship with his Lady is particularly rife with power inequalities (dominance and submission). These relationships are additionally positioned in direct opposition to the knight fulfilling his chivalric and political duties as well as, for Lancelot, his inability to obtain the ultimate Christian symbol, the Grail, which is a source of shame for the knights. I read these two relationships, Lancelot/Guinevere and Lanval/Lady as representing a kinky ideal of courtly love, but particular to BDSM's expression in fanfiction, where kink is explored in a fantasy context that ignores real-life concerns, but uses known and beloved characters to do so in an erotic but engaging fantasy for readers and writers both to participate in.



BDSM tropes and scenarios as they are expressed in fanfiction are therefore ideally comparable to the expressions found in medieval romance: the idea that these things are only “sexy in a fantasy context,” as Sheenagh Pugh has described slash, hurt/comfort, and other fanfic expressions of male vulnerability (Pugh 155). This distancing from “real” desires in the material world into a fantasy world pits BDSM against hurt/comfort fanfiction I explore in Chapter 3, where the reduction of aesthetic distance is crucial to a fan’s affective enjoyment. Here, instead, that distance becomes liberating. Lewis Call explores BDSM in modern fantasy and science fiction genres in part because “fantasy is such a fundamental part of kink, and because the genre I’m studying lends itself so well to representations of the fantastic” (10). Jenny Alexander’s study of sadomasochistic fanfiction regularly stresses the divide between In Real Life practices with fictional desires, and Alexander, too, focuses her study on science-fiction and fantasy genres, which contain “a much higher prevalence of sadomasochistic fanfiction” and suggests this may provide a further “distancing effect” for readers and authors (120). Robin Anne Reid, in exploring readerly interest in what she calls “darkfic,” stresses that interest in reading about something in fanfiction does not translate into wanting it in real life: “the argument that readers will immediately act out what they are reading about is neither new nor limited to fan fiction but has applied to debates, contemporary and historic, about readers since the 18<sup>th</sup> century” (Reid 470). Because fanfiction authors very often are minorities or marginalized groups, their fantasies at least have the *potential* to be particularly counter-heteronormative. Anne Kustritz compares kink literature for BDSM communities with a slash fanfiction re-presentation of it, and finds that “fan fiction BDSM occurs between characters individuated by richly detailed psychological and interpersonal backstories and

who exist within a particular cultural and historical context, not between blank social types in a privileged space outside law and society,” allowing fantasy desires to be enacted through fantasy characters in a way controlled by the author and consented to by the reader ([2.7]). In fact, readerly consent is an important element of understanding fantasies of BDSM, as the source-author, reader-author, and reader enter into a kink relationship across time by means of a derivative text. Not only do these stories “as fantasy, present readers with a ‘scene’ they consent to participate in by choosing to read a scenario marked as containing BDSM” (Kustritz [4.2]), but they engage with the power of interpretation that a reader always has over a text and its author. Key tendencies of BDSM in fanfiction therefore include the importance of known characters enacting these desires, the attempts at distance from the author or reader’s real-life desires through fantasy (both imaginative and fantastic) genres, and the entrance into a “scene” of reader and author. Lancelot and Guinevere and even Lanval represent known characters in an established Arthurian setting supported by its own romance-genre rules of engagement, which a writer takes control over from a previous author or canon of texts.

### **The Rules of Courtly Love as BDSM Scene**

Some scholars and theorists have already as good as claimed modern BDSM as a survival from courtly love, with Slavoj Žižek even going so far as to argue “It is only with the emergence of masochism, of the masochist couple, towards the end of the last century that we can now grasp the libidinal economy of courtly love” (89). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen describes the sadomasochism of Lancelot and Guinevere’s relationship as “a script that was written already and put in [Lancelot’s] hands by the larger cultural narratives in which

they are both contained,” and this script is clear in treatises of the time (251). Just as a “safe, sane and consensual” BDSM scene is practiced within a limited set of parameters and according to rules pre-agreed upon (Alexander 124-5), I reference Andreas Capellanus’ twelfth-century *Art of Courtly Love* and Geoffroi de Charny’s fourteenth-century *A Knight’s Own Book of Chivalry* for the idealized rules of courtly and chivalric love in the Middle Ages. Andreas dictates that the rules of love are to be kept “sub regis amoris interminatione firmiter conservandas iniunxit” [“faithfully under threat of punishment by the King of Love,”]<sup>109</sup> so that, actually, a man’s submission to his lady is part of his submission to Love itself, under threat of (erotic?) punishment that adds a three-way kink to this relationship structure (186). Like courtly love, BDSM has its own “code of ethics,” and rather *unlike* courtly love, because it is meant to structure and control real-life practices, the “basic mantra is ‘safe, sane, and consensual’” for practitioners of BDSM (Alexander 125). When firmly in the realm of fantasy, however, as in fanfiction, and in Marie de France’s *Lais* and *Le Morte D’Arthur*, consent and safety are not always a given, and apparently many authors find it titillating to explore some elements that are *only* “sexy” in a fantasy context.

What BDSM refers to as “submission” entails submitting to the will or desires of another. By virtue of being an erotic practice, the ideal submissive partner *desires to* desire the will of the dominant partner. In his instructions on this, Andreas emphasizes the lover’s role as one of making himself worthy of and pleasing to his lady, especially in obedience to her will:

Sed et necessitatibus quisque tenetur occurrere coamantis et eius cunctis

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<sup>109</sup> The Latin text is from The Latin Library. Translations are from John Jay Parry.

compatiendo laboribus et iustis eius voluntatibus obsequendo. Sed etsi quandoque minus sciatur ipsius iusta voluntas, ei tamen esse debet obsecundare paratus revocationis primitus admonitione praemissa.

[Every man is bound, in time of need, to come to the aid of his beloved...by acceding to all her reasonable desires. Even if he knows sometimes that what she wants is not so reasonable, he should be prepared to agree to it after he has asked her to reconsider.] (151).

Influenced by troubadour interpretations of Ovid, Andreas' version of courtly love is one in which the lady is her lover's "feudal suzerain, and he owes allegiance to her... Her status is far above his" (7). Geoffroi has a similar sentiment for the knight of his time: "Et bien doit l'en honorer, server et tres bien amer icelles tres bonnes dames" ["one should indeed honor, serve, and truly love these noble ladies"] and "pour ce toutes bonnes gens d'armes sont tenuz de droit de garder et deffendre l'onnour de toutes dames contre tous ceulx qui voudroient dire ne mesdire ne faire le contraire" ["all good men-at-arms are rightly bound to protect and defend the honor of all ladies against all those who would threaten it by word or deed"] (94-94).<sup>110</sup> This is a dictum which emphasizes service, bondage (in the sense of being held to a behavior, though *tenuz* does not preclude physical bondage or captivity), and good deeds done for the lady instead of for personal glory. Andreas and Geoffroi recognize that the lover's will may differ from his lady's, so they rather encourage mere obedience, a behavior rather than a state of mind. But because Lancelot and Lanval are fictional characters, they can go beyond mere obedience to actually desiring the will of another, going above and beyond Andreas and Geoffroi's dictates of obedience into

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<sup>110</sup> All citations and translations are from the Richard W. Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy edition of *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny*.

submission.

Lanval and Lancelot are good examples of knights who, especially in these texts, submit to their female lovers' desires, even to their own personal detriment, enacting the courtly love described as ideal by Andreas and Geoffroi. Lanval pledges his love and his service to his lady according to her pleasure. He speaks "*avenantment*,"<sup>111</sup> indicating that he is following, to some extent, a script, when he declares "'Ja ne savriez rien commander / Que jeo ne face a mien poeir, / Turt a folie u a saveir. / Jeo frai voz comandemanz'" ["... you could command nothing / that I would not do to the best of my power, / be it folly or wisdom. / I will do what you command"] (124-7). Her requests are not quite folly, but they do get Lanval into trouble, as it is paradoxically his Lady's ennobling love that makes the queen take predatory notice of him. He then loses his Lady's favor when he values his reputation above her secret, and nearly dies for it (328). For Lanval, this threat of punishment affirms his lesson about submission. When Malory first introduces Lancelot, he describes how "he loved the Quene agayne aboven all other ladyes days of his lyff, and for hir he dud many dedys of armys, and saved her frome the fyre thorow his noble chevalry" (Malory 151-2). Even when Andreas' contradictory denouncement of love in his third book emphasizes the "disgrace" that extramarital love brings about, it reflects precisely where Lancelot falls short, "Immo ad summam scimus verecundiam pertinere viventis et Dei omnipotentis iniuriam, si carnis illecebras et corporis voluptates secutus ad Tartareos iterum laqueos elabatur" ["Indeed, for a mortal man we consider it a very great disgrace and an offense against Almighty God if by following the enticements of the flesh and the pleasures of the body he slips back again into the snares of Hell"] (Andreas 188).

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<sup>111</sup> Waters translates this "becomingly" while Hanning and Ferrante use "in a suitable way."

Lancelot's love for Guinevere is what keeps him from attaining the Holy Grail, for, "as the booke seyth, had natt Sir Launcelot bene in his prevy thoughtes and in hys myndis so sette inwardly to the Quene as he was in semyng outewarde to God, there had no knyght passed him in the Queste of the Sankgreall" (Malory 589). Lancelot and Guinevere's separate self-cloistering after Arthur's death speaks to their anxiety for salvation, and Guinevere at least has regret and shame over their extramarital enjoyment of each other. Lancelot never stops loving Guinevere, but his desire for her will extends even to her desire never to see him again. In this way, Lanval and Lancelot go above and beyond Andreas and Geoffroi's rules, to the point of desiring that which is harmful to them because their lady desires it.

In speaking about true lovers, both Andreas and Geoffroi highlight the importance of secrecy and struggle in an ideal courtly relationship. Because BDSM remains a subcultural, taboo practice, a certain amount of shame, and therefore a desire for concealment, is necessarily required in BDSM, and also for the fans that read and write it in fanfictions. The elements of secrecy and difficulty are, in the courtly love tradition, meant to arouse desire, which can certainly engage elements of kink: Andreas rules that "Facilis perceptio contemptibilem reddit amorem, difficilis eum carum facit haberi" ["the easy attainment of love makes it of little value; difficulty of attainment makes it prized"] (185). Here he emphasizes this kind of love as insatiable, and that the struggle to satisfy love makes it perfect. Geoffroi encourages his reader to "Mais gardez que les amours et li amers soient telement que vous gardez si cher come vous devez amer vos honnours et vos bons estaz que l'onnour et l'amour que vous y trouveres gardez le secretement" ["make sure that the love and the loving are such that just as dearly as each of you should cherish your own honor and good standing, so should you guard the honor of your lady above all

else and keep secret the love itself and all the benefit and the honorable rewards you derive from it”] (Kaeper and Kennedy 118-119). He also uses Guinevere as his primary example here, saying,

Et moult en y a qui dient qu’ilz ne voudroient pas amer la royne Genyevre, s’il ne le disorient ou s’il n’estoit sceu. Ycelles gens aimeroient miex que chascun dist et cuidast qu’il amaissent trop bien par amours et ja n’en fust rien, que ce qu’il amaissent et bien leu ren deust venir et fust tenu bien secret. Et ce n’est mie bien fait, que plus parfaicte joie en a l’on d’estre en la compaignie de sa dame secretement que l’en ne pourroit avoir en un an la ou il seroit sceu et apparceu de pluseurs. Et devons savoir certainement que la plus secreete amour est la plus durable et la plus loyal, et tele amour doit l’en vouloir mener.

[And there are many who say that they would not want to love Queen Guinevere if they did not declare it openly or if it were not known. Such men would prefer it to be said by everyone that they were the accepted lovers of ladies, even if this were not true, than to love and meet with a favorable response, were this to be kept secret. And this is ill done, for there is more perfect joy in being secretly in the company of one’s lady than one could have in a whole year, were it to be known and perceived by many. And we should know for certain that the most secret love is the most lasting and the truest, and that is the kind of love for which one should aim.] (118-119)

Geoffroi’s use of Guinevere as an example speaks to how well-known he expects the story

to be, and how this illicit love affair is something to aspire to: it is a model text, after all. The secrecy demanded by courtly love renders secrecy a kind of kink, one that is related to shame in opposition to honor as it is perceived by the dominant culture. If the average knight, according to Geoffroi, would only love Guinevere if he could boast about it publicly, then such a love would benefit only his own honor; Geoffroi instead suggests that the *true* lover loves secretly (shamefully?), and has “more perfect joy” in it as a result.

Lancelot and Guinevere’s relationship must, because of her marriage to King Arthur, be concealed, and here the secrecy is precisely because of the shame in both parties being unfaithful to Arthur. In *Le Morte D’Arthur*, Lancelot warns, “The boldenesse of you and me woll brynge us to shame and sclaudir,” but this tension is what continues to capture the minds of readers and authors who continue to rewrite it (Malory 589). And even as shameful as it is, Lancelot and Guinevere’s relationship is represented as the example of true love. “Causa coniugii ab amore non est excusatio recta” [“Marriage is no real excuse for not loving”], Andreas begins his rules (184), and ends with, “Unam feminam nil prohibet a duobus amari et a duabus mulieribus unum” [“Nothing forbids one woman being loved by two men”] (186). The secrecy of the relationship in Malory is not necessarily kept from Arthur but rather the larger court (and only barely). In addition to being made aware of Guinevere’s infidelity when he marries her by Merlin (62), Arthur scolds Guinevere for being unable to “kepe Sir Launcelot uppon [her] syde,” since whichever “party” has Lancelot, “hath the moste man of worship in thys worlde uppon hys syde” (592). Arthur, who “had a demyng of hit” [their relationship] (647), is therefore consenting to an alternatively erotic (kinky) role, too, either that of the pimp, directing his wife’s sexuality towards the worthiest knight in the world, or else a cuckold, allowing their



relationship to continue until it is no longer secret.

The conflict of *Lanval* hinges on his Lady's condition for her continued love of Lanval, which is that he conceal their love and her existence. She commands and begs him,

“Ne vus discoverz a nul humme!

De ceo vus dirai ja la summe:

A tuz jurs m'avriez perdue,

Se ceste amur esteir seüe.”

“do not reveal your secret to anyone! / I will tell you the whole truth: / you would lose me forever / if this love were known.” (144-8)

Lanval answers that he will “bien tendra / Ceo que ele li comaundera,” [“certainly hold to / what she commands”] reiterating her power over his actions (151-2). Here the reader begins to understand that the Lady is otherworldly, as she seems to have the power to visit him wherever and whenever he desires, but this is predicated again upon secrecy—a secrecy to nullify the potential of shame:

“Quant vus vodrez od mei parler,

Ja ne sarez cel liu penser

U nuls puist aver sa amie

Sanz repreoce, sanz vileinie,

Que jeo ne vus seie en present

A fere tut vostre talent;”

[“when you want to talk with me / there is no place you can think of / where one could have his beloved / without reproach or base behavior, / that I will not be with you at once / to do all your will.] (163-8)

In her discussion of “you want” and “your will,” the Lady calls attention to Lanval’s will and desire for her, with secrecy as conditional to his desires (“when”). This secrecy is in keeping with both Andreas and Geoffroi’s rules of appropriate courtly love, and importantly, the shame is only evoked in potential opposition to their secrecy. The place “where one could have his beloved / without reproach or base behavior”<sup>112</sup> is always a private place, even though she can clearly control whether anyone can see or hear her (169-70). This place is structured erotically, as a suitable place for lovers to “have” each other. And, as in BDSM, this secrecy constructs a space bounded by their pre-negotiated rules (*if* he keeps her secret, she will come to him and fulfill his desires) rather than according to the social nexus of honor and shame. As Byrne argues, practitioners of BDSM “neither follow nor transgress the law but evade it entirely by entering into the ritualized space of the rule” (145). Experiences of shame desire concealment from others (Ahmed 103-4); secrecy, then, becomes a tactic the lovers employ to avoid shame, even to constructing a space separate from the material world where shame even *matters*. At the conclusion of this chapter I will return to a discussion of shame and when it ceases to matter in its relationship to erotic humiliation.

For a kyriarchal audience, whether medieval or modern, a woman in a position of power, especially over a man, is kinky because she presents an erotic position alternative to heteronormative relationships. Many scholars attest to the erotics of power in the Middle Ages: Marilyn Desmond argues that a “cultural fantasy of power erotics as the triumph of delirium and desire” was prevalent in the Middle Ages (13). Susan Smith’s assessment of the Power of Woman *topos* “proves that the normative hierarchy of gender was subject to

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<sup>112</sup> Hanning and Ferrante translate it is “reproach or shame.”

inversion” (3). Anna Kłosowska borrows from Jonathan Goldberg’s study of early modern queerness the premise that “the economy of power is described by structures and equations blind to bodily gender. That is, the persons in power, whatever their genital sex, are always desired, and the equation of power with masculinity may produce effects of same-sex desire and effects of gender-bending, which we would be mistaken in classifying as homosexual, transvestite, or transgendered” (Kłosowska 17). By bringing his claim to the medieval period, Kłosowska confirms that power is an attractive feature in all sexes. This “fantasy of power erotics” was most clearly presented in the sexually dominant woman such as Phyllis or the Wife of Bath. But where those narratives emphasize female desire, *Guinevere* and *Lanval’s Lady* are, I argue, erotic fantasies that are not limited to and do not exclusively emphasize female desires: rather importantly, both partners desire this fantasy relationship. The feminine sadist, or dominatrix, is a kink precisely for its antiheteronormativity, erotic and shameful because it reverses the “proper” gender norms of power, but apparently in a compelling or at least titillating way that made people want to read (or see) it again and again.

Andreas, for his part, encourages relationship inequality in this inverted way, always placing the male lover in a subordinate position, since he almost exclusively uses masculine pronouns for the example of the lover, and in his controversial (either antifeminist or ironic<sup>113</sup>) third book he essentially implies that women can never love and therefore never be lovers (153). This casts the woman in a courtly love relationship as a cruel mistress almost by default, and her lover, in serving her, as submitting to that cruelty.

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<sup>113</sup> See, on the side of antifeminism, Robert Miller, “The wounded heart: Courtly love and the medieval antifeminist tradition”; on the side of irony (as well as antifeminism), see D. H. Green, “Irony and Love” in *Irony in the Medieval Romance*; Michael D. Cherniss “The Literary Comedy of Andreas Capellanus.”

What better description than “dominatrix” for this role, and who better to represent the dominatrix role in medieval romance than Guinevere? In Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* this power imbalance is emphasized even down to pronouns, as Guinevere uses the authoritative and intimate “thou” when addressing Lancelot, who in turn always uses the formal “you” and declares himself “at all tymes your poure knyght and trew unto my power,” who “never fayled you in right nor in wronge” (Malory 649). Even though they are lovers, Lancelot’s move to maintain their social differences keys into a relationship structured on an imbalance of power.

One way that the courtly lady dominates her lover is by making him endure physical pain. Malory’s Lancelot is regularly beaten, abused, and unloved, experiencing bouts of madness, great physical injury, and unrequited love at the hands of Guinevere. When Guinevere rebukes Lancelot, calling him “false traytoure knyght,” twice, Malory seems to enjoy describing Lancelot’s suffering, because he describes it at great length:

“Alas,” seyde Sir Launcelot; and therewyth he toke such an hartely sorow at her wordys that he felle downe to the floure in a sowne... And whan Sir Launcelot awooke oute of hys swoght, he lepte oute at a bay wyndow into a gardyne—and there wyth thornys he was all to-cracched of his vysage, and hys body—and so he ranne furth he knew nat whothir, and was as wylde [woode] as ever was man; and so he ran two yere, and never man had grace to know him. (472)

Malory compounds Lancelot’s emotional and mental suffering with the physical. Because his suffering is inflicted *at* Guinevere’s rebuke, is what makes his suffering erotic, inviting us to view it as BDSM, or more specifically, sadomasochism. Other segments of Lancelot’s

madness have kink elements: for these two years he is only wearing his “shurte and his breke” (480), and when he is discovered by Sir Blyaunte, the sane knights have to chain him to keep him from escaping or trying to fight them (481-2). In typical medieval misogyny, of course, Guinevere’s attempts at a dominatrix role usually cause her as much pain as Lancelot; since she “wepte as she shulde have dyed” when they are reunited, she is not a very good sadist (489). But Lancelot makes an excellent masochist, submitting himself to physical pain because Guinevere’s scolding has so thoroughly obliterated any knowledge of who he is (making him “woode”). This, too, is sadomasochistic, as Byrne makes clear: “giving up ownership of one’s body means divorcing that body from one’s notion of self” (116). Lancelot’s submission to pain, captivity, and the dissolution of himself under Guinevere’s treatment of him is very clearly sadomasochistic.

But the separation of the lovers also makes them long for each other, and their reunion is as cathartic as the separation is pathetic—*every time*, because this is, of course, a repeated motif. Both of them are aware of this pattern and aware that there *is* a pattern: Guinevere realizes “that he had done to her so grete kyndenness where she shewed hym grete unkyndenness” (597), and Lancelot tells her, “thys ys nat the firste tyme...that ye have ben displeas with me causeless, but, madame, ever I muste suffir you—but what sorow that I endure, ye take no forse” (618). Their relationship is predicated upon a cycle of rebuke and reunion, where Guinevere exerts her power over Lancelot as his queen and his lover to induce his suffering, which usually causes her to suffer as well, before their reunion grants both of them relief and joy. The fanfictional element is important: rather than repeating this cycle in the safety of a convenient dungeon as in BDSM practice, Guinevere must always be *really* angry, and Lancelot must always be in *real* danger and suffer *real* wounds. Because Lancelot

is fictional, Malory can go as hard as he wants: the magnification and repetition indicates Malory's interest in, even meditation on, Lancelot's suffering from desire. Because this is bounded in a theory of BDSM fanfiction, the scale and the repetition reflect fantasy potential rather than replicate real-life BDSM practice.

If Malory's Lancelot and Guinevere represent a more sadomasochistic relationship,<sup>114</sup> Lanval and his lady in Marie de France's *lai* demonstrate a relationship which I read in terms of the fantasy of dominance and submission, but not one necessarily involving pain. Lanval's Lady is powerful, possibly otherworldly, and even richer than King Arthur; Lanval submits to her desires happily (except on one point, and he is summarily punished for it); she denies him access to her except when she wants him—all patterns that fit the role of the dominatrix. Lanval's obedience to her and her requirement of secrecy is total, and when it is tested and found lacking, it is the Lady's choice and through no effort of Lanval's that she forgives him and returns to him in spite of his failure. This reading of *Lanval* as a fantasy of dominance and submission suggests that the Lady's return has more to do with her power than anything Lanval could or did do.<sup>115</sup> In this way, the lady's limitless power to achieve her desire reflects Marie de France, the fanfiction author who simply wants her desires enacted in her own rewriting of a well-known narrative.

The power and beauty of the Lady in *Lanval* is described in terms of her wealth and her ability to take care of her submissive male lover. Marie tells us that no king could buy

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<sup>114</sup> Admittedly most versions of Lancelot and Guinevere reproduce this power imbalance and focus on Lancelot's suffering. Karen Lurkhur reads Lancelot's wounds in *Le Chevalier de la Charette* as significant to the construction of Lancelot's masculinity.

<sup>115</sup> "The lady returns to rescue Lanval despite his betrayal of their secret, because his love for her has not wavered. His only concern when he is accused is that he has lost her—his disgrace at court does not trouble him at all. Her mercy, despite his fault, is in sharp contrast to the king's attempt to condemn Lanval for an act he did not commit" (Hanning and Ferante in Marie 124).

her tent “Pur nul aver k’il i donast” [“for any wealth he might offer”], and descriptions of her beauty and radiance spend more time on the richness of her garments, bed, and lush surroundings than they do on her (91-2). It is not until the climax of the poem that the reader is afforded a blazon of the Lady’s features, but it is only seven lines long (563-70) as compared to the descriptions of her accoutrements, which takes seventeen (550-574). She wields the power of her wealth and beauty to set Lanval free, asking “Si par me peot ester aquitez,” [“if he can be acquitted by me,”] and demanding, “Par voz baruns seit deliverez!” [“let your nobles set him free!”] (623-4).<sup>116</sup> Lanval, on the other hand, is introduced to the reader as poor and friendless, having spent all his wealth, “Kar li reis rien ne li dona” [“for the king gave him nothing”], and is as a result “dolent e mut pensis” [“sorrowful and anxious”] (30-34). He is a good knight by any usual romance standard, but instead of praised, he is envied by the other knights (21-22). The Lady, with her great wealth and probable magic, gives Lanval gifts, and continues to give him anything he asks for, until Marie declares “Lanval bien herbergez,” twice (140, 154).<sup>117</sup> By the metric of wealth, then, the Lady’s power far exceeds her lover’s, with material consequences: his enjoyment of her wealth is dependent on his submission to her will.

Lanval’s submission to his Lady extends beyond the monetary. Marie does not explicitly tell us the Lady’s motivation for choosing Lanval, though *her* great power and wealth allows her to choose whomever she desires. The reader must therefore assume that she could choose no better when she says

“beus amis,

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<sup>116</sup> In Malory, Guinevere’s power is in her wealth, too, and her desire indicated by who she spends it on. When Lancelot goes mad and flees the court, she spends £20,000 (in fifteenth century money!) to recover him (Malory 489).

<sup>117</sup> Waters translates this as “well lodged” while Hanning and Ferrante “is well cared for.”

Pur vus vienc jeo fors de ma tere;

De luinz vus sui venue quere...

Kar jo vus aim sur tute rien.”

“handsome friend, / for you I have come out of my own land; / I have come from afar to look for you... / for I love you more than anything.” (111-6)

Lanval is in all respects the passive partner in this relationship, pursued, discovered, loved, and cared for. Even in their sexual encounter, the Lady is still the active participant: “S’amur e sun cors li otreie” [“she grants him her love and her body”] (133), and she sets the duration of their encounter, for “plus i fust, se il poïst / E s’amie lui cunsentist” [“he would have stayed longer, if he could / and if his beloved had allowed him”] (157-8). The Lady’s control over Lanval, what he gets and when, is therefore both material and sexual.

If the Lady has complete control, it is very clear that Lanval consents quite happily to her control. He is delighted with her condition of secrecy (171), and Marie tells us that “Mut ot Lanval joie e deduit” [“Lanval had great joy and pleasure”] in his new life (215). Under the rules of BDSM, I read his enjoyment as his consent to this power exchange, and not as a submission that is coerced in any way. Though Marie tells us (once) that “Tut est a sun comandement” [“she is entirely at his command”], it is understood that his ability to command her extends only to his ability to *desire* her presence and her willingness to allow him to see her regularly (216-8). Their mutually consensual agreement to the rules of their relationship brings them both pleasure.

When Lanval breaks their condition of secrecy and boasts to the queen about his lover, in BDSM terms, he is the one who “ends the scene” of reciprocal pleasure. From that point, the Lady is no longer bound to honor his desire:



Il ne seit tant crier ne braire  
 Ne debatre ne sei detraire  
 Que ele en veulle merci aveir  
 Sul tant que la puisse veeir.

[He cannot cry out or wail / or reproach or torment himself / enough to make her want to have mercy on him, / even enough that he might see her.] (347-50)

In some sense, it is Arthur's queen (presumably a Guinevere) who encourages sadomasochism in the relationship, since she goads Lanval into breaking his oath, which initiates his suffering at the hands of his Lady. This scene evidences true suffering, outside the bounds of acceptable BDSM practice, and the fantasy element explores how the "scene" continues even after it has technically ended. Lanval's great pain at his Lady's continued absence is characterized as entirely due to her refusal to grant him mercy:

En une chamber fu tut suls,  
 Pensis esteit e anguissus;  
 S'amie apele mut sovent,  
 Mes ceo ne li valut neent.  
 Il se pleigneit e suspirot,  
 D'ures en autres se pasmot;  
 Puis li crie cent feiz merci  
 Que ele parolt a sun ami.

[He was all alone in a chamber, / he was anxious and distraught; / he calls on his beloved, over and over, / But it did him no good at all. / He lamented

and sighed, / he fainted repeatedly; / Then a hundred times he begs her to  
have mercy / and speak to her beloved.] (337-44)

His sadness, when he knows she will not return to him, is due chiefly to his lost love, though he does attempt at least half-heartedly to defend his honor in court, a rally that Gawain and other knights and barons take up in his support against the king's wrath. Ultimately, however, Lanval can do nothing in his defense, either in the secular court or to win back his Lady's favor and love: when the court demands "Que s'amie face venir / Pur lui tencer e garentir" [he should have his beloved come / to defend and bear witness for him], he tells them that he cannot: "Ja par li sucurs nen avereit" ["he would never get help from her"] (463-6). Her choice to save him and continue to love him is her own, and her decision to do so is easier read through a lens of female desire and kink than through any possibility that Lanval does anything to deserve or earn her mercy.

For readers of both Lancelot and Lanval's love stories, portrayals of women with complete power over their lovers seems to be more positive rather than cautionary. In courtly love, the lady's erotic power is less an antifeminist warning against the problem of loving women too much, and more something to be explored through intimate language and repetitively, in repeated versions of Lancelot and Lanval. For Lanval, of course, his relationship with a powerful woman, barely escaping the predations of another powerful woman, and submitting to the penalty for not perfectly obeying his lover, all works out well in the end. He rides off with his supernaturally powerful lady to presumably live happily ever after: hardly a cautionary tale! And even though Lancelot and Guinevere do not have a happy ending, their story is so beautiful in its tragedy that different writers retell it again and again, its staying power as an entertaining story far outstripping even Lanval's.

The erotic power exchange is ultimately consented to by the knight, even to his own pain or dishonor: just as his chivalric mettle cannot be tested without combat, his devotion to his lady cannot be tested without anguish.

### **Sexy Only in a Fantasy Context**

A discussion of power and sex requires some discussion of rape. Before I proceed any further, I wish to make clear that this discussion hinges on the difference between *rape* and *rape fantasy*. Rape fantasy can be an element of BDSM scenes, which manifests as explicitly stated “consensual non-consent” where practitioners act out a pre-negotiated scene of fantasy rape (Call 71). On some level rape fantasy is embedded in all roleplay of dominance and submission, as “safewords” (used to call a halt to a scene) may be built into the rules to allow participants to say “No” or otherwise perform displeasure without stopping the proceedings (164). The Sex Wars surrounding kink,<sup>118</sup> when they reach fanfiction, prompt some fanfiction authors to remind each other that “a rape fantasy, by definition, isn’t really about actual rape, because we’re in control of our fantasies” (MadameAce). Fandom continues to struggle with “purity culture” in the name of progressive politics that condemn fans for entertaining such fantasies (“Purity Culture in Fandom”). The consent issues that I argue become significantly blurred in fanfiction, where only fictional people are harmed, are predicated upon a distinct line between rape and rape fantasy in real-life kink, where real people could be harmed.

Part of what makes the various expressions of kink “titillating” in Lanval’s and Lancelot’s stories is the power inversion of a woman exercising power over her male lover:

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<sup>118</sup> See Desmond 1-9; Call 3-9.

the reverse, a man dominating his female lover, is not usually quite so erotically exciting for readers. Dominant men are a heteronormative structure in kyriarchal societies, a real presence in the material world, and therefore, less novel a subject for exploration in a fantasy text. Chrétien's *Erec and Enide* might come close to a positive or sexually interesting representation of a dominant male and submissive female partner, but although Erec's treatment of Enide is never condemned, it is not precisely condoned, and certainly not fetishized to the extent that Guinevere's treatment of Lancelot is (since she hurts him again and again and he continues to come back for more). Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* is an obvious example of a masculine power fantasy gone too far, one which Griselda merely endures, unhappily, as her wifely duty, and to which the teller and audience reaction mostly evokes pity.<sup>119</sup> For both Erec and Walter, abusing their female partner is a kind of test, something all parties "learn" from and then cease to practice, so not something that is practiced for its own kind of pleasure. Lanval's happy ending is continued submission to his Lady, and though Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship is cut short, he continues his sacrifice for Guinevere by joining a convent. Because Lanval enjoys a happily ever after with his Lady, and Guinevere is called a "true lover" whose story is still being retold even today, the trope of a woman with total control over her male lover is not only erotic, but ultimately functions as its own kind of happy ending, enjoyable for its authors and readers if not quite "realistic."

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<sup>119</sup> Tison Pugh argues that "the moments when characters submit to domination can also be understood as moments when they convert submission to domination through a mastery of the masochistic dynamic at play in gender. The Clerk's Tale thus demonstrates that by playing out feminine passivity to such a radical degree, Griselda simultaneously demonstrates its impossibility and its undesirability for women—and for men as well. With queer fidelity, pleasure bubbles up in the act of self-sacrifice, whether that pleasure is confessed or not. This pleasure can be likened to a sadomasochistic contract in which a given individual plays both roles: Griselda is surely the masochistic victim of Walter's sadism, but the text's penchant for sadism extends to her in that she ultimately conquers Walter's tyranny" (*Sexuality and Its Queer Discontents in Middle English Literature*, 79-80).

Related to male domination, sexual violence against women is unfortunately common enough in medieval romance and other genres,<sup>120</sup> not to mention the material world. Texts like *The Wife of Bath's Tale* establish rape as a serious crime in Arthur's court, punishable by death—though in this case, the rapist knight is, at the behest of women in Arthur's court, reformed rather than executed. Marilyn Desmond has explored the potential for this element to be read as a kink in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* as a reflection of the medieval reception of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*. She ultimately defines “erotic violence” as distinct from sexual violence or rape (6), but argues that the *Wife of Bath's Tale* suggests that such violence “remains part of the psychic residue of chivalric identity” (142). Chrétien de Troyes' *The Knight of the Cart* reveals what seems to be a casual approach to rape:

Mes se ele conduit eüst  
 Uns autres, se tant li pleüst  
 Qu'a celui bataille an feüst  
 Et par armes la conqeüst  
 Sa volenté an poüst faire  
 Sanz honte et sanz blasme retraire.

[If she were escorted by another, and the knight chose to do battle with her defender and defeated him at arms, then he might do with her as he pleased without incurring dishonour or disgrace] (1311-16).<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Even hagiographic depictions of martyred women and girls will emphasize the erotic in sexual violence, as Kathryn Gravdal argues: “The representation of seduction or assault opens a licit space that permits the audience to enjoy sexual language and contemplate the naked female body. The *vitae* authors do not hesitate to indulge in descriptions of the nubile attractiveness of thirteen-year-old virgins; their smooth, tender flesh as they are being stripped bare in public before a crowd” (24). See also: Julie B. Miller.

<sup>121</sup> Text and translation are from William W. Kibler, prose translation from Kibler (2004) 223.

This functions more as a fantasy of romance to provide erotic tension, since Lancelot passes a moral test when he does *not* take sexual advantage of a woman he saves from rape (Kibler 220-2). The Pentecostal Oath in *Le Morte D'Arthur* expressly requires knights to “allwayes to do ladyes, domesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes [socour], strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe” (77), but this list excludes non-noble classes, so Torre’s mother’s rape by Sir Pellinor goes unpunished and is even narratively sanctioned because Sir Torre makes such a great addition to the Round Table. So, despite the attempt at rules about, and punishments against, sexual crimes in the various iterations of the Arthurian court, the possibility of rape remains a threat to female bodies, and one that is crucial not only to plot development but to creating erotic background tension in medieval romances. What happens in the cases of Lanval and Lancelot, however, is that when rape becomes a function of fantasy, threatened male bodies are opened up for even more kink.

Sexual violence against men is certainly rarer than violence against women in medieval romance, but I argue that fanfiction reveals the ways rape functions to discipline already submissive male bodies. In keeping with modern fanfiction being more sexually explicit than medieval romance, there are 141,495 works of fanfiction posted to Archive of Our Own that include a warning for “Rape/Non-Con” contained in their stories, of which over 92,000 are M/M, or male/male relationships where the victim of the sexual violence is necessarily male.<sup>122</sup> A majority of scholarship on sexual violence in fanfiction therefore

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<sup>122</sup> Many of the M/F-tagged fanfictions may also include male victims, but without counting them individually by reading them, there is no way to tell how many for a quick overview like I wish this to provide. These statistics were recorded on Archiveofourown.org on 1 March 2020 and are by no means intended to be conclusive, as there are issues of deceptive tagging, or not tagging at all. I share these numbers merely to illustrate in a ballpark estimation that this is hardly a small subcategory, rather than present them as statistically significant.

discusses male victims: Robin Anne Reid's study of darkfic in "Thrusts in the Dark: Slashers' Queer Practices" examines two *The Lord of the Rings* fanfictions where the victims of sexual violence are male (Frodo and Faramir), and Anne Kustritz's "Painful Pleasures: Sacrifice, Consent, and the Resignification of BDSM symbolism in *The Story of O* and *The Story of Obi*" compares the issues of consent and subjectivity between a "mainstream" kink narrative of a female submissive and the fanfiction kink of *Star Wars*' Obi-Wan Kenobi as a male submissive.<sup>123</sup> Written by fans about beloved characters and franchises, many of these cases of sexual violence are written for the purpose of hurt/comfort, where rape is a means to explore the erotics of masculine vulnerability, as similar to that which I discuss in Chapter 3—but a nonzero number of these fanfictions are written for a different kind of pleasure. Women, in both medieval and modern rape cultures, are in ever-present danger of the real threat of sexual violence, so these erotics can never remain mere fantasy. Because men are seen as less vulnerable to sexual violence in the material world, sexual violence (or the threat thereof) against fictional male characters can more readily figure as a kink, whether as sexual fantasy or as a challenge to heteronormativity or rape culture.

Rape and rape fantasy are dealt with in a variety of complicated ways in fanfiction practice, which provides language to discuss the equally complicated and multi-faceted treatment of sexual violence in Malory's and Marie's works. An intriguing development of fanfiction culture is the categorization of such material. Archived stories are traditionally

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<sup>123</sup> Una McCormack's "Finding Ourselves in the (Un)Mapped Lands: Women's Reparative Readings of *The Lord of the Rings*" is a notable exception, examining the rape of women in fanfiction, but in the context of fans correcting the under-representation of female characters. Indeed, the preponderance of fanfiction written about men certainly has something to do with the imbalanced male-to-female characters that exist in popular media to be written about.

given specific warnings (for example, for violence or adult themes), which are as close to an organized rating system as fanfiction gets. Warnings for stories that contain rape can, on Archive Of Our Own, be appropriately marked with a “Warning,” or tagged “dub-con” (for a sexual encounter of “dubious” consent from one or both parties) or “non-con” (for a non-consensual sexual encounter).<sup>124</sup> *Fanlore* delineates between the types of such sexual situations in this way:

Non-con may be distinguished from *dub-con* (that is, fic which involves dubious consent) depending on how explicitly refusal is made, whether force or coercion is used, whether one or both characters is under the influence of mind-altering substances, the pre-existing nature of the characters’ relationship and/or whether the issues of consent stem from an inherent power imbalance in the relationship. (“Non-con”)

Since fandom is hardly monolithic in its beliefs, the definition goes on to provide, diplomatically, that “some fans feel that dub-con is a meaningless category that should be folded into non-con: consent cannot be assumed if it’s not given explicitly, and sex without consent is rape. For other fans, dub-con is a useful marker for fanworks that play with the titillating nature of (fantasy) rape without the more problematic associations of non-con” (“Non-con”).<sup>125</sup> An argument can be made that, because of the “fan” and “fictional” nature of the genre, that all rape or near-rape narratives are, in fact, playing with “the titillating nature of (fantasy) rape,” which, as Reid and others remind us, is unproductive to condemn too readily.

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<sup>124</sup> My epigraphs, though fictional, illustrate these tagging structures.

<sup>125</sup> Had Sir Gawain and Sir Bertilak engaged in sexual contact, the author might, as I indicate in Chapter 2’s epigraph, tag such an encounter “Dubious Consent” or “dub-con,” either for the extent to which Gawain may feel coerced, or even be intoxicated and therefore unable to consent.



Lanval experiences a threat to his sexual integrity in Marie's *lai*, as the queen's encounter with him is essentially one of attempted coerced sex. The queen catches him alone and does not appear to doubt her ability to appeal to him, since "Tut sun curage li mustra" ["she revealed to him all her feelings"] (259-62). As the wife of his king, the queen's demand forces Lanval into a situation where, like Sir Gawain in *Gawain and the Green Knight*, Lanval is damned if he does (he betrays his lord's trust by sleeping with his wife) and damned if he doesn't (he angers a woman much more powerful than him, and his lord's wife). Unlike Gawain, however, Lanval is less skilled at sexual negotiation, and refuses the queen's advances but insults her in the process (306). In a retaliation evoking Potiphar's wife, the queen throws the near-rape back at Lanval, saying that "Lanval l'ad hunie" ["has shamed her"] and claiming that "De druerie la request; / Pur ceo que ele l'en escundist, / Mut la laidi e avila" ["He asked her to be his lover; / because she refused him this, / he insulted her and said ugly things"] (317-20). This makes Lanval out to be the predator—a story which Arthur and most of the court believe. Lanval can hardly claim that the opposite happened in a kyriarchal rape culture which argues a man cannot be raped. The situation of "dubious consent," where the queen both threatens his ability to consent and accuses him of violating hers, is less sexually threatening than Lancelot's, and thus less titillating, but it remains shameful both personally and publicly. And, as with Lancelot, Lanval's very relationship with his Lady is threatened by this attempted transgression, because this sexual threat inspires him to break the promise of secrecy with his Lady, and inspires her to punish him.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Marie deals with other near-rape scenarios in her *lais* outside of Lanval's story that are worth noting here to emphasize the pattern. In *Guigemar*, the mutual knots that the knight and the lady tie into each other's clothes function as at least markers of, if not protections of, chastity while they are separated from each other. The chastity garment itself is an element of kink that is often a component of BDSM—already titillating as

Throughout her study of rape in Malory, Catherine Batt explores how the complicated nature of Malory's *raptus* charges reflects the complicated gamut of rape and near-rape situations in *Le Morte*, of and by both men and women. "The fact of rape," she explains, "has particular significance in the *Morte* because of the intensity with which Malory invests the physical with a meaning beyond itself: the body is the locus of honour and of shame, the site of strength and the means to the assertion of selfhood, yet simultaneously the locus of vulnerability" (804). Clearly, there are situations in which an actual violent rape is very much an activity only villains and monsters engage in.<sup>127</sup> However, "Malory's narrative most tellingly investigates the consequences of rape—in terms of its effects on the physical person and its implications for the sense of a moral and social self—not in relation to a female character, but to the person of Lancelot, even though Lancelot's experiences of violation are partially on the planes of potentiality and fantasy" (Batt 804). Lancelot's desirability to women other than Guinevere may render him vulnerable to female predations, but these figure as less dangerous to Lancelot than

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"Il n'i ad dame ne pucele / Ki n'i alast pur asaier" ["there is no lady or maiden / who did not go there to try"] to untie the knot in Guigemar's shirt in order to try to win him as her husband (652-3). The knot is especially sexually charged in reference to the unnamed Lady, for whom it lays against her skin: "Que ele le face seur de li / Par une ceinture autresi, / Daunt a sa char nue se ceint, / Par mi le flanc auks estreint" ["she will make him sure of her / in the same fashion, by a belt / that she girds around her naked body / and wraps quite tightly around her waist"] (569-72). The indication that this knot or her will actually prevents sexual intercourse is debatable, depending on how negatively we read the knight Meriaduc, who grows angry when she shows him the knot, and is quite happy to "De sun bliaut trenche les laz" ["cut the laces of her tunic"] to get to the knot (737), even though "La ceinture voleit ovrir, / Mes n'en poeit a chief venir. / Puis n'ot el païs chevalier / Que il ne feïst essayer" ["he wanted to open the belt, / but he could not achieve it" (737-740). His actions in the next lines, "there was no knight in the country / whom he did not make try it,"] have varying levels of rape potential, depending again on how we understand his motivations (741-2). Since he would rather wage war against Guigemar after he undoes the knot reveals to some extent his unsavory motivations, saying "Jeo la trovai, si la tendrai" ["I found her, I will keep her"] (851), so the threat of rape remains implicit rather than explicit.

<sup>127</sup> The giant of Saint Michel's Mount being the primary example (Malory 121). Torre's mother's rape by Sir Pellinor is, however, described as "half be force" (65), a situation which is almost a textbook definition of fanfiction's moniker "dub-con." Women are not the only ones to suffer sexual violation in Malory's text. A knight on the quest of the Sankgreal suffers an ambiguous (but assumed to be sexual) encounter of which he says "such shame had never man as I had" at the hands of three knights of Carteloyse (569).

Guinevere's reproach.

Lancelot is a special case for “the *Morte*'s sexist (and of course unequal) terms of individual social integrity—women are rapeable, men risk defeat in battle”—as Lancelot is “especially the object of feminine interest, manipulation and desire” (Batt 811). He suffers sexual violation at the hands of women, and his physical injuries and defeats either come from women or through treachery of men. His unwitting sexual intercourse with Elaine (thinking her to be Guinevere) on whom he fathers Galahad (Malory 465) is most closely relatable to the sexual situation of Igraine, who sleeps with Uther thinking him to be her husband and begets Arthur,<sup>128</sup> and his “loss of physical integrity and...his lack of volition in sexual matters” is not easily accommodated (Batt 809). The similarity of these two scenarios serves to feminize Lancelot: in Arthur's conception, Uther is disguised, and in Galahad's conception, Elaine is. Igraine is later shamed for this incident by Uther (Malory 33), while Lancelot is shamed by Guinevere (472).

Lancelot's desirability causes no end of trouble for him, as his becomes a vulnerable body whose integrity he must protect for Guinevere, not for himself. On one adventure, four queens capture Lancelot and “began to stryve for that knyght, and every of hem seyde they wolder have hym to hir love,” despite Lancelot's attempts at refusal (154). When the queens give him an ultimatum, “because that we undirstonde youre worthynesse, that thou art the noblest knyght lvyng, and also we know well there can no lady have thy love but one, and that is Quene Gwenyvere—and now thou shalt hir love lose for ever, and she thyne... Now chose one of us, whyche that thou wolte have to thy paramour, other ellys to

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<sup>128</sup> The other instance of rape by fraud is when Arthur has sexual relations with his sister, Morgause, but she disguises her relationship to him rather than her person, and, differently from Elaine and from Uther, acts alone. Furthermore, the result of this union, Mordred, is significantly more problematic than the conception of Arthur or of Galahad, suggesting narrative condemnation of the one rape by fraud scene, but not the others.

dye in this preson,” Lancelot dramatically responds, ““Yet had I lever dye in this preson with worshyp than to have one of you to my paramoure, magré myne hede”” (155). After this speech, the four queens depart, leaving Lancelot to be rescued by a lady who asks him to save her father’s life in return (156), so that, although universally desired, Lancelot escapes a potentially near-rape scenario with his “worshyp” (his honor, his sexual integrity) intact. This “titillating” adventure threatens Lancelot’s sexual purity while also protecting it. Because Lancelot is desirable, according to the rules of medieval romance,<sup>129</sup> he is rapeable, so he must protect himself or face the wrath of the dominatrix who ultimately controls his sexuality: Guinevere. That this is not the only such titillating scenario for Lancelot implies the reader/writer’s desire to repeatedly put him in such situations is at work.

In a romantic relationship characterized by its fantasy kinkiness, an external sexual threat against a male submissive partner remains, in a fantasy setting, tightly controlled by the author, and will never go “too far.” In fact, the undermining of a man’s consent mostly functions as an opportunity for his Lady to punish him, to further enact a scene of dominance and submission that characterizes their relationship. Rape fantasy is itself a kink, one potential component of BDSM. As Lewis Call argues, though “Long stigmatized as an abuse of power, BDSM could now be read as an egalitarian sharing of power, one which held clear ethical advantages over the non-consensual social power which is, in the Foucauldian model, omnipresent in our societies” (8). The only way to control the reality and severity of sexual assault is to do so fictionally, through fantasies like those explored in fanfiction—or medieval romance. Because the rape of both our heroes is fictionalized,

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<sup>129</sup> Compare the Loathly Ladies I discuss in Chapter 1.

not to mention merely threatened, it can have arguably positive outcomes. Where this has problematic bearings on the realities of rape, granting a violent action narrative coherence, as a rape fantasy, writing such situations can be a strategy for coping with what writers cannot control in real life. Lancelot and Lanval can have threats of rape thrust upon them, and it may be titillating to do so, but because the knights are fictional, they are ultimately safe from any true danger.

### **Conclusion: Humiliation Kink as Liberation from Shame**

The MED cites Malory's uses of the word "shame" as most often occurring in definition 4: "Disgraceful conduct, immoral behavior...a disgraceful act, an injury; something disgraceful or humiliating," a definition which also includes "nakedness, the genitals" ("Shame"). Sexual shame is arguably the driving force of the Arthurian romance cycle, from Arthur's conception, to Guinevere and Lancelot's affair, to the court's ultimate destruction through Mordred's incestuous conception. Even Galahad the Grail-finder would not exist without a rape by fraud. The thrill of illicit sexual shame and the way it sometimes results in good outcomes bleeds into other instances of shame in Arthurian stories: the characters, author, and readers presumably *enjoy* the titillating nature of these unacceptable (in real life) sexual behaviors. Shame's close association with sexual enjoyment in Arthuriana is an important point of comparison with fanfiction, a genre where the shame-enjoyment tension has been thoroughly considered by scholars and by fanfiction authors themselves.

Experiencing shame for love is a staple of *fin amor* ever since Lancelot rode in a prisoner's cart to save Guinevere in Chrétien's story. Chrétien's Lancelot hesitates because

of the cultural shame he would bring on himself by riding in the cart (and is later rebuked by Guinevere for this hesitation), but gets in the cart anyway because of his love for her. *Le Morte D'Arthur* rewrites this scene, repeating and reveling in shame's intersection with desire. Malory's "le Shyvalere de Charyotte" sequence handles the shame of the cart differently, as Lancelot locates shame in the knights who shoot his horse full of arrows and necessitate the cart ride: "'Alas, for shame,' seyde Sir Launcelot, 'that ever one knyght shulde betray another knyght'" (629). Being "sore acombird of hys armoure, hys shyld, and hys speare" as he is forced to walk, Lancelot is "annoyed" even before he spies the cart. When the "charyote" passes by him, Lancelot is so eager for a ride that he murders one of the drivers who refuses him passage and threatens the other into carrying him to Meleagant's castle to rescue the Queen. Indeed, shame is absent from the cart ride until one of Guinevere's ladies spies the cart approaching and supposes "he rydyth unto hangynge" (630). But once Guinevere recognizes Lancelot, she "rebuked that lady," saying, "'hit was fowle-mowthed...and evyll lykened, so for to liken the moste noble knyght of the worlde unto such a shamefull dethe'" (630). Here Lancelot is relieved of all shame, not just because he rides in the cart for love of Guinevere, as in Chrétien's version, but due to Guinevere's love for him, as she literally re-defines the nature of the cart ride and the parameters of shame. Because the Queen and the narrative agree that Lancelot is the "moste noble knyght of the worlde," an act such as riding in a cart and being mistaken for a prisoner, which would be "shamefull" for any other knight, is instead defended through Guinevere's esteem for him. Shame experienced for love or sex, or shame that is removed because of love, is a key feature of kink.

Lanval endures several humiliations for his Lady, not least of which is his total

ceding of control to her. He begins his story in a position of dishonor (though not quite shame), since he is poor and without friends, an outcast in the court of King Arthur. It must not escape mention that it is in this position that the Lady pursues, summons, and declares her love for him. He is certainly not the only good knight in King Arthur's court at the time—Gawain, for one, is called “*li frances, li pruz, / Que tant se fist amer de tuz*” [“the noble, the worthy, / who made himself so beloved by everyone”] and reminds his fellows that they have wronged Lanval by forgetting him (227-8)—so it is possible that Lanval's goodness *and* his low degree are what appeal to the Lady (that she is a Top seeking a Bottom). Lanval's encounter with the queen is another humiliation: he has remained unnoticed in court until clothed richly by his Lady, which paradoxically draws the predation of the queen. His refusal of her advances invites her wrath, and she humiliates him in several ways:

“*Asez le m'ad hummed it sovent*

*Que des femmez n'avez talent.*

*Vallez avez bien afeitiez;*

*Ensemble od eus vus deduiez.”*

[“People have often told me / that you have no desire for women. / You have shapely young men / and take your pleasure with them.”] (280-3)

The primary way she humiliates him is by accusing him of homosexuality—“you have no desire for women. / You have shapely young men / and take your pleasure with them”—and further, by couching this accusation in terms of courtly rumor—“people have often told me”—which returns him to his former isolation from the rest of the court. It is this accusation that inspires Lanval to reply “*maltalent / Dunt il se repenti sovent*” [“out of

anger, that he would often regret”] (289-90), as it is this boast and betrayal that loses him his lover. Though he hardly cares at this point, Lanval must then endure the humiliation of the queen’s accusations against him that he dishonored her, and then endure King Arthur’s wrath, and because his wealth has disappeared along with his Lady, he must rely on Gawain and other knights to stand surety for him (400). His inability to do anything to save himself is a slight against his own honor, placing him in the usual feminine position of needing a knight to fight for him, but Lanval is so obsessed with love that the loss of his Lady is his only concern.

The Lady’s return to him against all odds and entirely of her own volition to save him from death is a humiliation Lanval is so utterly unconcerned with, that he declares, ““ceo est m’amie! / Or m’en est gueres ki m’ochie, / si ele m’ad merci de mei” [“it is my beloved! / Now I care little who may kill me, / if she does not have mercy on me”] (597-9). When she invites him to do so, Lanval leaps onto the back of her horse, using “Un grant perrun de marbre bis, / U li pesant humme muntoent, / Que de la curt le rei venoent” [“a great block of dark marble, / where heavy men would mount / who were coming from the king’s court”], the use of which might be read as a condemnation of Arthur’s larger court as much as a final humiliation that Lanval happily endures because it helps him join her on her palfrey (635-7). Because he rides “behind her,” she is in control of the horse and driving him, much like Phyllis drives Aristotle. But the joke is on Aristotle, because Lanval is so glad to see his Lady again he will endure any shame (640). Instead of a cautionary tale against the dangers of women, Marie presents readers with what can only be understood as a happy ending.

In conclusion, Lancelot endures what we might readily interpret as sadomasochistic



humiliation for love, from Chrétien to Malory, again and again, throughout time always leaping into a prisoner's cart (with or without a moment's hesitation) because Guinevere orders him to, and because readers and writers seem to enjoy rereading the lengths he will go to for love. Lanval, too, has a female power fantasy enacted upon him, to which he consents with joy, and is punished by the temporary loss of his Lady only when he *refuses* to endure humiliation for her. Humiliation understood as a kink becomes something desirable, a state where shame ceases to have any affective power. Maybe the mounted Aristotle should have just "owned it" like Lanval and Lancelot seem to have done.

Just like Lancelot and Lanval, fans endure and even revel in reading and writing their favorite characters in shameful and problematic (up to and including rape) scenes, precisely because it (secretly) brings them pleasure as readers and rewriters. Reid's conclusion that "a significant portion of fans refuse to judge other fans on their kinks" instead acknowledges that some readers and writers find joy in something that the dominant culture finds shameful, and sometimes that is transgressive enough (481). By understanding shame as both an obstacle to and a component of enjoyment, something that can be embraced for its own sake, we see where fanfiction authors are "getting down in the muck of the id with dirt under our fingernails," as one fan puts it (Busse 56). A kinky reading of Lancelot and Lanval allows us to see where medieval rewriters may have been doing the same thing.

## Conclusion

I use fanfiction as a model for theorizing later medieval romances, beginning with elements that function as major motifs in fanfiction, in spite or perhaps because of their embarrassing nature: its predominantly female authorship and its catering to their queer desires, the prevalence of male/male romantic storylines (slash), the focus on rendering male bodies vulnerable through hurt and comfort, and its embrace of a variety of erotic kinks which may remain fantasy desires only. By locating fanfiction desires and shames in medieval romance, I reveal modes of resistance to structures of hegemony through the tactic of finding personal pleasure in the culturally shameful. The ways in which fanfiction challenges heteronormative ideologies of gender and sexuality shows how medieval romances “press on” these boundaries, too. The nonheteronormativity of the motifs in fanfiction lead to a consideration of the nonheteronormativity of the text.

The predominantly non-male authors of fanfiction necessarily emphasize and cater to non-male fan desires. While “female fan desires” are not monolithic in either modern fanfiction or medieval romance, the Loathly Ladies in Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* demonstrate tactics of fantagonism such as rewriting male characters and avatar deployment, which female fans employ today to resist misogynist readings. These tactics, like the loathly body which allows for a degree of anonymity and subjectivity not always afforded to women, only allow an individual elite woman to focus on her own desires without being objectified for her desirability. Like her loathly body, however, which she ultimately submits to heteronormative standards of beauty and behavior, this transformation is so narrowly subjective it is only ever personal, without any appreciable destabilization of wider gender politics.

The erotic potential of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Prose Lancelot*, viewed through the tropes of male/male erotic fanfiction known as “slash,” highlights Gawain’s queer interactions in both medieval romances as well as Galehaut’s unparalleled love for Lancelot. I reconceptualize the somewhat outdated fan usage of the term “slash” as a process by which secondary authors rewrite a source text queerly, treating canon as a world they operate within rather than an authoritative source to which they are beholden. I argue that slashed ways of writing include an emphasis on character integrity, including sometimes singular or “first time” queer encounters which do not threaten a male character’s canonical heterosexuality; playing with relationship inequality when the two members are otherwise socially equal, as fans play with “Top” and “Bottom” coding in queer relationships; and an element of singularity that speaks to the shame for the reader and writer of a text where didactics are threatened by erotics.

In exploring medieval masculinities in the *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick* and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, I find that violence, when read through the fanfiction genre of “hurt/comfort,” becomes a non-shameful narrative tool to explore otherwise potentially shameful intimacy between men. Guy of Warwick’s disguise as a humble pilgrim is all but impenetrable to his friend Tirry except in violent exploits or mutual suffering and comfort. Gawain and Priamus change from enemies to allies as a result of shared violence, wounding, and healing, and Arthur and Mordred question everything as a response to the painful witnessing of Gawain’s death. Understanding these texts through the hurt/comfort fanfiction genre reveals that intimate and physical relationships between men are acceptable and even exemplary within structures of masculinity and homosociality, but specifically through an economy of hurt and comfort like we see in fanfiction. Additionally,

the aesthetic closeness between readers and writers to the characters in hurt/comfort fanfiction (where fans feel sympathetic pain and experience their own desires to be comforted, itself “embarrassing”), should be applied to the medieval readers and writers (whom we know read devotional works affectively and meditated on the passion/ascension or hurt/comfort of Christ) of texts that ascribe such emotional intensity and meaning to violence and pain.

After covering these aspects of gender and sexuality, I locate fantasy desires for nonheteronormative kink in the erotic exchanges of pain, power, and humiliation in Marie de France’s *Lanval* and Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*. These titillating scenarios, enacted by beloved fictional characters, are not bound by the rules of “safe, sane, and consensual” BDSM practices but are governed by the “rules” of courtly love, and I read both fanfiction authors and medieval romance authors as indulging in true “fantasies” as separate from real-life desires. Lancelot endures what we might readily interpret as masochistic humiliation for love because Guinevere wants him to; Lanval, too, consents with joy to the female power fantasy enacted upon him and is punished only when he *refuses* to endure humiliation for her. Humiliation understood as a kink therefore becomes something desirable, where shame’s affective power works to produce pleasure, and so I argue that shame can be both an obstacle to *and* a component of these kinds of nonheteronormative pleasures.

I therefore find that the practice of rewriting beloved stories and characters, whether medieval romance or modern fanfiction, represents a power exchange, too. Just as medieval authors, including not only Marie de France and Sir Thomas Malory, but also Geoffrey Chaucer, and the other unnamed authors whose works I have explored here, often claimed

inspiration from and deference to an authoritative text, the ultimate power exchange is the fanfiction author submitting to the authority of texts composed by others while at the same time controlling the relationship through their transformative rewriting. Shameful fanfiction might be resistant to dominant cultures and ideologies, it might be therapeutic, it might simply be fun, or “sexy in a fantasy context,” or all of the above—but it is resistant to dominant cultures and ideologies, especially in the ways that it is embarrassing *and* pleasurable. For the medieval Christian author, that shame might be due to meditating on lust-filled secular romances instead of devotional literature; for the post-copyright fanfiction author, that embarrassment might be due to over-investment in fan enjoyment which, by virtue of being amateur, has no capitalist value.

Reading medieval derivative works as fanfictions makes their medieval authors and readers into fans who desire to explore fictional relationships, characters, intimacies, and fantasies further, whether critically or in celebration—or, very often, both. What I find to be an important element of fanfiction’s erotics, which has been under examined by scholars, is the desire to rewrite as a pleasure drive itself, a drive to enjoy, through the process of rewriting, shameful stories which already give the writer, or someone in their community, pleasure as readers—and that that pleasure can be subversive. Selecting medieval romance literature as “fanfiction” because it is amateur, intentionally derivative, and fantasy, reveals how these texts locate pleasure through shame, both in their composition process and in their narratives. Narrowing in on elements such as female authorship, queer erotics, masculine vulnerability, and kink, elements that modern audiences may consider counter-culture and nonheteronormative, tightens our historicization of heteronormativity in medieval literary communities. How we define

fanfiction for medieval and modern times becomes, ultimately, how it challenges the heteronormativity of textual production. Such a reading of medieval derivative works as fanfictions, because of how they negotiate shame and pleasure, therefore provides one way of narrowing the definition of fanfiction, which can be difficult to pin down on some level, anyway, and which a project like this could potentially explode, making fanfiction impossible to define with any utility.

Most readers today have heard of fanfiction and can, I hope, see the fruitful comparison to medieval romance, but those who know fanfiction's memes, and, most importantly, those who have experienced these desires, and read (or written) these tropes, have an instant connection, however dehistoricized, to the desires of some medieval readers and writers. What is most important to me in this project is that fanfiction provides a framework through which modern readers may, to some extent, emotionally, intimately *know* why medieval romances were read and rewritten throughout the Middle Ages, making literatures of as many as nine hundred years ago more immediately accessible to them today.



Figure 3. Stitch. Screenshot.





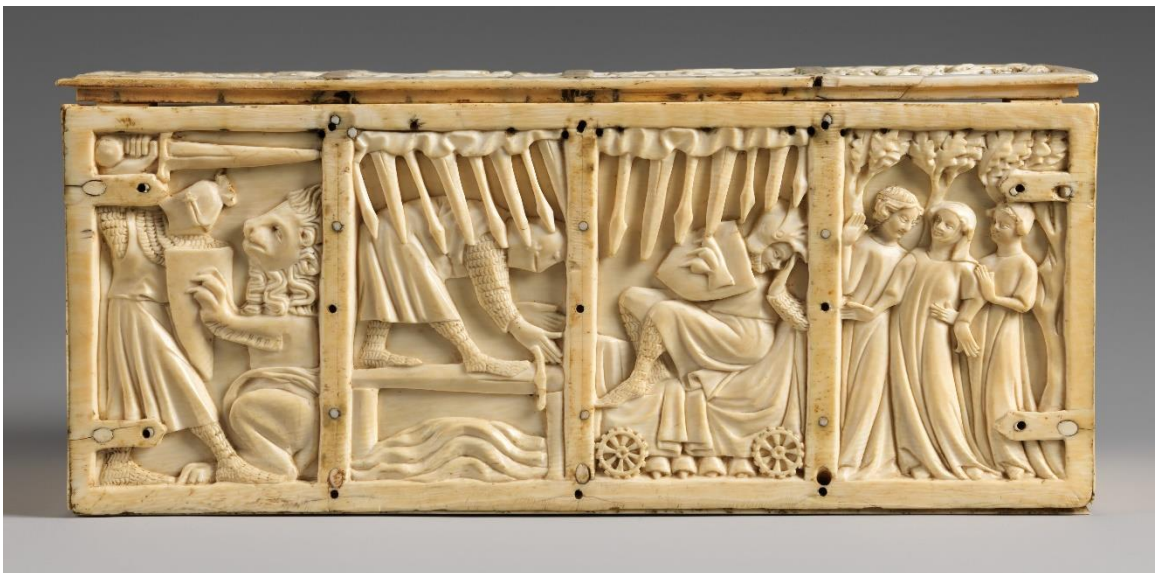
Figure 4. "Aquamanile in the Form of Aristotle and Phyllis."



Figure 5. "Casket with Scenes from Romances" (front).



Figure 6. "Casket with Scenes from Romances" (back).



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