IMPREGNABLE FRIENDSHIP:
LOCATING DESIRE IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH AMIS AND AMILOUN

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in English

by

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Washington, DC
April 26, 2010
Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to Professor Kelley Wickham-Crowley for serving as my thesis advisor. Her guidance and support have been indispensable to this project; throughout my two years at Georgetown her words of wisdom as well as her patience with me and with this project have made this a memorable and enjoyable process. It should be noted that all misuses of the comma herein are contrary to her wishes.

I am also grateful to Professor Sarah McNamer for serving on my oral exam committee and for her invaluable contribution both to this project, and to my education.

With sincerest appreciation,

Elizabeth Frager
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Introduction

In muche ioy with-out stryf
To-geder ladde þey her lyf,
Tel god after hem dide send.

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Boþ on oo day were þey dede
And in oo graue were þey leide,
Þe knyȝtes boþ twoo;
And for her trewþ and her godhede
Þe blisse of heuyn þey haue to mede,
Þat lesteþ euer moo. (2494-96, 2503-08)¹

The Amis and Amiloun tale, popular though it was in the Middle Ages, is yet a tale that defies expectations; appropriately, then, it may be useful when analyzing it to begin at the tale’s end. The above lines mark the “happily ever after” ending of the Middle English romance, in which we witness the eponymous heroes reaping the rewards of an extraordinary friendship—sharing their last days, and their graves, with each other. The Amis and Amiloun legend, which follows the men’s friendship throughout their lives, was

¹ All quotations from Amis and Amiloun, unless otherwise noted, are from Amis and Amiloun. Ed. MacEdward Leach. EETS / OS 203. London: Oxford UP, 1937. Print. Leach states that his edition is “largely a printing of the Auchinleck Manuscript” (cii).
well-known and quite popular throughout the Middle Ages—the text’s foremost scholar, MacEdward Leach, has delineated at least twenty-seven renditions, varying in language, genre, and plot structure. The earliest extant edition, entitled Epistolae ad diversos, is dated at 1090 and appears as a Latin verse epistle by Radulfus Tortarius, a monk of Fleury. The Epistolae is a mere summary of the tale, opening with the declaration that the story is already well known among the Saxons of Gaul, and ending with a concise moral: “Haec retuli tibi care mihi studeas ut amari.” While no one version can be proven to be derived from any other, scholars are in general agreement that Radulfus’ epistle, as well as the Vita Sanctorum Amicii et Amelii, a Latin hagiographic version from about 1200 and an Old French chanson de geste from the first half of the thirteenth century, are individually derived from an eleventh-century Old French secular chanson de geste.

Though Leach has found it “impossible to indicate exactly what the relation was between the English and the French,” the Middle English (ME) version is thought to have as its source a lost Anglo-Norman text of the early thirteenth century (xcvii). Likewise, the oldest surviving manuscript of the ME romance is dated at 1330, though this version of the story could have been a century old, if not more, at this point. For practical purposes, discussions of the tale are often supplemented with the historical context of the thirteenth through the early fourteenth centuries, as will be the premise here as well.

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2 C. Stephen Jaeger translates this: “I have related this story, my dear, so that you will strive to be loved” (74).
3 See Leach’s extensive introduction to the Middle English Amis and Amiloun for an overview of the related hagiographic and romantic stories.
Scholarship on *Amis and Amiloun* has generally been divided into two critical schools. The majority of critics have read the work as an exemplar of perfect friendship, overlooking (or ignoring) any trace of homoeroticism, citing the possibility itself as anachronistic, or explaining away its presence by offering historical or theoretical justification for intimacy among medieval men. With increasing frequency in the last several decades, however, other critics have been willing to allow for the possibility of homoeroticism; their continuum of arguments ranges from a presented and immediately rejected temptation (Pugh), to the outright suggestion that Amis and Amiloun form an erotic same-sex couple (Sheila Delany). Not all critics in this latter category argue for an explicitly erotic element within the tale; what they do share as common ground is the notion that the bond between Amis and Amiloun surpasses normative friendship, and enters into the realm of a love relationship.\(^4\) Still others who default into this same category assert the necessity for a more open, and thus ambivalent, reading of the tale; for example, the work of Carolyn Dinshaw and Sheila Fisher has produced an entire body of queer medieval scholarship which “articulates possibilities of desire suggested but not explicitly treated” (Zeikowitz 5). More specifically, Peggy McCracken finds that although *Amis and Amiloun* “does not overtly eroticize the relationship between the two

\(^4\) Alan Bray’s *The Friend* (2003), which offers a defense of Boswell’s *Same Sex Unions*, is perhaps the best example of this “middle road” solution. Bray’s reading cautiously suggests that eroticized male-male friendships were not seen as sodomitical in the Middle Ages because the intimate bond was culturally approved of—and it is this latter factor, rather than the relatively new designation of homosexuality, which affects today’s “anachronistic” readings.
knights, neither does it entirely suppress the possible erotic aspects of the friendship” (Curse of Eve, 134, n.28).

Following in the established tradition of scholarship, then, this thesis will explore the nature of Amis and Amiloun’s friendship as a socially-approved substitute for a more intimate relationship. Recent queer theorists have already pointed to the romance as fertile ground for a queer reading; my own argument aims to support and extend these by analyzing such details in conjunction with the medieval institutions of knighthood, sworn brotherhood, and perfect friendship—guises which the poet could have appropriated as a cover for a more earthly relationship. My analysis will treat the literary text as a reflection of medieval life, presenting veiled moments of homoeroticism as manifestations of passionate love, desire, and perhaps even the longing for a culturally-approved identity—desires which did not need to be perfectly understood in order to be experienced.

In other words, just as I have begun with an inversion of order, I want to illustrate how Amis and Amiloun, too, resists normativity. I apply the term “impregnable” to describe the men’s friendship on two levels—the word functions as “unassailable” to indicate the morality of “spiritual” friendships, and also in the bodily sense of “able to be impregnated.” This latter definition refers to elements found within the text—feminine roles, womb imagery, and even the “creation” of offspring, all of which convey the potency of Amis and Amiloun’s friendship. Though this bond is presented in the classical
tradition of virtue-based *amicitia*, the romance evinces a preoccupation with physicality. The reader is bombarded with admiring descriptions of the male body through the gaze of both men and women; furthermore, an emphasis upon the men’s knighthood enforces an ever-present image of physical prowess. That their relationship could be based upon virtue appears unfounded, and almost parodic when we consider the numeration of their sins spurred by this very devotion—betrayal, deceit, false oaths, and finally, infanticide.

In addition, a survey of the surviving variants of the tale reveals that the Middle English romance retains only traces of the Christianized details appended to a secular French *chanson* perhaps a century earlier. While this shift can be accounted for by various historical and literary theories, its overall effect is to give immediacy to the men’s relationship on earth, focusing, thus, on their physical bodies and mortal lives, rather than on the entwining of their souls or the promise of an afterlife together. These details lend an atmosphere of eroticism to the romance; the text repeatedly suggests this sense and then revokes it, scorning the sexual temptation it has only just raised. Clearly, though, these moments do culminate in physical gratification—for the men share “oo graue.”

They have died on the same day, yet the physical union is unnatural; it is caused by the survivors who bury them. We should not say, then, that the union is equated with death, but rather that death is the sole condition which allows for such a union. Only in the extremity of death is the threat of sodomitical sin removed; only in a shared burial can the men lie together in peace. In the wake of this rich reward, that Amis and Amiloun also
enjoy the “blisse of heuyn” comes across as a trite formula, if not an afterthought. As we have begun at the story’s ending, this conclusion may seem extreme; however, my reading of the text put forth in the following chapters will illuminate those moments in the text within which homosexual desires appear to lurk, as well as the poetic methods which work towards the suggestion, if not the outright depiction, of a same-sex love between Amis and Amiloun.

Though this thesis takes a particular “side” in the romance’s major trends of scholarship, which aim either to uncover or to refute homoeroticism within the text, it should be acknowledged that much of the discrepancy found in the criticism of Amis and Amiloun is due to a split in thought over the idea of homosexuality itself. Again, scholars are divided into two schools of thought over whether or not a premodern “homosexual subjectivity” truly existed. Although the essentialist-constructionist “debate” takes the various desires of historical men and women into consideration, I will define it here only in terms of what implications it might have on the history of homosexual men. Those who take an “essentialist” position maintain that even prior to the nineteenth-century development of homo- and hetero-sexual as definitive identities, men who experienced sexual desire for other men acknowledged a link between their object-choice and their larger identity. Sexual urges, then, regardless of society’s condemnation of them, would inherently play a large role in creating or completing one’s sense of self. On the other hand, those of the “constructionist” school argue that the notion of one’s sexuality is a
construction of modern culture. Therefore, the categorical terms “homo-” and “heterosexual” cannot be applied to premodern people, who “appear to have understood sexuality only in terms of deviant / normative acts, rather than as constitutive of identity” (Stretter 240), or, as Ruth Mazo Karras posits, in terms of “reproductive and non-reproductive sex” (8), with the “dividing line” between chastity and sexual activity, rather than between homosexuality and heterosexuality. I have chosen to ground this thesis upon a constructionist stance, though occasionally my arguments may seem to imply an essentialist reading of Amis and Amiloun. I emphasize, however, the historical implausibility (if not impossibility) of these knights as self-identified homosexuals.

Although I will, at times, employ the terms “homo-” and “hetero-sexual” in this thesis, these are selected only for the sake of clarity or convenience, and are not intended to convey an essentialist perspective. Similarly, the terms “queer” and “queerness” will refer not to a stable identity by which Amis and Amiloun would have defined themselves, but to male-male erotic behavior, including sexual acts, although the romance never explicitly depicts these.

As justification for both my constructionist stance and my decision to align same-
sex desire with male-female role oscillation, I would offer Chaucer’s fourteenth-century
description of his Pardoner, found in the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*:

> His walet, biforn hym in his lappe,

> Bretful of pardoun comen from Rome al hoot.

> A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot.

> No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;

> As smothe it was as it were late shave.

> I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare. (686-91)

Chaucer’s narrative voice questions the Pardoner’s sexuality, wondering if he might be “a
geldyng or a mare”—that is, a eunuch or an effeminate, the latter marked by “gender
inappropriate behavior,” which evinced “a lack of male strength of character
and...cowardice and baseness” (Johansson and Percy 158). In the Middle Ages, *mare*
could denote a horse of either sex; however, by the fourteenth-century it had also
acquired the distinct meaning of “an effeminate man” (“mare, n.”). The Pardoner is
further aligned with femininity through his vanity and concern with appearing “al of the
newe jet” (682), and through his potentially queer relationship with the Summoner, who
“bar to hym a stif burdoun” (673)—a phrase meant to convey the men’s harmony in song,

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7 The Pardoner is also associated with the hare—“Swiche glarynge eyen hadde he as an hare” (684)—an animal which in medieval usage may represent various traits, including lust; John Boswell suggests the hare was used in medieval bestiaries as a symbol of homosexuality (*Christianity* 141-42). Though this ambiguous association does not clarify our understanding of the Pardoner’s “sexuality,” it does reinforce his non-normativity.
but which may connote their sexual harmony as well. The image of his wallet, full of fake holy relics and positioned “in his lappe” implicates the Pardoner’s reproductive organs, too, as fraudulent. Although the source of the Pardoner’s sexual “queerness” is thus located in his testicles (or lack thereof), other characteristics contribute to it, including the lack of beard which qualifies his body as androgynous, if not wholly feminine. Because “medieval societies generally contained experience and expression within a very rigid binary of masculine and feminine, with little or no cross-over allowed” (Burgwinkle 41), the Pardoner can only be characterized by ambiguity. The narrator’s ambivalence about how to categorize the Pardoner leads him to equate forms of non-normative sexuality; thus, effeminacy belongs to the same realm as both “homosexuality” and the lack of sexuality. The range of terms used to describe the Pardoner illustrates the lack of clearly defined categories of sexual identity in the Middle Ages while revealing that deviant sexuality was thought to be marked by an unstable or even failed masculinity.

Having given the above disclaimers, it seems the fear of anachronism has become somewhat obsessive in recent criticism; I would agree with recent queer theorists who suggest that anachronism does not always render a reading invalid, and, at times, can even be productive as “both an object and a method of inquiry, a means to investigate the knotting and redoubling of time” (Rohy 71). In her essay “Ahistorical,” Valerie Rohy offers a succinct justification for the the anachronism of queer readings:

when the insistence on historicism is, first and foremost, an effort to put the past
first and foremost, it mimes the heteronormative demand for proper sexual sequencing. ... Resistance to phobic definitions of homosexuality...might mean a turn away from the discipline of straight time, away from the notions of historical propriety that, like notions of sexual propriety, function as regulatory fictions.

(69-70)

Similarly, Carolyn Dinshaw’s *Getting Medieval* successfully employs Homi K. Bhabha’s ‘meanwhile,’ which, she explains, “opens up ‘new times’ and new locations, found in the very split of ambivalent signs, wherein other cultural meanings may be located, other histories found” (16). Dinshaw suggests that the process of “making relations with the past” allows us to “realize a temporal dimension of the self and of the community” (21).

As we realize that the act of textual interpretation is inseparable from the reader’s own ideas and experiences, it becomes increasingly important to define how we perceive history and time. Particularly with pre-modern texts, all readings (regardless of whether they examine such sensitive subjects as gender and sexuality) are influenced by our very modernity. Thus, there is much to be gained by using rather than resisting anachronism, by embracing Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, which allows the literary text to become layered with new meaning and significance, transcending temporality. As we nuance texts with modern ideas, we also open them to new possibilities—as Richard Zeikowitz puts it, “[h]istorical inquiry is, in part, an imaginative activity—not in the sense of making something up, but rather imagining possibilities from evidence contained
in a text” (10).

The process of interpretation not only enriches our own understanding of literature but also strengthens our connection to the past. Consider, for instance, how a thesis of this nature might be further built upon, in a work of much larger scope: I will deal here with instances of apparent homoeroticism, and how they function intratextually. But how might such moments function intertextually? If we are to disregard history altogether, how might the idea of a homosexual subculture—men who identify themselves and bond with others based on the tenet of who or what they sexually desire—affect the way in which we read medieval texts? This thesis will not assume that Amis and Amiloun, nor any piece of medieval literature, intends to offer a psychological profile, perhaps least of all in terms of (non-)normative desires or identities. However, an exploration of particular moments in the text which are suggestive of homoerotic desire, as well as of how the text contains, approves, and/or transforms that desire, are offered as a contribution to a cross-temporal dialogue of queerness, which ultimately refutes the notion that our current “heterosexuality” is now, or ever has been, the only normativity.

The following chapters of this thesis are arranged to give the reader an understanding of historical and thematic context before discussing the ME Amis and Amiloun. Chapter One will focus primarily on a continuum of relationships between

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8 The history in question, of course, is defined traditionally. Recent scholars, such as Alan Bray and John Boswell, have made headway into establishing “new” histories by applying so-called “anachronistic” terms to medieval men, such as “closeted” and “gay,” respectively.
medieval men, from the social to the sexual. A brief introduction will be given to the classical idea of *amicitia*, as it was formulated in the thought of ancient Greek philosophers, recorded in the writings of Aristotle and Cicero, and inherited by scholars of the Middle Ages. Focusing next on the view of *amicitia* in the Middle Ages, I will provide an overview of friendship’s scriptural foundation in the story of David and Jonathan, and its subsequent manifestation in spiritual writings, such as those by Saint Augustine and Aelred of Rievaulx, as well as in secular texts by Andreas Capellanus and Peter Abelard. We will then examine more ambiguous spaces on the continuum, or those relationships which appear to surpass the normative boundaries of friendship; a particular emphasis will be given to those institutions which promoted or necessitated homosocial bonding, such as monasticism and sworn brotherhood. This discussion will give an overview of medieval attitudes towards sexual acts between men, including the warnings against such behavior and the punishments enacted upon its discovery. We will also analyze the fine line which might have separated friendly feelings from more passionate ones, as becomes apparent in the language of love and intimacy which characterized correspondence between friends and political allies. Chapter Two will turn to *Amis and Amiloun*, analyzing the focus on familial relationships, the gaze on the physical body, and the omission of Christianized details. Together, these strategies open up a space in which the poet could concentrate primarily on the (earthly) interactions between two friends; in turn, this space becomes a foundation which allows for the modern reading which this
thesis offers. The ideas presented in the first two chapters combine and culminate in Chapter Three, in which we can finally tease out the subtext of homoerotic possibilities which lies not far below the romance’s textual surface. Just as the ME poet’s inclusion of these erotic details worked toward the creation of alternative relationships, as well as alternative ways to negotiate selfhood, our modern understanding of their significance is a movement toward the creation of a past unrestricted by the constraints of history itself.
Chapter One:

Friendship and Beyond: A Continuum of Male-Male Relationships in the English Middle Ages

Before moving into the tale itself, it is necessary to understand the medieval English continuum of male-male relationships. The discussion in this chapter will contextualize the place of both friendship and sexual desire in a culture constructed and controlled by the Church, courtly facades, and the code of chivalry. Furthermore, as even Edward II’s own relationship with his deputy and friend Piers Gaveston was “a major political issue of the day” (Delany 72), it is also necessary to treat the danger inherent in ambiguous relationships. To illustrate this point, this chapter will offer an overview of how and why male-male sex acts came to be classified as both criminal and sinful, as well as of the punishments and penalties for transgressions of these laws.

The classical tradition of amicitia, which gave weight and validity to a bond such as that between Amis and Amiloun, extends back at least to the writings of Pythagoras in the late sixth century B.C. Reginald Hyatte notes that although the ancients lacked a single standard definition for their concept of perfect friendship, they did “generally agree on the following fundamentals: perfect friendship exists only between virtuous men who love virtue in one another for its own sake; amici veri are like a single soul in two...bodies” and that “vera amicitia...is worth pursuing and even dying for...it lasts for a
lifetime or even beyond life” (4-5). In addition to Pythagoras, other pagan Latin authors, including Heracleitus, Empedocles, Epicurus, and Seneca highly praised amicitia in their works. In the Middle Ages, however, the idea of perfect friendship was appropriated primarily from the ancient works of Aristotle and Cicero. In his fourth-century Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle lauds friendship as “not only a necessary thing, but a noble one as well” (VIII.1155a). He meditates upon the different degrees of friendship, noting that while the young often engage in short-lived friendships based upon pleasure or erotic desires, “complete friendship” occurs among “good people, those who are alike in their virtue” (VIII.1156b). With the maxim, “a friend is another self,” Aristotle emphasizes the centrality of similitude in friendship; as Robert Stretter summarily puts it, “[t]rue friends achieve such spiritual unity that their separate identities begin to collapse” (236). In addition, Aristotle here suggests the need for friendship to be an exclusive tie, reasoning, “One cannot be a friend in the sense of complete friendship to many people, just as one cannot be in love with many people at the same time (love is like an excess, and such a thing arises naturally towards one individual)” (VIII.1158a). This passage articulates the strength and passion that could be found in friendships among men, and the fidelity that might be expected among friends elucidates the controversy these

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10 Rackham 472.
medieval relationships have caused among modern historians, theorists, and activists: characterized by deep intimacy and even jealousy, traditional bonds of friendship do not fit neatly into our categories of “the platonic” and “the romantic.”

However, the majority of Aristotle’s works were not translated from Greek into Latin until the mid-twelfth century, most notably by James of Venice and Gerard of Cremona, who translated those works which had already been rendered into Arabic; it was another century before the translation of Aristotle’s works in their entirety was completed. Cicero, who wrote in Latin, therefore wielded a considerably greater influence on medieval thinkers. His second-century treatise *De amicitia* expanded upon friendship; like Aristotle, Cicero treats friendship as a central concern among men, prefacing his discussion of its particulars with the address: “ego vos hortari tantum possum, ut amicitiam omnibus rebus humanis anteponatis; nihil est enim tam naturae aptum, tam conveniens ad res vel secundas vel adversas” (V.17).  

11 This is a rather optimistic statement, for by Cicero’s own definition—“omnia divinarum humanarumque rerum cum benevolentia et caritate consensio”—friendship is virtually synonymous with virtue, without which, he says, “amicitia esse ullo pacto potest” (VI.20).  

12 Furthermore, Cicero’s treatise expounds upon the qualifications which make

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11 “All I can do is urge you to put friendship ahead of all other human concerns, for there is nothing so suited to man’s nature, nothing that can mean so much to him, whether in good times or in bad” (All translations are from *De amicitia* translated by Frank O. Copley).

12 “complete sympathy in all matters of importance, plus goodwill and affection”; “friendship cannot exist at all.”
one worthy of amicitia; he asserts, “ nisi in bonis amicitiam esse non posse” (V.18), or those “[q]ui ita se gerunt, ita vivunt, ut eorum probetur fides, integritas, aequitas, liberalitas, nec sit in eis utra cupideitas, libido, audacia, sintque magna constantia, ut ii fuerunt” (V.19). Though Cicero has stated earlier that men are naturally well-suited to partake in friendship, surely such noble qualities could be found only in the ideal man. And indeed, Cicero appears to regard amicitia only as an aspiration, conceding that “ita contracta res est et adducta in angustum, ut omnis caritas aut inter duos aut inter paucos iungeretur” (V.20). If such an affection was ever considered to exist, that is, beyond a philosophy or an ideal—it was thought to be extremely rare.

In the Christian Middle Ages, the ancient tradition of amicitia was transformed into a spiritualized bond; its predication upon virtue was not replaced but specified towards godly aims—friendship between men on earth could prefigure brotherhood with Christ. In addition to classical texts, the Bible was, as M. J. Ailes writes, “the other main literary source for the expression of love between men” (215). Ailes notes the attention given to the “apparent tenderness between John ‘the Beloved Disciple’ and Christ, which is foreign to our culture” (215), though certainly, the most frequently cited example of this affection was the friendship between Jonathan and David. The Old Testament books of Samuel recount their immediate (and reciprocated) love for each other: “anima

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13 “friendship can only exist among good men”; “regarded as models of honor, integrity, justice, and generosity, men who have no vestige of avarice, lustfulness, or insolence, men of unwavering conviction.”
14 “friendship is so concentrated and restricted a thing that all the true affection in the world is shared by no more than a handful of individuals.”
Jonathan conligata est animae David et dilexit eum Jonathan quasi animam suam” (1 Sam. 18:1). This “knitting together” of souls fits into the tradition of spiritual friendship, or the joining of men’s virtuous natures, but, as an image of their passion, also connotes a physical proximity—a sentiment reinforced by the next verse: “tulitque eum Saul in die illa et non concessit ei ut reverteretur in domum patris sui” (1 Sam. 18:2). The passage suggests that mere appreciation of another is inadequate; in true friendship, men will cleave to each other’s presence. When Saul’s ire is later kindled towards David, the envious king orders his son Jonathan to kill David, but “Jonathan filius Saul diligebat David valde” (1 Sam. 19:1). Like the classical texts which gave shape to the idea of friendship, the story of David and Jonathan (which will reappear frequently throughout the chapters that follow) centers upon a love that appears so suddenly and naturally that it seems predestined. Furthermore, the story also manifests this love through the friends’ souls and their appreciation for virtue; however, and also in the classical tradition, this “spiritual” love is complicated by textual attention to the men’s physical bodies and mortal lives.

In the twelfth century, these concepts were compiled and articulated in the highly influential Spiritual Friendship, written by monk and historian Aelred of Rievaulx.

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15 Biblia Sacra Vulgata. “the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul” (Douay-Rheims Bible). All scripture quoted hereafter will be from the Biblia Sacra Vulgata; the English translations given in footnotes will be from the Douay-Rheims Bible.
16 “And Saul took him that day, and would not let him return to his father’s house.”
17 “Jonathan the son of Saul loved David exceedingly.”
Although himself greatly influenced by Cicero’s *On Friendship*, Aelred sets up his own text as a corrective to the ancient work, declaring that Cicero was necessarily “unaware of the excellence of true friendship, since he was unaware of Christ, who is friendship’s principle and goal” (I.8). Like the ancients before him, Aelred distinguishes the true, highest bonds from “carnal” and “worldly” friendships, grounding it upon “similarity of character, goals, and habits in life” (I.37) and “the love of God” (III.5). Spiritual friendship, too, stands upon and is pervaded by virtue: “prudence guides this friendship, justice rules it, courage watches over it, and moderation tempers it” (I.49). While it remains, then, similar to that bond proposed by the ancients, we can observe in Aelred’s emphasis upon moderation a significant shift away from Aristotle’s conception of love as “an excess.” Nevertheless, Aelred’s language is often a passionate outpouring of enthusiasm for the benefits of friendship: “in human affairs there is no goal that is holier than friendship, nothing more useful, nothing more difficult to find, nothing that is sweeter to experience, nothing more enjoyable to maintain. For friendship bears fruit in this life as well as in the life to come” (II.9). Furthermore, although Aelred depicts perfect friendship as no less of an ideal than did Cicero, it is, he says, “a path that leads very close to the perfection which consists of the enjoyment and knowledge of God, such that a man who is a friend of man is made into a friend of God,” (II.14) and his text gives the

impression that the qualifications to create these bonds were not quite so rigid and exclusive. By stressing humanity’s fallibility as it contrasts with God’s perfection, Aelred implicitly suggests that even if the highest state of spiritual friendship cannot be obtained, one might still benefit from attempting this pinnacle.

Interestingly, as Mark F. Williams notes in his introduction to *Spiritual Friendship*, Aelred’s text was relatively unpopular in the Middle Ages. The dominant view at the time held, in fact, that friendship was “possibly beneficial but certainly risky and potentially divisive of the Christian community. Above all, friendship was seen as a potential threat to one’s attachment to God: Human friendships...always compete with the devotion to God, often to the detriment of the latter” (21). Williams goes on to observe that Aelred was apparently aware of this danger, but tried to avert it by grounding friendship in the mutual love of Christ. The suggestion here, clearly, is that Aelred simply held a different view than his peers on the topic; one wonders, however, if this might not be an inversion. Certainly, the question of Aelred’s sexual identity has been debated extensively, a discussion spurred by his affectionate and even erotic language, as well as his reflections on his boyhood and the recollection of his longing to be loved—for instance, these latter points found in the beginning of *Spiritual Friendship* have been taken by John Boswell as Aelred’s admission of his “homosexuality,” whereas Williams counters that these are part of the Augustinian rhetorical tradition (94). While we certainly do not possess the evidence to label Aelred’s sexual identity or his desires, it
may be thought peculiar that he should have positioned himself as a passionate proponent of friendship in a time when this bond was looked upon with suspicion, especially as the abbot of a monastery, an institution in which exclusive friendships were “frowned on as divisive” or even as dangerous for the temptation of sodomy (Williams 18). In light of this, we might entertain the notion that Aelred’s enthusiasm for friendship grew out of his desire for close companionship—sexual or otherwise—and Christ was incorporated as the third party to a “friendship triangle” as a means of both neutralizing friendship’s perceived threat and justifying his favor of them. This conjecture is similar to the one which I will shortly apply to the ME *Amis and Amiloun*.

Another twelfth-century work which built on Cicero’s ideas of friendship was Andreas Capellanus’ *De Amore*, which modern scholars read as a satirical or humorous work rather than a historical source on courtly practices. The Latin treatise, descriptive of the courtly love system, refers to friendship as an institution diametrically opposed to heterosexual love relationships, and clearly held by Andreas as the superior relation of the two; for he muses, “Quid enim tam necessarium tamve utile hominibus invenitur quam amicos habere securos?” (III.10). This line is from the work’s third book, and thus stands in stark contrast to the material presented in *De amore*’s first two books, which are devoted to the intricacies of heterosexual love. Book Three, or “De reprobatione amoris”

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19 “What do we find so necessary or so useful to men as to have reliable friends?” (189). All Latin quotations are from E. Trojel’s edition of *De Amore libri tres*; all footnoted English translations are from Parry’s *The Art of Courtly Love*.
employed misogynistic language and offered reasons to avoid love, many of which suggest that male-female love could be damaging to a man’s standing among his male peers, and thus, to his friendships as well. Like those writing before him, Andreas understood amicitia to be possible only among men of the staunchest virtues, and these could become compromised in pursuit of a woman. For example, Book Three remarks upon women’s propensity to spur men to commit “latrocinia, rapinas furtave aliaque nefanda commissa” (III.21). Though such deeds surely marked the downfall of a man’s character, Andreas found greatest fault in the rift they undoubtedly caused between a man and his friends. Likewise, personal character is again eclipsed by relations with other men as Andreas asks, “quid magis contemptibilem quemlibet reddit hominibus quam si aliquis pro mulieris amore obscura cogatur inopia laborare?” (III.21). In addition, homosocial bonds risked destruction when men became aroused with the vulgar lust women could incite; Andreas remarks upon “poteris qualis vel quantus inter homines sit reputandus, qui amicitiam carnis voluptati luxuriando postponit” (III.12). De Amore is one of the earliest texts to specifically point to this seeming natural enmity between male-female and male-male relationships; one possible explanation for their opposition may be found in the necessity of two friends being as closely alike as possible. The love of a woman,

20 “robberies and thefts and other furtive and wicked acts” (191).
21 “what renders a man more contemptible to other men than for him to be compelled to suffer the obscurities of poverty for the love of a woman?” (191)
22 “how little reputation, and of what sort, a man deserves to have among his fellow men if he makes friendship secondary to wallowing in the pleasures of the flesh” (189).
Andreas shows, throws off this perfect balance, creating difference where none had been, and where none should be:

Praeterea, etsi ex amore quandoque non offendatur amicus, quia forte in extraneam personam extenditur amor amici, mutuas tamen amicitiae vices agnoscer non posset amicus, donec in amico verus dominabitur amor. Quem enim amoris iacula tangunt nil aliud cogitat...et in amore neglectum vel amissum sibi male compensat amicum. Sibi ergo et coamanti suae tantum miser ille vivere iudicatur, qui aliorum omnium utilitatem et amicitiam negligendo...et ideo non immerito ab omni videtur negligendus amico, immo penitus ab omni homine declinandus. (III.17-18)

Clearly, medieval men were to be more concerned for their reputation among other men than for their fame among women. For heterosexual love was seen as a selfish but inevitable desire; soon found stagnant and inadequate, those relationships represented only a single phase of life. True friendship, on the other hand, could last the length of one’s lifetime, providing him with much comfort and sympathy, and simultaneously enriching his own character. Though the contradictory views portrayed in De Amore he work preserves the medieval understanding of the foundation, as well as of the governing

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23 "Besides, even if your friend happens not to be offended by your love because it is directed toward some person in whom he is not interested, still he can never feel real friendship for you until true love dominates him too. For he whom Love’s darts hit thinks about nothing else...and he renders such a poor return to his friend whom, in his love, he neglects or loses. That wretch is considered to live only for himself and his beloved who neglects being useful or friendly to everyone else...so with good reason he should be dropped by all his friends, and all men should avoid him" (190-91).
precepts, of true friendship among men.

Though Cicero contended that “a good man, upon hearing a commendation of another, may be attracted to him, indeed, may begin to love him even before they meet face to face” (Hyatte 28), the romance of *Amis and Amiloun* stands as testament to the necessity of physical proximity in friendships. Indeed, medieval relationships were not limited to the philosophical sphere. Despite the differences between societies of the Middle Ages and those of modernity, we must not forget that *real* men and women existed, with *real* bodies that were subject to the same physiological urges as ours are today—desires that could be criminalized, preached against, and punished, but not eradicated. In his work on the institution of brotherhood-in-arms, historian Maurice Keen notes that “literary description…tells us what was understood by the relation, which formal records will not indicate and may conceal” (*Nobles* 43). Although nowhere in his essay does Keen entertain the idea that brotherhood-in-arms could signal the occlusion or concealment of a possibly deeper and erotic intimacy, his suspicion that the relations might purposefully be omitted from history is telling. Although medieval men may not have identified themselves according to their desires, and their choice of *which* sexual acts to perform must have been compelled, at least in part, by the existing social and spiritual frameworks, homosocial bonds carried a threatening potential, even when they took shape as brotherhood oaths among knights, political alliances among nobles, or close fraternity among monks. Not only have same-sex desires, sex acts, and
relationships largely been excluded from historical record, but they have also been blurred into history through the obligatory re-channeling of these desires into other outlets. Thus, before delving into a close analysis of *Amis and Amiloun*, I would like to acknowledge the ambiguity, sexual tension, and threat of sin necessarily present in medieval same-sex relationships. Regardless of whether or not—or rather, how frequently—these relationships contained an element of eroticism, this thesis will not categorize medieval same-sex relationships as distinct binaries (sexual / non-sexual, for instance), but rather, suggest that they exist upon a continuum between these extremes, on which each inter-mixture of affection, desire, and sexual acts could be plotted. We should explore briefly the reasons for which medieval men were compelled to displace or disguise their desires for other men, as well how passion may have manifested itself in their relationships.

In the Middle Ages, the intolerance of homosexual acts, much like the admiration for friendship, was sanctioned by a strong Old Testament foundation. Saint Paul, among the first to categorize sexual sins, condemned all sexual behavior outside of marriage, and most sexual acts within marriage as well. In particular, Paul denounced same-sex intercourse, which, together with cross-dressing and growing long hair, marked men as effeminate (Johansson 160-61). In one Pauline epistle, the behavior of heathens (generally denoting non-Judeo-Christians) is specially marked by “unnatural” sexuality: “similiter autem et masculi relickto naturali usu feminae exarserunt in desideriis suis in
invicem masculi in masculos turpitudinem operantes et mercedem quam oportuit erroris sui in semet ipsis recipientes” (Rom. 1:27). Paul’s emphatic denouncements were commonplace by the late thirteenth century, when “sodomy had taken on mythic dimensions within the works of some theologians” (Burgwinkle 32). Across Western Europe, sodomy moved from being merely a canonical offense to a civil crime; secular law adopted “penalties ranging from mere fines to castration, exile, and death” (Johansson and Percy 175). The earliest recorded execution for sodomy dates back to 1277, when the German King Rudolf I sentenced an accused nobleman to die at the stake. In this vigilant atmosphere, even the most well-intentioned attachment could transgress the boundaries of propriety into sin and salaciousness. Just as King Edward II himself would not be above suspicion, nor were members of the clergy excepted from strict scrutiny. Evidence of this fear is preserved in the “Rule of Saint Benedict,” in which monks are forbidden from sexual unions and “even particular personal friendships” (Haseldine 238). However, it is the handbooks of penance which most frequently supplement discussions of medieval “homosexuality.” The *libri paenitentiales*, in use from the sixth through the eleventh century feature compilations of sins and their corresponding punishments derived from various sources; their frequent contradictions make them generally unreliable or, as R. D. Fulk writes, at least “arbitrary witnesses” (7).

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24 “And, in like manner, the men also, leaving the natural use of the women, have burned in their lusts, one towards another: men with men, working that which is filthy, and receiving in themselves the recompense which was due to their error.”
In any case, a “disproportionately large” percentage of the penitentials is devoted to sexual sins (Payer 5). Though Fulk suggests the detailed nature of these canons may signal the relative rarity of homoerotic practices, he also notes the sheer breadth of male-male sexual acts for which priests were to prepare penances.

Though male-male sex was thought of as the unspeakable sin, love among men was valorized as that transcendent quality which marks true friendship. From a compact of friendship, Cicero wrote, “amor exoriatur necesse est” (XIV.48). Surviving correspondence between men evinces highly affectionate language, and because “[f]riendship between individuals occupied a central role in political thought as an ethical force for the maintenance of order and social cohesion” (Haseldine 242), this intimacy was even adopted in political discourse as a sign of alliance and goodwill. C. Stephen Jaeger’s Ennobling Love stands as perhaps the most extensive study on the vocabulary of love within non-sexual relationships; here he contends that

[t]he language of passionate male friendship stretched over various realms of aristocratic life. In the earlier Middle Ages it is documented most abundantly at royal and imperial courts. It is a language that may be called upon to describe favor relationships, peace arrangements, and genuine passionate friendships, and the three are often mixed in proportions that cannot be untangled by reading the documents. (14)

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25 “love is bound to arise.”
Jaeger claims that exalted love was itself a significant institution, a “mode of love that proposed indifference to sex, or mastery of it” and in which “gender was a matter of indifference, far less important than social ranking” (17). Both love and friendship in their ideal form would overcome the dependence on the body and encourage the chastity, morality, and refinement of both parties. William Calin’s study of Old French *chansons de geste* likewise supports the idea of exalted friendship; he explores “manly love—hero and companion, uncle and nephew, friend and friend” (*Epic Quest* 70) as an alternative to heterosexual passions (Calin does not, however, consider these bonds as sexual alternatives to male-female intercourse). Jaeger sees chastity as essential to ennobling love; Calin extends this idea, locating the themes of sacrifice and renunciation as “central to the love ethos of the troubadours and *trouv’eres*. Some went to the extreme of rejoicing that their love would never be consummated” (96). This intimacy between men, however, extended well beyond their language, and into physical embodiment. Allen Frantzen writes that “[n]onsexual intramale acts, including embraces and kisses, took place within an institution of male friendship…that the culture authorized and indeed valorized… And so long as sexual intercourse is not involved, the acts cannot be considered deviant. But neither are they meaningless, or without erotic significance” (107). The possibility that medieval men’s love for each other could be manifested in physical intimacies which are at once “nonsexual” and “erotic” illustrates both the breadth and complexity of the continuum of male-male relationships.
One reason for the apparent confusion is that, in certain situations, medieval men were encouraged to form intimate bonds known as brotherhood-in-arms or sworn brotherhood which were considered beneficial for knightly endeavors; Zeikowitz finds that “[w]hile these orders were not necessarily founded for the purpose of promoting male-male intimacy, the success of their campaign was, in part, dependent on ‘intimate personal loyalty’ between men” (23). Research on sworn-brotherhood offers an array of inconsistent and controversial results. Alan Bray writes that the rite was commonly performed within the Catholic church from the late twelfth through the early fifteenth centuries, suggesting that “the mass provided a familiar culmination for the creation of ritual ‘brothers,’ a ritual completed in their taking Holy Communion together,” and subsequently endowing the relationship with “a formal and objective character” (25). Dean R. Baldwin suggests that sworn-brotherhood was nearly extinct by the twelfth century, but that its emphasis was on the medieval notion of treuthe—a word connoting “both fidelity to a vow and the personal integrity and moral courage necessary to fulfill a pledge, implying thereby a general moral uprightness” (355). Leach, in his introduction to Amis and Amiloun, analyzes compagnonage, a ritual again extinct by the twelfth century, which “consisted of taking an oath, usually upon a sword-hilt, to observe brotherhood,” which he claims “meant faithfulness to death; it could never be broken or repudiated” (lxx). Leach explains the bond as such: “The brothers wore the same device on their shields; they shared property in common; the one brother had the right to fight in
any duel for the other; each brother was bound to avenge the death of the other, if
necessary. One could not marry without the permission of the other. At the death of one
brother, the other, if free, often married the widow” (lxx). As to the instance of this rite,
Bray notes that though we cannot guess how frequently the relation of *fratres iurati*
(wedded- or sworn-brothers) was enacted, he has found no occasions of use within the
eleventh through the sixteenth centuries when the term was *explained* for a reader’s
benefit (32).

P.J. Heather’s findings on sworn-brotherhood are in agreement that the contract
would be “binding for life” (163); however, he questions the exclusivity of the bond,
pointing to the example of the fourteenth-century romance *Athelston*, in which four men
become “weddyd brethryn” (10) at once.26 Indeed, this also occurs in Chaucer’s late
fourteenth-century “Pardoner’s Tale,” in which the “riotoures thre” (661) plight troth
together, though critics have pointed out that this drunken and quickly-broken pledge to
“sleen this false traytour Deeth” (699) may be Chaucer’s own commentary on the
declining feudal oath.27 If we accept that sworn-brotherhood had fallen out of practice by

26 The oath scene in *Athelston* is unfortunately brief, revealing only that the four messengers’ love is
predicated upon their frequent meeting in a particular spot in the forest: “For love of here metyng thare, / They swoor hem weddyd brethryn for evermare, / In trewthe trewely dede hem bynde” (22-24).
27 One rioter suggests: “Lat ech of us holde up his hand til oother, / And ech of us bicomen others
brother, / And we wol sleen this false traytour Deeth” (697-99); the others agree: “Togidres han thise thre
hir trouthes plight / To lyve and dyen ech of hem for oother, / As though he were his owene ybore brother”
(702-04). Lois Roney, for example, has read Chaucer’s “subjectivization” of the oath, particularly in the
“Knight’s Tale,” as a consequence of the decline in verbal oaths as they came to be replaced by written
contracts. For more on the oath’s historical decline, see Richard Firth Green’s *A Crisis of Truth*, in which he
describes how “increasing reliance on written records forced people to confront not only the fallibility of
human memory but, far more traumatically, the unreliability of human trouthe” (39).
the twelfth century, the explanation for these discrepancies may simply be the texts’ later
dates. Regardless, however, of the number of men involved, these texts do demonstrate
the primacy of male-male relationships over male-female ones. In Athelston, for example,
the queen acknowledges that her husband’s brotherhood will take precedence over her
own political power as well as their marriage: “He wole doo more for hym, I wene, / Thanne for me, though I be qwene” (306-07). Sworn-brotherhood is also depicted in
Chaucer’s “Knight’s Tale”; it is the bond which strengthens the familial tie between
Palamon and Arcite, though in Chaucer’s source for the tale—Boccaccio’s Teseida—the
knights are simply kin.28 Stretter suggests that Chaucer uses brotherhood “as shorthand
for a (theoretically) indestructible male relationship” (237), positing that this usage is
only to demonstrate the stronger (because more natural) power of love and sexual desire,
though their strength actually incites death and destruction in the “Knight’s Tale.” Sworn
brotherhood and heterosexual love may be thought of as opposing forces, then, but in
many ways the relationships are parallel, especially if we consider (as Stretter does not)
the possibly underlying force of sexual desire in brotherhood. Institutionalized male-male
bonds, as Tison Pugh puts it, “straddle the border between the normative and the queer”
and may provide a “possible cover for homoerotic desires to flourish” (103). It is of little

28 Palamon refers to himself as Arcite’s “cosyn and thy brother” (1131); and reveals that they have sworn
That nevere, for to dyen in the peyne,
Til that the deeth departe shal us twye ne,
Neither of us in love to hyndre oother,
Ne in noon oother cas, my leve brother,
But that thou sholdest trewely forthren me
In every cas, as I shal forthren thee… (1133-38)
wonder, even from a statistical standpoint, that the relationship of sworn-brotherhood has occasioned so much controversy within scholarship. If it were determined that this institution or even several instances of its use signify church-sanctioned domestication of same-sex relationships, the ramifications for literary, historical, gender, and sexuality studies would be immense. As a testament to both the prominence of sworn-brotherhood and the ambiguity which today encircles it, many scholars have attempted to apply sworn-brotherhood to pre-modern relationships which might otherwise appear to be of a homosexual nature to modern readers, as will be discussed in later chapters.

Still, in a society in which love between men is lauded and encouraged but sexual activity between them is fiercely rejected, discerning the depth of intimacy is an uncertain task. The example of the friendship between David and Jonathan is again a fitting illustration of such ambiguity. Their relationship, predicated both on their souls and on their physical bodies, is characterized by a rare depth of emotion and intimacy, displayed at its strongest in David’s lament for his dead friend: “doleo super te frater mi Ionathan decore nimis et amabilis super amorem mulierum sicut mater unicum amat filium suum ita ego te diligebam” (2 Sam. 1:26). Foremost, David’s use of the past-tense “diligebam” conveys his sense of loss, revealing that their friendship has actually ended with the death of Jonathan’s body, despite the idea of the soul’s immortality. His

29 “I grieve for thee, my brother Jonathan: exceeding beautiful, and amiable to me above the love of women. As the mother loveth her only son, so did I love thee.” Note that this last phrase is not found in the ancient Hebrew or Greek texts; it is added on in the Latin Vulgate text circa 400 A.D.
description of his friend as “beautiful” marks an appreciation primarily for the physical rather than for disembodied ideals such as virtue, and also heightens the sense of the tragedy of Jonathan’s death. Even more complex is David’s rhetoric in praising their bond over any heteronormative relationship he could have experienced, either real or potential. At the same time, David’s comparison of his love to a woman’s intimates that women were, perhaps, capable of experiencing an equivalent quality of feeling, though men could only return this love to other men. David’s lament conveys both a tenderness and an intimacy which are channeled through examples of more common bonds, thereby making a rare and noble bond accessible to all readers.

However, despite the consistent description of the men’s love as the sharing of one soul, Saul reproaches his son with words that suggest they may also share an inappropriate physical intimacy—“fili mulieris virum ultrro rapientis numquid ignoror quia diligis filium Isai in confusionem tuam et in confusionem ignominiosae matris tuae omnibus enim diebus quibus filius Isai vixerit super terram non stabilieris tu neque regnum tuum” (1 Sam. 20:30-31). Saul’s anger surely complicates the argument of scholars such as Ailes, who claim that the love between David and Jonathan is “not eroticized” (216). If we are to understand perfect friendship and spiritual love as noble

30 To express that one’s emotions surpass those of women seems to have been a rhetorical strategy aimed at conveying the depth or intensity of those feelings; the usage is also found in Gottfried von Straßburg’s thirteenth-century Tristan: “Good King Mark was so deeply distressed by this duel that the timidest woman could not have suffered so much for a man” (129).
31 “Thou son of a woman that is the ravisher of a man, do I not know that thou lovest the son of Isai to thy own confusion, and to the confusion of thy shameless mother? For as long as the son of Isai liveth upon earth, thou shalt not be established, nor thy kingdom.”
and revered bonds, what is it that Saul finds shameful about his son’s friendship? Though the epistle of Samuel does not address this question directly, Saul’s rebuke contains obvious clues; the admonishment “virum ultro rapientis” has been translated as “ravisher of a man,” a reprimand which clearly betokens a possible sexual relationship. That Jonathan’s love supposedly causes the confusion of both himself and his mother, and that it obstructs the establishment of his person and his kingdom are details that evince Saul’s view of same-sex bonds as unnatural. In the context of medieval thought, this passage may have depicted King Saul as preoccupied with the continuation of patriarchy; Jonathan’s participation in an exclusive and intimate but non-procreative relationship signals a disruption of this cycle, one opposed to the laws of nature as well.

Despite the ambiguous element of shame in the story of David and Jonathan, the emotive power of their friendship resonated throughout the Middle Ages. Peter Abelard, the famed medieval scholar, explored their relationship through poetic verse. Having been castrated as punishment for his affair with his student, Héloïse, Abelard’s works may convey a heightened sensitivity to issues of masculinity. Among his collection of sacred songs, which “take eminently human situations in the Old Testament and fashion them anew for the man of the twelfth century” (Weinrich 304), Abelard’s “Planctus David super Saul et Ionatha” has received perhaps the most critical attention.32 To lament the loss of Jonathan, the planctus employs passionate language which evinces the

32 Boswell, for example, remarks, “Whether or not [Abelard] intended to portray the relationship as sexual, he certainly used erotic vocabulary to invest it with pathos” (Christianity 238).
importance of both the fleshly body as it honors the “virtus invicta Ionathe” (III.38).\textsuperscript{33} Abelard’s interpretation, faithful to 2 Samuel 1, also emphasizes the necessity of the friends’ physical proximity. David’s great tragedy is thus rendered “ut tibi presidio / non essem in prelio” (V.71-72).\textsuperscript{34} This image superimposes the body of David directly upon the body of Jonathan, echoing his current state as he laments over his friend’s body but also invoking the intimacy of their friendship which once so enraged Saul. Indeed, memory is but little comfort without Jonathan’s actual presence: “quid amor faciat / maius hoc non habeat” (V.75-76).\textsuperscript{35} The men’s all-encompassing friendship is conveyed best through the oft-quoted lines:

\begin{quote}
Plus frate michi, Ionatha, 

in una mecum anima 

que peccata, que scelera 

nostra sciderunt viscera. (III.45-48)\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

This passage illustrates the nature of the love between David and Jonathan—the familial designation of “brothers” is insufficient; their attachment is manifested through a shared soul and a single flesh. The image of the men’s unity attests to their closeness, but also


\textsuperscript{34} “I was not able to be a shield in battle for you” (Weinrich and Marshall 477-78).

\textsuperscript{35} “whatever love might do, this it cannot surpass” (Ibid.).

\textsuperscript{36} “O Jonathan, more than a brother to me, one with my soul! Through what sins, what crimes was our flesh torn asunder?” (Weinrich and Marshall 476)
allows for an image of barrenness to follow, as David projects his own emptiness onto the surrounding landscape:

\[\text{Expertes montes Gelboe} \]
\[\text{roris sitis et pluvie,} \]
\[\text{nec agrorum primicie} \]
\[\text{vestro succrescent incole. (III.49-52)} \]  

David’s curse upon the land highlights his own sense of loss and is meant to sharply contrast with the happier period preceding Jonathan’s death. Centering on fertility, the imagery naturally extends itself to David’s body, suggesting that the lack which he now experiences is akin to barrenness. Having lost the one who completes him, David laments that it is now grief and despair which “luctu replent omnia” (I.12). Jonathan’s death, therefore, destroys David’s former impregnability, leaving him able to conceive of the future only in terms of lamenting: “inter cuncta gaudia / perpes erit lacrima” (IV.67-68).

History has recorded a similar example of the ambiguity to be found in close male-male relationships in the friendship between Edward II of England and Piers Gaveston. In February of 1307, when Edward of Carnarvon was still a young man, his father, King Edward I, issued an ordinance, decreeing that Gaveston (then a member of the royal household) was to “leave England by the end of April, and to stay away until

37 “Ye mountains of Gilboa, thou shalt be without dew and rain, and the first fruits of your fields shall not grow for your dwellers” (Ibid.).
38 “fill all places” (Weinrich and Marshall 467).
39 “in the midst of every joy there will always be a tear” (Weinrich and Marshall 477).
recalled, and both [Gaveston] and the prince were to take oaths upon the Host that they
would obey the royal ordinance faithfully. ...it was simply stated that the expulsion was
‘for certain reasons’” (Hutchison 48-49). Harold F. Hutchison has found numerous
fourteenth-century chronicles which speculate upon this ordinance, virtually all of which
attest that Edward feared the love between his son and Gaveston—that he “suspected a
homosexual infatuation which he was determined to thwart if he could” (49). This
account alone illustrates the outrage caused by the men’s relationship, which clearly must
have gone above and beyond the semblance of typical friendships in order to elicit such a
reaction from the king. After Edward I’s death, however, the scandal increased, as
Edward II’s first royal decree was for the reinstatement of Gaveston, who then served as
the king’s deputy with “the exercise of the royal prerogative” (Chaplais 3). The friendship
was seen as inappropriate—the chroniclers, though most “hesitated to be frank”
(Hutchison 147), observed that the king’s love was “‘beyond measure and
reason’...‘excessive’, ‘immoderate’, or ‘inordinate’, and the intimacy between them
‘undue’” (Chaplais 7). The chroniclers’ language recalls, in fact, the description of the
way Jonathan loved David as valde, “exceedingly.” One chronicler, Robert of Reading,
explicitly alluded to Edward II’s “illicit and sinful unions” (Chaplais 7), while another, a
Cistercian monk of the abbey of Meaux in Yorkshire, criticized Edward for “‘too much’
sodomy” (Hutchison 147). Though Queen Isabella bore Edward four children—he
fathered, additionally, at least one illegitimate child—rumors about his rejection of his
wife abounded. Edward’s insistence that Gaveston be granted rights and privileges equal to his own further enraged the nobles—so much so that eventually their pressure forced Edward to surrender to another contract exiling Gaveston. Following this, the king attempted several times to recall his friend until 1312, when Gaveston, violating the ordinance of his banishment, was captured and murdered by barons. The relationship between Gaveston and Edward II has been frequently referred to as indicative of the king’s bi- or homosexuality, though the fact remains that there is no irrefutable evidence for such a claim. What the case does illustrate is the existence of a clear boundary, an appropriate realm, of male-male friendship that was not to be transgressed. In addition, although the nature of Edward and Gaveston’s relationship was as difficult to determine in the Middle Ages as it remains today, the records of their friendship stand as an rare acknowledgment that behavior outside of these bounds did exist and occur. Edward’s defiance of this effected violent consequences and a centuries-long scandal.

In a society which lauded the most ideal or spiritualized forms of friendship, encouraged or even necessitated intimate homosocial bonding, and yet strictly punished physical manifestations of love among men, one can only imagine the difficulty of locating an appropriate space on this continuum. As the discussion turns towards questions of identity, these examples should serve as reminders of the imposing social and cultural forces that medieval men faced. How would these well-known spiritual, literary, and historical examples influence a man’s homosocial bonds? More significantly,
how would they affect his construction of self-hood?
Chapter Two:
“Of boon and blood:” Amis and Amiloun’s Construction of Identity

The previous chapter has been essential in contextualizing the ME *Amis and Amiloun* and in illuminating those more nuanced moments—from the men’s brotherhood oath to Amis’ bathing of Amiloun in the blood of his sons to their shared burial—which we will turn to in Chapter Three. With its rich historical background and many variations, the romance can be approached through any number of its intriguing facets; however, I want to pay particular attention to the poet’s emphasis on the physical body and its metamorphoses. This chapter will explore the transformation of familial bonds, the process of courtly indoctrination, and the narrative privileging of the earthly and corporeal over the spiritual, and consider the implications of reading the focus on the men’s bodies as a *gaze*. I stress these aspects as they constitute a productive approach to understanding the “construction” of Amis and Amiloun’s bodies and identities, a connection which opens up a wealth of intriguing questions. How are the natural ties of kinship transcended, and how is one seamlessly integrated into a new family? How do these new bonds become “blood” relations? What changes does the body itself undergo in this process? Furthermore, examining how each man’s identity is manifested in terms of masculinity and/or femininity will be a valuable addition to this study. How does the body mirror “gender” categorizations, and how does it then respond to *other* bodies?
What types of imagery are attached to each category, and how do these function towards the establishment of one’s identity? By focusing on these questions of physicality and identity, it will become apparent how the poet has cast a microcosm of ambiguity and suggestivity—that is, the depiction of the men’s bond as something more than traditional friendship—within the details of traditional institutions, thereby creating a macrocosm of social approval and divine sanction.

Scholars of Amis and Amiloun have frequently found themselves preoccupied with the knights’ brotherhood oath, which creates a bond of kinship between them, though little has been said about the actual functioning of family dynamics within the romance. Indeed, the text gives us little to work with; it opens with a brief description of the boys’ lineage, emphasizing both the nobility and the magnanimity which they inherit from their own well-born fathers. Almost immediately, however, we encounter a problematic line when the poet promises to tell “how vnkouth þey were of kynd” (14). Leach’s study remarks upon the difficulty of this phrase; he presents various translations—J. L. Weston’s “And how their kinsmen knew them not;” Eugene Köbling’s “And how extraordinary they were in character” or “Of what unknown ancestry they were;” and Edith Rickert’s “And how they were not kin”—and notes that it is the latter which he finds most suitable, though he calls it “pointless” (113). Alternately, Edward E. Foster

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40 The referenced works are collected in Leach’s comments, though he omits the following citations: Weston, The Romance Cycle of Charlemagne, 1901; Köbling, Amis und Amiloun, 1884; Rickert, Early English Romances in Verse, 1967.
has glossed the line as “unaffected by their lineage,” intended to convey that the boys are
“not proud or haughty” (*Amis and Amiloun*, ed. Foster, n. 14). A strong possibility is that
this line signals Amis and Amiloun’s lack of concern for their natural families, for not
only do the boys’ biological parents disappear from the romance after the children join
the duke’s court, but their own families are also ultimately disregarded, or, in the case of
Amiloun’s imprisoned wife, discarded. The poet declares, “To-geder ladde þey her lyf”
(2495, emphasis added), but neglects any further mention of Belisaunt or of Amis’
resurrected sons. Such a reading would prepare the audience to understand friendship as
the superior relationship. In light of Foster’s reading, however, I would offer a
speculative interpretation for the problematic line fourteen, reading “vnkouth…of kynd”
as a reference to the boys’ unconcern for continuing their lineage, that is, producing
offspring within a heterosexual marriage. For, despite the fact that natural bonds are not
the focus of the romance, narrative emphasis is placed on Amis and Amiloun’s lineage. A
good deal of the opening stanzas is devoted to their parentage—“[h]er faders were barons
hende” (7) and their mothers were “two ladyes free to fond” (29)—thereby establishing
that they are aware of their lineage and ensuring that the audience recognizes that the
boys are not related. Through this interpretation, the placement of such a statement in the
tale’s beginning may signal that their disinterest in the normal patriarchal cycle extends
either from their youth (for they are, as yet, “children”), or prophetically from their
forthcoming bond of friendship, which will overshadow their devotions to their wives.
and children. An early insinuation would, furthermore, color our understanding of the text to come, allowing us to consider the possible weight of similar innuendos which may otherwise go unnoticed. In any case, this line resonates with significance, stressing as it does the notoriously ambiguous Middle English word *kynd*, which connotes the natural order that this thesis attempts to invert. In medieval usage, one’s *kynd* may indicate his or her ancestry, family, or birthright; race, type or kind; gender or sex; or “nature,” as in one’s own nature, with “to do one’s kind” denoting “to perform the sexual function” (“kind, n.”). By noting Amis and Amiloun’s descent from flesh and blood, and perhaps pointing towards their future replication in flesh and blood, this “notoriously shifting term” (Dinshaw 9) draws attention to their corporeal selves, distinctly foregrounding a sensual (and possibly dangerous) physicality. Finally, “kynd” indicates that Amis and Amiloun, though they will immediately recognize themselves reflected in the other, are unable to recognize what would be in the Middle Ages an essential component of their own identities, for as Dinshaw has noted, “the scorning of nature seems to include scorning the proper gender order” (7). Using Vern Bullough’s definition of medieval manhood as a “triad” of duties—“impregnating women, protecting dependents, and serving as provider to one’s family” (34), it is clear that the creation of one’s own family—that is, the participation in patriarchy—played a crucial role in the late medieval English social conception of masculinity. A disregard for *kynd*, though it may simply signal an indifference to ancestry, can also indicate that one or both of the friends fails to
realize his masculinity. As will be discussed in Chapter Three, this is quite plausible
given Amis and Amiloun’s vastly different characteristics and roles later in the romance,
which have been brought to light by Susan Dannenbaum’s scholarship on the
differentiation of Amis and Amiloun in both the Anglo-Norman and ME tales. The risk of
over-reading here is justified, as it reveals how intricately, and how subtly, ambiguity is
woven into the romance, particularly when characteristics of masculine normativity are at
stake.

Like all the lords present at court, the duke is enthralled by the twelve-year-old
boys; not surprisingly, he finds admiration from afar insufficient. For the children of
noble families, leaving home for an education at court was not unusual in the Middle
Ages; indeed, the duke’s offer to educate and raise the boys would have been a fortunate
one, relieving their parents of considerable expense and ensuring an honorable position in
the youths’ futures. Still, this should not preclude an examination of the duke’s motives—
foremost, he desires Amis and Amiloun “[i]n his seruise wiþ him to be, / Semly to fare bi
his side” (116-17). Though we should not be surprised by the use of “service” to describe
the role of pages at court, we might wonder at the duke’s foregrounding of this capacity,
and moreover, his specificity that the boys will be at his own, personal service— in other
words, both serving and “servicing” him. The duke does not, however, emphasize the
actions the boys will be performing so much as their passivity: “Semly...bi his side”
suggests that his purpose in obtaining the children is self-aggrandizing. The aesthetic
remains the central focus; as mere accessories, Amis and Amiloun are to fulfill a decorative function. Whether the boys’ future “fare” denotes travels with the duke, or simply their decorous behavior, it implies change, a turning away from their biological families and the lives they have known thus far. This is exactly the duke’s intention—the courtly world is divided from the outside world, and in order to assimilate into it, Amis and Amiloun, after their fall from their natural state of innocence, must adopt a new identity by donning the constructs of the court. Finally, the duke’s promise of exchange—that he will knight the children and “susten hem for euer mo” (119)—verbalizes the financial aspect of the social fostering transaction, and suggests his desire for a life-long relationship with the boys. His proposal, then, extends well beyond the duties of a benefactor and into the realm of fatherhood. The full significance of this event may not be realized until, several stanzas later, Amis and Amiloun plight their trewe.

A bond that cannot be erased or surpassed by any other.

The boys’ arrival at the duke’s court marks the beginning of their transcendence into a new world, new roles, and a new family dynamic. Courtly life prepares Amis and Amiloun to form an intimate relationship as it brings them together, assigns them a single identity, and then confines them to a thoroughly male-dominated space. Though we know
that this path will also designate the boys as definitively masculine when they are made
knights, their initial years at court first posit them as distinctly feminine. Up to this point,
their reputations have been grounded upon attractive bodies and passive characteristics—
by age five, it has been decided that “[f]airer were neuer noon on lyue” (50), and they are
praised for being “mylde...of mood” (54), qualities which increase steadily throughout
their childhood:

When ȝey were seuyn ȝere olde,
Grete ioy euery man of hem tolde
To beholde ȝat frely foode;
When ȝey were twel ȝere olde,
In al þe londe were noon so bolde,
So faire of boon and blood. (55-60)

Despite casting the above description as praise, the poet feminizes Amis and Amiloun by
qualifying them only on the basis of looks, rather than deeds, as would be more
appropriate for heroes of romance, even in their youth. The characterization of “bolde” is
not attached to a qualifier, and is eclipsed by the more descriptive phrase which
immediately follows, “faire of boon and blood.” The gaze on the body persists when the
boys arrive at court:

Mony men gan hem byholde
Of lordynges ȝat þere were,
Of body how wel þey were pryȝt,
And how feire þey were of syȝt,
Of hyde and hew and here;
And al þey seide with-out lesse
Fairer children þan þey wesse
Ne sey þey neuer þere. (77-84)

As in the above passage, these lines render Amis and Amiloun’s pre-adolescent, and thus ambiguous or even androgynous bodies as subjects of both the narrative and the courtly gaze, both of which are marked as distinctly male gazes. Though this commendation is meant, presumably, to accept and welcome them into the fraternity of the courtly world, the lords’ approach to Amis and Amiloun as objects of aesthetic admiration ends up subverting both their own and the boys’ normative masculinities.

The admiration of the young male body is, perhaps, not uncommon in romances of the Middle Ages. The medieval “pederastic mindset,” as Warren Johansson and William A. Percy term it, may have been derived from the classical tradition of androphilia; they point out that “Hellenistic and Roman artists were fond of androgynous youths” (159). The gaze on the undifferentiated body can be found again in Athelston, in which the Earl of Stane’s two sons, aged fifteen and thirteen, are described thus:

In the world was non here pere—
Also whyt so lyle-flour,
Red as rose off here colour,
As bryght as blosme on brere. (69-72)

This *effictio* of the boys’ beauty appropriates the language typically used to describe women. Their physical association with flowers intimates both fragility and purity, while the lily-white skin and rose-red features are staple depictions of feminine beauty. Together with the above-mentioned passages from *Amis and Amiloun*, we might conclude that the medieval appreciation of beauty valued the same features in both sexes, as James A. Schultz has argued in his work on Gottfried von Straßburg’s *Tristan*. However, Schultz’s rationale might be complicated by the fact that both romances are specifically evaluating young males. Indeed, we certainly witness admiration for male youths in *Tristan*—for instance, King Gurman requires as tribute thirty “children as were capable of service and as handsome and acceptable in their appearance, as courtly usage required. There were no girls, only boys” (122). This pointed narrative statement, paired with Gurman’s role as antagonist, intimates that there is something suspicious in his “collection” of the young boys. Furthermore, when Morold meets Tristan in battle, the former man takes note, foremost, of his young adversary’s “boyish appearance” (125), yet Morold remarks to him, “No knight that I ever set eyes on has pleased me as much as you” (132). This passage figures Tristan, like the Earl’s sons and Amis and Amiloun, as the object of a male gaze which finds aesthetic pleasure in their youthful bodies. These moments evoke larger questions—does the androgyny of a pre-adolescent body validate
androgyny affect how medieval English culture would construe such an attraction? The passages above construct this ambiguity by aligning children with women, who are nearly always subject to the male will; more significantly, though, they reveal the distinctly *homosocial* foundation upon which the court rests. The lords are brought together in their admiration for Amis and Amiloun, whom they view them as potential extensions of their own selves (that is, still pliant boys who will come to replace them in the self-duplicating cycle of patriarchy) and as part of a (feminine) Other—seen as nonthreatening for its capacity to be controlled and shaped, and perhaps for much the same reasons, looked on with delight.

It may be significant that the detail given to Amis and Amiloun’s beautiful adolescent bodies is unique to the ME version of the tale. Even in the closely-related Old French *chanson de geste*, Ami and Amile are not described as physically handsome until they are fifteen years of age. Although the *chanson* gives a much more detailed account of the heroes’ bodies, and lingers upon the tale’s most sensual moments, the Old French poet also safely neutralized the sexual desire inherent within the gaze. As is revealed in the 1981 modern English prose translation of this text by Samuel Danon and Samuel N. Rosenberg, Ami and Amile do not meet until the age of fifteen, but all the emotion shared between their ME counterparts is concentrated in one passionate scene:

He [Ami] had never seen him, yet knew him instantly by his fine armor and all
else he had heard described. With a kick of his golden spurs, he rushed toward him, and Amile, who had seen him from afar, recognized him in turn. He raced forward, and the two met in such a tight embrace, so mighty was their kiss and so tenderly did they clasp each other, that they almost fainted dead away; their stirrups snapped and they fell together to the ground. Only now would they speak.

(11)

This is only one example of what E. Joe Johnson terms Ami and Amile’s “unabashedly physical relationship” (23). It must be pointed out, though, that throughout this erotically-charged moment, the audience is never allowed to lose sight of Ami and Amile’s masculinity. Even as the men kiss and embrace, the prominence of the physical body is filtered through a layer of armor, which enforces the idea of being “protected” from physical assault and thus conveys an image of warlike violence rather than affection. The status of knighthood polices the men’s friendship, carefully revising the picture so that it shows armor and spurs, rather than chests and calves. The scene resounds with battle imagery—determined rushing, a “mighty” clash, snapping stirrups, and bodies, almost “dead,” falling from their horses—all of which overlies the actual “tender” actions which take place. The ME romance lacks a corresponding scene of physical passion between Amis and Amiloun, but its sparser details zero in on their aim, offering us not strong, masculine bodies, but decidedly vulnerable ones—bodies that do not bear armor, although their androgyny, which proscribes our view of them as fully masculine, acts as a
shield against homoeroticism.

The ME poet’s rendering of the *Amis and Amiloun* legend continues to reinforce the male gaze through the selective use of religious details and Christian invocations. As has been noted, the Latin version, which is our oldest extant edition, was completely devoid of spiritual language, but subsequent versions have tended to fall within two categories—secular romance and hagiographic legend. The ME text would seem to resound with Christian matter—angelic voices intervene in human affairs, divine punishments are enacted, and most strikingly, Amis’ children are resurrected in what is nothing less than a miracle. Nevertheless, a brief reconsideration of these details will suffice to show that they function in the ME romance only as formalities.\(^{41}\) That the divine interacts with human characters only for poetic convenience is most evident when looked at in conjunction with the Old French *chanson*, in which the role of the spiritual is heavily underscored. Though it is less detailed altogether than the *chanson*, the extent of the ME romance’s exclusion of the spiritual is quite surprising. The ME poet’s divergence from Christian thematics which almost certainly pervaded his source marks a conscious shift from the spiritual, a move which allows the poet to focus more directly upon the mortal bodies, rather than the souls, of his earthly subjects. Though this thesis cannot offer a full-length comparison of the texts, several details may attest to their difference.

\(^{41}\) Note, however, Neil Thomas’ suggestion that stories of the *Amis and Amiloun* tradition may not have “enjoyed their wide popularity in medieval Christian Europe had it not been for the emergence at the conclusion of the story of a (Christian) *deus ex machina* to revive the dead children” (937).
Both variations of the tale open with an account of the birth of Amis and Amiloun; that they are “getyn in oo nyȝt / And on oo day born a-plyȝt” (40-41) is a device meant to justify their mirrored bodies, and to explain the strength of their later bond. In the chanson, however, the fact of the boys’ identical births is not just a cause but also an effect—it fulfills a divine prophecy: “an angel sent by God had told of their great friendship and fidelity” (2). The heavenly annunciation manifests several facets of the chanson’s spiritual nature—a disembodied angelic voice marginalizes the fleshly acts of conception and birth, casts Ami and Amile’s friendship as a matter of fate, rather than of choice or desire, and grants sanction to their bond, neatly proscribing any questioning of the relationship’s intimacy. The chanson translates this prophecy into the mortal world by placing emphasis not on their actual births, but on their baptism; the line corresponding to the ME cited above is rendered, “They were conceived on the same night and were baptized on the same day” (2). We are thereby directly alerted to the spiritual lives of Ami and Amile, which will take prominence over their earthly lives. Moreover, the Old French text suggests it is actually this ritual, performed by the pope, which induces their bodily duplication. Before the rite is executed, there is no mention of this similarity, but after Pope Ysoret presents the children with matching goblets—“marvelous pieces cast in the same mold”—the boys’ bodies follow suit, for only then are we told that “they were alike in every way” (2). As tokens of baptism, the golden cups are associated with Christ’s chalice, a powerful image which vindicates the very force of Ami and Amile’s bond.
The ME poet’s alteration of these details and their chronology within the poem also radically alters the substance of the knights’ friendship. Here, Amiloun himself has the gold cups fashioned only after his friendship with Amis has been established, ordering their construction to be “as liche... / As was Sir Amiloun & sir Amis” (250-51). Rather than positing their friendship as a matter of fate, this change establishes the conscious autonomy of their relationship. Though Amiloun does not present Amis with the gift at the time of the troth-plight, the audience will perceive the golden cups as a memento of the brotherhood oath, for at their parting, the men reaffirm their vows—Amiloun reminds Amis that they are bound “Fro þis day forward neuer mo / To faiely oþer for wele no wo, / To help him at his nede” (295-97). His language (“for wele no wo”) is reminiscent of that used to describe the boys’ troth-plight; at the same time, his preface of “Fro þis day forward” connects this moment with that of their first oath, and suggests that the scene marks a renewal of that oath. The chalices’ association, then, allows the brotherhood rite to replace the rite of baptism in structural prominence. The church, in fact, has played no role in forming or continuing the friendship, as Amis and Amiloun are brought together in the decidedly secular setting of the duke’s court, rather than in the Roman church. In keeping with this, the cups are likewise stripped of their religious significance; if there is any lingering echo of the Christian mass in the image of the two chalices, I would propose that it is of the dramatic moment of consecration, with its corresponding hoc est enim corpus meum and hic est enim calix sanguinis mei. For, as the poet’s placement of
the gift-giving at the moment of separation suggests, the embodiment is quite literal. The cups are to serve as mementos of the other in anticipation of their parting, suggesting that physical presence is what will be most longed for. The image of the empty vessel reflects the men’s own emptiness, encompassing both the emotional void caused by separation, and the physical emptiness which is expressed through the oscillating imagery of homoerotic sexual acts and the barrenness of the womb. With a level of detail unusual for the romance, the poet tells of the goblets’ creation, including Amiloun’s special visit to a “gold-smiþe” (244) and the “þreundred pounde” (246) he pays for them, remarks which highlight not only the cups’ importance but also their material nature by ensuring that we read the gold cups as part of an economic system of wealth—the system, in other words, which allows for the creation of courts such as the duke’s, which, as secular hierarchies, are cast as directly opposed to the Church. Finally, these economic details reinforce the cups’ association with the men’s bodies by recalling the financial incentive the duke offered to Amis and Amiloun’s parents in exchange for their sons; the duke’s “purchase,” like Amiloun’s purchase of the cups, marks the forging of an adoptive relationship which will take precedence over biological ones.

The association of the golden cup with the human body was not a new one at the time of Amis and Amiloun’s composition; the imagery was familiar not only from the rite of consecration (“hic est enim calix sanguinis mei”), but also from a similar appearance in Ovid’s tale of Narcissus. Ovid’s writing was popular throughout the Middle Ages, and
this first-century poem, found in his *Metamorphoses*, was perhaps among his best-known and most highly-influential works. The myth of Narcissus ends with his death, which itself is presented not as an ending but as a transformation: “iamque rogum quassasque faces feretrumque parabant: / nusquam corpus erat; croceum pro corpore florem / inveniunt foliis medium cingentibus albis” (III.508-10).\(^{42}\) Clearly, death is transcended, as the body is replaced not by an immortal object such as a chalice, but by the narcissus flower, which will be reborn each spring. Ovid’s *croceum florem* is rendered into a *cup of gold* through A. D. Melville’s translation, but the language is less important here than the actual functioning of the symbol. By reading the narcissus as a flower-cup that stands in for Narcissus’ body (“pro corpore”), these lines provide an analogue for Amis and Amiloun’s golden cups. That these tokens also serve as substitute bodies is confirmed when the cups serve as catalysts for the friends’ reunion, after leprosy has degenerated Amiloun’s body into an unrecognizable state. Pugh suggests that the cups, symbols which can be read as womb imagery, “iconically mark both men with feminine imagery” (113). Unlike Ovid’s poem in which the “golden cup” of the flower replaces the body, resulting in a *lack* of body and the presence of only a beautiful image, and unlike the Old French *chanson* in which the body is transcended through the spiritual associations of the golden

\(^{42}\) See A.D. Melville’s 1986 translation:

> And then the brandished torches, bier and pyre
> Were ready—but no body found anywhere;
> And in its stead they found a flower—behold,
> White petals clustered around a cup of gold! (66)
cup, the disembodiment of the knights in the ME romance is ineffectual. The symbol that stands in for their bodies cannot neutralize the threat of corporeality because it is too clearly associated with what it represents, and bodily presence is always revealed to be imminent.

Finally, there is one more scene which can enrich the comparison of Christian details in these two closely-related versions of the tale. In the *chanson*, Ami and Amile both embark upon a quest to find their counterparts, and both encounter along the way an old pilgrim who is described thus: “He had sought God by land and by sea; there was no place in the world, no place in Christendom, no good church of God, which he had not visited and where he had not disciplined his body and mortified his flesh” (7). Amile speaks to him of his search for Ami, to which the palmer replies, “Don’t be troubled; simply stay on this road” (7). After their parting, the pilgrim meets Ami, whom he mistakes for the man he has just left. Surprised that his directions have been disregarded, the pilgrim urges Ami, “Turn back along this straight road. So help me God...I should really have led you on the way” (8). Though the palmer appears only briefly in *Ami and Amile*, we might wonder about his larger purpose in the *chanson*. Certainly, the pilgrim’s appearance is a sharp contrast to the figures of Ami and Amile—whereas he is an old and weary traveler, they are the image of youthful knights of romances; whereas his flesh has been mortified, Ami and Amile have distinctly noble bodies, and are yet to face any physical repercussions for their own devotions—as knights of Charlemagne, they will
survive their battles unscathed, but as sworn-brothers, Ami will face the ravages of leprosy, and both men will, at the tale’s end, themselves become pilgrims. The old palmer thus acts as a fleshly foil to the young knights of the *chanson*, yet he also foreshadows them; his presence reminds the audience of the body’s transience and points instead to the immortality of the soul. His directing Ami and Amile to the “straight road” contains this spiritual advice, particularly reminiscent of a passage from the Sermon on the Mount —“quam angusta porta et arta via quae ducit ad vitam et pauci sunt qui inveniunt eam” (Matt. 7:14). That the straight road, in this case, leads the men to each other suggests that friendship is an institution which strengthens their personal faith, and aids them, ultimately, on their path towards God. Clearly, the Old French *chanson* conceives of friendship in the tradition praised by Aelred—that is, for its capacity to strengthen both individuals’ spirituality when grounded in Christ. The ME romance, however, seems to laud friendship for its inherent value. As a result of the notable lack of Christian details and the erotic gaze positioned on the body rather than on the “disciplined flesh,” the audience’s attention is drawn away from the question of how friendship might function in one’s spiritual life, and mortal life becomes the primary concern. There are no spiritual guides in the romance who might correspond to the *chanson*’s Pope Ysoret or the traveling pilgrim, though there seems to be little need for anyone to point Amis and Amiloun onto the path to find each other, as this is effected through a psychic connection.

43 “How narrow is the gate, and straight is the way that leadeth to life: and few there are that find it!”
which manifests itself, for example, in Amiloun’s foreboding dream of Amis’ trouble.\textsuperscript{44} In this way, emphasis remains on the masculine body, and the capabilities with which true friendship endows it.

As we continue to analyze the construction of Amis and Amiloun’s bodies and identities, we should turn, at last, to the question of how the courtly world influences the men, their feelings for each other, and the oath that they take. Understanding how the heroes mirror the lords of the court, and how they subsequently mirror each other, will contribute to the overall illumination of the romance’s homoerotic subtext presented in the next chapter. The audience has been subtly introduced to the notion of mirroring through a variety of poetic devices meant to lend credence to Amis and Amiloun’s identical looks and to the intensity of their attachment, such as their conceptions on the same night, and births on the same day; these details, paired with the narrator’s emphasis on the fact that Amis and Amiloun are not twin brothers, nor kin at all, work toward a depiction of the men as distinct mirror reflections of each other, rather than two branches of the same tree, for instance.

Despite the miraculous nature of Amis and Amiloun’s inherent similarities, however, medieval society requires a different mirroring, that of its own established

\textsuperscript{44} Though it seems that Amoraunt later fulfills a similar role, “delivering” the leprous Amiloun to Amis’ court, the text makes it clear that the men’s arrival is merely by chance or fate: “Þan Amoraunt crud sir Amiloun / Þurc mani a cuntre, vp & doun, ... So he com to a cite toun” (1861-62, 1864). Thus, Amoraunt aids Amiloun but does not direct him towards Amis; rather, this is a spontaneous occurrence, a sign of the poem’s natural order.
ideals and ideologies. Their education and training at the court is intended, ostensibly, to
instill masculine qualities in Amis and Amiloun, thereby destroying their youthful
androgyne and passiveness, admired traits though they are. The poet acknowledges this
new life at court as both leisurely and active:

In court frely to fede,
To ride an hunting vnder riis,
Ouer al þe lond þan were þai priis
& worþliest in wede. (135-38)

The imagery is suggestive of masculine aggressiveness; the initial description is of the
boys eating “freely,” which may connote that their food is of a fine quality, that they
engage in their meals without reservation, or that they do so abundantly and with great
appetite (“freely, adv.”). Caroline Walker Bynum’s scholarship enriches this detail:

eating in the European Middle Ages was stereotyped as a male activity and food
preparation as a female one. The sexes were often separated at medieval banquets,
and women were sometimes relegated to watching from the galleries. The history
of Western cooking, as reflected in cookbooks, diaries, and memoirs, suggests that
‘heavy’ food, especially meat, was seen as more appropriate for men and lighter
food for women, in part because meat had, for a thousand years, been seen as an
aggravator of lust. Cookbooks came increasingly to suggest that women…hardly
needed to eat at all. (191)
By depicting Amis and Amiloun eating, then, it is quite probable that the poet’s intent was to reinforce the idea of the masculinity that the boys are growing into through their education at court. Hunting, too, can be seen as a patently male activity, one that, in medieval England “seems to have reinforced masculine identity” (Murray 134-35); like war, it involves violence and bloodshed, but also implies an enjoyment of performing aggression.45 This is not to suggest that Amis and Amiloun become aligned with any evil, but rather, to acknowledge that those medieval duties and activities which incorporated forms of violence virtually always fell into the male domain. As they “learn” manhood, then, we should not be surprised to find traces of this violence inculcated into the identities of Amis and Amiloun, for it should prepare them to undertake the masculine duty of protecting dependents, per Bullough’s definition of medieval manhood discussed earlier.

However, the deeper we delve into this passage, the more problematic it becomes. Foremost, the tone of the passage shifts considerably if we read “frely to fede” as an indication that Amis and Amiloun are actually consuming copious amounts of food. Bynum notes that because of widespread famine in the Middle Ages, “luxuriating in food until food and body were almost synonymous…became in folk literature an image of

45 An alternate possibility which I have not explored in depth is the relation of hunting and sexuality. Barbara Hanawalt’s remarks call to mind the striking hunt scenes of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: “The combination of hunting and male sexuality was a common literary theme. Even the very terms have parallels: the hunter takes a deer as the man takes a woman” (“Men’s Games, King’s Deer: Poaching in Medieval England.” Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies 18 (1988): 175-93, at 190-91. Qtd. in Murray 135). Furthermore, Boswell has proposed that in the twelfth century, “‘hunting’ and terminology related to it figure prominently in poetry by or about gay people” (Christianity 253).
unbridled sensual pleasure” (2). This sensual pleasure, so closely aligned with other bodily pleasures, is one temptation of the courtly world; hence it is unsurprising that gluttony was associated with “self-aggrandizement” (Nicholson 53), a sin that might be seen as an inherent part of patriarchy, if we recall that the duke’s purpose in “fathering” Amis and Amiloun is, of course, to reproduce himself. Despite the qualification of eating as a masculine activity in medieval thought, gluttony was also frequently described as a feminine sin. Such a paradox was arrived at by the logic that “[t]he original glutton was Eve” (Nicholson 53); thus, the female sex—whose very bodies were considered uncontrollable because subject to the pains of menstruation and childbirth—were thought to lack self-control. It would follow that if, like women, Amis and Amiloun fail to control their urges and, thus, their bodies, they would be subject to physical desires, rather than rationale, and to the will of other men, rather than their own. This danger is echoed in the poet’s observance that Amis and Amiloun are “wor[liest] in wede,” which notes not their inner growth or internal values, but rather, attests that they are putting on, like so much finery, the facades of the court. The aesthetic quality which initially made Amis and Amiloun attractive children has not been replaced, only dressed up; the cost the count incurs as compensation for “buying” them from their rightful fathers is embodied in clothing to show the boys’ value. Though their clothing is meant to mirror the courtly world, what it actually reflects is the position of a courtly woman, for this description recalls an earlier line which remarks that Amis and Amiloun’s mothers “worthy were in
wede” (30); it is, in fact, the only thing we are told about the two women. By aligning them with their mothers, and again, with exterior appearances rather than deeds or values, the boys are marked as subservient and feminine, as property that is owned by and exchanged among men.

Finally, in addition to the perilous slippage into femininity, the above passage also suggests the danger of the opposite extreme for courtly men. The poet points, quite unnecessarily, to the setting of the hunt—“vnder riis,” under the trees, a wooded, unsettled area. While eating is one activity that men could engage in together in the safety of the public sphere, hunting is a homosocial activity which takes place in a marginal environment, just outside the bounds of civilization. Together, these lines resound with the court’s potentially corruptive effects—at the extreme, men may grow uncivilized; ample luxury can encourage the loss of self-discipline, and the pleasures of a courtly huntsman may easily become the savagery of a predatory beast. Though it remains unspoken, the risk of sodomy is ever-present in this world of homosocial bonding, which demands displays of aggression and dominance even as it offers temptations of self-indulgence. In the courtly world, appropriate masculinity is a balance between two extremes—an equilibrium which, as the poet shows, could be difficult to achieve and maintain.

Up until this point in the text the praise for Amis and Amiloun has lingered upon their bodies or aesthetic appeal, and their passivity. Interestingly, it is their friendship
which yields the boys’ first autonomous action; we are told, “Nas neuer children loued hem so, / Noiþer in word no in dede” (140-41). This is, at last, an association with deeds, but it is used to depict their love rather than valor or prowess. Furthermore, it intimates that this love is manifested physically, though the poet disarms this sense by consistently referring to Amis and Amiloun as “childer,” with the appendage “child” preceding their names. Although the innocence usually associated with the idea of youth cannot entirely preclude the potential for eroticaism within the boys’ relationship, it does renegotiate those traces of sexuality as a form of “play,” stemming from curiosity, rather than as mature and conscious acts, stemming from explicit sexual desire. In any case, the poet’s consistent singling out of the boys’ love from all other youthful loves indicates that theirs is highly unusual.

It is little wonder that Amis and Amiloun have come to form this friendship. Though their identical births and appearances have to some extent prefigured their bond, we can also locate its development in their courtly education. From their arrival onwards, the boys have been praised by other men, as their passivity and androgyny make them the perfect tabulae rasae for courtly or patriarchal self-replication. The boys are so well-liked by the duke that his desire to have them by his side exceeds even their own families’ claims to them. Their subsequent time at the court is spent learning to imitate the dress, manners, and actions of other men. In effect, they are taught to appreciate male beauty, the company of other men, and the mirror image or Same. The boys’ love for each other,
or for their own mirror reflections, shows that Amis and Amiloun have absorbed the values of the courtly lords as well, for they appreciate the capacity to imitate or reflect.

The next logical step, of course, is to follow the duke’s example and contrive a formal, if not exactly legally binding, relationship which will make them as good as blood-relatives, ensuring their future togetherness.

It appears, then, that Amis and Amiloun’s adaptation of courtly values ensures their love for each other, even if only for the reason of their reflection of the other.

Though I use the terms “mirroring” and “reflecting” here, this word choice is not simply for convenience. The mirror, a symbol which must be briefly introduced, was a central concept in medieval thought, itself reflecting an intrigue with predestination. It was used thematically, as Frederick Goldin notes, “in the writing of nearly every author of the Middle Ages,” representing “both God and man, and also the relation between them. It was an instrument of magical divination. It was a symbol of the Virgin,...a symbol of all the deceitfulness of secular experience... It stood for chastity and vanity, for the Bible and the earth, for mortal reason and divine intelligence” (3-4). As Goldin’s study asserts, this versatile image can be found in medieval writings of all genres; the mirror’s popularity as a metaphor, though, likely originates with the Bible. Scholars have pointed to several passages of scripture as possible influences, particularly in the epistles of Paul to the Corinthians. Goldin notes its appearance in a passage of II Corinthians 3:18—“nos vero omnes revelata facie gloriam Domini speculantes in eandem imaginem transformamur a
claritate in claritatem tamquam a Domini Spiritu.” Likewise, Ritamy Bradley has evoked “videmus nunc per speculum in enigmate tunc autem facie ad faciem nunc cognosco ex parte tunc autem cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum” (1 Cor. 13:12). She suggests, additionally, a passage from the epistle of James: “quia si quis auditor est verbi et non factor hic conparabitur viro consideranti vultum nativitatis suae in speculo consideravit enim se et abiit et statim oblitus est qualis fuerit” (Jas. 1:23-4). Bradley remarks that “the Pauline text refers to enigmatic mirrors, whereas the literary mirrors are clear” (102), but it should be noted, too, that while the Pauline image is suggestive of a mirror which reflects the world in general, the mirror of the latter passage specifically shows an individual man, one who seems to forget himself without an ever-present reminder (or reflection) of who he is. Perhaps we can infer that despite the ambiguity in which the world was thought to be entrenched, knowledge of oneself, at least, was still attainable in the Middle Ages. Goldin acknowledges this potential, but sees it as limited—“there were but two possibilities for the medieval man: to know himself in an image, or to know himself as an image” (48, emphasis added). The characters of Amis and Amiloun are virtually unique in that they can be placed in both of these categories. Because they are incomplete without the other, it can be said that they truly know themselves only in

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46 “But we all, beholding the glory of the Lord with open face, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord.”

47 “We see now through a glass in a dark manner: but then face to face. Now I know in part: but then I shall know even as I am known.”

48 “For if a man be a hearer of the word and not a doer, he shall be compared to a man beholding his own countenance in a glass. For he beheld himself and went his way and presently forgot what manner of man he was.”
the image of their (br)other; but because each man is in turn a reflection of a certain set of values and characteristics, they also know themselves as images. The duality that this allows for ensures that Amis and Amiloun do have clearly defined and even distinct identities, yet just as these have not been formed in a vacuum, nor can they be recognized without the presence of essential components, including each man’s “other half.”

The frequency of medieval mirror imagery, as Goldin explains, is a logical consequence of the Neoplatonic world view during the Middle Ages, in which actual experiences and objects were thought to be shadows or reflections of a true Reality, and existence itself was seen as “a relation between paragon and image, between one Reality and its innumerable reflections” (4). Although Platonic influence on medieval thought could only have been received indirectly, we can recognize a similar function of mirroring in both Amis and Amiloun and the fourth-century Symposium. Just as the reflected nature of the boys’ bodies marks them as somehow destined for each other, Aristophanes’ satiric speech on the nature of love also suggests a physical component to finding one’s other half. He recounts the myth that all humans were originally a rounded whole, but to humble their insolence, Zeus separated the whole into halves, dooming the humans to search for what they have lost. Men who were originally joined to a woman

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49 Paul Spade remarks that the Middle Ages “for all practical purposes had only the first part of the Timaeus…in a translation and commentary by a certain Calcidius,” and he asserts that although Henry Aristippus translated the Phaedo and the Meno in the twelfth century, these were neither widely read nor very influential (“Medieval Philosophy”). Plato’s “presence” was thus channeled into the Middle Ages largely through the Christian Church and its scholars’ interpretations of Platonism.
would be attracted to women, as would women who were originally attached to other women. Aristophanes devotes his greatest energies, however, to speaking of men who were once joined to other men—not only do these men exhibit the strongest homosocial bonds, but they “are the finest boys and striplings, for they have the most manly nature. Some say they are shameless, but falsely: for their behaviour is due not to shamelessness but to daring, manliness, and virility, since they are quick to welcome their like” (143). With this, Aristophanes both refutes the notion that men who are inclined more to homosocial bonds than heterosexual ones are effeminate, and attributes to these bonds a natural and profitable nature. That he focuses on male-male “wholes” suggests that the quest for the other may be a narcissistic one, where love is located solely in the self / reflection of self; furthermore, the quest may frequently be, as scholar Stephen Bruhm has pointed out, a homoerotic one (27). Aristophanes continues, noting that these “manly” boys grow into adult men who

have no natural interest in wiving and getting children, but only do these things under stress of custom; they are quite contented to live together unwedded all their days. A man of this sort is...born to be a lover of boys or the willing mate of a man, eagerly greeting his own kind. Well, when one of them...happens on his own particular half, the two of them are wondrously thrilled with affection and intimacy and love, and are hardly to be induced to leave each other’s side for a

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50 The edition used, part of The Loeb Classical Library, provides the Greek text and a facing-page English translation by W. R. M. Lamb. The quoted text can be found in Greek on page 142.
single moment. These are they who continue together throughout life, though they could not even say what they would have of one another. (143)

This excerpt from Aristophanes’ speech prefigures the friendship between Amis and Amiloun so precisely that only the fact that Plato’s works were not widely available in the Middle Ages prevents the conclusion that their legend is a direct manifestation of the attachment described here. However, as Bruhm observes, Plato has raised male-male affections above carnal love, for though physical union is not forbidden, nor is it “to become the sole purpose for loving outside the control of the will” (27). Plato rejects the view that physical passion alone, or “the mere amorous connexion” (143) could be enough to bind two men together. He points instead to the human soul as the true location or origination of man’s desire for man, but the desires themselves remain ambiguous: “the soul of each is wishing for something else that it cannot express, only divining and darkly hinting what it wishes” (143). Through this lens, we might read Amis and Amiloun’s bodily reflection of each other as a physical manifestation of their souls, an idea that functions in the Platonic tradition and surely would have found approval in the Christian Middle Ages, in which the soul, not the body, was the location of one’s true worth.

Though it interrupts my reading of *Amis and Amiloun* somewhat, this discussion of the medieval *speculum* must be integrated with the romance in order to understand

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51 Greek text can be found on page 142.
fully the importance of its more subtle details. Much of the pertinent information the poet
gives us about the two men is located in their bodies, and though we can make certain
assumptions about them based on these descriptions—for example, that well-formed
physiques indicate strength and prowess, and thus military training and probably nobility
or a special status—most of the information to be gleaned this way is still connected to
the flesh. However, this corporeal focus increases the value of the friends’ twinned
bodies, and demands that we question the theme of identity and identification which runs
throughout the romance. The text distinguishes between what is real and what is imitative
—for example, juxtaposing natural and forged familial relationships, and commingling
trustworthy characters with conniving ones. Most significantly, however, the romance
highlights and turns upon the inability of all its characters to differentiate between Amis
and Amiloun. True to the Platonic view, the text acknowledges the necessity of discerning
the Real from its shadows, and nuances the ability to do so by showing that not all
decisions can be made based on surface reflections. As a brief illustration of this we can
look to the scene of the ordeal, in which Amiloun stands in his friend’s stead to fight the
steward. Medieval ordeals functioned upon the idea of truth, yet the ME romance
suggests that mere humans could find loopholes within the larger scheme of justice. God
is not fooled by the stand-in, as evinced by the divine warning Amiloun receives before
entering battle. Yet the ordeal fails; despite the steward’s wicked intentions, his own oath
—“As wis as he seyd no wrong, / God help him at his nede” (1292-93)—is just as
genuine as Amiloun’s vow that he “neuer kist þat may” (1295). The steward’s death in battle, however, is taken to indicate that his accusations of Amis were false; Amis, in turn, is rewarded for his righteousness. The moral ambiguity of these events encapsulates the romance’s preoccupation with the ability to distinguish the actual from the impostor. The disguised “Real” of *Amis and Amiloun*, however, is not a higher, spiritual plane, but the true, individual identities of two men concealed by the duplicate masks of their bodies. Even though the romance’s stakes surpass the physical body, as in much of ME literature, *Amis and Amiloun* is remarkable for maintaining its emphasis upon the complexity of the individual. As the text guides us through a series of mirror images, it becomes apparent that consciously constructing and defining their identities is of central importance if Amis and Amiloun are to maintain their statuses in the courtly world. Of course, this process does not end with simply achieving an appropriate masculinity; as the next chapter will demonstrate, the struggle to avoid slippage from these categories of cultural normativity could be an equally difficult task.
Chapter Three:

Amis, Amiloun, and the Deconstruction of Normative Masculinity

In the previous chapter, we discussed a process which might be termed “masculinization”—that is, the court’s education of Amis and Amiloun, designed to ensure that they will duplicate the duke and eventually replace him in the cycle of patriarchy, which is necessarily founded upon self-replication. In the following pages, I want to turn from the knights’ reflection of generic masculine identities, and examine a process which is much less evident in the romance. As masculine identities have been built up primarily through associations with the body, we also witness the reversal of this effect through the use of imagery that works to feminize the body, thereby deconstructing the carefully-built facade of masculinity. Of course, associations with the feminine (or with what might be read today as feminine) do not necessarily indicate the presence of homoeroticism between Amis and Amiloun. However, as I will argue, these details are present in only one of the friends at any given moment in the text after their passage into knighthood. Both men are never feminized at the same time; rather, they alternate gender roles, a framework which highlights the essential role gendered hierarchies of power occupied in medieval life, and likewise suggests that even medieval same-sex desire was imagined in heteronormative terms. The oscillation of roles is accomplished through their assigned positions at court, the symbolism which is affiliated with each man, and their
physical and emotional states which, in turn, grant or restrict their power to act. The following analysis of these textual moments will break down the romance’s surface-image of the friends’ perfect similarity, which posits them as two separate wholes, and will reposition them instead as interdependent, a scheme which locates homoeroticism within dynamics imitative of a normative male-female relationship.

Before delving into this imagery, however, I would like to look first at the brotherhood “ceremony” which Amis and Amiloun undertake early in the romance. The boys plight troth at the age of fifteen; although their youth is emphasized even in this passage by the epithet “þe childer” (145), the poet assures his audience that the boys are “war & wiȝt” (145), or alert and brave. In other words, their friendship is not that of the naivety of youth; the boys are aware that they are binding themselves together. They pledge:

While þai miȝt liue & stond

þat boȝe bi day & bi niȝt,
In wele & wo, in wrong & riȝt,
þat þai schuld frely fond
To hold to-gider at eueri nede,
In word, in werk, in wille, in dede,
Where þat þai were in lond,
Fro þat day forward neuer mo
Failen oþer for wele no wo... (147-55)

There is no detail to suggest that this was a planned ceremony; rather, the boys choose to hold it “[o]n a day” (145), the non-specificity of which connotes spontaneity. Though the scene also neglects mention of a priest and witnesses, we cannot assume that the vow is simply child’s play. The oath has warranted much critical discussion as to what is at stake here; Leach warns that it is a mere “remnant” of compagnonage, not to be confused with blood- or wed-brotherhood (lxxi). Perhaps most notable, though, is the language’s resemblance to a marriage ceremony. In his article “Merry Married Brothers,” John C. Ford argues that sworn-brotherhood, as it is depicted in both Amis and Amiloun and Athelston, is an institution parallel to that of marriage. Noticeably absent from his reading is the possibility of same-sex desire; rather, Ford posits friendship as an ideal worthy of the same consecration found in marriage. However, he does observe that “troth-plight” is “a term generally used in reference to a couple’s pledge to marry” (Ford 2003). Indeed, we do see the term used elsewhere in the romance, specifically between Belisaunt and Amis. When the duke’s daughter approaches Amis with a confession of her love for him, she begs, “Pliȝt me þi trewþe þou schalt be trewe / & chaunge me for no newe” (583-84), a request which does seem to imply marriage. Yet one week after “[h]e graunted hir hir wil þo, / & pliȝt hem trewþes boþe to” (667-8), Belisaunt comes to Amis to redeem the pledge, and though the knight is hesitant to “spouse” (746) her, she refuses to be satisfied until “he wan hir maidenhede” (767). The scene reveals that intercourse is the act of
validation for their troth-plight, or marriage, a necessity which is reminiscent of the
twelfth-century writings of Gratian, who stated that physical consummation was crucial
to the validity of marriages. To further strengthen the connection between the two
institutions, Ford provides a fourteenth-century wedding liturgy for comparison:

I .N. take the .N. to myn wedded wyf,
to have and to holde from this day forward,
for better, for wers, for richer, for porere,
for fayrere, for fowlere, in seknes and in helthe,
til deth us departe, yif holy chirche it wil ordeyne:
and therto I plithe the myn trewthe. (5-6)\(^{52}\)

The men swear their fidelity and aid to each other throughout all circumstances; the
similarities, as Ford points out, are obvious even to a modern reader.

While we might gloss over the stated intervals—“While ṭai miȝt liue & stond”
and “boȝe bi day & bi niȝt”—as generalizations or rhetorical cliché, the text demonstrates
that Amis and Amiloun’s friendship actually far exceeds these terms. Indeed, they are
together even in death: “Boȝ on oo day were ṭey dede / And in oo graue were ṭey leide”
(2503-04), a scene to which we will later return. The strength of the oath’s language
suggests that the boys will have obstacles to face in their futures, and possibly even
objections to their friendship; however, perhaps one of the greatest challenges they will

face is their own affection for each other. For if their brotherhood is to be privileged over their marriages, and if it has the power to outlast death, why is the boundary of standing included, especially as it directly precedes the terms of day and night? In a passage permeated by binaries, “stond” suggests its excluded opposite—lying down, which recalls its own “unspeakable” connotations, especially if they occur during the included clause of “nruit,” which is a time when we might otherwise think of them being apart.

Another possibility is to read “stond” as an action verb, implicative of masculine virility and associated with battle prowess as well as a stiffness and erectness of position. The latter reading would allow for erotic undertones throughout the entire oath, so that their purpose—“To hold to-gider at eueri nede”—becomes one which actually necessitates the privacy in which the oath is taken. Both readings, however, hint at the temptation of sexual pleasure which Amis and Amiloun will have to struggle against.

Other critics have taken Ford’s observation further, looking beyond the language of the oath and to the ceremony itself for evidence that what we witness here is actually a marriage ceremony. A male-male marriage is differentiated from sworn-brotherhood in that it parallels traditional marriage and allows for the presence of sexual desire. Perhaps the most controversial argument has come from John Boswell, who, in two groundbreaking books, has put forth a strong case for the existence of same-sex marriages in the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{53} Though as of yet there is no widespread agreement on

\textsuperscript{53} See Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century, 1980, and The Marriage of Likeness: Same-
his theories, Boswell has claimed that several manuscripts contain prayers and guidelines for both heterosexual and same-sex unions, the latter often using familiar language such as the term “brother.” Though he admits that the only discernible connotation we can gather today from this word is one of equality, Boswell asserts that “brother” had both erotic and countererotic premodern meanings (Same-Sex Unions 22-3). Furthermore, he suggests, it is the erotic connotation of “brother” which often prevails because of the frequent use of sibling terminology as an analogy for Christian spouses, as marriages were expected to be chaste (that is, faithful as well as free from all unnecessary sexual indulgences). Even if the union preserved in Amis and Amiloun is a rite of adelphopoia (Greek, “making brothers”) or the corresponding Western ordo ad fratres faciendum (Latin, “rite for making brothers”), we gain little in the understanding of male-male sexuality, for marriages between men could only have been intended as sexually abstentious ones. There is no evidence in the manuscripts Boswell has examined to suggest that enjoined men would not have been subject to the harsh penalties for sodomy. Other rules which governed same-sex unions declared that men sworn together could not already be, nor could they become, married (in the word’s traditional sense), though “divorce” clauses were included (Same-Sex Unions 221).

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54 See also the sibling epithets in the Song of Solomon; for example, “quis mihi det te fratem meum sugentem ubera matris meae ut inveniam te foris et deosceler et iam me nemo despiciat” (Song of Sg. 8:1); Douay-Rheims: “Who shall give thee to me for my brother, sucking the breasts of my mother, that I may find thee without, and kiss thee, and now no man may despise me?”

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Though Boswell’s claim for same-sex marriages is fascinating, and further research in this area may yield exciting discoveries, the question as to whether Amis and Amiloun “marry” is as yet unanswerable; however, nor is it central to a study of same-sex desire within the romance. The ceremony which the boys enact does not follow Boswell’s general guidelines for same-sex unions; foremost, it is informal, and performed privately, without the presiding of a priest. Of course, the various divine interventions of the romance do suggest that their oath has been taken before God, although divine presence at the moment of the oath may only be inferred, as the language of the vow is curiously bereft of any mention of God—which we would expect, at the very least, on a formulaic level. Furthermore, though we are given no additional details as to where the boys are when they swear this oath, the tone of the passage suggests a certain spontaneity; the boys are vowing their mutual dependence and reliance on each other—and only each other—and this exclusivity begins with the oath, not after it. Thus, we can reasonably assume that the oath does not take place in a church. Although other characters (most notably the steward) will later acknowledge the men’s brotherhood, the scene gives no immediate sense as to the approval (or disapproval, for that matter) of the duke or other members of the court; we may assume, then, that there are no witnesses present. Though the troth-plight appears, then, remarkably distinct from the ceremonies of the ecclesiastical sphere, it remains questionable as to whether these formalities would truly be necessary with such divine interest, and divine approval, as meets the boys’ friendship
later. Surely their identical bodies, which have destined them for intertwined lives as well as visitations from angels and a final, miraculous resurrection, grant sufficient credence to their friendship, thereby rendering a church ceremony unnecessary. Finally, this pivotal scene lacks any trace of physical contact, including the rite of hand-joining which was often featured in vassalage oaths and which Boswell lists as a component of same-sex unions. Interestingly, however, we are told that as the oath is taken, “þai held vp her hond” (156)—perhaps mirroring a larger, corporeal intent. Rather than yielding to temptation—that is, enjoining their bodies—the men have only enjoined their lives. Holding up their hands suggests an unspoken aspect of the vow: “upholding” their morality and their masculinity. By refusing to unite their bodies, Amis and Amiloun vow to reject the temptation of physical pleasure; in this sense, their rite of brotherhood does reflect the ideal of chaste Christian marriages.

Despite our ultimate beliefs as to whether a brotherhood oath can truly be taken as a form of medieval same-sex marriage, the ceremony which we witness in Amis and Amiloun certainly recalls, though in a different way, the image of Narcissus discussed earlier. The legend hinges on two characters’ love for each other, yet the catalyst for the friendship is actually the boys’ perfect reflection of each other—the plot structure demands, then, that we also consider the idea of self-love. In Ovid’s narrative of Narcissus, medieval audiences found “the birth of self-consciousness through love” (Goldin 22), though because it “both conflates and separates desiring subjects, desiring
objects, objects and subjects of desire,” post-psychoanalysis readers might see in it “a universalizing equation of sexual object-choice and egoism” (Bruhm 13, 12). Bruhm’s reading of the Narcissus myth is grounded in Freudian psychoanalysis, which “not only posits mirror reflection as the lamentable symptom of homosexuality but provides the mirror for that reflection” (3). He cites Freud’s *On Narcissism*, which explicitly marks homosexuals as narcissists due to an error in their choice of love object—men who desire other men have chosen themselves as models, rather than the proper anaclitic choice, their mothers. By this logic, homosexual men are not actually attracted to other men, only to their own reflections. In an alternative queer reading, Bruhm posits Narcissus as a “figure who rejects,” which has a destabilizing effect upon the “range of binarisms upon which gender in Western culture is founded” (15). We can see these binaries clearly in *Amis and Amiloun*; they permeate its every aspect, including the language of the oath the boys take. In fact, the poem insists upon these binary conditions, even until its very end.

Though *Amis and Amiloun* consistently presents conditions and situations which seem to offer an alternative—the male-male love relationship—that alternative is just as consistently rejected in favor of a “normative” choice. For example, the troth-plight which binds Amis and Amiloun is so exclusive that it eliminates the possibilities for other friendships; thus, when the steward offers his troth, Amis equates an acceptance with a breach of his vow. Despite this privileging, both knights do get married, although the marriages apparently function, as Aristophanes had suggested, only to fulfill a culturally-
mandated facade. The textual refusal to depict male-male intimacy, at least on a level that would exceed the bounds of classical amicitia or spiritual love, leaves its heroes in a non-sexed limbo; having been prohibited from the love which they would choose, the knights cannot form equivalently meaningful heterosexual relationships. For just as the romance presents a tension between true friends and false, so too are Amis and Amiloun’s wives categorized into a binary structure of good and evil—though Belisaunt is first introduced as a temptress, marriage subdues her into passivity; she accepts even her husband’s murder of their children with calm compliance to his wishes. Amiloun’s wife is cast in the opposing, evil role—she berates her husband shrewishly and isolates, mistreats, and eventually rejects him after the onset of his illness. I posit the men’s marriages as markedly less meaningful than their friendship because of the way in which both women are ultimately marginalized; their bodies and statuses as wives are discarded regardless of whether they deserve such treatment. Instead, the romance explores the complex depths of male-male relationships in moments which become evocative of Narcissus’ own refusal. Whether one sees these instances as a collective warning against solipsism or against the tragedy caused by the denial of love, the prophesied result is exactly that which alone can fully enjoin the men—disembodiment.

A precedent for the theme of disembodiment, of course, could also be found in the myth of Narcissus, in which disembodiment is punishment for excessive self-love. Amis and Amiloun are distinguished sufficiently enough, at least, that we cannot deem their
relationship “self-love,” yet certainly, their bond suggests a similar attachment to the reflected image of oneself. Such images are represented frequently, albeit less literally, elsewhere in the literature of courtly love. Knights, for example, are depicted with shields bearing symbolic representations of their persons and tokens displaying their personal devotions; they become well-known primarily in connection with their exploits in the service of a lord or for the love of a lady. Through these details, however, such symbols become intrinsically bound up with the knight’s own identity. Thus, we often see a knight’s love of chivalry, loyalty to feudal hierarchy, or devotion to similar courtly ideals as the very expression of his personality and social status. Not surprisingly, this leads to a struggle to find a middle ground between the actual (a knight’s physical embodiment) and the image (the courtly ideals which the knight adheres to)—that is, the search for one’s true self. This theme appears in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which the tests Gawain faces are not so much of his strength or ingenuity; rather, Gawain’s challenge is to differentiate himself as an individual, rather than as a member of Arthur’s court. The sash which he afterwards wears as a reminder of his trial singles him out from the court, whose other members, though they fashionably don the sash, fail to understand his transformation. In other romances, the knight’s understanding of himself comes only after recognizing his reflection in the image of a lady, who will typically be his match in virtue and devotion. Here, however, the similarity of the lovers is overshadowed by their heteronormativity; furthermore, their sameness usually extends only to their
personification of courtly ideals, rather than their physical bodies. We can read such romances as heeding the warning of the Narcissus legend—though love is predicated upon likeness, the love object must be external to oneself. In Amis and Amiloun, too, this is manifested quite literally—the knights’ love objects are externalizations of their own selves. Just as the Narcissus myth is “as much an attempt to efface or obliterate homoerotic desire as it is the desire to anatomize and decry it” (Bruhm 13), so too does the romance simultaneously exhibit the patriarchal desire to duplicate the self (as evidenced in the actions of the knights, the duke, and the men of the court), the desire to fully possess the “same,” and the impossibility of ever doing so within the established institutions. Still, as it depicts same-sex friendship as a consequence of innate similarities, and the attempt to uphold it as solemnly, and as intimately, as one would uphold a marriage, Amis and Amiloun exposes same-sex desire as natural, innocent, and even divinely approved.

I now want to suggest that Amis and Amiloun negotiates same-sex desire, and in particular, male-male relationships, through a process which positions one of the men in a masculine role, while the other is cast as feminine—positions which are exchanged throughout the romance. I define these categories not by modern standards—although they have remained surprisingly stable—but as according to the generalized expectations and duties of each sex in the Middle Ages. Masculinity entails an active role—physical labor or battle—as well as a notion of power in relation to others—controlling,
possessing, aiding, and protecting wives and children, for example. By contrast, femininity entails a sense of passivity or helplessness, confinement to a more limited sphere, and requiring the aid or protection of a male figure. By rotating these gender roles between Amis and Amiloun, the poet presents an intense male-male bond as functioning with the same dynamics as heterosexual relationships, a framework which exposes the limitations of medieval male-male relationships even as it works toward neutralizing the unspoken threat of sodomy. Recall that before Amis and Amiloun are knighted, they are treated as children but also distinguished as feminine, and therefore subject to the objectifying male gaze which is usually focused on women. The duke, despite his admiration of their androgynous bodies, plays a masculine role as adoptive father-figure; when he knights Amis and Amiloun he appropriates them into his court, and because of patriarchy’s grounding upon heteronormativity, into masculinity as well.

For a brief narrative moment, Amis and Amiloun, now courtly knights, are on equal (masculine) ground. It is again the duke who changes their status; he allots them to different roles in his household, thereby creating, or possibly exposing, the first differentiation between Amis and Amiloun. Amis is made “chef botelere” (188), while “sir Amiloun of hem alle / He made chef steward in halle” (190-91). Though the role of each knight is qualified as “chief,” the differences between these posts is substantial. As chief butler, Amis would be in charge of dispensing all rations of food and drink, even to the cook, and would also be responsible for the store of supplies, as well as the record of

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transactions. Amiloun, as chief steward, would manage most other domestic affairs, including the meeting and escorting of guests; he would also be in charge of the duke’s ushers and groomsmen. Both stations are within the domestic realm, although their power over others maintains an appropriate sense of masculinity. However, we might question the motives the duke has for dividing them, for up until this point they have been indistinguishable even to their biological parents. Does he simply want to ensure that their good qualities are spread evenly among his household, or is there a need to keep them apart? It seems as if his decision is based on each man’s respective qualities—Amis’ task is chosen “[f]or he was hend and fre” (189), or, because of his pleasing looks; thus he continues to be the subject of the male gaze, aligned more with beauty than with deeds. Though we are not told quite as explicitly why Amiloun is made steward, the phrase which states his duty—“To diȝt al his meine” (191)—indicates a capacity for governing and controlling others, and suggests that Amiloun is a better representative of the duke himself than Amis would be. The difference between their stations may be only for convenience, and may represent a relatively minor discrepancy; however, the separate assignments present the first textual differentiation between Amis and Amiloun. As such, the implications of this moment are magnified; the men’s duties at court mark the beginning of a distinction between them which will gradually move from their external conditions into their performance of masculinity. This gender division, once set in motion, will persist throughout the romance until they are again equalized by the power
of death.

Having initially been cast as feminine, Amis continues to occupy this role for a rather lengthy duration of the romance, and is consistently differentiated from Amiloun in this sense. The latter, upon receiving word of his parents’ death, requests leave from the duke so that he may “resaiue his lond” (228). Though this is a logical and necessary step, the separation greatly distresses Amis. Amiloun is grieved as well, and perhaps doubly so, considering the death of his parents; however, it is he who has the forethought to order the golden cups as a parting gift, to reaffirm his troth, and to give Amis a piece of advice—not to trust the steward. This is wise counsel, as well as one that manifests Amiloun’s masculine instincts, for it is an attempt both to shield the weak and to protect his own interests in the relationship’s fidelity. While Amiloun’s outward behavior exhibits the “detached practicality that would have been perceived as a hallmark of masculinity” (Ford, “Contrasting the Identical” 313), Amis is cast as the typical maiden of romance fiction; he is “so ful of care, / For sorwe & wo & sikeing sare, / Al-mest swoned þat fre” (256-58). Although it is not uncommon for the nobler men of medieval romances to faint, Amis’ near-swoon, as it is juxtaposed with Amiloun’s self-control, highlights his passivity and inaction—two characteristics which are particularly evident in the wake of the duke’s mandate that Amis must stay at court, under his control and within the safety of the domestic sphere. Amiloun, however, must ride off to rescue the lands that are rightfully his—thereby performing masculine activity, earning an individualized identity, and
asserting his place within the cycle of patriarchy by inheriting his biological father’s title. While away from court, Amiloun also freely chooses a wife, while Amis finds himself the target of Belisaunt’s affections. The duke’s daughter attempts to seduce him; when he protests, she mocks his manhood by questioning whether he possesses the virility typically associated with knighthood—“Þou no schust haue ben no kniȝt… Þou schust haue ben a frere!” (619, 621). Belisaunt finally triumphs by threatening to cry rape, promising to assert that “wiȝ michel wrong, / Wiȝ strenȝe Þou hast me todrawe” (633-34). Belisaunt’s threat directly insinuates the corporeal punishment as well as the public shame which he will be subject to for such a grave transgression; perhaps its more perilous threat, however, is of the knowledge which only they two will share. Amis is faced with a deeply personal shame and a crisis of identity—he has hitherto been a passive character, but now passivity will bring upon him charges of an aggressively masculine action. He must perform normative masculine sexuality to avoid simultaneous association with femininity (an inadequate masculinity) and criminality (a hyper-masculinity).

After Belisaunt has forced Amis into bed with her and their love is discovered by the steward’s betrayal, Amis exhibits a sequence of shameful behaviors. From behind a closed door, he pleads with the angry duke; when it is resolved that he should be tried through battle with the steward, he is unable to secure the surety of anyone except two women—Belisaunt and her mother. Amis finds he is too frightened to enter into battle,
knowing that he will be swearing falsely. He can find no other solution but to appeal to
Amiloun, and so Amis steals away from court, journeying until, exhausted, he falls asleep
in the forest. His situation would be hopeless; luckily, Amiloun is already skilled in the
art of rescue. Asleep in his home nearby, Amiloun has a prophetic dream in which his
friend is attacked by a bear, highlighting Amis’ dependence and passivity. Amiloun
realizes “[o]f blis [Amis] is ful bare” (1029). Perhaps it is only the animal from his dream
which impels Amiloun to use the word “bare,” but it is an appropriate choice, conveying
desolation but also the possibility that Amis may be defenseless, nude, or unarmed.
Alternately, Edward E. Foster has glossed this term as “barren,” which can be suggestive
of an empty womb or of castration, images which convey femininity. Because he has also
seen Amis “alon” (1018) in his dream, Amiloun recognizes that the source of his friend’s
trouble is his own absence, and decides he must go to him. He thus continues to conform
to the masculine role, intending to “fill” Amis’ feminine void.

Amiloun’s solution to this dilemma is to exchange places with Amis. Both the
steward and Amiloun will swear truthfully; the ordeal is then relegated from the sphere of
infallible divine justice to a battle of skill, in which Amiloun’s demonstrated prowess
virtually guarantees his victory. Indeed, when he rides back to Amis a fortnight later, he is
able to triumphantly relay the duke’s proclamation: “Y graunt þe ful ȝare....Mi lond & mi
douhter dere, / To hald for euer mare” (1386, 1391-92). Amis’ status has been “rescued”;
he will no longer be mocked and despised as the passive, fearful knight who hid behind a
door, pleading for his life. His new title brings power, wealth, and land, as well as the respect of other noblemen. Furthermore, because Amis has won Belisaunt as wife, or as the duke puts it, he has “bouȝt hir ful dere... / Wiȝ grimli woundes sare” (1388-89), Amis is relocated within normative patriarchy, and the memory of his earlier seduction by the aggressive girl is textually replaced. Effectively, Amiloun has restored Amis to masculinity, at least in appearances.

Amis himself may be said to have had a hand in this process, if we consider his faithful refusal to sleep with Amiloun’s wife. Instead, Amis “his swerd out braid / & layd bitvix hem tvo” (1163-64). The sword embodies the fluid nature of Amis’ positioning on the continuum of “gender.” Pugh reads the sword as “a self-imposed metaphoric castration” (113); Sarah Kay, in a study of the Old French text, suggests a less extreme reading, wherein the sword functions as an “emblem of chastity” (137). At the same time, however, Kay points out the sword’s “phallic significance,” evocative of both the male organ, and of the institution of knighthood—it is, she writes, an “obvious reference to combat and knighthood; to the world, that is, of the male companions whose relationship is so clearly perceived by [Amiloun’s wife] as a rival to that between herself and her husband” (137). The sword is a suggestive link to male sexuality, even in the cases of non-normative or absent sexualities. Amis’ placing of it between himself and the lady posits him as masculine, for it is an honoring of the patriarchal system. However, his effort towards masculinity is ineffectual, for the act simultaneously feminizes him,
marking him as (temporarily) asexual in the eyes of Amiloun’s wife and revealing his greater deference for homosocial bonds than for heterosexual desires.

The bodily exchange between the men comes at a much higher cost for Amiloun, who experiences physical punishment for his trespass. Before the battle, he was warned by “a voice fram heuen” (1250) that if he fights, divine vengeance will be taken: “So foule a wreche þou schalt be, / Wiþ sorwe & care & pouerte” (1265-66). As Amis rises in the years that follow—winning renown, inheriting the duke’s title, and begetting two sons—Amiloun is cast down as predicted. Scourged by leprosy, Amiloun is further devastated at his abandonment by his friends and kin, though his wife’s treatment of him is undoubtedly worst of all. She chides him for bringing the disease upon his own head, expels him from his chamber, and forces him to “eten at þe tables ende” (1582), thereby stripping him of his status and isolating him from male camaraderie. When Amiloun, in his offensive physical state, fails to die after six months, his wife further relegates him to a hut, though within a year he is denied all nourishment as well. Having fallen under full control of his shrewish wife and receiving sore mistreatment from her, Amiloun is now feminized by his fall from his position of patriarchal power and his subsequent helplessness. His status, once central, becomes increasingly marginalized, both literally and figuratively, as he is refused the companionship of his wife, his household, and finally, his entire court. Amiloun’s social interactions undergo a complete reversal—his authority disappears, and he is forced to become a beggar, a role that underscores his new
The ME romance has lingered extensively upon the subject of the knights’ beautiful bodies, making the destruction of Amiloun’s flesh seem particularly tragic. Since his knighthood, Amiloun’s prowess has been his greatest attribute, ensuring that we perceive his worth as located within his physical strength. This is now replaced by the dependence and helplessness which previously characterized Amis. Femininity can be read within this romance as a phenomenon which, like a demon or a disease, infects men, plaguing at once their bodies and spirits. We have seen Amis improve from this condition; although his masculinity is still ambiguous, his confident appropriation of the role Amiloun has procured for him suggests the possibility of a full “recovery.” For Amiloun, though, it is clear that leprosy is his primary obstacle to wholeness and proper masculinity. Though it does not inhibit the generosity of the townspeople, who are “ful fre to fond / & brouȝt hem anouȝ to hond / Of al kines þing” (1708-10), leprosy had numerous associations with sin in the Middle Ages. A disease thought in the eleventh and twelfth centuries to reflect “God’s recompense for blasphemous and cruel acts” (Allen 33), leprosy was also associated with pride, envy, anger, and, most frequently, usurpation, because of its place in scripture.55 Peter Lewis Allen has found that twelfth-century

55 Leprosy affects Miriam in Num. 12 after she “attempts to usurp two social positions” (Grigsby 47), that of a man, and a priest; the passage also connects the disease to envy and pride. For further evidence of this connection, as well as that of anger, Grigsby cites 2 Kings 5, in which Captain Naaman is afflicted with leprosy and is cured through Elisha. Grigsby and Allen also point to 2 Chron. 26, in which King Uzziah is struck with leprosy after attempting to burn incense in a temple—a task appointed to consecrated priests. Leprosy is the punishment for his subsequent anger, but might also be linked to his attempt to usurp the priest’s role.
medical writings connected leprosy to sexually transmitted diseases, which may account for its further association with the sin of lust. Because of their understanding that leprosy was only “divinely sent” (Grigsby 89) and “incurable unless God himself should take pity on the sufferer” (Kratins 352), medieval people saw leprosy as an explicit identifier of “those that threaten the stability of society” (Grigsby 89). Despite leprosy’s association with sin, however, Ojars Kratins remarks that the disease “in the lives of saintly persons…was seen as a blessing,” since “ministering to the most wretched amounted to ministering to Christ himself” (352). Of course, the fleshly body’s centrality to the plot of Amis and Amiloun prevents any such reading here; instead, there is a sense of urgency about restoring the body back to wholeness. Leprosy appears explicitly as a punishment, a curse from which Amis labors to free his friend. If we are to categorize Amiloun’s own sin, or analyze the threat he may pose to the community, his violation seems most closely aligned with that of usurpation, for although Amis agreed to the exchange, Amiloun transgressed the very foundation of the ordeal, “the basic concept of the act of truth” (Hexter 27, emphasis added), by fighting in his friend’s stead. The infliction of this punishment reveals an intriguing flaw in Amis and Amiloun’s brotherhood—if the men were truly made “one flesh” by their vow, they would be interchangeable, and thus their physical exchange before battle would not have warranted any punishment. Instead, Amiloun’s leprosy is an intimation of the possibility that this friendship is not irreproachable, and that the knights’ bond is a violation of the community’s sense of
morality. In choosing to ignore the divine warning, Amiloun has positioned his will as diametrically opposed to God’s; the consequence of his transgression is the decay of that which makes his relationship with Amis so threatening—his masculinity and his corporeality.

Before Amiloun can re-gain his masculinity, he becomes even further feminized through his association with his young nephew, Oweines. As Amiloun’s only loyal companion, the boy serves his uncle while he is allowed to remain in the hut, and then becomes a beggar alongside him. The description of Oweines as a “gentil child” (1624), “fair...of blode” (1635), and “[w]el curteys, hend & gode” (1638) is reminiscent of Amiloun’s own childhood. Rather than being identified again with Amis, however, Amiloun is now identified with Oweines, especially after the boy turns twelve and takes on the name “Amoraunt.” This is a derivation of his uncle’s name in the sense that love springs from friendship, as Cicero, for one, has emphasized. The association of names posits Amoraunt as a figurative offspring to Amis and Amiloun—their friendship gives birth to love. That the handsome youth does represent the forthcoming generation is explicated when Amiloun later endows him as his heir. For Amiloun, Amoraunt’s presence is akin to having, as once the duke had, a young duplication of himself. However, Amiloun is not yet re-masculinized, for it is evident that the townspeople find something inappropriate in Amoraunt’s attachment to his uncle: “Al þat þer was gan him pray / To com fro þat lazer oway” (1648-49). We might attribute this unease to Amiloun’s
leprosy, but it may also represent an anxiety about the intimacy of their relationship, particularly so because of young Amoraunt’s beauty. Their relationship, which strangers readily assume to be that of father and son, never advances to a troth-plight; nor is there ever a mention of friendship between them. The poet might simply have deemed it unnecessary to grant friendship to two blood-relatives, yet this lack highlights a strain of what can only be sexual tension between Amiloun and Amoraunt. Most notably, the language which depicts their journey functions toward a homoerotic reading. When “[þ]at winter com so hard & strong” (1840), the landscape provides an opportunity for unnatural proximity between the men:

    So depe was þat cuntray;
    þe way was so depe & slider,
    Oft times boþe to-gider
    þai fel doun in þe clay. (1842-45)

Having been described as “hard and strong,” the winter itself is evocative of the masculine body; with the suggestive imagery of the deep, slippery land, this scene becomes cloaked more with eroticism than with pathos. If we interpret the poet’s description of the “cuntray” as the employment of vaginal or womb imagery, the impression of the two men in such a compromising position might be excused. However, it is difficult to overlook the poet’s figuration of them in the beginning of this same stanza: “Þus Amoraunt, wiþ-outen wrong, / Bar his lord about so long” (1837-38). This is
not the first, nor will it be the last mention of their mode of travel—in the previous stanza Amoraunt, having sold their single ass for five shillings, is described as “strong & bold” (1828), and thus, naturally, he supports his uncle: “at his rigge he diȝt him ȝare / & bare him out of þat cite” (1832-33). The poet stresses the verb “to bear”—noting again that Amoraunt “he him bare” (1835), and “[s]erued his lord boȝe niȝt & day / & at his rigge him bare” (1850-51). Sheila Delany offers a homoerotic reading of this scene which feminizes Amiloun—“as a submerged but grammatically correct sexual pun, the phrase could read: at his (Amiloun’s) back he (Amoraunt) did / serviced him (Amiloun)” (69). Another way to understand the passage, however, is to see Amoraunt’s feelings for his uncle as a type of maternal love—he bears the leper; when he can no longer carry him, he pushes him forth (for the men obtain a push-cart at this point), and finally, he delivers him to Amis, where Amiloun’s life is truly renewed. Amoraunt serves as a third-term in a triangular relationship between Amis and Amiloun, but his role is short-lived; he reappears twice towards the tale’s end, but is then called “Child Oweys” (2428, 2489). Nevertheless, Amoraunt’s place in the romance is more than a mere convenience; rather, just as his disappearance emphasizes the exclusiveness of Amis and Amiloun’s bond, his loyalty to Amiloun emphasizes the rich complexity of male-male relations. That their relationship seems to oscillate between an erotic one and a father/son or mother/child bond reminds us of the instability inherent in homosocial interactions. Amiloun’s desperation evinces a void which cannot be filled by a woman, and Amoraunt’s apparent
ability to fill this void is only temporary. When Amis was previously associated with barrenness, Amiloun acted to “fill” that void; now that Amiloun fills a different “womb” (Amoraunt’s), it is evident that a transformation is about to take place within their gender roles yet again.

Even more so than the previous events of the romance, the next shift in Amis’ and Amiloun’s roles is subtle and shrouded in ambiguity. In his feminized state of weakness and impotence, Amiloun exhibits the need for his own masculinity to be rescued, which entails a restoration of his diseased body. The cure for his leprosy is told to him, and to Amis, by an angel who appears in their dreams, announcing that Amis must “slen his children tvay, / & alien his broþer wiþ þe blode” (2205-06). Though it causes Amis great distress, he obeys the heavenly messenger which Amiloun once defied. Amis performs the requested sacrifice—a duty he is able to perform in the capacity of his masculinity, for, as Peggy McCracken has observed in her study of infanticide in medieval narratives, “a father may kill his child in the service of some higher good or purpose. ...when a mother kills her child, the infanticide is always a murder. ... Mother’s murders are located in the realm of the domestic, not the divine” (56). Thus, as Amis, in obedience to the Lord, takes up his knife to slay his sons, he enacts an alignment with the biblical patriarch Abraham, and with patriarchy in general. Familial engendering, as well as familial control, are the patriarch’s duties, and sacrifice of the sons falls within this realm of authority. In the Old French *chanson*, this is recognized even by the young boys, who
acknowledge, “do with us as you will; you gave us life, and we are your flesh” (154). These last words are left out of the ME—perhaps so that their pathos will not incite sympathy for any bond other than that between Amis and Amiloun—yet the inclusion of the angel ensures that Amis’ authority to sacrifice the boys is still recognized. Indeed, Amis’ position as patriarch is emphasized at least enough to overshadow his next task, according to the angel’s orders—the tender bathing of Amiloun, as he anoints his friend’s body with the blood. This scene is not explicitly described in the text, nor do we need to linger on it here, for, as we have discussed, Amiloun’s leprosy renders his body feminine, and thus removes the threat of sodomy from a potentially erotic act. However, the gaze on the male body would now seem justified, as the subsequent restoration of Amiloun’s body is described exuberantly—he is “hool & fere,” “strong of powere,” and “as feire a man / As euer he was ȝet or þan” (2425, 2426, 2410-11).

As has been mentioned, another miracle occurs at this point in the text. Amis’ slain children are found “[w]ith-out wemme and wound” (2419), a miracle which conveniently eases the moral tension of Amiloun’s own restoration. This moment also does much to further complicate a categorization of male-male relations. That Amiloun is healed by Amis’ own blood (in the form of the blood of his children) suggests that we might now consider Amiloun the third son of Amis, though the only one to be generated without the “interference” of a woman. However, the marvelous revival of the young boys then posits Amiloun as their third parent, for his restoration brings about theirs.

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Amis and Amiloun become further entangled in familial relationships, but their queer parentage of Amis’ sons is presented as a more natural and enduring bond than even their brotherhood allowed for. Divine intervention dispenses with the need for formalities, oaths, and tokens; it further authorizes the men to spend their lives together, united in a bond which excludes the need or desire for women, yet which evidently can still be procreative. Amis and Amiloun now form a perfect whole, in that each man is a dichotomy of the masculine and feminine; this is the only solution which allows their figurative and quasi-literal parentage to Amis’ sons and to Amoraunt. Finally, their queer parentage also allows both men at once to be associated not with symbols or imagery, but with a deed—that of bringing forth offspring.

Glorious as the outcome has been for all parties involved, this is also the textual moment when the men’s friendship becomes dangerous. Both men are fully masculine, and have demonstrated their willingness to sacrifice anything for each other—whether it be God’s beneficence, self, or family; clearly, something must be done to counter the looming threat of homoeroticism. The romance negotiates the situation with an ending which glosses over the rest of the friends’ lives, giving no indication of how long this duration may be. Still, it allows the men to reap the reward of each other’s companionship: “In mucho ioy with-out stryf / To-geder ladde þey her lyf, / Tel god after hem dide sende” (2494-96). Having arrived at where this thesis began, let us re-examine the final lines, which offer what may be a subversion of consummation:
Boþ on oo day were þey dede
And in oo graue were þey leide,
Þe knyȝtes boþ twoo;
And for her trewþ and her godhede
Þe blisse of heuyn þey haue to mede,
Þat lestþ euer moo. (2503-08)

As the troth-plight has been scholars’ primary focus in the Amis and Amiloun tale, discussion on this last scene has been somewhat neglected. The shared death was denied to David and Jonathan, leaving David to desire that “mors nos iungeret / magis quam disiungeret” (V.91-92), yet it is granted to Amis and Amiloun.\footnote{“death, which separates, may bind us inseparably” (Weinrich and Marshall 477-78).} Though Tison Pugh will not go so far as to argue for the presence of homosexuality within the text, he admits that the ending seems to be an attempt to “circumscribe...queer brotherhood” (116). Thus, in the end, “normative sexuality returns with a vengeance,” as the “image of the two men in their celibate graves effectively returns them to the realm of masculine normativity” (Pugh 103, 18). While I agree that the text has established a need for resolution which this final scene makes a show of moving toward, I would argue that the image of Amis and Amiloun in one grave is the one perhaps most fraught with queerness. The celibacy inherent in death cannot retrospectively revise the moments of queerness which precede it, and therefore, their burial instead solidifies those moments, leaving a concrete
reminder of the men’s intimacy, a testament which will continually speak for the queerness which has been silenced. The coffin serves as their marriage bed, suggesting that only in death is it safe for the men to lie together. However, the shared grave also illustrates that the friendship of Amis and Amiloun cannot be categorized as an example of Jaeger’s ennobling love—“a love that overcomes the reliance on the body” (117)—for it signals a desire for physical proximity, even in death, when the physical body should matter least, especially by the standards of medieval theology, in which the condition of the soul is the primary concern.
Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have laid out groundwork to show the complex and nuanced relationships between medieval men, with the intent of closely analyzing the friendship between Amis and Amiloun. In Chapter One, I laid out the contextual and background information which enhances a reading of the romance. The classical, traditional, and biblical perceptions of friendship discussed there reveal a multitude of open and ambivalent spaces upon a continuum of medieval male relationships. In order to show that in transgressions of these normative boundaries there was much more at stake than simply one’s character, Chapter One also provided a brief overview of the place of sodomy in medieval thought. Chapter Two attempted to explore the implications of this groundwork by examining the prominent role of the physical body in the Middle English Amis and Amiloun. In this reading, the poem’s subtle privileging of familial attachments over spiritual ones, its select use of Christian detail, and the poetic gaze on the male body function as rhetorical techniques which expose factors of influence in Amis and Amiloun’s construction of identities. This painstaking process of self-structure is all too easily undone, as Chapter Three labors to demonstrate. In this final section, I have explored the men’s rotating conformity to normative masculine and feminine roles. This strategy allowed for the reading of Amis and Amiloun’s intense attachment to each other as a manifestation of deep-seated emotions, rather than as standard behavior within sworn-brotherhood or as adherence to the social ideal of perfect friendship.
Robert Stretter has observed that by the middle of the Renaissance, “the ideal friendship tale was a dying genre” (249). Readers’ preferences were more inclined to stories of love-rivalries, such as is found in Chaucer’s “Knight’s Tale,” a progression which, as Stretter claims, “points to the limitations of idealized human relationships such as male friendship as a subject for interesting poetry” (249). Yet as recent theory on premodern queerness within *Amis and Amiloun* suggests, the romance today retains its worth and intrigue at least as much as those tales which foreground love rivalries. The Middle English poet’s focus on corporeality, no doubt intended to cloak the men’s relationship in ambiguity without explicitly representing a sinful union, allows for a surprisingly relevant reading of the romance. Highlighting moments of intense passion that we now recognize by the term homoeroticism, the above reading is intended to offer a glimpse into the complexity of medieval male-male relations. As the subtle nuances between Amis and Amiloun reveal, homosocial interactions were characterized by a rich depth and a breadth of emotion that may match or surpass that of many male-female relationships, even in the most passionate works of the Middle Ages. Even without the element of adultery commonly found in medieval romance, the depiction of a love between two men is intensified by the coinciding threat of discovery, the perils of entering into sin, and the desperate need to remain together. Perhaps we may say, too, that the stakes are higher in *Amis and Amiloun* than in heteronormative romances—beyond the couple’s own lives and happiness, the men risk even the cycle of patriarchy, to which
they are both subject and, as knights, sworn to uphold.

It has been my intent throughout the researching, structuring, and writing of this thesis to craft an exploration of *Amis and Amiloun* that is at once fully contextualized and yet relevant to modern issues of sex and gender. As Dinshaw has proposed, “this kind of queer history can be usable history—usable to...lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, queers forming selves and communities; to medievalists seeking to broaden the narratives of the field; to cultural theorists in search of new times” (22). Although this thesis has not been so all-encompassing as this statement suggests, I believe that it functions towards the same end. Uncovering neglected histories, even as they are manifested through literary texts, is a delicate task, but one that exposes the inadequacy of narrowly defined categories of identity, and one, as well, which helps to form and to strengthen historical, cross-temporal, and modern communities.

Finally, although it has not been my aim in undertaking this study, queer readings of *Amis and Amiloun* suggest the need for a restructuring of the way in which we categorize medieval literature. While scholars have long attempted to fit this text into an impermeable genre such as romance or hagiography, *Amis and Amiloun* fits within several traditional categories, yet simultaneously resists them. Indeed, the Middle English romance fits best, perhaps, within a cross-temporal genre of male-centric literature, focusing directly on the relationships between men, sidelining both heteronormative relationships and circumstantial contexts such as battle. Close analysis of this text offers
the modern reader a glimpse of medieval history as a wider and more complex horizon than history may have hitherto represented it. More significantly, however, *Amis and Amiloun* has remained a fertile text, one that can easily be appropriated today as foundation for expanding and accepting notions of identity and interpersonal relationships. In other words, by allowing us to reinterpret and reconstruct the past, *Amis and Amiloun* also allows us to attempt what Foucault sees as a necessary challenge; that is, to “escape...the two ready-made formulas of the pure sexual encounter and the lovers’ fusion of identities” (“Friendship” 137). Applying a queer reading to a work fraught with ambiguity may help us to question “[w]hat relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied, and modulated?” (Foucault, “Friendship” 135). In this way, sexuality does not define the individual; instead, a multiplicity of sexualities may shape society and bring together, rather than divide, its members.
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