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THE QUEER FANTASIES OF NORMATIVE MASCULINITY IN MIDDLE
ENGLISH POPULAR ROMANCE

By

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Bachelor of Arts, University of Montana, Missoula, 2008

Thesis

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English

The Queer Fantasies of Normative Masculinity in Middle English Popular Romance

Chairperson: Dr. Ashby Kinch

This thesis examines how the authors, Geoffrey Chaucer and Thomas Chestre, manipulate the construct of late fourteenth-century normative masculinity by parodying the aristocratic ideology that hegemonically prescribed the proper performance of masculine normativity. Both authors structure their respective tales, *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *Sir Launfal*, in the style of contemporary popular romances; the plot of the tales focusing on the male protagonists' quest for sexual and social identity. Instead of perpetuating the masculine identity of the hegemony, their romances parody the genre by queering the characteristics of the protagonists and the expectations of their audience.

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Introduction: Late Fourteenth-Century Heteronormativity and Popular Romance

When we think of medieval romances, such as tale of King Arthur and his knights, the identities of the characters that inhabit them are, more often than not, positioned as heteronormative. Often considered the bedrock of heteronormative behavior for male-female relations, medieval sexual identities have been limited by modern interpretations of the past and the restrictive nature of heteronormativity.¹ Medieval and modern sexual identities have been forced into a paradigm, one that suggests that heterosexuality is the only form of “natural” sexuality, and that all other forms are abhorrent and unnatural; thereby ending the exploration of our collective sexual identities before it begins. Heterosexuality, as the normative state of one’s sexual identity, is an illusion, constructed in our cultural past. Karma Lochrie addresses this issue, explaining that heterosexuality has been culturally interpreted as “heteronormativity,” meaning:

... heterosexuality that has become presumptive, [...] heterosexuality that is both descriptive and prescriptive, that defines everything from who we think we are as a nation, to what it means to be human... It is also a heterosexuality that excludes others from these same meanings and communities.²

Viewed as a transhistorical normative state, heteronormativity has reached an “entrenched place in contemporary American culture as a mystified norm that reaches

¹ See Sylvester, Louise M.’s *Medieval Romance and the Construction of Heterosexuality*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, for more an in depth and convincing argument of medieval romance’s effects on modern heteronormativity.

² Lochrie, Karma. “Introduction.” In *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn’t*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. xi-xxviii. xii.

into the past, [and] permeates the present.”³ It allows for only one form of sexuality, and excludes and denies other forms, even other forms of heterosexuality. This exclusion forces non-heteronormative sexual identities into the position of queer Other – an identity that operates outside of dominant social norms – as individuals whose sexual identities defy the prescriptive order and resist normative definitions.

The effects of heteronormativity on queer identities, however, are less apparent when we analyze medieval sexualities. Despite studying texts that exist outside of our modern ideological apparatus of sexual identification, scholars of medieval culture use modern sexual definitions to define medieval identities. Applying heteronormative standards to medieval sexual identities is not only limiting, as it is for modern sexualities, but highly anachronistic. Since medieval sexual identities existed before modern heteronormativity’s terminologies and definitions, how can the modern scholar discuss sexual identities that exist outside of the modern system of sexual signs and signifiers? Lochrie coins the term “heterosyncrasies” to define sexual identities that exist(ed) outside of heteronormativity and that “[oppose] a unified, monolithic, and presumptive understanding of heterosexuality in favor of a more idiosyncratic, diversified, and even perverse take on heterosexuality.”⁴ In the process of exploring the “complexity and plurality” of desires in medieval sexual identities, a plethora of medieval heterosyncrasies emerge from the flattened “heterosexual norm” that has dominated medieval scholarship.⁵ In a similar attempt to avoid anachronism, Tison Pugh suggests that instead of creating new terms we “supplement the suffix *-like* to *heterosexual*, *homosexual*, and

³ Ibid., xiii.

⁴ Ibid., xix.

⁵ Ibid., xx.

heteronormative [...] to spare [scholars] the weight of clunky neologisms.”⁶ For my research, I have chosen to rely on the modern terms *heterosexual*, *homosexual*, *heteronormative*, *masculine*, and *feminine*, and, like Pugh, ask that my readers add the suffix “like” to these terms with the understanding that the modern cultural baggage associated with these terms does not exist when applied to medieval sexual identities. As Lochrie states, the presence of many sexual identities that lack modern cultural baggage does not “rule out the circulation of cultural anxieties about the particular trajectories of desires.”⁷ Instead, these anxieties towards non-normative sexual identities reveal the constructs of normativity and prescribed performance of normative sexual identity. In particular, the prescriptive nature of normative masculinity found in fourteenth-century Middle English popular romances provide examples of popular culture’s interpolation and expression of hegemonic normativity through its literature. The fourteenth century’s lack of modern heteronormativity, and the control it wields over modern sexual identities, does not suggest that fourteenth-century identities did not have a hegemonic authority. Instead there were multiple hegemonic structures that sought to prescribe normative behaviors including, but not limited to, the medieval Church and the feudal system of government.

The construction of normative masculinity requires a binary Other, an identity that masculinity opposes categorically which Pugh terms, “the possibility of the queer.”⁸ In his analysis of the construction of normative masculinity in Middle English literature, Pugh reminds us that “assuming a normative masculinity is a task fraught with

⁶ Pugh, Tison. “Introduction.” In *Sexuality and Its Queer Discontents in Medieval English Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 1-19. 10.

⁷ Lochrie, “Introduction,” xxi.

⁸ Pugh, “Introduction.” 1.

queerness,” as culturally constructed normative masculinity requires other gendered identities against which to define itself.⁹ Pugh’s analysis focuses primarily on masculine identities –both normative and queer – which are defined against and by one another. This study, however, will focus on normative masculinity and the sexual identities it defines itself against, which include: normative femininity, non-normative femininity, and queer masculinity. Queering the genre conventions of Middle English popular romances destabilizes the heteronormative identities and expectations and reveals an aristocratic social identity inherent in hegemonic masculinity. Queer sexual identities are often limited to homosexual identities in common discourse; I, however, will rely on David Halperin’s definition which states that:

Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. “Queer” then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative.¹⁰

In Halperin’s model, resistance to normativity creates the identities labeled with the blanket term “queer,” which signifies not homosexuality, transsexuality, or heterosexuality, but identities that resist normative constructions. The action of resistance does not need to be a pointed refusal to conform or a public protest, but a simple act of non-compliance of which the individual may or may not be aware. Halperin does not address medieval sexualities; his examination of social constructivism’s effects on gender links his notion with Foucault’s concept of

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Halperin, David. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. 62.

transhistorical constructions of sexuality.¹¹ Despite their lack of a modern vocabulary full of sexual jargon, medieval individuals formed their sexual identities – through either resistance or adherence to social norms – in a manner similar to modern individuals.¹²

Locating queer identities in medieval cultures is an undertaking that usually arrives at the doorstep of the medieval Church and the authority it wielded over individuals. Pugh and other scholars view the medieval Church as the source of heteronormative authority in medieval culture, embodied by the works of medieval theologians such as Alain de Lille, who railed against sodomy and sexual perversions in twelfth-century France. Focusing on ecclesiastic origins, however, limits sexuality to ecclesiastic definitions and to the ecclesiastic societies found in monasteries, abbeys, convents, etc. The authority of the Church over medieval people's lives cannot be denied, but ecclesiastic life, though not unknown to lay people, intentionally cloistered itself away from secular society. Ecclesiastic life otherized itself by positioning itself outside of secular culture, creating its own rules, expectations and normative identities. Consequently, I would like to offer an alternative heteronormative authority and queer location, specifically in regards to fourteenth-century popular English culture. Instead of a cloistered construct, the location of the queer and the construct of normative masculinity are secular, public, and rooted in the political rhetoric of the time. Found in fourteenth-century popular romances, examples of this secular and public heteronormative construct manifest as a seeming cultural obsession with masculine identity. In these texts, young men dominate the narratives; like Lybeaus Desconus, they seek their patrilineal identities; like Sir Eglamour of Artois, they battle giants and wild

¹¹ Foucault, Michel. *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of the History of Sexuality*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

boars. The preoccupation with masculine actions and achievements in popular romances suggests not only a secular construct of masculinity, but the aspirational ideology of the bourgeoisie-like classes that received these texts. In the following study, the term “bourgeoisie,” and its derivatives, refers neither to Marx’s social group that opposes and exploits the proletariat, nor to the middle class of eighteenth-century France. Instead, the term bourgeoisie refers to a class in fourteenth-century England that consisted of non-aristocratic gentility and wealthy merchants and tradesmen who were experiencing social mobility in a way that had never before been witnessed in England.¹³ This medieval English bourgeoisie ideologically aligned itself with the aristocracy, and thus the literature that depicted aristocratic behaviors and beliefs – popular romances – appealed to them greatly, despite their non-realistic fantasy elements.

Despite their popularity, or perhaps because of it, popular romances and their cultural significance are often neglected because of their status as popular art instead of high art. Ad Putter notes that though “praise for the vigor and vitality of some romances is still occasionally found, the appreciation of them as folk culture is at present effectively no more.”¹⁴ Deeming popular romances less compelling because of their lack of “formal complexity and conceptual sophistication,”¹⁵ prominent medievalists such as Derek Pearsall roundly dismiss their study, claiming it is “difficult to understand why poems that are so bad according to almost every criteria of literary value should have held such a central position in the literary culture of their own period.”¹⁶ This type of

¹³ For an in depth analysis of the changing social order of fourteenth-century England see: Strohm, Paul. *Social Chaucer*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.

¹⁴ Putter, Ad, and Jane Gilbert. “Introduction.” In *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, by Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert, 1-38. Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2000. 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁶ Pearsall, Derek. “Understanding Middle English romance.” *Review 2* (1980): 105-125. 105.

critique of popular romances, according to Putter, encourages two limiting views of the genre: 1) that popular romances were the medieval equivalent of the modern popular fiction novel and 2) that the only political function that they served was to paint chivalric life as “glamorous from a safe social distance.”¹⁷ Such an approach condenses the genre of popular romance into a single entity with a homogenous audience and a solitary theme, when in actuality the popular romance genre can be divided into a plethora of sub-genres and thus appeal to a variety of audiences. The sub-genre of popular romance that this study focuses on, as Putter describes, is that of “the self-fulfillment of a knight in adventures of love and chivalry.”¹⁸ These tales present their audience with a male protagonist who seeks to win wealth and fame – and consequently, honor and a wife – through martial force, typically combined with elements of fantasy and magic.

The structure of masculine identity quest romances, according to Stephen Knight, validated “the practice of the feudally powerful, and [persuaded] the non-powerful of the authenticity of the whole imaginary” through fantasy and fiction.¹⁹ Defined as an individual’s – or a class’s – acceptance of a hegemonic ideology, the “imaginary” (mis)represents itself to its subjects in order for them to identify with and perpetuate its ideology. In the unconscious hope that they would benefit from the hegemonic order, the bourgeoisie of late fourteenth-century England interpolated and perpetuated the hegemonic ideology of normative masculinity as found in popular romances whose narratives focused on the formation of the protagonists’ identity. The masculine identities portrayed in these romances were not just the product of authorial creativity,

¹⁷ Putter, “Introduction.” 20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 1.

¹⁹ Knight, Stephen. “The Social Function of the Middle English Romances.” In *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology & History*, by David Aers, 99-122. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986. 103.

but the appropriation and expression of a hegemonic ideology, passed down from the aristocratic strata of English society. But not all romances seamlessly perpetuated the imaginary, as some indicate a level of self-awareness that simultaneously exposes and dismantles the construct of normative masculinity. Specifically, the tales *Sir Launfal*, by Thomas Chestre, and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Tale of Sir Thopas* indicate an ideological struggle within the bourgeoisie, as neither of these tales, though constructing their heroes within the parameters of fourteenth-century English normative masculinity, construct normative masculine characters. Using Thomas Chestre's *Lybeaus Desconus* as a model of perpetuated normative masculinity, this study will examine how *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *Sir Launfal* defy normativity through social satire.

Despite the lack of conclusive evidence identifying or naming Thomas Chestre as the author of *Lybeaus Desconus*, *Sir Launfal*, and a third text *Octavian Imperator*, scholars, chief among them M. Mills, acknowledge him as such.²⁰ The basis of this claim lies in the texts' relationship to one another in M.S. Cotton Caligula A. ii, in which the only copy of *Sir Launfal* exists, at the end of which Chestre identifies himself, "Thomas Chestre made thys tale" (1039).²¹ Preceded in the manuscript by *Octavian Imperator* (also known as *The Southern Octavian*) and *Lybeaus Desconus*, Mills substantiates his claim with evidence showing unique similarities between the three texts in regards to dialect and style; particularly, the author's use of specific phrasal patterns and narrative devices.²² Chestre's style, as characterized by Mills, "betrays a consistent desire to meet

²⁰ Mills, M. "The Composition and Style of the 'Sothern' *Octavian*, *Sir Launfal*, and *Libeaus Desconus*," *Medium Ævum*, 31 (1962), 88-109.

²¹ Chestre, Thomas. "Sir Launfal." In *The Middle English Breton Lays*, edited by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, 210-239. Kalamazoo: TEAMS, 2001.

²² Mills, M. "Introduction." In *Lybeaus Desconus*, edited by M. Mills, 1-70. Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1969. 65.

the needs of rhyme, at whatever cost to stylishness and sense,” and manipulates all of his sources with his “unscrupulous approach to language.”²³ Chestre’s “unscrupulous approach to language,” refers primarily to the narrative revisions that the author makes to his French sources, changes that scholars such as Renee Ward and Anne Laskaya view as intentional revisions, intended to customize the narrative for its audience.

Unlike Chestre, Geoffrey Chaucer receives little criticism for his style and revisions to source material, and is often lauded as the ‘Father of English Literature’. Chaucer’s most well-known and studied work, *The Canterbury Tales*, tells of a socially diverse group of pilgrims traveling from London to the tomb of St. Thomas Becket in Canterbury, and the tale-telling game they play to pass the time. Dating the tales can be problematic, as they were written non-sequentially, but by examining the tales in relation to the historical events of Chaucer’s life time – roughly 1342 to 1400 – elements in the tales appear to correspond directly to contemporary events. For example, noticing the manner and frequency in which Chaucer “satirizes the bourgeois instincts of the Flemish knights”²⁴ in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, J.M. Manly suggests that the tale would have been composed around 1383, “the date of the Flemish embassy to London.”²⁵ Remarkably, it is through Chaucer and his examined life that scholars date Thomas Chestre’s works to the late fourteenth century as Chaucer parodies Chestre’s *Lybeaus Desconus* in the *Tale of Sir Thopas*. Though similar versions of Chestre’s tale existed earlier in the fourteenth century and later in the fifteenth-century, Mills claims that “Chaucer’s knowledge of *Lybeaus Desconus* almost certainly went beyond the limits of what he could have

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 67.

²⁵ Ibid.

obtained.”²⁶ Considering the relationship between the two texts, Mills reasons that *Lybeaus Desconus* “could hardly have been written much later than 1380.”²⁷

Considering Chaucer and Chestre’s historical setting, this study asserts that the political rhetoric of Edward III’s reign served as a secular origin of normative masculinity. Edward III dedicated copious amounts of energy to cultivating an image of masculinity in order to distance himself from the reputation, and failed rule, of his father, Edward II. In her analysis of the “carefully tended” masculine reputation of Edward III, Sylvia Federico draws attention to the contested nature of the “manliness” of English kings in the fourteenth century.²⁸ By examining Lancastrian propaganda used to discredit Richard II as “unfit to rule,” Federico establishes how such propaganda relied upon an earlier model of normative masculinity, that which was cultivated by Edward III.²⁹ Edward’s masculine reputation, fashioned as a “counterpoint to his sexually problematic father,” was one of hyper-masculinity.³⁰ He defined himself not just through military conquests and aggressive heterosexuality, but via direct responses to “scandals associated with his predecessor.”³¹ Those sexual scandals, however, were not necessarily based on the actions of Edward II, but constructed by chroniclers and clerics during the early years of Edward III’s reign. For example, Ian Mortimer argues that “the popular idea that Edward II engaged in sodomitical acts was entirely and exclusively due to [Bishop Oreleton’s] sermons.”³² Oreleton, the Bishop of Hereford, preached on October of 1326 that Edward II was a “tyrant and a sodomite” (*tryannus et sodomita*), a claim that

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁸ Federico, Sylvia. “Queer Times: Richard II in the Poems and Chronicles of Late Fourteenth-Century England.” *Medium Ævum* 78, no. 2 (2010): 25-46. 29.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 29-30.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Mortimer, Ian. *Medieval Intrigue*. London: Continuum International Publishing Grp., 2010. 52.

he later repeated in the following years.³³ This narrative had existed primarily in popular traditions as unofficial orally transmitted tales during Edward II's life and remained so until 1344 when Orleton was accused, by agents of Edward III, of attempting to subvert the authority of the deceased Edward II. Once the narrative became "official," through the repetition and acknowledgement of Orleton's sermons, the "anal rape narrative" began to appear in chronicles, specifically a *Brut* continuation and Higden's *Polychonicon*.³⁴ The "anal rape narrative" claims that Edward II was killed by having a "red-hot copper rod"³⁵ or "red-hot iron"³⁶ inserted into his anus, the intention of which was to kill him without leaving any external wounds in a symbolic manner that indicated his supposed sodomitical nature.³⁷

Federico claims that Edward III intended to redeem his father's reputation as "properly heterosexual" by calling Bishop Orleton to account for his accusations against Edward II.³⁸ In this posthumous reputation management, Edward III shifted the blame for his father's problematic reign and marriage on to Queen Isabella, creating a narrative that focused on the queen's usurpation of the throne with her lover Rodger Mortimer, instead of Edward's supposed deviant behavior. Unfortunately, Edward's attempt to shift the rhetoric surrounding his predecessor's (his father's) reign actually brought the charges of sodomy "out of the informal, oral tradition and into an officially acknowledged (by way of being officially denied) existence."³⁹ By insisting upon his

³³ Federico, "Queer Times." 31.

³⁴ W.M. Ormrod coins this phrase in "The Sexualities of Edward II," in *The Reign of Edward II*, ed. Dodd and Musson, 22-47.

³⁵ *Brut, or The Chronicles of England*. Edited by Friedrich W.D. Brie, 2 vols. Millwood, NY, 1987. I, 248f.

³⁶ *Polychonicon Ranulphi Higden monachi Cestrenis*. Edited by C. Babington and J.R. Lumby, 8 vols. London, 1866, VIII, 324.

³⁷ Federico, "Queer Times." 32.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

father's heterosexuality and bringing the term "sodomite" into the rhetoric of failed kingship in fourteenth-century politics, Edward III established a hegemonic masculinity that defined itself both against the deviance of his mother's adultery and usurpation of the throne and his father's (supposedly) deviant sexuality. This masculine performance became a powerful rhetorical tool to maintain his power and authority in a political environment in which the authority of the king could be and had been called into question by doubting his masculinity.

In the process of defining his father's sexuality, Edward III inadvertently developed what Federico terms "royal queerness." By "violating a straight(forward) development of chronology and causality," chroniclers and politicians disrupt both the modern scholars and contemporary individuals' "understanding of the boundaries between past, present, and future," obscuring facts behind rhetoric.⁴⁰ Though Edward III initially benefitted from this rhetoric, establishing a masculinity defined by successful military campaigns and mistresses, the binary of his sexuality defined against his father's backfired, as the same factors that chroniclers and politicians used against Edward II were soon used against him. For example, in 1340, John Stratford, the Archbishop of Canterbury, questioned the young king's choice of advisors, and directly reminded the king of the consequences his father had faced for choosing to surround himself with the wrong people.⁴¹ Stratford never directly accused Edward III of being a sodomite, but nonetheless the same rhetoric that established Edward II's queerness, and thus secured Edward III's power, was used in attempts to control Edward III.

By fashioning himself in opposition to his father's queered sexual identity,

⁴⁰ Ibid. 26.

⁴¹ Ibid., 31.

Edward III established a normative hegemonic masculinity. This identity benefitted his reign by curbing his political opponents' ability to undermine his reign with accusations of deviant sexual behavior but essentially established what Federico calls "the ultimate statement of political unfitness," that of non-normative masculinity.⁴² Though this masculine hegemony secured Edward III's power, it set a dangerous precedent for his heirs, in that for them to maintain power and deflect baronial criticisms, the king *must* perform his kingship and masculinity as Edward III or be characterized as unfit to rule. Within the aristocratic social strata the rhetoric of hegemonic masculinity was used to legitimize the deposition of Richard II in the fifteenth-century, a chapter in history that historians such as W.M. Ormrod have examined thoroughly.⁴³ The effects of this social construct on popular culture, however, have been neglected, in part because of the poor reputation of the cultural artifacts that contain manifestations of Edward's normative masculinity; those artifacts being the oft neglected and derided popular romances. My study will examine these neglected texts, specifically Thomas Chestre's *Lybeaus Desconus* and *Sir Launfal*, and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Tale of Sir Thopas* from the *Canterbury Tales*.

In Chapter 1 of the following study, I examine how the parody of *The Tale of Sir Thopas* is not simply the "drasty rhyming" of Chaucer the pilgrim, but a parody of normative masculinity, created by a performance, or lack thereof, of licit gendered acts. The proper performance of these gendered acts can be found in Thomas Chestre's *Lybeaus Desconus*, in which the text succeeds in forming a character that adheres to the

⁴² Ibid., 33.

⁴³ See Ormrod's "Monarchy, Martyrdom and Masculinity: England in the Later Middle Ages." In *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, by P.H. Callum and Katherine J. Lewis, 174-191. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004.

rubric of normative masculinity by presenting three key character tropes. These tropes include performing acts of licit violence, engaging with and subduing a non-normative woman, and uniting with a normative woman. Defined in part by the performative and public acts of licit violence, the main character's sexual identity defines itself against and by gendered Others – in this case femininity – both normative and non-normative. The character tropes utilized in *Lybeaus Desconus* closely mirror the rhetoric of the “royal queering” of Edward III's reign, and provide a link not only to the text's historical context, but to a culture's reception and projection of a rhetorical use of hegemonic masculinity. By comparing Chaucer's construction of Sir Thopas's sexual identity through queered genre conventions found in their normative state in *Lybeaus Desconus*, the parody of masculine identity that Thopas represents emerges. Furthermore, by recording Harry Bailly's erratic reaction to *Sir Thopas*, the characteristics of normative masculinity are called into question by the very social group it is supposed to control.

In Chapter 2, I examine how Thomas Chestre, who demonstrates his ability to shape a narrative that seamlessly portrays and perpetuates hegemonic normative masculinity, alters the well-known narrative of Marie de France's *Lanval* to create *Sir Launfal*. Like *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, the attempts to conform to normative masculinity made by *Sir Launfal*'s titular character possess elements of parody that destabilize heteronormative identities and expectations. Chestre's parody of knight(man)hood, however, does not focus on the unobtainable sexual identity of hegemonic masculinity like *Sir Thopas*, but on the unobtainable social identity that normativity perpetuates. By aligning the desires of his character with those of his bourgeois audience Chestre effectively queers the genre of popular romance by constructing a self-aware masculine

identity that does not require licit violence, but is still able to achieve the wealth, fame, and possession of a normative female character, thus securing his masculinity.

Chapter One: More Than a ‘Toord’: Chaucer’s Queering of Popular Romance

When Harry Bailly interrupts Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas*, he claims that he cannot take a moment more of the tale’s “drasty speche,” (VII.923) “rym dogerel,” (VII.925) and “drasty ryming,” as it is “nat worth a toord” (VII.930).⁴⁴ These lines are often evoked when critics discuss *Sir Thopas*, as well they should be: How often does a text contain its own succinct criticism? Unfortunately, critics have taken Harry’s word as the last word, reducing Chaucer’s tale to a mere “rym dogerel,” that being reason enough to disregard it. This reading, justified as it may be in regards to rhyme scheme, neglects the content of Chaucer’s tale and Harry’s connection to it. Outwardly *Sir Thopas*, with its forced tail-rhymes and fantastic realm of faery queens and giants, appears before the Host as a popular romance; a genre that the Host would have been keenly familiar with as a member of the burgeoning middle class. However, Sir Thopas, with his pale face, “lippes rede as rose” (VII.726), and pesky habit of forgetting his armor, does not fit the model for chivalric heroes. Chaucer does not construct *Sir Thopas* with elements that, in popular romances, would signify the protagonist’s normative sexual identity, and align the tale with those genre conventions. Instead, *The Tale of Sir Thopas* functions more as a queered popular romance by preparing its audience for the familiar masculine exploits of a knightly quest and then presenting a rendition that, not only fails to meet expectations, but never intended to meet them. Reading through the three fits that structure the tale, it becomes clear that *The Tale of Sir Thopas* contains a chaotic potential, one that threatens to destabilize the control that the Host wields over the

⁴⁴ All of the citations of *The Canterbury Tales* are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson, 3-328. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987.

pilgrims and the tale-telling game. The atypical titular character presents the reader with both a queered masculinity and the unsettling possibility that runty, faltering, *pryking* Sir Thopas could, in fact, successfully maneuver his way through the dreamscape that Chaucer creates. If the defining characteristics of normative masculinity need not be met to successfully navigate through a fantasy realm of unconquerable obstacles, what does it mean for someone who has built his identity on those ideals in the real world?

Of course, Harry Bailly does not, and did not exist in the “real world” (as far as we know), and his reaction is fictional. Chaucer’s description of Harry in the *General Prologue*, however, brings the character to life:

A semely man OURE HOOSTE was withalle
For to been a marchal in an halle.
A large man he was with eyen stepe –
A fairer burgeys was ther noon in Chepe –
Boold of his speche, and wys, and wel ytaught,
And of manhood hym lakked right naught.. (I. 751-756)

Successful in business, confident in speech, physically imposing, well-educated – Chaucer presents Harry as a vivacious representative of the social-climbing bourgeoisie. Harry’s primary characteristic, according to Chaucer-the-pilgrim, is his manhood. Tison Pugh identifies Harry as either a “bourgeois master-of-ceremonies or an aristocratic social climber with pretensions of employment in a more courtly position” throughout *The Canterbury Tales*.⁴⁵ Consequently, he attempts to align himself with the pilgrims who appear to perform hegemonic (aristocratic) masculinity. Any approval or acceptance

⁴⁵ Pugh, Tison. “Queering Harry Bailly: Gendered Carnival, Social Ideologies, and Masculinities Under Duress in *The Canterbury Tales*,” In *Sexuality and Its Queer Discontents in Middle English Literature*, by Tison Pugh, 49-73. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 55.

Harry shows of *Sir Thopas* could establish him as a member of a non-aristocratic class and, therefore, unable to lord authority over his fellow pilgrims. In order to maintain his power over the other pilgrims, Harry rejects *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, ostensibly on the basis of its rhyme scheme. But the Host's objection cannot reside solely in form or rhyme, as *Sir Thopas*'s end-rhyme style was the general *modus operandi* for most popular romances. Instead, the following study will show that Harry Bailly's objection is rooted in his desire to align himself with the more aristocratic members of the pilgrimage. By repressing the non-normative identity of Sir Thopas he tries upholds hegemonic masculinity in an attempt to identify with it.

Unfortunately, distancing *Sir Thopas* from its "drasty ryming" is no small task, as Harry's critique has dominated the discourse of both the tale, its genre, and the scholarship about it. This simplistic judgment has spawned the belief that, if popular romances are "nat worth a toord," then they are certainly not worth serious critical study. But Geoffrey Chaucer would never simply give his reader an easy explanation to the problematic elements of his *Canterbury Tales* project. In fact, Chaucer prefers to make the simple reader the butt of his sly wit; for example, after Chaucer's first apology for the soon-to-be offensive nature of *The Canterbury Tales*, he loosely quotes Plato: "Eek Plato seith, whoso kan hym rede; / The words moote be cosyn to the dede" (I.741-742). The statement separates his audience into two camps; those who have read Plato and, therefore, will understand Chaucer's tongue and cheek wit, and those who have not read Plato and, therefore, do not realize that poet just mocked them. Similarly, Chaucer attempts to link *Sir Thopas* to a tradition outside of his own text. In the final fit of the tale he explicitly links *Sir Thopas* with the popular romance tradition:

Men speken of romances of prys,
Of Horn child and of Ypotys,
Of Beves and Sir Gy,
Of sir Lybeux and Pleyndamour –
But sir Thopas, he bereth the flour
Of roial chivalry! (VII.897-902)

Like the heroes listed by Chaucer – Lybeaus Desconus, Guy of Warwick, Bevis of Hampton, etc. – *Sir Thopas* belongs to the sub-genre of popular romances that tell the tale of a hero's quest for identity. In the course thereof, the hero establishes his masculine identity through the performance of licit gendered acts. But unlike those romances *Sir Thopas* does not fulfill the masculine milestones that signify normative masculine behavior. Instead, Chaucer uses them as parodic elements that queer both the character Sir Thopas and Harry Bailly. By parodying the narrative tropes that signify normative masculinity Chaucer constructs Thopas outside of the normative imaginary – the hegemonic ideology unconsciously ascribed to by the bourgeoisie – and undermines it by revealing the unachievable nature of hegemonic masculinity. Examining Chaucer's construction of Thopas's sexual identity through queered genre conventions – found in their normative state in Thomas Chestre's *Lybeaus Desconus* – allows the parody of masculine identity that Thopas represents to emerge. In order to establish *Sir Thopas* as a queer parody – defined as a parody that exposes the humorous and/or ridiculous nature of its parodic foci, thereby destabilizing heteronormative identities, expectations, and audience – this study will first show the manner in which *Lybeaus Desconus* presents normative fourteenth-century masculinity. In contrast, Chaucer's *Sir Thopas*, and the

reaction it provokes from Harry Bailly through queered genre conventions, shows the bourgeoisie's problematic relationship with knight(man)hood.

Composed in the fourteenth century, *Lybeaus Desconus* is a Middle English tail rhyme romance, attributed to Thomas Chestre.⁴⁶ Chestre's version of the "fair unknown" tradition has received mixed criticisms from modern scholars who tend to compare his Middle English retelling to many twelfth-century romances, such as Renaut de Beaujeu's *Li Biaus Desconeüs* (*Le Bel Inconnu*) and Chretien de Troyes's *Conte du Graal*.⁴⁷ Such comparative analyses typically conclude that Chestre corrupts his source material and had an inadequate grasp of French, though recent work, such as Renee Ward's, attempts to defend Chestre as an innovator instead of a cultural hack. The plot of the "fair unknown" tells of a young handsome man, Geynleyn in Chestre's Middle English text, who is without a father and consequently a title. Desiring to become a knight he journeys to King Arthur's court to receive a knighthood with no one and nothing to recommend such a title, other than his good looks. Intrigued by the young man's brazenness and beauty, Arthur bestows the title Sir Lybeaus Desconus (*Bel Inconnu* / *Biaus Desconeüs*) to the young man, despite his lack of knightly/manly achievements. Aware of the hollowness of his title, Lybeaus sets out on a quest to earn his knighthood, and along the way he discovers that he is the son of Sir Gawain, a noble lineage that the audience knows

⁴⁶ Though no conclusive evidence exists to identify or name Thomas Chestre as the author of *Lybeaus Desconus*, scholars, chief among them M. Mills, claims Chestre as the author of *Lybeaus Desconus* as well as *Octavian Imperator* (see M. Mills, "The Composition and Style of the 'Sothorn' *Octavian*, *Sir Launfal*, and *Libeaus Desconus*", *Medium Ævum*, 31 (1962), 88-109. Throughout this paper I accept Chestre as the author of *Lybeaus Desconus* and in the course of my analysis of the text I will be utilizing the text from MS. Cotton Caligula A. ii in *Lybeaus Desconus* edited by M. Mills. Oxford: Oxford University Press, EETS, 1969.

⁴⁷ In *Conte du Graal* (*The Story of the Grail*), Perceval's mother raises her son in the wilderness away from court and particularly knights. Despite his isolation Perceval continually encounters knights and then travels to Arthur's court to become one, despite having nothing to recommend him other than his fairness. Troyes, Chretien de. "The Story of the Grail." In *Arthurian Romances*, translated by William W. Kibler, 381-494. London: Penguin Group, 2004.

throughout the tale, but the protagonist does not.

In Chestre's version, once young Geyleyn receives the name Lybeaus Desconus, he requests that Arthur provide him with a quest to earn the title of knight. Soon thereafter Elene, a maidservant to the imprisoned Lady of Synadowne, arrives with a dwarf companion in need of a champion from Arthur's renowned court to free her mistress. The king gives the task to Lybeaus, much to the chagrin of Elene, and they begin their journey, encountering many foes, including black knights, giants, enchantresses, and evil clerks, until finally they reach the land of Syndadowne where Lybeaus rescues the Lady. Upon being rescued, the lady informs Lybeaus of his lineage and offers herself in marriage to her rescuer. Defined, in part, by the performative and public acts of licit violence required of masculinity, Lybeaus's sexual identity defines itself equally against gendered Others. Contained within this relatively simple narrative, three key character tropes shape Lybeaus's sexual identity: performing acts of licit violence, subduing a diabolically powerful – non-normative – woman, and uniting with a disempowered – normative – woman.

In the popular romance tradition, licit violence served as a proving ground for knightly characters to assert their militaristic prowess, thereby publically performing popular culture's appropriation of chivalry. Maurice Keen explains that chivalry "had a key impact in the fashioning of the idea of the gentleman," and that by performing knightly feats of socially sanctioned and acceptable violence, an individual, or character, aligned himself with that which was noble and honorable.⁴⁸ Popular romances appropriated the concept of acceptable violence from chivalry as a means of signifying the protagonists masculine identity, but not all violence was considered licit. In his

⁴⁸⁴⁸ Keen, Maurice. *Chivalry*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984. 249.

examination of the episodic violence found in Middle English romances, Ilan Mitchell-Smith describes *Lybeaus Desconus* as a text that reveals a “construction of ideal chivalric masculinity.”⁴⁹ Defined by the violent acts within the text, the narrator and characters of *Lybeaus Desconus* disregard acts of excessive – illicit – violence and praise episodes of restrained, honorable – licit – violence. By utilizing a system of praise and rejection that resembles paternal guidance, the text takes great pains to show that Lybeaus’s violence is of the honorable chivalric type. Furthermore, by criticizing certain acts and lauding others “we find an ideal for chivalric masculinity constructed by episodic violent acts that happen only within defined spaces at appropriate moments.”⁵⁰ Masculinity then becomes a construct made, in part, by both prescribed licit violent acts and denied illicit violent acts. Being a bastard, Lybeaus lacks a male role model, and thus the hero must, as Mitchell-Smith states, “strive to construct a viable masculinity all by [himself] because of the father’s absence.”⁵¹ The text addresses this absence in the beginning of the tale, stating that though “Pys Gynleyn was fayr of syȝt, / Gentyll of body, of face bryȝt” (13-14) his own mother feared his nature and “kepte hym yn clos / For douute of wykkede loos” (16-17). Because Gylenyn (not yet renamed Lybeaus in the above passage) lacks a male role model, his mother fears his base nature and attempts to keep him close and unable to cause harm. The version of the tale in M.S. Cotton Caligula does not expand upon why the hero’s mother fears her own son, but M.S. Lambeth Palace’s version adds that she made it so “That he shulde se no knyght / J-armed in no maner, / For he was ful savage” (17-19). Incapable of controlling her son’s natural state (ful savage), she seeks

⁴⁹ Mitchell-Smith, Ilan. “Defining Violence in Middle English Romances: “Sir Gowther” and “Libeaus Desconus”.” *Fifteenth Century Studies*.34 (2009): 148-161. 148.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 150.

to prevent him from seeing a knight who might inspire him to violence. Lybeaus's mother cannot prevent him from resorting to his violent nature, however, as Lybeaus soon discovers a dead knight and becomes entranced by the corpse's armor and weaponry. The narrative never explains the mother's fear of her son's violent potential, though it suggests that because Lybeaus lacks a noble paternal role model to teach him the proper performance of chivalry, he risks becoming monstrous and immoderate.

Lacking a male role model to teach him the difference between licit and illicit acts of violence, Lybeaus must learn on his own through trial and error with the praise of the narrator and his feudal lord filling the paternal role. For example, early in his quest Lybeaus comes across a magical cur (dog) and steals it from its owner. In order to keep the dog, he battles the twelve knights of Sir Otis de Lyle, but despite Lybeaus's ability to win in the face of being grossly outnumbered, the narrator abstains from lauding his greed begotten violence. The narrator then describes Lybeaus as "fend Satan" (1127), and characterizes his actions as fiendish. Once the battle ends the narrator makes no further judgment or comment about the battle despite the hero's victory. Instead, the narrator tells the audience that there are many "oper tales" (1221) of Lybeaus's quest to be told, pulling the focus back to the quest. Compared to the aftermath of the battle with Gyffroun le Fludous – for which King Arthur praises, "Lybeaus well werry kan! / He hap sent þe valour / Of noble dedes" (1010-1012) – Lybeaus's victory over Sir Otis is strikingly neglected. By presenting two forms of violence, Chestre's narration casts judgment on Lybeaus's illicit act of violence by denying it praise.

Similarly, Chestre presents femininity in two opposing forms by performing what Renee Ward terms "purposeful reductions" of female characters. These reductions not

only place a “greater emphasis on the hero,” but also separate women into two types: the diabolic seductress and the disempowered male fantasy, non-normative and normative femininity, respectively.⁵² Ward envisions Chestre as intentionally challenging the “tradition of medieval popular romance” and interprets passages that have been considered “corruptions of source material” as successful revisions.⁵³ In regards to non-normative femininity, Chestre’s *la Dame d’Amore* creates a more sinister figure than her French predecessors and, therefore, “an even greater threat to overcome.”⁵⁴ When Lybeaus encounters the sexual power of *la Dame d’Amour* he does not desire a sexual partner, but he is forced to have one. *Amour*’s ability to force Lybeaus rests solely on her magical powers, as the text explicitly overstates that she keeps Lybeaus against his will with the aid of sorcery:

For þys fayr lady
Kowþe moch or sorcery,
More þen oþer wycchess fyfe;
Sche made hym melodye
Of all manner menstracy
þat man myȝte descryue.
What he seyȝ her face
Hym þouȝ he was
In paradise alyue;
Wyth fantasme and fayrye

⁵² Ward, Renee. “Challenging the Boundarie of Medieval Romance; Thomas Chestre’s *Lybeaus Desconus*.” *Florilegium*, 2004: 119-134. 121.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

Bus sche blerede hys y3e,
Pat euell mot sche þryue. (1422 – 1434)

Using “fantasme and fayrye” to distract Lybeaus from his quest and his chastity, Amour stands in direct opposition to Lybeaus’s normative counterpart, the Lady of Synadowne. Despite the relationship between Lybeaus and Amour taking place within the safe realm of heterosexuality, it exists outside of the licit realm of marriage and of patriarchal control and, therefore, outside of heteronormativity. By presenting Amore as more powerful than Lybeaus, Chester presents Amore as a threat to both his ability to complete his quest as well as his ability to achieve a normative masculine identity.

Similarly, Lybeaus requires a normative female character to establish his sexual identity and, unsurprisingly, the Lady of Synadowne – the romance’s damsel in distress – fills this role. The Lady of Synadowne, despite her wealth, does not present a threat to Lybeaus, a fact that Chestre belabors for his audience, as it is essential for Lybeaus’s construction that he link himself with a non-threatening normative femininity. Once in the land of Synadowne, Lybeaus defeats the two clerks Yrayn and Maboun, who hold the Lady of Synadowne captive through “nygremansye” (1694). At the moment of their defeat he is approached by a wondrous beast:

A warm come out apace
Wyth a womannes face,
Was 3ong and nopyng eld;
Hyr body and hyr wyngys
Schynede yn all þynges,
As gold gaylyche y-gyld were. (1990 – 1995)

The creature leans forward and kisses Lybeaus and magically transforms into a woman, the Lady of Synadowne. Original to Chestre's version of the fair unknown tradition, the serpent-woman's transformation is unique in its combination of bestial and human features. Examining this element, James Weldon similarly asserts that Chestre's human-beast rendition of the enchanted lady has been intentionally presented in a manner that distances her from the "potent icon of medieval misogyny which reconstructs the antifeminist readings of women, Eve, and the serpent in the Garden."⁵⁵ The enchantment represents the abuses of power and the abhorrent illicit behaviors of evil men (the clerks), and seductive women (Amour), all of whom used magic to enact their evil deeds. Establishing that the Lady of Synadowne is not completely overpowered by "nygremansye" and retains an innocent human element allows her to be viewed as chaste and virtuous.⁵⁶ Furthermore, by limiting her magical ability and power, Chestre presents the Lady of Synadowne as a non-threatening, powerless female who needs rescuing. Plus, she just happens to be naked.

When the lady transforms into a human she stands nude before Lybeaus:

And after þat kyssynge
 Þe warmys tayle and wynges
 Anon hyt fell fro hyre:
 So fary, yn all þyng,
 Woman, wyth-out lesyng,

⁵⁵ Weldon, James, "'Naked as she was bore': Naked disenchantment in *Lybeaus Desconus*." *Parergon* 24, no.1 (2007): 67-99. 74.

⁵⁶ Weldon notes that the serpent-woman hybrid parallels Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and Langland's *Pier's Plowman*, both of which also manipulate the iconography of Eve and the serpent as one single misogynistic entity, but he does not discuss how or why this Middle English icon restructuring occurred. "Naked as she was bore." 73-74.

Ne saw he neuer er þo;
But sche stod be-fore hym naked
And all her body quaked:
Per-fore was Lybeauus wo. (2008 – 2019)

Standing exposed before her liberator her body trembles as she thanks Lybeaus for rescuing her. She then tells him that only a member of Gawain's lineage could free her from the clerks' spell.⁵⁷ As Lybeaus stands silent before her she next offers herself in marriage to him, thus giving him not only a past identity (a masculine lineage), but a future identity through the possession of her and her wealth. Serving as a wish-fulfilling fantasy the Lady of Synadowne then gives the young knight all he has desired: an honorable patrilineage, wealth from their presumptive union, and fame for his heroic deeds throughout his quest.

Using this analysis of *Lybeaus Desconus* as an example of fourteenth-century England's hegemonic masculinity, as found in popular romance, the necessary acts that a male protagonist must perform to affirm his masculinity identity become more apparent. Lybeaus's knight(man)hood is secured only after he achieves the three character tropes of normative masculinity. First, he learns how to be appropriately violent; second, he evades a powerful seductress; and third, he joins with a non-threatening maiden.

⁵⁷ Weldon sees this scene as one of the few "in medieval art where the body of a naked woman provokes none of the stereotypical medieval reactions. She is not subject to a lascivious 'male gaze' in the usual sense, nor does the language invoke moral or clerical condemnation" (77). However, Weldon's analysis stems from a liberal picking and choosing of passages between two very different manuscripts, the Cotton Caligula and Lambeth Palace. In this particular instance he cites from LP, which revises lines 2015-2016 into "As God had hir maked: / Therfor was Lybeous woo," the scribe of LP completely repressing the erotic nature of an exposed body and instead attaching it to the divinity of human origin. The word "quaked," According to a footnote by Mills in the EETS edition, the word "quaked" in M.S. Cotton Caligula text is "preceded by expuncted and deleted "quadek" preceded by expuncted and deleted "cou" (198). It seems apparent that scribes had a serious problem with a naked quaking female body, as a comparison between these two manuscripts indicates.

Together these three masculine milestones construct a masculine identity that perpetuates the imaginary by upholding a noble lineage, wealth and fame through militaristic endeavors, and the complete disempowerment of its normative female characters. But in relation to its audience, the non-aristocratic gentry, this narrow definition of masculinity was unachievable, as the knight cannot serve as the bourgeoisie's masculine role model, a fact that Chaucer's *Sir Thopas* uses to queer hegemonic masculinity.

The *Tale of Sir Thopas* begins with a lengthy description of Sir Thopas that establishes him as "doghty swayn" (VII. 724), not as a man of arms and physical prowess capable of performing licit acts of violence. Instead, Thopas's physical feats seem limited to hunting: "He koude hunte at wilde deer, / And ride an haukyn for river / With grey goshawk on honder" (VII. 736-738), which seems to please the ladies as much as his fine appearance. But hunting skills and beauty do not redeem Thopas's ill-equipped state when he encounters the giant Olfaunt. After being challenged to fight, Thopas replies,

Tomorwe wol I meete with the,
Whan I have myn armoire;
And yet I hope, par ma fay
That though shalt with this launcegay
Abyen it ful sowre. (VII. 818-823)

Not only has Thopas forgotten his armor, he threatens his foe with a "launcegay," a light lance intended more for show in tournaments, not battle. Thopas's lack of proper equipment renders him an impotent male in a realm of necessary violence. V.J. Scattergood similarly views Thopas as lacking in martial ability; however, he claims that

“by making his hero a caricature of the typical cowardly Flemish townsman, by making him so thoroughly lacking in chivalric prowess, Chaucer is implicitly ridiculing the possibility of an Anglo-Flemish military alliance.”⁵⁸ Though Scattergood does not come to terms with the strange sexual elements of Thopas’s “pryking,” the parallels he draws between Thopas’s identity and inept Flemish warrior assist in establishing the ridiculous nature of the knight’s masculinity. Instead of a sexual Other, Scattergood reads Sir Thopas as a racial Other, one whose poor reputation amongst the English people included their cowardice and inability to achieve military prowess.⁵⁹

Equally problematic to the ridiculous and inept nature of Thopas’s martial skills is his insistent “prikyng.” Suggesting a lack of sexual control, Chaucer uses Thopas’s “prikyng” and “love-longynge” (VII. 772) to expose both the fantasy of the text and the social fantasy of the bourgeoisie. Lee Patterson equally notes that “the repetitive insistence” of Thopas’s ‘priking’ persistently invests Sir Thopas with “a powerfully sexual valence.”⁶⁰ His fine features – “his lippes rede as rose” (VII. 726) and “semely nos” (VII. 729) – seem to be better descriptors of feminine beauty than a knight, and giving him a somewhat androgynous allure. The focus of Thopas’s desires further complicates his “sexual valence” because the “elf-queene,” who fills him with “love-longynge,” has been conjured from his dream. “Me dremed al this nyght, pardee, / An elf-queene shall my lemman be” (VII. 877-878), he states, “An elf-queene wol I love, ywis, / For in this world no woman is / Worthy to be my make” (VII. 890-892). Thopas

⁵⁸ Scattergood, V.J. “Chaucer and the French War: *Sir Thopas* and *Melibee*.” In *Court and poet: selected proceedings from the third congress of the International Courtly Literature Society*, edited by Glyn S. Burgess, 287-296. Francis Cairns Publications, 1981. 294.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁶⁰ Patterson, Lee. “What Man Artow?”: Authorial Self-Definition in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee*.” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 11 (1989): 117-175. 132.

seduces himself with a figment of his own imagination; the woman who overpowers him exists only in his mind.

Chaucer only queers two of the three character tropes exemplified by *Lybeaus Desconus* through Sir Thopas: he fails to perform acts of licit violence and he is powerless to resist the fantastic female apparition. Before Chaucer shows his reader how he will queer normative femininity, Harry Bailly interrupts, preventing the dreamlike tale from continuing: “Namooore of this, for Goddes dignitee / ... for thou makest me / So wery of thy verray lewdness” (VII. 919-921), he cries out, stopping Chaucer from drawing any further parallels between Perceval and Thopas. Tison Pugh perceives Harry’s interruption of Chaucer as an attempt to exert his authority over Chaucer-the-pilgrim and control the tale telling-game. Initially, he requested “a tale of myrthe” (VII. 706), but after stopping Chaucer, he requests a prose doctrine, indicating that Harry would rather listen to moral certitude than Chaucer’s queer romance. Harry’s desire to hear a different tale stems from what Pugh identifies as Harry’s “linking of manhood to narrative,” which consequently “puts his own masculinity in jeopardy” through his responses to the various tales.⁶¹

In his exchanges with the other male pilgrims in the preceding fragments of *The Canterbury Tales*, Harry seems to revel in questioning the definition of masculinity through his statements and actions. First he bullies the Clerk of Oxford in Fragment IV, calling the young man’s horsemanship “mayde”-like (IV.2). Characters like the Clerk, and later the Nun’s Priest, appear to Harry as not only physically weaker than himself, and therefore unmanly, but as members of a social class he has no desire to be a part of. But this behavior changes after Chaucer exposes Harry’s insecurity with *Sir Thopas*.

⁶¹ Pugh. “Queering Harry Bailly,” 62.

Despite Chaucer's introduction of Harry as a man who does not lack "manhood" (I.756), Harry admits to his fellow pilgrims that he lacks power in his marital relationship with his wife after listening to Chaucer-the-pilgrim's *Tale of Melibee*: here the Host's masculine façade begins to crumble. He confesses to his fellow pilgrims that his wife threatens to take his knife and force him to take her "distaf and go spynne" (VII.1902-1906), that she yells at him, curses, beats, and generally dominates him. "This is my life" (VII.1913), he laments. In this moment, Harry has no illusion that he somehow can be like Lybeaus Desconus; the fantasy of knight(man)hood cannot exist for a battered husband. Looking to have the fantasy of hegemonic masculinity reaffirmed, Harry turns to the Monk who, according to Harry, "art a maister whan [he is] at hoom" (VII. 1938). The "manly man" (I. 167) Monk would never be ruled by a woman in his own household, that is, if the Monk was not celibate. Harry assumes that because the Monk appears virile and wealthy – key features of hegemonic masculinity – that he will in some way reaffirm the existence of a masculine identity that has been denied Harry by his abusive wife.

Calling upon the Monk to tell a tale to placate his sexual anxiety, Harry expects the Monk to tell a tale that will reaffirm normative gender tropes or social success. Instead, the Monk tells tragedies "of hym that stood in greet prosperitee, / And is yfallen out of heigh degree / Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly" (VII. 1975-1977), a seeming reminder to those seeking fame and power, that what goes up, must come down. Ignoring Harry's prompting to tell a tale of masculine power and success, the Monk's tales catalogue the tragedies of ambition, a theme that both Harry and the Knight do not want to hear. The Knight's interruption echoes both his and Harry's social-climbing desires, stating that "whan a man abideth in prosperitee / Swich thyng is gladsome" (VII. 2777-

2778) and provides a tale worth telling. Harry adds that the Monk should tell a tale of hunting (VII. 2805), but the Monk refuses, thwarting Harry's authority in the tale-telling process and refusing the masculine identity Harry attempts to project onto him.

Unable to have his desired sexual identity reaffirmed by a seeming role model, Harry returns to his previous behavior of bullying and dominating weaker men on the pilgrimage, and turns to the Nun's Priest. In the same breath that he insults the man's horse as being "both foul and lene" (VII. 2813), he asks him to tell a tale. For his tale of Chauntecleer and Pertelote, the Nun's Priest receives the highest praise from Harry Bailly, not because of its fine speech or lack of "drasty rhyme," but because of its depiction of masculinity, the masculinity of a rooster. By linking what Pugh terms "textual fecundity with masculinity"⁶² Harry deems the Nun's Priest a supreme "trede-foul" (VII. 3451), who if he was secular, would require "moo than seven tymes seventeen" (VII. 3454) 'hens' to satiate his sexual needs. Deeming the Nun's Priest a "trede-foul," Harry assumes that a man who can tell such a sexually charged tale must possess an equal amount of virility, neglecting the fact that the Nun's Priest's tale concerned the lives of farmyard fowl. By depicting chickens that perform hegemonic masculinity – in as much as it pleases Harry Bailly – *The Nun's Priest's Tale* provides Harry with the character tropes he unconsciously desires.

Chaucer exposes the unobtainable nature of a masculinity defined by conquering giants, overcoming sexually deviant enchantresses (that read more like male fantasy than actual hardships), and joining with a disempowered by queering the masculine character tropes found in *Lybeaus Desconus*. While the tale itself parodies the masculine tropes, it is the series of interactions the Host has with other pilgrims that follow that ultimately

⁶² Ibid., 62.

serve to destabilize the authority he attempts to wield over his fellow travelers and his own masculine identity. Though Harry initially attempts to align himself with both the pilgrim Knight and the archetypal knight as found in popular romances, neither provide him with a stable source of masculine identity or authority. The figure of the knight, though a stock character in Middle English popular romances,⁶³ cannot ultimately serve as the bourgeois model of masculinity, not only because the prototype character does not exist, as shown through Chaucer's parodic *Sir Thopas*, but because the limited mobility of the burgeoning middle class does not allow for the grandiose leaps and bounds that encompass Harry Bailly's class desires.

Reading *Sir Thopas* alongside *Lybeaus Desconus*, the parodic comedy of Thopas's masculine performance becomes apparent to the modern reader. It also provides what John Finlayson terms "the literary baggage of [an individual] of the fourteenth century," giving modern readers the tools to recognize the elements of parody.⁶⁴ This dialogue proves useful in examining a less well-known example of atypical and parodic masculinity, that of Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*. Though possessing many of the tropes of normative masculinity as typified in *Lybeaus*, *Sir Launfal* deviates from this standard by explicitly addressing the socio-economic desires of the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, by reversing the sequence of knightly events, Chestre exposes their futility and the fantasy of defining an identity on the impossible. The parody in *Sir Thopas* thus serves as the catalyst in resurrecting Middle English popular romance from what Cory James Rushton calls "the death warrant for [its] feasibility

⁶³ Riddy, Felicity. "Middle English romance: family, marriage, intimacy." In *The Cambridge Companion to the Medieval Romance*, edited by Roberta L. Kruegar, 235-252. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

⁶⁴ Finlayson, John. "Definitions of Middle English Romance." *The Chaucer Review* 15, no. 1 (1980): 44-62. 45.

within modern intellectual circles,”⁶⁵ by exposing how past critics unquestioningly aligned themselves with Harry Bailly, without considering other motivations for objections.

⁶⁵ Rushton, Cory James. “Modern and Academic Reception of the Popular Romance.” In *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*, edited by Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James Rushton, 165-179. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2009. 171.

Chapter 2: The Queered Desires of *Sir Launfal*

Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* tells the tale of a knight, Sir Launfal, and his quest for social and sexual identity. After falling from favor at King Arthur's court and suffering the indignity and shame of poverty, the titular knight encounters a faery maiden who provides him with wealth and the means to regain his former glory. The maiden, Dame Tryamour, provides Launfal with a magical purse, an invisible servant, and a warhorse, all on the condition that he never speaks of her existence or else she will withdraw her love and gifts. Upon returning to court – after being sidetracked by tournaments and giant slaying – Queen Gwenerre propositions Launfal, who denies her sexual advances by comparing her lackluster beauty to Tryamour's, thus breaking his promise to the faery maiden. Having insulted the queen, Launfal then finds himself on trial for treason and only proof of his lover's beauty can save him from punishment. Moments before Arthur has his judgment carried out, Tryamour arrives, rescues Launfal and the two ride off into the sunset, disappearing into the land of Avalon together.

If this tale sounds familiar, it is because Thomas Chestre bases *Sir Launfal* on Marie de France's twelfth-century Breton lay, *Lanval*. Marie's tale casts a large shadow over scholarly analyses of Chestre's adaptation as scholars have tended to judge *Sir Launfal* as a lesser work that fails to recreate Marie's poetic form, rhyme, or desires. One such scholar, A.C. Spearing, dismisses Chestre's version of Marie's tale as a "fascinating disaster" because Chestre does not properly convey the desires in Marie's text in his fourteenth-century retelling.⁶⁶ Spearing classifies Marie's text as a "wish-fulfilling

⁶⁶ Spearing, A.C. "Marie de France and Her Middle English Adapters." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 12 (1990): 117-156. 148.

fantasy;” a tale that presents its audience with a protagonist whose desires are magically fulfilled through the apparition of a faery damsel who provides Lanval with the rewards of wealth and love, despite the fact that he does nothing to deserve them. Though Chestre’s text possesses elements of wish-fulfillment, Spearing classifies them as materialistic and “expressions of [Chestre’s] personal identification with his hero.”⁶⁷ By interpreting Chestre’s “personal identification” as a failure of translation and interpretation, Spearing ignores how Chestre claims the text for himself, his culture, and his audience.

Of course, Chestre’s text does dramatically alter Marie’s *lai*. Written during the mid-twelfth-century by the anonymous Marie de France,⁶⁸ *Lanval* addresses the concerns of its time and its class, specifically the marginalized members of Norman aristocracy: women and bachelor knights. Bachelor knights, the younger sons of landed nobles, required means to gain position and wealth as they were, according to Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, “dispossessed by the system of primogeniture through which the ruling class perpetuated itself.”⁶⁹ Forced to seek ways to maintain their aristocratic position, they sought the patronage of a feudal lord. Within this relationship there existed the expectation of an exchange of resources, and in the case of a knight, “material and economic... or political and military” resources would be exchanged for “prestige, influence, and status.”⁷⁰ Denied reward within the Arthurian court, Lanval’s relationship with the faery damsel mirrors the economic mobility of bachelor knights: who moved

⁶⁷ Ibid., 156.

⁶⁸ For more information on the potential identity of Marie de France see: Bloch, R. Howard. *The Anonymous Marie de France*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

⁶⁹ Finke, Laurie A., and Martin B. Shichtman. “Magical Mistress Tour: Patronage, Intellectual Property, and the Dissemination of Wealth in the *Lais* of Marie de France.” *Signs* 25, no. 2 (2000): 479-503. 479.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 484.

from one lord to the next in search of reward. For Finke and Shichtman, the damsel derives her power from “her association with a supernatural world of fairy,” and the spectacle of her eroticized body, thus rewarding Lanval with not only monetary reward, but with the fulfillment of his sexual desires.⁷¹ Lanval’s exit from Arthur’s court acts as a retreat from the “sterility of the Arthurian world,” as the faery damsel’s sexuality and power cannot be contained within the confines of feudalism.⁷²

The desires of Marie’s world (wealth, prestige, and status) cannot be fulfilled as neatly in reality as they are in the fantasy of *Lanval*. Not only because, in the sage words of Monty Python, “strange women lyin’ in ponds distributin’ swords is no basis for a system of government,”⁷³ but because the world in which faery damsels appear to knights and provide them with everything they could desire *is* a fantasy. Early translations of Marie’s lai, including the Middle English *Sir Landevale*, maintained both the fantasy and aristocratic desires of the text. Anonymously composed in the early fourteenth century, *Sir Landevale* deviates little from Marie’s text, and most scholars, including Myra Seaman, view the text as demonstrating “an appreciation of and respect for Marie’s text.”⁷⁴ Chestre, compared to the *Landevale*-poet, does not shape *Sir Launfal* with the same fantasy or desires as Marie’s text; instead he crafts *Sir Launfal* “in response to what struck him as the tastes and experiences” of his bourgeoisie-like audience.⁷⁵ Chestre’s intentional revisions of Marie’s text shape *Sir Launfal* into a document specific to its time and place. In particular, Chestre’s *Sir Launfal* attempts to construct his hero with tropes

⁷¹ Ibid., 495.

⁷² Ibid., 500.

⁷³ *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Directed by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones. Performed by Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Eric Idle, Terry Gilliam, and Terry Jones. 1975.

⁷⁴ Seaman, Myra. “Thomas Chestre’s *Sir Launfal* and the Englishing of Medieval Romance.” *Medieval Perspectives* 15 (2000): 105-119. 109.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

of normative masculinity, much like the titular character of *Lybeaus Desconus*, discussed in the previous chapter. To construct their normative masculinities, the heroic protagonists of both texts define themselves against two forms of femininity, non-normative and normative, and both perform acts of licit violence.

The masculine identity Thomas Chestre constructs for Sir Launfal has received a great deal of scholarly attention, most academics acknowledging that there is something different about Sir Launfal's masculine identity that sets him apart from other popular romance heroes. For example, Earl Anderson claims that in *Sir Launfal* "the test of manhood as central theme is developed by a convergence of various contrasts" and one of those contrasts is that between "heterosexuality and homosexuality."⁷⁶ Anderson uses the binary of these two terms as a source of conflict, anachronistically relying upon modern tensions and interpretations of the two opposing identities. Similarly, Stephen Guy-Bray utilizes the binary of maleness and femaleness in his examination of how *Sir Launfal* draws "attention to the problems of forming, and especially, of maintaining a masculine and knightly identity."⁷⁷ Guy-Bray interprets the female characters of Dame Tryamour and Gwennere as "more powerful" than the titular hero because the narrative focuses more on the knight's *largesse* and *gentillesse* than his chivalric feats.⁷⁸ In his examination of Chestre's female characters, Guy-Bray argues that both Gwennere and Dame Tryamour are more than mere archetypes of femininity, especially compared to their twelfth-century predecessors, and claims that "the women have more power than the

⁷⁶ Anderson, Earl. "The Structure of *Sir Launfal*." *PLL* 12 (1977): 115-124. 124.

⁷⁷ Guy-Bray, Stephen. "Male Trouble: Sir Launfal and the Trials of Masculinity." *ESC* 34, no. 2-3 (2008): 31-48. 33.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

men.”⁷⁹ Grounded in a comparison with Marie’s original, Guy-Bray’s analysis offers a useful foundation to examine the cultural context in which Chestre claimed her text for his audience, an analysis that forms the basis of the chapter that follows.

Placing *Sir Launfal* in its fourteenth-century cultural context exposes the queerness of the titular character’s achieved masculinity in relation to the norms of popular romance. Though described as, and performing the role of a knight, Launfal has no desire or need to achieve his identity through licit violence like other protagonists in the hero-alone narrative. Chestre introduces Sir Launfal as an established knight of the Round Table who has presumably already proven his martial abilities and identity. When Launfal loses, and then regains, his social position, Chestre provides Launfal with situations to perform acts of episodic licit violence, but instead of praising the knight for his victories, thereby approving of the acts and the associated identity, the narrator and characters of the tale ignore them. While the violent acts of Lybeaus Desconus receive praise from the characters and narrator alike, the same cannot be said for Sir Launfal’s acts. In fact, Launfal’s *largesse* and *gentillesse* are the only characteristics attributed to him until the final lines of the poem when the narrator describes Launfal as “good of chyvalrye” (1040). Moreover, Chestre waits 433 lines to situate his character in a setting to perform licit violence, in this case a tournament, and another thirty lines for Launfal to demonstrate his martial abilities. Once Launfal begins to perform the trope of licit violence, each episode exceeds the previous; his opponents become progressively grander, culminating with his defeat of the giant Sir Valentyne. In a similar fashion the other two necessities of normative masculinity, normative femininity and non-normative femininity, are heightened – Chestre portrays Queen Gwennere as an evil nymphomaniac

⁷⁹ Ibid.

and Dame Tryamour as a sexually available mate – and though not as ridiculous or as explicit as Chaucer’s construction of the *pryking* Sir Thopas, Sir Launfal’s attempt at conformity possesses similar elements of parody.

Like the parody of Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas*, Chestre queers the genre conventions of popular romance and destabilizes the heteronormative identities and expectations therein. Chestre’s parody of knight(man)hood, however, does not focus on the unobtainable sexual identity of hegemonic masculinity, but on the unobtainable social identity that normativity perpetuates. Inherent in the ideology of hegemonic masculinity, discussed in this study’s introduction, are implications of social, as well as sexual, identity. Chestre’s bourgeois audience – non-aristocratic gentility, wealthy merchants and tradesmen – were capable of achieving wealth and power through commerce and did not need to achieve it in the fantastic manner of knights like Lybeaus Desconus. Still aspiring to an aristocratic position, the bourgeoisie saw that they did not need to perpetuate the ideology of chivalry, as the wealth, fame, and wife associated with normative masculinity could be gained without it. By paralleling the desires of his character with the desires of his audience who, despite their attraction to aristocratic tastes, valued fantasies of economic achievements over militaristic ones, Chestre effectively depicts an emerging bourgeois masculinity. Unlike the hegemonic masculinity of *Lybeaus Desconus*, this masculinity is self-aware and sees itself through the eyes of others. Chestre constructs his protagonist’s queered social/sexual identity by replacing the unexplained fantasy of his twelfth-century predecessor with specific recognizable elements of wealth, fame, and power. With every de-mystifying explanation Chestre removes the Althusserian “imaginary” from his tale and shapes it

into a self-aware romance that does not perpetuate the dominant ideology of the hegemony. Because Chestre presents his audience with a hegemonically non-normative protagonist his text cannot, as Stephen Knight describes, persuade “the non-powerful of the authenticity of the whole imaginary.”⁸⁰ This chapter argues that Chestre’s revisions to Marie’s text result in a culturally reflective examination of the construct of masculinity. Chestre recreates the Lanval narrative with a more realistic means of establishing a masculine identity; he does this by presenting his audience with the material and social effects of poverty, the socio-political context of gaining a wish-fulfilling mate, and the ignoble nature of being a fourteenth-century soldier of fortune. By linking his protagonist’s sexual and social identities, Chestre shows both knight(man)hood and the hegemonic ideology that created it in crisis.

Chestre introduces his audience to Launfal, a bachelor knight, who has been “the kyges [sic] steward” (32) for many years.⁸¹ Known for giving gifts such as “gold and sylver and clothes ryche” (29), Launfal’s “largesse and hys bounté” (31) brings him fame and praise. Unlike Marie’s Lanval, Launfal is not the son of a king or a foreigner, but a member of the Round Table. Instead of describing Launfal as handsome and physically desirable, as Marie describes Lanval, Chestre chooses to inform his audience that Launfal held the position of the king’s steward for “ten yer” (33). Chestre presents Launfal as a knight with position and renown and the years to show for it as opposed to a young knight seeking self-fulfillment and identity. Launfal’s position at Arthur’s court changes upon the king’s marriage to Gwennere, and Chestre’s narrative keenly places all of the

⁸⁰ Knight, Stephen. “The Social Function of the Middle English Romance.” In *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology & History*, by David Aers, 99-122. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986. 103.

⁸¹ Chestre, Thomas. “Sir Launfal.” In *The Middle English Breton Lays*, edited by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, 210-239. Kalamazoo: TEAMS, 2001.

blame for Launfal's descent into poverty on her shoulders. The knight dislikes the new queen immediately, "for the lady bar los of swych word / That sche hadde lemmannys under her lord" (46-47). Despite the fact that other well-bred knights share Launfal's dislike for Gwennere – "But Syr Launfal lykede her noght, / Ne other knyghtes that were hende" (43-44) – she singles him out as the recipient of her hatred. In Chestre's narrative the queen becomes the feudal lord, usurping Arthur's role as an authority figure and distributor of gifts and riches. She bestows "gold and selver and precious stonys" (68) to all the knights of the court, "but Syr Launfal sche yaf nothyn" (71). Deprived of his income and unable to perform the social acts of *largesse* and *gentillesse* that define him, Launfal banishes himself from court, excusing himself with the false claim that he received a letter informing him of his father's death (76-77). Gwennere's destruction of Launfal's social masculine identity creates a realistic basis for conflict between the two characters, one that Chestre's audience would have understood, or even feared.

Even once Launfal leaves court, Gwennere's personal attacks on Launfal continue, and in his absence she insults his virility: "Than seyde Quene Gwennere, that was fel, / "How faryth the prowde knyght Launfal? / May he hys armes welde?" (157-159). Not content to allow the audience to merely hold the queen responsible for Launfal's lack of feudal reward, the narrative presents evidence of her continued attacks, this time cruelly mocking his age by questioning if he can still bear arms. The queen's malice, as the prime factor in Launfal's departure, is a clear deviation from Marie's text, which does not explain why the knight falls out of favor. Similarly, Peter Lucas claims that "the effect of these deviations ... is to thrust the whole burden of responsibility for the action on to [Gwennere]."⁸² Chester intentionally constructs the queen as Launfal's adversary;

⁸² Lucas, Peter J. "Toward an interpretation of *Sir Launfal* with particular reference to line 683." *Medium*

her hostility and uncontrolled sexuality act as the root of all of Launfal's woes.

Gwennere, a non-normative and extremely powerful woman, does not rely upon magic to thwart the titular knight as Dame D'Amour does in *Lybeaus Desconus*, but with the very real tools of exclusion, sexuality, and gossip resulting in the knight's shame.

The effects of Gwennere's malicious machinations, though not marvelous in origin, reduce Launfal to a pathetic heap of self-pity controlled by his shame and loss of identity. Chestre expands upon Launfal's poverty directing his audience's attention to the shame that Launfal feels towards his own poverty and the tangible woe he feels at losing status. Finally, when it seems as though the knight could not sink further from his former glory, he is refused the hospitality of the mayor of Karlyoun due to his lack of royal patronage (112-114), and then finds himself too ashamed to attend church (187-189). He explains to the mayor's daughter that "Today to cherche I wold have gon / But me fawtede hosyn and schon, / clenly brech and scherte" (199-201). Poverty transforms Launfal from a well-dressed and generous knight into a man so ashamed of his lack of dress that he cannot attend Mass. Launfal's social shame damages even his religiosity, as his fear of being seen in public has become greater than his desire to attend a central Church rite. If the audience somehow had not grasped the extent of Launfal's poverty and the physical transformation it causes him, the narrative presents a final devastating blow. As the knight leaves Karlyoun to seek solace in the woods with the birds and the beasts:

He rode wyth lytyll pride

His hors slod, and fel yn the fen,

Ævum 39 (1970): 291-300. 292.

Wherefore he scorned many men

Abowte hym fer and wyd. (213-216)

Covered in mud and filth Launfal becomes the man he once scorned. Without his wealth and social status Launfal loses his former identity and begins to define himself by poverty and the shame of it. His shame results from what Valerie Allen calls “an abysmal moment in which one sees oneself being seen being seen; reflections are reflected in the reflections of eyes.”⁸³ Launfal sees a man in rags with “lytyll pride” (213), a man unworthy of charity, kindness, or even companions. Launfal’s shame focuses not on himself or his own actions and how he could be responsible for the consequences of living beyond his means, but how others perceive him. In the original narrative, Marie touches briefly on Lanval’s dejection once he leaves Arthur’s court, but Lanval’s shame comes nowhere near the level of self-pity and self-consciousness of Launfal. The shame derived from Launfal’s complete social degradation would not have resonated with Marie’s aristocratic audience as it would with Chestre’s bourgeoisie, whose tenuous fortunes and social position were threatened by a changing social climate.

In keeping with the original narrative, Launfal then finds himself rescued from the havoc wreaked by Gwennere by the arrival of the faery maiden. In Chestre’s text, the faery maiden is not a nameless damsel, as in Marie’s text; she is Dame Tryamour, the daughter of the King of Olyroun; the “Kyng of Fayrye, / Of Occient, fer and nyghe, a man of mochell myghte” (280-282). By replacing the fantasy and wonder of faery with foreignness and patrilineal lineage, Chestre structures Dame Tryamour as a more socially complex figure than her twelfth-century predecessor. Unlike Marie’s damsel, whose

⁸³ Allen, Valerie. “Waxing Red: Shame and the Body, Shame and the Soul.” In *Representations of Women’s Emotions in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, Ed. by Lisa Perfetti, 191-210. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005. 198.

namelessness and wealth enhance her otherworldliness, Tryamour's name and the specific material items that define her wealth link her to the real world of obtainable and knowable elements. Despite this fact, Tryamour still exists as the vehicle of Chestre's "wish-fulfilling fantasy," but the fantasy Chestre presents is not one of escapism, but of normativity. Tryamour becomes an available and acceptable potential mate, able to enter into a licit relationship and produce legitimate offspring. Tryamour initiates this relationship, suggesting the power of seduction, but the manner in which she offers herself to Launfal does not coerce or threaten the hero. Firstly, before uttering a single word to Launfal, Dame Tryamour disrobes; "For hete her clothes down sche dede / Almost to her gerdylstede / Than lay sche uncovered" (289-291). The narrator quickly points out that the purpose of her striptease is not one of seduction, but one of practical temperature regulation, thus affirming her modesty and disempowering the image of her exposed body. After announcing her love for Launfal, she addresses the wrongs done to him, telling him that she understands the situation of his poverty from beginning to end and that he has no reason to feel shame. Next she asks him to devote himself to her and "all women for [her] forsake" (317). In exchange, she vows to make him rich and implicitly restore his former identity.

Chestre maintains the elements of wish-fulfilling fantasy, but the magic and wonder that characterize Marie's text have been replaced with the material. Tryamour bestows her gifts upon the hero and, like the details that constitute her wealth, her gifts are specific. First, she gives him a gold purse that magically refills itself, (323-324), next she gives him a warhorse and an invisible servant, and lastly, her coat-of-arms to carry in tournaments. After gifting Launfal with these various items, Dame Tryamour feeds him

“mete and drynk” (343) and then leads him to bedde, where “for play, lytyll they scelpte that nyght, / tyll on morn hyt was daylyght” (349-350). In the morning, the two part ways, and Launfal agrees to her condition to never speak of her or else she would withdraw her love and, implicitly, all the perks associated with it. At this point in Marie’s text, the damsel disappears from the narrative not to return until the end, but Tryamour does not vanish. Instead, she promises to appear to Launfal whenever he needs her and to privately come to him where no one can see her which ends up being on a nightly basis, “every day Dame Triamour, / Sche com to Syr Launfal bour / Aday what hty was nyght” (499-501). Chestre presents their relationship like a marriage, not as a magical encounter that exists outside of feudal society.

When Launfal returns to Arthur’s court, he resumes his former identity and associated behaviors, giving gifts generously to knights, squires, clerics, the poor, prisoners, and minstrels. To celebrate his return to court, and return to *largesse*, his fellow Knights of the Round Table hold a great tournament. Up until this moment no mention of Launfal’s militaristic prowess or desires have been made in the text either by the narrative or a character, except for Gwennere’s insult. Launfal victoriously moves through the tournament lists, and with the aid of his invisible servant, Gyfre, and his mighty steed, Blaunchard, opponents easily fall to Launfal; first a constable of Karlyoun who had shamed him while he was poor, (456), next the “Erl of Chestere” (469), and finally a great company of “Walsche knyghtes” (479). As stated earlier in this essay, neither the narrator nor the other characters praise Launfal’s victories, though “the prys of that turnay / Was delivered to Launfal that day” (487-488). With his winnings he hosts a great feast “that leste fourtennyght” (495), which the court praises as an example of his

generosity. Their praise draws the attention of a knight in far off Lombardi, the giant Syr Valentyne. Though Valentyne “was wonder strong / [and] fyftene feet he was longe” (510-511), he burns with envy towards Launfal’s fame and jousting ability, and insists on proving himself against Launfal. Valentyne’s envy seems somewhat out of place, as no mention of such militaristic prowess has been made by Launfal’s own society. An even more problematic element of Valentyne’s challenge can be found in the message he sends Launfal:

And sey hym, for love of his lemman,
Yf sche be any gantyle woman,
Courteys, fre, other hende,
That he come wyth me to juste,
To kepe his harneys from the ruste,
And ells hys manhood schende. (522-528)

The challenge suggests that to keep his weapon from rusting, Launfal must joust with Valentyne. A refusal to do so would not just lead to iron oxide, but to more shame, a state to which Launfal cannot return. Chestre places Valentyne’s challenge, as Anderson notes, “at the exact center of the poem,” which makes Launfal’s response to the challenge central to the narrative’s construction of his manhood.⁸⁴ Though Launfal accepts Valentyne’s challenge, the episode does not progress in a manner that exhibits a glorification of warfare. First, as Launfal leaves for Lombardy, Tryamour comforts him saying, “Dreed the nothyn, Syr gentyl knyght, / Thou schalt hym sle that day!” Her words, encouraging and reassuring to the hero as they may be, suggest that the hero needs encouragement, and unlike the cocksure bravado of Lybeaus Desconus, Launfal fears

⁸⁴ Anderson. “The Structure of *Sir Launfal*.” 121.

combat against such a monstrous foe.

Chestre provides his audience a realistic option for a fourteenth-century man to achieve a masculine identity through a feat of arms by setting the contest between Launfal and Valentyne in northern Italy. With a preconceived notion of Lombardy, which, according to Maurice Keen, was referred to as “the school of arms,” Chestre’s audience would have known Lombardy as a place where men could gain militaristic employment by becoming mercenaries.⁸⁵ Most famous among these mercenaries was Sir John Hawkwood who amassed great wealth and fame fighting for the Milanese in the 1370’s. Though gaining wealth and fame, mercenaries like Hawkwood often displayed less than chivalric behavior and were known to loot, pillage, and rob their way across the countryside in a manner that Keen compares to “the effect of the plague.”⁸⁶ Aware of the ignoble reality of fighting in late fourteenth-century Lombardy, Chestre censures the reaction of both the narrator and other characters in regards to Launfal’s experience in Italy. When the contest between Launfal and Valentyne begins, Launfal immediately loses his helmet, giving Valentyne the advantage and the occasion to laugh at him. The narrator states that Launfal had “never so moche schame / Beforhond, yn no fygh” (578-579), but this shame is quickly alleviated, as the invisible Gyfre quickly assists his master by putting the helmet back on his head. The contest intensifies, and with the continued aid of Gyfre, Launfal “Syr Valentyne he smot so dere / That hors and man bothe deed were” (598-599). Killing one’s opponent in a tournament was severely frowned upon in fourteenth-century English culture, as the purpose of the tournament was not to kill one’s opponent, but to best him. Moreover, the combat served primarily as entertainment and

⁸⁵ Ibid., 228.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

was fought with blunted weapons.⁸⁷ Next, after Syr Valentyne's comrades rally together to avenge the giant (604-606), Launfal slaughters all of them and departs to Britain "wyth solas and with plawe" (612). Once he returns to Arthur's court, Launfal does not receive "solas" nor "plawe," and though the king invites him to join him at the Feast of St. John the Baptist and offers to make him his steward again, no one comments on Launfal's victory over Valentyne and the lords of Italy. Instead, Launfal's *largesse* receives praise, and it appears as if Launfal's trip to Italy never happened. Unlike Lybeaus Desconus, whose violence was received with censure only when the act was illicit, Launfal's violence is always met with silence.

At this point in the tale, Launfal has proven his martial ability and found a normative mate, but the hero has yet to defeat a non-normative female. Despite having overcome the hardships created by Gwenerre earlier in the narrative, Launfal now triumphs over her in the following episode in a manner that exposes the homophobia of Chestre's culture. While the court celebrates Launfal's reappointment to the position of steward, the queen, who once felt nothing but disdain toward the knight, decides that he "ys the fayreste bachelere" (650) and sets out to seduce him. Like his twelfth-century counterpart Launfal refuses the queen's advances, stating that he "nell be traytour day ne nyght, / Be God, that all may stere!" (683-384); he refuses to participate in the tryst on the grounds of loyalty to his king. Gwennere counters, claiming that Launfal "lovyst no woman, ne no woman" loves him (689). Her insult to Launfal sharply contrasts with the statement made by the queen in Marie's *Lanval*, who accuses Lanval of preferring the company of young boys to the company of women. Because the construct of normativity

⁸⁷ For a discussion on tournaments in fourteenth-century England see: Ormrod, W.M. "Family and Friends, 1330-1344." In *Edward III*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. 120-146. Saul, Nigel. "The King and His Court" In *Richard II*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. 327-365.

in which Chestre operates was created to expressly deny the possibility of Other masculine identities, it should come as no surprise that Chestre changes the charge of homosexuality, to one of celibacy, especially as the audience knows that Launfal and Tryamour spend every evening together. By subduing the accusation of homosexuality, Chestre exposes not only his discomfort with the possibility of a queer Other but, as Anne Laskaya describes, his “profound discomfort with the heterosexual imperative.”⁸⁸ The “heterosexual imperative” in which Chestre’s text operates seeks to deny the possibility of the queer, but when confronted with his source’s reference to that identity, neither the text nor the hegemony that it *should* be perpetuating, can suppress the Other. Gwenerre’s baseless insult functions as both the mechanism that exposes Chestre’s discomfort with a hegemonic masculinity defined against a queer Other, as well as the last gendered attack Launfal must face from the queen. Unlike her earlier attack on Launfal’s social identity, Gwenerre’s accusation has little effect on Launfal’s sexual identity. Despite suffering through a trial for deeming the queen’s beauty inferior to Tryamour’s “lothlokest mayde” (697), the charge of treason, and the loss of Tryamour’s gifts and love, Launfal remains secure in his sexual identity.

After “twelfe moneth and fourtenyght” (818), Tryamour presents herself to Arthur and his court, thus proving her superior beauty and Launfal’s innocence. In Marie’s text the lovers’ exit from society ends the tale, but Chestre adds one last brow-raising caveat to his rendition, that

Every yer, upon a certain day,
Me may here Launfales sted nay,

⁸⁸ Laskaya, Anne. “Thomas Chestre’s Revision of Manhood in *Sir Launfal*.” In *Retelling Tales: Essays In Honour of Russell Peck*, by Thomas Hahn and Alan Lupack, 191-212. 208.

And hym se wyth sight.
Ho that wyll ther axsy Justus,
To kepe hys armes fro the rustus,
In turnement other fyght,
Dar he never forther gon;
Ther he may fynde justes anoon
Wyth Syr Launfal the kynght. (1024-1032)

Launfal does not need to continue to prove martial abilities to achieve wealth, fame, or normative masculinity, as his mate, the wealthy Dame Tryamour can provide him with everything he needs. Launfal's challenge serves only as an empty gesture, one as hollow as the construct of chivalry that produces it. The knight has no real need to participate in acts of violence to maintain his fame and wealth, but Chestre anxiously reminds his audience that, if need be, Sir Launfal could succeed in feats of arms. But the occasion for Launfal's return never happens, as once Launfal departs to Olyroun, he is never seen again, and like Marie's Lanval, the hero's departure represents a retreat from the Arthurian world's impotent and fragile construct of hegemonic masculinity. Instead of merging into the aristocratic realm of magical fantasy formed by the imaginary, Launfal moves into a bourgeois state.

With the patronage and love – both emotional and physical – of Dame Tryamour providing him with the wealth and fame he desires, Launfal does not need to earn his identity through violence. The masculine identity espoused by Chestre's text requires only the exposure of licit violence's underbelly and, notes Myra Seaman, "accepts it and

even finds aspects of it appealing and socially beneficial.”⁸⁹ Chestre’s vision of manhood with its less than ideal form of chivalry bears a much closer resemblance to the actuality of fourteenth-century knighthood than the idealized conquests of Lybeaus Desconus. Yet for deviating from the norm and showing knight(man)hood in crisis “Chestre is rewarded with our censure,” and his text has been viewed as a failure of translation.⁹⁰ Instead of perpetuating and accepting an aspirational ideology passed down by the hegemonic powers of the aristocracy, the bourgeois looked towards modes of social mobility available to them and towards a fantasy derived from their own lived experiences. Social mobility transformed the political unconscious to a political conscious, and in romance it manifested itself as a partial break from the imaginary. Though no longer controlled by a desire to unconsciously perpetuate the hegemonic masculinity of the aristocracy, bourgeois masculinity creates its own hegemony that requires the suppression of non-normative sexual identities that challenge its newly achieved tenuous social identity.

⁸⁹ Seaman, Myra. “Thomas Chestre’s *Sir Launfal* and the Englishing of Medieval Romance.” *Medieval Perspectives* 15 (2000): 105-119. 118.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Conclusion: Chestre's Redemption and Beyond Knight(man)hood

Both Chestre's *Sir Launfal* and Chaucer's *The Tale of Sir Thopas* (and the consequences of its telling) present their respective audiences with a bourgeois masculinity. Established by queering the traditional characteristics of normative hegemonic masculinity, this new identity benefits the socially queer more than the sexually queer. In fact, bourgeois normative masculinity appears to suppress and control non-normative and non-masculine identities more so than aristocratic normativity. More disturbing still, at the end of *Sir Launfal* the non-normative queen, Gwenerre, is punished by blinding. Though Dame Tryamour, the submissive normative female, enacts the punishment – “Wyth that Dame Tryamour to the queen geth, / And blew on her swych a breth / That never eft might sche se” (1006-1008) – her actions benefit a crime against masculinity and the delicate balance it requires to sustain itself.⁹¹ Bourgeois masculinity, unlike aristocratic masculinity, needs the assistance of normative femininity in order control and suppress the non-normative sexual identities it defines itself against. Normative femininity, as depicted by Chestre in the character of Dame Tryamour, operates both as a wish-fulfilling fantasy as well as the only entity that can control Gwenerre's destructive non-normative behavior. Tryamour's control over Gwenerre allows Launfal to secure his social position and potentially climb even higher as the mate of the daughter of the King of Olyroun.

Current scholarship suggests that popular romances sought to reconcile the social structure of the aristocracy – the court – with the social structure of the bourgeoisie – the

⁹¹ For a fascinating and in depth discussion of Gwenerre's blinding see Dinah Hazell's “The Blinding of Gwenerre: Thomas Chestre as Social Critic.” In *Arthurian Literature XX*, by Keith Busby and Roger Dalrymple, 123-143. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003.

home. This suggestion perhaps explains Launfal's dependence on Tryamour, but more scholarship is needed to redeem both popular romances and the little known authors who operated within that genre. Chestre, like Chaucer, observed the culture around him and saw the conflict between the aristocratic masculinity perpetuated by his own class and the class that attempted to perform. Compared to the literary juggernaut of Chaucer's works and biography scholars know little of Thomas Chestre. Some scholars, such as Rushton, attempt to signify the worth of studying Chestre by linking the two authors' lives, suggesting that the two possibly knew one another as a "Thomas de Chestre" was listed in "the same 1360 list of ransomed soldiers in which Chaucer himself appears."⁹² This possibility, intriguing as it may be, does nothing to redeem Chestre's texts. Instead, by showing that Chestre was as keen an observer of individuals and his culture as Chaucer, we can redeem the author and his texts. Furthermore, by connecting his queer romance with Chaucer's *Sir Thopas* and identifying the cultural anxieties present in both texts, the opportunity – and need – to examine other neglected "toords" arises, as we realize that their "drasty rhyming" may be hiding a wealth of knowledge about Other sexual (and social) identities and the changing culture(s) that created them.

⁹² Rushton, Cory James. "Modern and Academic Reception of the Popular Romance." In *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*, edited by Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James Rushton, 165-179. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer. 2009. 173.

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