

**WHAT MAKES A MAN?  
EXAMINING MASCULINITY IN THE MIDDLE AGES**

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Making sense of masculinity, particularly alternative or “deviant” masculinity, has not been a project of twentieth century authors and theorists. The literature of the Middle Ages, in particular, is mostly made up of stories of heroism, chivalry, strength, and virility—yet, it also presents tales of castration, sodomy, and male chastity. In understanding these references, we should not project modern pre-conceptions and terminology (such as “sexual orientation”) onto medieval society. Rather, the texts themselves provide insight into how masculinity was understood in the Middle Ages. The focus here is on the letters of Abelard and Heloise, Dante’s *Inferno*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In addition, I will begin with a brief discussion of contemporary gender theory, as well as some comments on Chaucer’s “The Pardoner’s Tale” to lay the groundwork for my argument.

In this thesis, my main argument is that in these three texts listed above, masculinity is defined by sexual action—whether it is the inability to act (as with Abelard’s castration), “deviant” group action (as with the sodomites of Dante’s *Inferno*), or sexual inaction (as in the case of the chaste Sir Gawain). In other words, there were multiple masculinities in the Middle Ages closely tied to what men do, could not do, or would not do sexually. While a complete explanation of medieval masculinity is beyond

the scope of this paper, it is apparent that sexual action figures highly as the determining characteristic of maleness. The three types of masculine sexual actions such as homosexuality, chastity, and castration challenge the idea that there was only one way to be masculine in the Middle Ages.

To understand masculinity in the Middle Ages, some contemporary theory is useful as a backdrop. Theorists like Judith Butler, Carol Clover, and Nancy Partner have observed that although sexual identity may be physical, gender identity (which includes a person's behavior and self-conception) is more complicated.

Butler asserts that "sex/gender distinction suggest a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders."<sup>1</sup> In other words, she is suggesting that maleness and femaleness are not defined only by the physical body since gender is culturally constructed. Similarly, Carol Clover takes issue with rigid gender categories based on society. As she asserts, it is hard to mull over "such terms as 'femaleness' and 'masculinity' . . . for they seem to me inadequate to what they mean to describe."<sup>2</sup> Her criticism is that cultural categories don't account for individual differences. For instance, girls are socialized to be passive and boys to be aggressive. In other words, cultural categories generalize gender behavior.

I am suggesting that masculinity in the Middle Ages was based on neither just the body nor cultural ideas that were taught. Rather, males were defined by what they did or could not do. Nancy Partner comes closer to my approach. She argues this issue further by stating that "biological sexual identity (male or female) can stand in very troubled and problematic relation to gender identity and that these aspects require

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 10-30.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum* 68.2 (Apr., 1993): 363-387. p. 370

different kinds of understanding.”<sup>3</sup> According to Partner, “the idea of maleness was a systematic way of discussing core identity, the self, and the centrality of sexual drives and sexual identity to the formation of character in the Middle Ages.”<sup>4</sup> While Partner’s analysis is more general, this paper focuses more specifically on sexual drives and action because I suggest the way maleness was recognized was through sexual acts or inaction.

Before proceeding to the three main texts of this inquiry, Abelard’s letters, Dante’s *Inferno*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it is worth commenting on the often-discussed character of Chaucer’s Pardoner. The Pardoner represents a peculiar form of masculinity. His gender is dubious perhaps because it is not clear what sort of sexual action he engages in. Much scholarship has already focused on the Pardoner’s dubious identity—whether eunuch, hermaphrodite, (or in Chaucer’s terms “gelding” or “mare”).<sup>5</sup> So, I will not focus on the Pardoner, but will comment that his lack of identifiable sexual action seems to have created his gender ambiguity for the medieval audience.

In the letters of Abelard and Heloise, the issue of Abelard’s castration raises questions about the nature of his masculinity. His male organ, or lack of one, and resulting physical ambiguity play the most important role in this text. Abelard reconstitutes his manhood via rhetoric and intellectual discourse to redefine himself as a “whole”man. Abelard’s letters to Heloise helps him to regain his power of masculinity since his penis has been taken away from him through castration. His pen substitutes for the penis he lost to castration. This substitution of pen for penis lets him reconstitute his

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<sup>3</sup> Nancy Partner, “No Sex, No Gender”, *Speculum*, 68.2 (April 1993): 419-443. 421

<sup>4</sup> Partner 421.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, Edited by V.A. Kolve and Glending Olson, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989) 20. All citations are taken from Norton edition unless noted.

masculinity by providing a tool for action. Specifically, he can pursue his romance through writing with Heloise. If the reader accepts this symbolic exchange, the pen serves as a voice as well, since it is through Abelard's writings that the reader gets a sense of Abelard's characterization and actions. Although Abelard can never regain his body intact, the pen allows for perhaps greater intimate expression by giving him a masculine voice using intellect and rhetoric.

Dante's *Inferno* defines medieval masculinity in terms of its perversion through sexual action. The sodomites dwell in hell not so much because of "who they are" in the modern sense, but because of "what they have done." Committing the act of sodomy is the sin that becomes the source of their punishment. In the description of their punishment, such actions as running, fleeing, turning, and yelling are central. Their hell is one of movement and chaos. Like the glutton who is punished by overindulgence, the sodomites are punished by perpetual action, restless contact with each other, and the inability to separate themselves from partners in sin.

Sir Gawain presents the Arthurian ideal of masculinity. It is one which favors the typical masculine actions of bravery, but is primarily concerned with chastity and chivalry. The implication is that the Arthurian male is not defined by proving his virility, but by proving his control over sexual action.

There were alternative types of males in the Middle Ages that can be defined by their sexual actions. I explore letters from Abelard and Heloise, Dante's *Inferno*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to show examples of this argument. After examining selected medieval works, it is clear that the multiple masculinities are united in their importance of sexual action whether it is compensation for masculinity through intellect

with Abelard, sexuality into perverse sexual action of Dante's Sodomites, and a non-action like chastity with Sir Gawain.

## CHAPTER 2

### PENIS AND PENANCE: ABELARD'S PEN AS COMPENSATION

One of the most enduring and troublesome questions that confronted the medieval clergy was how to maintain chastity in the face of constant temptation. In particular, after the suppression of clerical marriage in the eleventh century and the extension of celibacy to the secular clergy, the question of how clerics were supposed to restrain their sexual desire and also be in the company of women, both in daily social interaction and as pastors and ministers became urgent in the twelfth century.<sup>1</sup> This was in part a result of the development of a bustling urban culture that embraced developing schools and eventually monasteries and lured more and more clerics from the monasteries into the world and contact with laymen and women. Furthermore, there was a gradual development and extension of sacramental confession, so priests frequently found themselves ministering to female parishioners.<sup>2</sup>

Discussion of clerical chastity emanated from the monastic environment, which was theoretically free from women. Priests and scholars living in the world were tempted by women and faced with a strict values. "The problem of clerical chastity and contact with women had been recognized by the church very early on. Certainly, holy men were

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<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Murray, "Mystical Castration: Some Reflections on Peter Abelard, Hugh of Lincoln and Sexual Control," *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West* (New York: Garland, 1999) 73.

<sup>2</sup> Murray 73.

needed, even encouraged, to teach women. With Origen, who mutilated himself in order that he might teach Christian doctrine to both men and women without eliciting scandal, this metaphor came to refer both to the symbolic and the actual abandonment of the body and to the rejection of lust and sexual desire.”<sup>3</sup>

It is not surprising, then, to find that Peter Abelard, perhaps the most famous castratus in all of western history, the great twelfth-century teacher of women, and himself the cause of great scandal, trying to place himself in the company of Origen. Indeed, while Abelard lamented the cruelty done to him, he also viewed his castration as a form of liberation, similar to that of Origen, but without the associated guilt, since he was an unwilling victim.

As explained in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Fulbert had Abelard castrated because Abelard was having a sexual relationship with his young niece, Heloise. Abelard recounts his shameful castration by Fulbert in his *Historia calamitatum* by stating, “Wild with indignation, they plotted against me, and one night as I slept peacefully in an inner room in my lodgings, they bribed one of my servants to admit them and there took cruel vengeance on me of such appalling barbarity as to shock the whole world; they cut off the parts of my body whereby I had committed the wrong of which they complained.”<sup>4</sup> In this section of his *Historia calamitatum*, the readers learn about Abelard’s shame and humiliation for giving into the pleasures of flesh with Heloise. Abelard explains that they removed the part of his body that did the wrongdoing.

Abelard raised questions about the ability of a clerical man to teach women while still controlling his lust and avoiding situations that could lead either to intercourse or to

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<sup>3</sup> Murray 74.

<sup>4</sup> Betty Radice, trans, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (London: Penguin, 1974) 75. All subsequent citations are taken from the Radice translation.

public shame and scandal. While Abelard celebrated his own virility, as soon as his sexual activities began to be a source of difficulty, he placed himself in the position not of the virile lover, but rather that of the helpless victim of the desires of the flesh. As Abelard began to reinterpret his sexual identity, he no longer described himself in the language of sexual prowess and virility. Rather Abelard began to identify with Origen, the teacher of women, whose physical deficiencies placed him above reproach, using his rhetoric and letter writing to reconstruct himself as a man again after his painful and shameful castration.

Martin Irvine encourages us to focus on “the significance of Abelard’s representations of self and the body and his strategies for remasculinization...Abelard’s strategies for positioning himself as a masculine subject in a world where castrates were feminized and marked by an irrecoverable lack were thus enacted in a world of already conflicted and conflicting social categories.”<sup>5</sup> What continues to be a topic of discussion in most modern studies of *Abelard and Heloise* is the complicated connections among the sexed human body, the discourses and ideologies that make sex, and the construction of gender identities. In this chapter, I want to unfold some of the repressions and evasions in the Abelard story, both then and now, by focusing on Abelard’s project of remasculating himself with new and imagined objects of wholeness that flow from his pen, from his books, and from the power of discourse in the homosocial world of the teacher, philosopher and monk.

Abelard’s narratives of emasculation and remasculinization participate in a large body of discourse and genres that represent bodily mutilation and stories of castration

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Irvine, “Abelard and (Re)Writing The Male Body: Castration, Identity, and Remasculinization” in Jeffrey Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler eds., *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* (New York: Garland, 1997) 87-105, here 88.

anxieties generally. The cultural meaning of the events narrated in Abelard's letters must be sought in the larger social system of values and identities within which they were produced. Abelard's lack of a penis is not only a sign of emasculation but also a sign of a deeper deficiency or reassurance of virtue. Abelard asserts in Letter 4 to Heloise, "You know the depths of shame to which my unbridled lust had consigned our bodies, until no reverence for decency or for God even during the days of Our Lord's Passion, or the greater sacraments could keep me from wallowing in this mire."<sup>6</sup> Abelard is writing to Heloise that he is ashamed about his lust and asks God's mercy so that he can be a virtuous and reputable man again. This notion allows the re-definition of the true performance of masculinity. Abelard is seeking a reconstruction of his manhood. With this in mind, Abelard sought to perform through his books, a claim to this inner virtue, a fantasized phallus-substitute, a re-identification with symbolic power. A closer reading reveals that for Abelard, the male body is only a shell for the masculine intellect, and the wholeness of one's mind and soul transcend the physical state of the body.

Abelard spent nearly two decades constructing new images of wholeness as a man and substituting his "social" body by using superior intellect and discourse as the ultimate tools of penetration. "My agony is less for the mutilation of my body than for the damage to my reputation, for it is written that 'A good name is more to be desired than great riches.'"<sup>7</sup> Abelard is driven to reinstate his reputation and his manhood through his writings and intellect.

Abelard's writings disclose that he was engaged in a project of remasculinization in response to his public identity as a feminized eunuch. Abelard's denial of his desires is

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<sup>6</sup> Radice 147.

<sup>7</sup> Radice 99

inherent in this text because his inexpressible pain is included within his letter, and his humiliation about being castrated continues to be featured as a repressed issue throughout his work. Abelard attempts to remasculate himself with new imagined objects of wholeness that gives the power to his pen, instead of penis.

In Letter 4 to Heloise, Abelard uses his power of rhetoric to sway her to turn to God and not lust:

It was he who truly loved you, not I. My love, which brought us both to sin, should be called lust, not love. I took my fill of my wretched pleasures in you, and this was the sum total of my love. You say I suffered for you, and perhaps that is true, but it was really through you, and even this, unwillingly; not for love of you but under compulsion, and to bring you not salvation but sorrow. But he suffered truly for your salvation, on your behalf of his own free will, and by his suffering he cures all sickness and removes all suffering.<sup>8</sup>

It is in his power of discourse that Abelard successfully executes this remasculinization through his writing. Abelard searches for this new identity of wholeness through scholarship and writing. Foucault discusses that “each era produces the means simultaneously to represent, manage, and control sexuality in the discourses that circulate around bodies.”<sup>9</sup> Abelard is a prime example for this because his pen is replacing his penis and his writings empower him to be a man again. It is also through his rhetoric in his writing and persuasion to Heloise about his religious state that helps him regain the empowerment he desires. In Letter 2 to Heloise he writes,

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<sup>8</sup> Radice 153

<sup>9</sup> Cohen and Wheeler 88

If, on the other hand, in your humility you think differently, and you feel that you have need of my instruction and writings in matters pertaining to God, write to me what you want, so that I may answer as God permits me. Meanwhile thanks be to God who has filled all your hearts with anxiety for my desperate, unceasing perils, and made you share in my affliction; may divine mercy protect me through the support of your prayers and quickly crush Satan beneath our feet.<sup>10</sup>

Abelard's spiritual state and his writings reveal his desire to empower himself and restore his manhood through God and religious devotion. Abelard is using a persuasive and didactic style of writing to show Heloise that the only salvation that they have is through religious virtue and devotion to God.

However, there is more to this assertion. More clearly, Abelard's narrative attempts to play down the significance of the physical violence and the irrecoverable loss of maleness, repressing the full psychic and social trauma. Abelard's bodily manhood was no longer intact, but his psychic manhood, his perception of his own essentialized gender status, was never in danger, so he claims. Even though Abelard is repenting for his shameful actions with Heloise, some people may suppose that Abelard possibly erases the impact of the castration on his masculinity by embracing it, for he not only recognizes and accepts, but also celebrates his bodily sin and its just punishment. However, specifically for Abelard, he thus represses the importance of the loss of his physical manliness. Furthermore, he never entertains the notion that he is in any way culpable in his public, professional roles as a cleric or an intellectual.

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<sup>10</sup> Radice 119.

Abelard compresses his castration narrative within a larger discourse, that of the wronged intellectual genius, and he pre-emptively identifies manliness with intellectual prowess. Abelard's commentary is a narrative of moral and spiritual development using this narrative of castration of his body for powerful rhetorical effects. Abelard stresses the importance of his intellectualism how he was "baited with a taste of philosophy-the practice of the greatest of Christian philosophers, Origen"<sup>11</sup> after he was castrated in order to redeem his reputation as a manly man. "The perfect philosopher is thus the castrato, he who, because he is beyond desire, escapes the contingent and illusory world of the senses. All of which changes somewhat Abelard's own relation to the narrative of his misfortunes."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps, Abelard's purpose is to show that philosophy was always "a matter both of knowledge and of morality, and that the moral fortitude of ancient philosophers is manifested in their celibate, communal and self-sufficient way of life."<sup>13</sup> Abelard stresses the inner, spiritual, and mental state. He felt that this is more important than the wholeness of the body.

Abelard's rhetoric is the battleground and dialectic the weapon for himself. The same can be said for Heloise because they both share intellectual and theological sources. As R. Howard Bloch has noted, in their letter writing to each other, Abelard is able to control his lust and sexual desire for Heloise through this scripting.

No one more than Abelard explores the consequences of such a fetishizing of the letter (or the body) to the detriment of its spirit. For desire, pushed beyond the mediatory capacity of signs, leads to the immediacy of

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<sup>11</sup> Radice 78.

<sup>12</sup> R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) 145.

<sup>13</sup> Katharina M. Wilson and Elizabeth M. Makowski, *Wykked Wyves and the Woes of Marriage: Misogamous Literature from Juvenal to Chaucer* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990) 75.

fulfillment; fulfillment leads to castration, castration to philosophy (“a devotion to the study of letters in freedom from the snares of the flesh”), and philosophy, finally, to another kind of book.<sup>14</sup>

Abelard recognizes the bond they have through intellect and religion. Abelard though seeming misogynistic at times throughout *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, is recognizing that Heloise may be at the same level as him professionally. There is an open possibility that Heloise is at the same level of education as a man here in this above passage since Abelard mentions that she is learned in letters. This suggestion hints at the possibility of Abelard respecting Heloise because of her intellect and knowledge of letter writing. Heloise could possibly be deemed as manly since intellectualism was characterized as masculine. So, in a way, their relationship could be deemed as a same-sex issue. Abelard is struggling to remasculate himself, while Heloise masculinates herself via knowledge and intellect. The two are balancing each other in their gender performances through the intellect that they have in common. Heloise becomes more masculine in this process and Abelard is fighting his emasculation as a castratus.

Abelard writes to Heloise and uses his rhetoric and understanding of religious virtue to sway her views on his punishment and their separation. Abelard writes,

See then, how greatly the Lord was concerned for us, as if he were reserving us for some great ends, and was indignant or grieved because our knowledge of letters, the talents which he had entrusted to us, were not being used to glorify his name; or as if he feared for his humble and incontinent servant, because it is written ‘Women make even the wise forsake their faith.’ What a hateful loss and grievous misfortune if you had

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<sup>14</sup> Bloch 141

abandoned yourself to the defilement of carnal pleasures only to bear in suffering a few children for the world, when now you are delivered in exultation of numerous progeny for heaven! Nor would you have been more than a woman, whereas now you rise even above men, and have turned the curse of Eve into the blessing of Mary. God himself has thought fit to raise us up from the contamination of this filth and the pleasures of this mire and draw us to him by force-the same force whereby he chose to strike and convert Paul-and by our example perhaps to deter from our audacity others who are also trained in letters.<sup>15</sup>

Abelard manipulates Heloise through his rhetoric and letter writing in order to convince her that religious devotion and intellect can save their souls. As Katharina Wilson and Elizabeth Makowski have pointed out, “The masterful manipulation of the argumentation does not deny the authenticity and sincerity of the letter; rather, it shows Abelard as a perceptive and creative artist who reshaped his reality with keen literary and dramatic awareness as he wrote his recollection of Heloise’s advice against marriage.”<sup>16</sup> Abelard is creative in his words of wisdom and advice to Heloise. He uses his powerful rhetoric to persuade Heloise into thinking about her penance for her sexuality and tries to change her views on marriage by writing his powerful words down with the power of his pen: his writing.

Abelard reconstitutes his masculinity by performing an act. Abelard uses this performance of letter writing and intellect to recuperate and heal his physical and emotional wound that scars him as a man. Ironically, Abelard recuperates himself fully

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<sup>15</sup> Radice 150

<sup>16</sup> Wilson and Makowski 77

by being severed from his penis. This lack, his penis, the core of male desire, makes Abelard whole. Abelard fulfilled his goal of reconstructing himself as a man who acts like a man, using superior intellect, the power of dialectic, and written discourse as the ultimate tools of masculine power and self-definition. However, when he is castrated, desire itself dies. His lust for Heloise is ended. When he is castrated, his dedication to philosophy and intellectualism increases.

More recent scholars such as Jacqueline Murray have been examining Abelard as a teacher and intellectual. According to Murray, although his castration might be understood to have weakened his claim to a fully masculine identity, a number of scholars have suggested that through his intellectual prowess, and deployment of rhetoric, Abelard was able to overcome the social liabilities, popular ridicule and marginalization that we might expect to have accompanied his very public mutilation. Murray suggests that after Abelard's castration, he began a process of remasculinization that allowed him to retain a fully masculine position in spite of the feminized social position granted to a eunuch. Abelard was able to minimize the impact of his bodily castration by celebrating both his bodily sins with Heloise, that is, his sexual prowess, and his just punishment for this virile masculine behavior.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, by invoking Origen as the greatest Christian philosopher, and thereby linking his castration to his predecessor's genius and integrity, Abelard was able to enhance his own authority.

There is controversy whether Abelard's penis and testicles were both excised, leaving him without genitals and devoid of any means to fulfill sexual desire. The exact nature of Abelard's mutilation does have a significance beyond prurient interest. As

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<sup>17</sup> Murray 76

Abelard mulled over the events of his life, he came to see the hand of God in his mutilation.

They urged me to consider that the talent entrusted to me by God would be required of me with interest; that instead of addressing myself to the rich as before I should devote myself to educating the poor, and recognize that the hand of the Lord had touched me for the express purpose of freeing me from the temptations of the flesh and the distractions of the world so that I could devote myself to learning, and thereby prove myself a true philosopher not of the world but of God.<sup>18</sup>

His evaluation of his own castration evolved from considering it an act of punishment, to one of human vengeance, to a divine punishment, until finally he saw it as an expression of divine grace that elevated him above his own human imperfection. If these stages of understanding are examined it is possible to see how Abelard moved away from a secular value system, that extolled manifestations of virility and sexual prowess, to embrace clerical values that put a premium on celibacy. In such a context, he then came to view his castration as a viable, indeed, even reasonable, solution to the problem of the body and sexual desire. "How just a judgement of God had struck me in the parts of the body with which I had sinned, and how just a reprisal had been taken by the very man I had myself betrayed."<sup>19</sup>

Yet as Abelard described himself after his castration, there was still something of the secular ideology of masculine virility and sexual prowess in his language. He focused on his shame, how humiliated he felt and how his friends lamented his

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<sup>18</sup> Radice 77

<sup>19</sup> Radice 75

mutilation.<sup>20</sup> This secular view is even apparent in Abelard's rationalization that this punishment fit his crime, and in his lament that a eunuch is such an abomination to the "Lord that men made eunuchs by the amputation or mutilation of their members are forbidden to enter a church as if they were stinking and unclean and even animals in that state are rejected for sacrifice."<sup>21</sup>

In his *Historia Calamitatum*, Abelard almost sounded relieved as he lashed out at those who would falsely accuse him, reminding them that "my present condition removes suspicion of evil-doing so completely."<sup>22</sup> He repeatedly invoked the necessity for a solution to his uncontrollable lust. Later in his *Historia Calamitatum*, he characterized his mutilation his wound which was "wholly beneficial and had cut me off from the filth of lust."<sup>23</sup> Abelard portrays himself throughout the affair with Heloise as "half beast, half monk, sinking through sensuality into the filth of carnal sexuality, but rising through philosophy and bodily mutilation to the stature of a spiritual man."<sup>24</sup> For Abelard castration was more than a punishment or an expiation of his sins; it was also a cleansing process. He explained: "Only thus could I become more fit to approach the holy altars, now that no contagion of carnal impurity would ever again call me from them."<sup>25</sup> He even linked castration with salvation because henceforth he would not even be able to defile his body. This rewriting of the meaning of his castration is encapsulated in Abelard's rhetorical question in his *Historia Calamitatum*: "When divine grace cleansed rather than deprived me of those vile members...what else did it do but remove a foul

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<sup>20</sup> Murray 78

<sup>21</sup> Radice 76

<sup>22</sup> Radice 98

<sup>23</sup> Radice 148

<sup>24</sup> Wilson and Makowski 77

<sup>25</sup> Radice 148

imperfection in order to preserve perfect purity?"<sup>26</sup> Thus, for Abelard, castration became a positive act of divine grace that freed him from the sexual demands of his body.<sup>27</sup>

Abelard's ultimate justification for his own castration was an act of aggression against his own body. This aggression was, as perverse as it may sound to modern ears, a celebration of castration. Ultimately, for Abelard, as for his hero Origen, the solution to lust was castration. Origen arranged for a surgeon to effect his release from the body and its sexual demands. While Abelard neither asked for nor wanted to be castrated, nevertheless, he saw this as a legitimate means by which to overcome the sexual desires that he celebrated while embracing secular values and Heloise. He rewrote the meaning of his bodily desires not only by refocusing on his intellect, but also by shifting his allegiance from a secular ideology of masculinity, which celebrated sexual prowess, to an ideology of celibacy, as considered by the Church. As Bloch has written, "Like his own truncated psychic, moral, and philosophical development, the Abelardian circle—from pride in philosophy to philosophy, and from letters to letters—is informed by the principle of closure."<sup>28</sup>

Abelard accepts the castration that had been forced upon him. His very attraction to women in the intellectual or spiritual realm was overshadowed by his beliefs that he should pay penance to God's mercy as he was trying to control his sexual desire for them. "How mercifully did he want me to suffer so much only in that member, the privation of which would also further the salvation of my soul without defiling my body nor preventing any performance of my duties!"<sup>29</sup> For a man who liked women, castration,

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<sup>26</sup> Radice 148

<sup>27</sup> Murray 79

<sup>28</sup> Bloch 142

<sup>29</sup> Radice 148

mystical or actual, was one means by which soul and body could remain pristine or non-sexual for Abelard in the end.

So, Abelard's castration creates a new form of masculinity in medieval literature that is pristine by rejecting sexuality. Thus, in medieval literature, the character of Abelard sets up for discussion the question of multiple masculinities. Abelard challenges the norm for masculinity with his writings and intellect. Through Abelard's writings and intellect, he was able to reconstruct a new masculine identity, which he lacked physically.

## CHAPTER 3

### RAISING HELL: SEXUAL SIN AND DANTE'S SODOMITES

This chapter looks at masculinity, particularly alternative or deviant masculinity in the Middle Ages, using Dante's *Inferno* and the sodomites as a prime example. Dante the poet gives us his creation of Hell through his mediated view in the text. Dante defines groups, specifically the Sodomites, through their various actions and the actions of one in particular, Brunetto Latini, recognizably a previous teacher of Dante the pilgrim.

Before closer examination of the text and explication of these issues, it is important to discuss terminology, since we should simply not project modern theoretical constructs and terms onto the Middle Ages. Although it was not labeled as such, homosexual sex was present in the Middle Ages, and there is abundant evidence of religious and secular condemnation of it. The word homosexual is a nineteenth century invention, and it is often suggested that one alternative, sodomy, had too varied a meaning in the Middle Ages to substitute for it. According to Michel Foucault, the nineteenth-century homosexual became a "personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology."<sup>1</sup> In other words, it was not until the

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, Trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: Pantheon, 1978) 43.

nineteenth century that homosexuality became a human identity rather than merely immoral and unnatural acts.

In the Middle Ages, the term sodomite is better understood to mean a person who commits the sin of sodomy, much like a blasphemer was one who blasphemed. Even so, the term was not necessarily literal, but could be a term of general insult, much as the slur “faggot” is today. Indeed, Carolyn Dinshaw’s “Queer Relations” describes the slurs that were coined for homosexuals during the Middle Ages. She states that “sodomites, faggots: everything bad sticks to these names, whether or not same-sex sexual relations are specifically or primarily denoted.”<sup>2</sup> In addition to Dinshaw, John Boswell has thoroughly examined early medieval Christian views of homosexuality in the Middle Ages. In his book, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, Boswell argues that early medieval Christians were actually relatively indifferent to homosexuality. He suggests that theological objections to homosexual acts in the early Middle Ages were somewhat rare and were generally predicated on the idea of the “impurity” of semen and the undesirability of releasing it except under absolute necessity.<sup>3</sup>

Boswell’s argument is primarily focused on the indifference and lack of information on homosexuality. Modern critics have argued Boswell’s stance on homosexuality.<sup>4</sup> Another critic, Jonathan Dollimore, suggests, “in early modern England the sodomite, although not an identity in the modern sense, could and did denote subject positions or types; ‘he’ precisely characterized deviant subject positions as well as denoting the

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<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, “Queer Relations,” *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 16. 7, (1999) 82-85, here 83.

<sup>3</sup> John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1980) 202.

<sup>4</sup> See Allen J. Frantzen, *Before the Closet: Same-Sex Love from Beowulf to Angels in America* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1998) for more argumentation against Boswell’s stance on homosexuality.

behavior of individuals.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, acts could render anyone a sodomite. As we will see in Dante, men’s sexually deviant acts on Earth are the source of their punishment in Hell, much like the glutton was punished for over-consumption. The sodomites in Dante’s *Inferno* are grouped not so much by what we might today call homosexual identity, but rather for their common sinful acts. If one acts or behaves as a gender, then he will be seen in Hell and on Earth as such and his punishment is synonymous with his actions.

Dante’s *Inferno* provides a window onto homosexuality in the Middle Ages. Specifically, this window of homosexuality reveals a landscape in which homosexuality is defined not so much as an innate human characteristic but as an action. Specifically with Dante, he illustrates a group of individuals who have their own identity constructed for them through sexual action. This centrality of action in the *Inferno* is made clear by the recurring motif of action: examples of these group actions are running, gazing, shouting, and rotating.

In Dante’s scheme, the sodomites’ perversion of normal sexual action creates a punishment characterized by relentless turmoil. I would argue that the images used to describe the sodomites in Hell highlight that their masculinity in Hell will be forever defined by restless and painful action. With the exception of Brunetto, the sodomites act only as a nameless, faceless mass. Also, his descriptions of their unified movement and the manner in which they move are also significant because they symbolize the nature of their punishment. They were unnaturally grouped on Earth by their sexual deviancy so Dante groups their actions in Hell in the same way.

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<sup>5</sup> Garrett P.J. Epp, “The Vicious Guise: Effeminacy, Sodomy, and *Mankind*” in Jeffrey Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler, *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* (New York: Garland, 1997) 303-320, here 316.

In this Canto, the Seventh Circle divides the sinners into three groups, the Blasphemers who lie on the ground, the Usurers who are described as crouching, and the Sodomites who wander and never stop. Dante describes the continuous action of the Sodomites:

Supin giacea in terra alcuna gente,  
 alcuna si sedea tutta raccolta,  
 e altra andava continüamente.

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 “some lay face up upon the ground,  
 some sat, their bodies hunched,  
 and others roamed about in constant motion.”<sup>6</sup>

Although they might stop temporarily out of pain or exhaustion, the sodomites are constantly moving. The sodomites' movements are described as swift and continuous. We see this when we notice that Brunetto Latini speeds away to catch up with the other sodomites as stated above. Dante categorizes these Sodomites into groups such as politicians, intellectuals and others by their occupations on Earth. They are ranked as such in Hell as they were on Earth. For example, the Florentine politicians are presented as being among the most admirable sodomites in Hell. Even though they are ranked, Dante classifies each of these men as sinners.

Dante the Pilgrim comes across a group of sodomites and notices that they are grouped in their gaze. He notices that the sodomites squinting to see him by the “knitted brows” imagery in the below passage. The passage mentions the sodomites struggle to

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<sup>6</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Robert and Jean Hollander trans. (New York: Doubleday, 2000) XIV, 22-24. All subsequent citations and accompanied translations are from same edition.

see Dante with an image of an old tailor trying to thread his needle. The sodomites' gaze takes on peculiar significance because, like trying to thread a needle, there is the desperation of study in one's eyes and added frustration. The poet reveals the limited visibility and grouped actions of the sodomites in this image:

che venian lungo l'argine, e ciascuna  
 ci riguardava come suol da sera  
 guardare uno altro sotto nuova luna;  
 e sì ver' noi aguzzavan le ciglia  
 come 'l vecchio sartor fa ne la cruna.(XV.17-21)

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Here we met a troop of souls  
 coming up along the bank, and each  
 gazed at us as men at dusk will sometimes do,  
 eyeing one another under the new moon.  
 They peered at us with knitted brows  
 Like an old tailor at his needle's eye.(XV.17-21)

Dante adds imagery as well as movement in describing these Sodomites. I suggest that the poet may intend to depict these sins by incorporating flames and limited visibility. The Sodomites strain to see the travelers, and there is desperation and frustration in their gaze. The reader is called upon to imagine the squinting eyes of an old tailor threading the eye of a needle. One looks at a needle's eye with a mix of concentration and frustration. The image of threading evokes concentration and frustration with the Sodomites in their gazing. They are grouped again in their gaze of Dante the Pilgrim.

Dante is peering back at them as well. This image leads into the appearance of Dante's old teacher, Brunetto Latini.

Specifically when discussing Dante's association with action and gender, critics like Judith Butler argue, "the performance constitutes the appearance of a 'subject' as its effect . . ." <sup>7</sup> By "performance," Butler means a person's chosen sexual action is an effect of his action or performance. In other words, the behavior and actions of individuals such as the sodomites would define their masculinity. With Dante's system of Hell, if on Earth individuals chose to do these same-sex acts and do not repent, they were condemned to be that part in Hell. Within Dante's hell, each sinner is subjected to a punishment that is synonymous with his or her sin in Dante's system of Hell.

According to Boswell, "homosexuality is thus reduced to a simple form of fornication, the release of seed in an improper way." Boswell lists homosexual acts as one of the sins committed by the Sodomites, along with sloth and gluttony. He insists that Paul's Epistle to the Romans condemns all forms of illegitimate sexuality, regardless of gender: "Whence it follows, as the Apostle says to the Romans, that if any commit uncleanness in any way, whether men with men, women with women, men with women, or all by themselves, it is an indecency which separates the guilty party from the kingdom of God"-(Corinthians 6:9). <sup>8</sup> Boswell's biblical reference demonstrates that the commission of uncleanness is the sinful act for which sodomites are condemned.

Later in Canto XVI, the circle of the Florentine sodomites, the group Brunetto is associated with, is introduced. The Pilgrim hears a loud roaring and he continues through the circle of violence:

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<sup>7</sup> Epp 314.

<sup>8</sup> Boswell 204.

Già era in loco onde s'udia 'l rimbombo  
 de l'acqua che cadea ne l'altro giro,  
 simile a quell che l'arnie fanno rombo,  
 quando tre ombre insieme si partiro,  
 correndo, d'una torma che passava  
 sotto la pioggia de l'aspro martiro.(XVI.1-6)

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I had arrived where I could hear the distant roar  
 of water falling to the lower circle,  
 like the rumbling hum of bees around a hive,  
 when three shades at a run  
 broke from a passing crowd  
 under that rain of bitter torment. (XVI.1-6)

The souls speak in unison and it signifies that their sin through its unnatural intimacy, robbed them of individuality, so that they no longer walk separately or speak individually. They all shout the same speech.

Here the poet solidifies the relationship between sin and movement.

Qual sogliono I campion far nudi e unti,  
 avvisando lor presa e lor vantaggio,  
 prima che sien tra lor battuti e punti,  
 così rotando, ciascuno il visaggio  
 drizzava a me, sì che 'n contraro il collo  
 faceva ai piè continüo viaggio.(XVI.22-27)

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As combatants, oiled and naked, are wont to do,  
 Watching for their hold and their advantage,  
 Before the exchange of thrusts and blows,  
 Wheeling, each fixed his eyes on me,  
 So that their feet moved forward  
 While their necks were straining back. (XVI. 22-27)

The sodomites form a wheel, meaning that this image is to physically join the three sodomites: guilty of a sexual sin characterized by physical contact with other men, they display a noticeable degree of physical intimacy with one another in the present formation.

They wheel about in a circle like grappled wrestlers as the word “combatants” suggests. They are naked and oiled waiting for the right moment to grasp or strike their opponents which makes connotations of sexual threat. Mark Musa, well-known translator and interpreter of Dante’s, *The Divine Comedy*, argues that “[t]heir movement also has allegorical implications: their dance physically twists their necks and bodies just as their sin of sodomy symbolically distorted nature and the right use of their bodies.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, the sodomites’ movement that Dante observes is synonymous to their act of sin.

Similar to the departure of Brunetto Latini, the three Florentine sodomites run off swiftly to catch up with their band. They are condemned to an eternity of running to be with those with whom they have sinned. Speed is the punishment of all the sins of sexual

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Musa, *Dante Alighieri’s Divine Comedy: Verse Translation and Commentary Vol. 2*, (Bloomington: Indiana U Press, 1996) 224.

nature according to Dante and the line, "...ali sembiar le gambe loro isnelle./"...Their nimble legs seemed wings."(XVI.87) illustrates the wretchedness and dishonorable presentation of the sodomites. It is as if Dante is illustrating a shameful creature that must scurry away rapidly in order to hide within a group. Again, the poet ties together sin and movement in Hell.

To solidify the idea of sodomites being punished for their actions as a group, Dante presents Brunetto. Brunetto represents a friend on Earth whose individuality is lost in hell. By introducing us to an individual who was once a friend, Dante accentuates the horror when that friend must rejoin the suffering sodomites. Dante the Pilgrim must grow spiritually by being less sympathetic to the sinners. He has compassion for the sinners, yet later comes to recognize that his pity is wasted on them.

An example of this sympathetic tone is when the relationship between Brunetto Latini, a former teacher of Dante's, is introduced in the *Inferno*, and here the reader senses that the Dante Pilgrim has sympathy for his former teacher. A sympathetic tone is felt here instead of a warning of humanity. Dante felt that sin was despicable, so much that even his friends cannot escape. Dante the poet shows no mercy for sinners in his *Inferno*. It can also be argued that the compassionate tone could be Dante the Pilgrim's own weakness for sympathizing with the sinners as well. In other words, instead of the Dante Pilgrim showing the reader the consequences of sin and punishment that the grouped sodomites have to endure, we get a personal look at a relationship between a human on Earth, Dante the Pilgrim, and Brunetto, a character in Hell. In Canto XV, Brunetto Latini recognizes the Pilgrim and leaves his band to walk and talk with him.

Here in the last two lines, Brunetto Latini is introduced to the reader when he recognizes his pupil, the Pilgrim in this text.

“O figliuol,” disse, “qual di questa greggia  
s’arresta punto, giace poi cent’ anni  
sanz’ arrostarsi quando ‘l foco il feggia. (XV. 37-39)

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“O son,” he said, “whoever of this flock stops even for an instant has to lie  
a hundred years, unable to fend off the fire when it strikes.” (XV.37-39)

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The word “flock” in the above passage is referring to a group. This passage shows Brunetto explaining the horror of being forever bound to moving with the group.

The Pilgrim’s encounter with his former teacher, Brunetto Latini, is characterized by affection, respect, and sympathy. Dante reaches toward Brunetto “because fondling the face by extending the hand to the chin was a traditional iconographic motif charged with sexual meaning.”<sup>10</sup> “e chinando la mano a la sua faccia,” “...And, lowering my hand toward his face,” (XV.29) Dante displays this scene by having him place his face as close to Brunetto’s as possible. This action expresses the sympathy and pity Dante feels for Brunetto.

The reverent tone of Dante’s words parallels the Pilgrim’s admiration and affection for his old mentor. In Canto XV, Dante the Pilgrim asks, “Rispuosi: “Siete voi qui, ser Brunetto?” (XV.30)/“Are You here, Ser Brunetto?” (XV.30) Dante accordingly prefixes the title “ser” to his name showing respect to his former mentor and friend on Earth.

Clearly, Dante felt that Brunetto was an important man and cared for him deeply. Dante

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<sup>10</sup> Musa 212.

is placing someone he respects in Hell and gives him respect he is due in their meeting. Thus, the fact that a dear and respected friend could be guilty and damned serves as a warning to readers that no one escapes punishment for unrepented sin.

So, Dante the Pilgrim's sympathy is limited by the text's general condemnation of the sodomites. Dante the poet is moralistic and acts as the judge of sins and sinners while Dante the Pilgrim is the more humane person who is on a journey and shows concern for the condemned yet realizes the heinous sins of man.

The Pilgrim in this text is saying that if his desires were completely fulfilled, then Brunetto would still be among the living. But, in Dante's *Inferno*, the literal meaning of his words is, "voi non sareste ancora de l'umana natura posto in bando;/you would not yet be banished from mankind."(XV.80-81) The Pilgrim's wish that his old master were still alive can also mean that he wishes Brunetto were not an unrepentant sodomite, who must now suffer the pains of Hell.

By speaking about the unspeakable, namely homosexuality, Dante is opening the doors of discussion by simultaneously warning the reader about humanity in his creation of Hell and, at the same time, inserting a sympathetic approach when presenting the Sodomite, Brunetto Latini and his relationship with his student, Dante the Pilgrim. According to Mark Musa's interpretation on Dante's *Inferno*, Brunetto Latini will use this very term, "greggia," meaning crude and unrefined, to designate the specific group of Sodomites to which he belongs.<sup>11</sup> Brunetto Latini is naked just as all the other sodomites in the text and this explicit mention of the sinners' nakedness is due the sexual nature of their sins. It was believed that in life, these sinners encouraged or forced others to take off their clothes in acts of illicit sex. Dante does this by creating his own vision of hell and

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<sup>11</sup> Musa 213.

by bringing the reader close to his creation. The vivid display of punishment and suffering of the individuals serves as a warning to people of his day.

The Pilgrim's last view of his elderly and dignified mentor is the sight of him naked, racing off at a top speed to catch up with his companions in sin. Brunetto is condemned to stay with the group. Part of his punishment along with his feet being touched by the burning sands, is the tension that he cannot be an individual and he must be a part of a condemned group.

In conclusion, Dante creates a vision of hell in which people are punished for their sins on Earth by condemning them to eternal exercising of that sin. Like the gluttons who are condemned to a perverse form of gluttony, the sodomites' sexual action defines their punishment. Their unnatural groupings with other men are punished by loss of their individuality to that group. Dante's hell is vivid and grotesque. He describes a place where all forms of peacefulness and calm are absent. In its place is relentless and restless motion and noise. The sodomites do not suffer alone, but as a group. Thus, in Dante's *Inferno*, the body in action constitutes a perverse form of masculinity.

## CHAPTER 4

### ARTHURIAN MASCULINITY: MAKING SENSE OF GAWAIN'S CHASTITY

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the story of a young knight's quest to prove not only his bravery against an ax-wielding foe, but also his nobility, honor, and chastity during his stay as a guest in a Lord's castle. Thus, the Arthurian version of masculinity is one which favors outward displays of bravery and strength as well as inward pledges of chastity, morality, and chivalrous ideals. So when Gawain is tested, his masculinity is both in the bravery of his action, and in the strength of his "inaction" or abstinence from sexual temptation. I suggest that Gawain's Arthurian masculinity is critically tied to his chastity, or his ability to avoid sexual action with virtue. He represents a particular type of medieval masculinity—the Arthurian chivalric and chaste hero.

It is worth mentioning that Gawain's chaste masculinity contrasts with another definition of masculinity of the period—one defined by virility. At least one critic, Vern L. Bullough, suggests that sexual action was vital for a man living in the Middle Ages in order to maintain male identity. Bullough's article, "On Being a Male in the Middle Ages," states: "Quite clearly, male sexual performance was a major key to being male. It was a man's sexual organs that made him different and superior to the woman. But maleness was somewhat fragile, and it was important for a man to keep demonstrating his

maleness by action and thought, especially by sexual action. It was part of his duty to keep his female partners happy and satisfied, and unless he did so, he had failed as a man.”<sup>1</sup> Although this may have been the case historically, this is not the ideal of Arthurian masculinity, where it is precisely the abstinence from sexual action that is so admired. The Arthurian male proves his chivalry not virility.

Gawain upholds the Arthurian male ideal by remaining chaste through his actions. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Arthurian masculinity involves both actions of the sword and actions of the soul. The two aspects, strength and morality, make him a noble knight. For Gawain, his moral challenge is remaining chaste. During his third meeting with the lady, Gawain vows virginity to St. John, and dedicates himself to the Virgin Mary:

þe knyȝt sayde, ‘Be sayn Jon,’

And smeþely con he smyle,

‘In fayth I welde rigt non,

Ne non wil welde þe quile.’ (III. 1788-1791)<sup>2</sup>

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The knight said, ‘By Saint John,’ and he

Smiled gently, ‘I have none whatsoever, upon my honour, nor do I intend

to have one at present.’ (III. 1788-1791)

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<sup>1</sup> Vern Bullough, “On Being Male in the Middle Ages”, *Medieval Masculinities*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1994) 41.

<sup>2</sup> Gawain-poet, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. W.R.J. Barron (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974) 28-134. All other citations are taken from Barron edition.

In this passage, Gawain answers the Lady's question of whether his disinterest in her is because he loves another. He makes it clear that he has no lover "at present" possibly carries a double meaning; he does not intend to have a relationship with the lady, nor does he intend to have one with anyone else.

Gawain's quest to the castle of the Green Knight presents the sort of physical challenges and dangers which one might expect of a warrior—confrontations with "wormez...and bullez"("dragons... and bulls"). (I. 720-725). Yet, it is during his respite at Lord Bertilak's castle that the test of his knighthood, or manhood, is the greatest. Chastity does not mean anything if it is not tested, so Gawain's chastity becomes meaningful when it is tested.

After Gawain arrives and settles in at Lord Bertilak's castle, the Lord suggests that Gawain remain in the castle and rest after his travels, while Bertilak goes hunting the following day. Gawain agrees to the Lord's hospitality, stating "“Why I byde in yowre borȝe, be bayne to ȝowre hest.”"("while I remain in your castle, I shall be obedient to your command") (II. 1092). The Lord then states that in his absence, he intends that his wife will host Gawain:

to mete wende

When ȝe wyl, wyth my wyf, pat wyth yow schal sitte

And comfort yow with compayny, til I to cort torne (III. 1097-1099).

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come to table whenever you like, with my wife, who shall sit with you  
and amuse you with her company, till I return home (III. 1097-1099).

By virtue of the Lord's hospitality, Gawain cannot refuse the company of the Lord's wife. Then, Bertilak proposes an "agreement"—that

Quat-so-euer I wyne in þe wod hit worpeȝ to youreȝ,

And quat chek so ȝe acheue chaunge me perforne. (II. 1106-1107)

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whatever I take in the woods shall become yours, and whatever fortune you come by here, give it to me in exchange for that. (II. 1106-1107).

Again, Gawain courteously agrees. Although the meaning of the bargain is not initially clear, it soon becomes so, with the advances of the Lord's wife on Gawain. The bargain suggests the Lord intending something to the effect of "don't do anything with my wife that you would not do with me." The test is whether Gawain can keep his pledge and uphold his honesty and honor.

When it comes to the Lady's flirtations and sexual advances, Gawain must artfully dodge them without offending. During the Lady's second visit, the Lady suggests to Gawain that a knight practicing chivalry should initiate a kiss when a Lady is receptive. She says,

'ȝet I kende yow of kyssyng,' quop þe clere penne

'Quere-so countenance is coupe quikly to clyme;

Ȝat bicomes vche a knyȝt pat cortaysy vses.' (III. 1489-1491).

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And yet I taught you about kissing . . . where a lady's favor is manifest to claim it at once; it befits every knight who practices chivalry to do so" (III. 1489-1491).

Gawain disagrees, stating that if he were refused he would be “‘I were wrang, iwysse, gif I proffered.’” (“‘at fault for having made an advance’”) (III. 1494). So, to Gawain, the chivalrous knight should never be the boorish, or make unwanted advances. This statement by Gawain once again shows his politeness, since he does not presume (although he probably knows) that his advance would be desired. The Lady, unsatisfied with this response, then suggests that a man as strong as Gawain could simply compel a kiss by force, if he were denied. Gawain protests that he is not this sort of man:

Ȝe ar stif innoghe to constrayne with strenkpe, gif yow lykeȝ,

Ȝif any were so vilanous pat yow devaye wolde.’

‘Ȝe, be God,’ quop Gawayn, ‘good is your speche,

Bot prete is vnpryuande in pede per I lende,

And vche gift pat is geuen not with goud wylle.

I am at your comaundement, to kysse quen yow lykeȝ;

Ȝe may lach quen yow lyst, and leue quen yow pynkkeȝ,

in space.’ (III. 1498-1503)

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‘What you say is correct, but the use of force is thought improper in the land where I live, and taking any gift that is not given with a good will. I am at your disposal, to kiss when you desire; you may begin when you wish, and leave off as soon as you think fit.’ (III. 1498-1503)

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So as not to offend by directly contradicting her, Gawain replies that in *his* land, force is thought improper. More shrewdly, he states that he cannot take a gift not given in good will, suggesting that she should not hold bad intentions with her flirtation. Yet, at the same time, out of courtesy, Gawain's response is one of passivity—he says that he is at the Lady's disposal. This response, although chivalrous, does not end the flirtation.

When the Lady further tests Gawain's control, his response continues to be courteous, if not friendly. Indeed, the reader senses a playful rapport between the Lady and Gawain. Yet, all the while, she teases him and tests his control before finally leaving:

Ȝus hym frayned pat fre, and fondet hym ofte,

For to haf women hym to woge, what-so scho poȝt elleȝ;

Bot he defended hym so fayr pat no faut semed,

Ne non euel on nawper halue, nawper pay wysten

Bot bysse.

Ȝay laȝed and layked longe;

At pe last scho con hym kysse,

Hir leue fayre con scho fonge,

And went hir waye, iwysse. (III. 1549-1557)

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In this way that noble lady tested him and tempted him repeatedly, in order to bring him to grief, whatever else she may have intended; but he defended himself so skillfully that no offence was apparent, nor any impropriety on either side, nor were they conscious of anything but contentment. They laughed and amused themselves for a long time; in the

end she kissed him, courteously took her leave and, finally departed. (III.  
1549-1557)

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In this passage, Gawain's method of resisting the lady is polite avoidance and gentility. Social graces are preserved first by Gawain's skillful defense, and then by the lady's courteous kiss and departure. In this way, Gawain's Arthurian masculinity is preserved in that he refrains from immoral action.

It is worth pointing out that Gawain's temptation is real—he does desire the Lady. Modern readers might wonder if Gawain's near-perfect restraint is not so much a function of his strong conviction, but rather testifies to his lack of male desire. Were it not for Gawain's knighthood, even in the Middle Ages, his passive behavior might have been seen as un-masculine by more common standards. However, there is evidence that Gawain did indeed desire the Lady. During the Lady's third visit to Gawain, she awakes him from a deep and restless sleep.

He welcumeȝ hir worpily with a wale chere.  
He seȝ hir so glorious and gaily atyred,  
So fautles of hir fetures and of so fine hewes,  
Wigt wallande joye warmed his hert. (III. 1759-1762).

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When he saw her so lovely and so gaily dressed, so flawless in her person  
and with so perfect a complexion, joy ardently welling up warmed his  
heart. (III. 1759-1762).

This joy expressed by Gawain apparently is almost passionate. The poet states that

Gret perile bitwene hem stod,  
 Nif Maré of hir knygt mynne.(III. 1768-69).

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there was great peril between them, should Mary not be mindful of her  
 knight (III. 1768-69).

Thus, Gawain's religious conviction helps him resist temptation. Throughout his  
 resistance to the Lady's advances, his verbal wit helps him avoid being ensnared by her.

At the end of her third visit, the poet describes his technique:

With luf-lagyng a lyt he layd hym bysyde  
 Alle pe specheȝ of specialté pat sprange of her mouthe. (III. 1777-1778).

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With some good-natured laughter he parried all the words of fond  
 affection which fell from her lips. (III. 1777-1778).

When Gawain finally confronts the Green Knight, his purity with the lady saves  
 him. Bertilak reveals to Sir Gawain that he was also the Green Knight in disguise.  
 Bertilak commends him, in spite of his failure in one respect: the girdle. Gawain's  
 interpretation of events is that he has failed miserably. He really fails at wearing the  
 magic girdle and cheating during the course of the Lord's test. So, he vows to wear the  
 green girdle forever in order to be constantly reminded of his own downfall. When  
 Gawain comes to understand his punishment-a single nick-has to do with his gift from the  
 lady, he begins to make sense of the events of the preceding days in terms of adulterous  
 sexuality. "The formidable and ferocious Green Knight is revealed to be an amiable

admirer of Gawain. The decapitating blows turns out to be a mere nick which will serve as healthful penance.”<sup>3</sup>

Bertilak has told him that he himself instigated his wife’s attempts to seduce Gawain, but before Bertilak tells him, further, that Morgan le Fay is behind his entire adventure. Bertilak surprises Gawain in the following passage:

Now know I wel py cosses and py costes als,  
 And pe wowing of my wyf; I wroȝt hit myseluen.  
 I sende hir to asay pe, and sothly me pynkkeȝ  
 On pe fautlest freke pat euer on fote ȝede; (III. 2360-2363)

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Moreover, I know all about your kisses and your conduct too, and my wife’s wooing of you; I myself brought it about. I sent her to put you to the proof, and truly you seem to me the most faultless knight who ever lived; (III. 2360-2363)

In this passage, Gawain is commended for having passed a test of his honor and virtue. Gawain’s chastity and faith in St. John and the Virgin Mary, marked by his refusal to act immorally, protect him physically from destruction at the hands of the Green Knight, and it upholds his standing as an Arthurian ideal of masculinity. The Green Knight’s dual nature, as friend and foe, mirrors the fact that dishonor in the bedroom is just as deadly as on the field.

The last time the lady visits Gawain, he is unable to completely avoid her advances. She succeeds in giving him her girdle, yet Gawain avoids adultery even though the gift is

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<sup>3</sup> Denton Fox, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 12.

improper. In the end, Gawain is not castrated or decapitated because he maintains control of his desire to act immorally. But it would be wrong to say that his abstinence is entirely passive. He artfully avoids the lady's temptation, while shrewdly preserving norms of politeness. Critic Denton Fox has noted: "He is not provoked into proving his masculinity; he does not get confused about the obligations of courtesy; he does not take the opportunity to escape tactfully by saying that he loves another; he does not accept a valuable ring from Bertilak's wife; and he does not display false generosity by giving a present to her."<sup>4</sup> By proving he has the ability to control his sexual actions, yet maintain social graces, Gawain holds true to the Arthurian ideal of masculinity.

As mentioned above, Gawain's restraint with the Lady represents his half of the agreement with the Lord. The implication of the agreement was that Gawain must make his actions in the castle known to the Lord upon his return from the hunt by showing the Lord the same affection as the lady. Although Gawain's chastity is clearly a test of honor and chastity, is still somewhat peculiar. It is precisely by avoiding heterosexual action with the lady that he also avoids homosexual action with the Lord.

Modern critics who have examined Gawain's relationship with the Lord, the two places in the text in which modern critics have seen homosexual implications are the kisses between Gawain and the Lord as well as the metaphor of the hunt. According to some interpretations, the bargain appears somewhat peculiar, it suggests a parallel between Gawain and the lady with Gawain and the Lord. Gawain's first kiss with the Lord is innocent enough. It is closely tied to the terms of the bargain and explicitly mentions courtesy rather than desire or lust.

He hent pe hapel aboute pe hailes and hendely hym kisses,

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<sup>4</sup> Fox 11

And eftersones of pe same he serued hym pere.  
 ‘Now ar we euen,’ quop pe hapel, ‘in pis euentide,  
 Of alle pe couenauntes pat we knyht, syden I com hider,  
 Bi lawe.’

Țe lorde sayde, ‘Bi saynt Gile,

Țe ar pe best pat I knowe!

Țe ben ryche in a whyle,

Such chaffer and Țe drowe.’ (III. 1639-1646)

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He clasped the lord round the neck and kissed him courteously, and then immediately served him again in the same way. ‘Now,’ said the knight, ‘for this evening we are fairly quit of all the conditions which we have drawn up in due form since I arrived here.’ The lord said, ‘By St Giles, you are the best man I know! You will be rich presently, if you carry such a trade.’ (III. 1639-1646)

Here Bertilak is presently surprised and affirms that Gawain is a man for his restraint.

The next kiss displays more affection and intimacy, yet it is still hardly sexual:

‘I schal fylle vpon first oure forwardeȝ noupe,

Țat we spedly han spoken per spared watȝ no drynk.’

Țen acoles he pe knyght and kisses hym pryres,

As sauerly and sadly as he hen sette coupe. (III. 1934-1937)

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‘This time I shall be the first to fulfill the terms of our compact, which we so fortunately agreed upon when the drink flowed freely.’ Then he embraced the lord and gave him three kisses, with as much relish and vigor as he could deliver them. (III. 1934-1937)

Here, the reader is sensing that the Lord truly admires Gawain and expresses this by kissing him. The contract between Gawain and the Lord is a physical one even if it is not overtly sexual. In the courtly setting, kisses apparently were given as courtesy or as expressions of good will. So, the kisses that Gawain gives the Lord are the same ones given to him by the lady. Yet, this is part of a bargain designed to ensure Gawain’s honor as knight.

Critics have suggested that the hunt may also imply a questionable relationship between the Lord and Gawain. As literary critic Sheila Fisher has observed, “The hunt within the walls mirrors the one outside, while the lady’s bold pursuit of Gawain inverts traditional expectations of gender behavior.”<sup>5</sup> The only hint that the Lord is pursuing Gawain is the juxtaposition of the Lord’s hunt with the lady’s pursuit of Gawain. Moreover, the terms of Bertilak’s “game” with Gawain open the door to the possibility of intimacy between the two men: each day, Gawain has to return his winnings to the lord. In fact, at the end of each day, Gawain “returns” to Bertilak the kisses he has received from the lady; on the third day, he gives Bertilak three kisses “[a]s sauerly and sadly as he him sette coupe” (“with as much relish and as vigorously as he could plant them,” (III. 1937). The suggestion, as Fisher has argued, is that if he had sex with the lady, he would

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<sup>5</sup> Sheila Fisher, "Taken Men and Token Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings*, ed. Sheila Fisher and Janet Halley (Knoxville, 1989), pp. 71-105.

have to have sex with the lord to even the score. Stated another way, it is precisely by avoiding heterosexual action with the lady that he avoids homosexual action with the Lord. Fisher concludes that the poem “raises the possibility” of physical intimacy between the two men but does not imply an actual homosexual pursuit.”<sup>6</sup> In the scenes discussed above in which the lady tries to win Gawain’s affections, one might say he is being “hunted” by her. In addition, there is evidence in the text that Bertilak’s hunt metaphorically parallels the lady’s hunt of Gawain. If such metaphorical parallel exists, the repeated description of hunter and prey at least creates the impression that Bertilak may be in homosexual pursuit of Gawain. This alternative reading of the bargain, one in which the Lord “wins” the same kisses from Gawain as his wife does, is at least worth examining, even if it is a departure from the original intentions of the story. Or, could the bargain of the Green Knight merely be a game of heterosexual power? For, as the Green Knight explains to Gawain at the end of the story, the scandalous events were staged by Morgan in an effort to harass Guenevere.

Critic Denton Fox argues that there is a

parallel drawn between Bertilak and Gawain as a result of their agreement to trade their daily winnings, and a less obvious parallel in that they are both struggling with nature: Bertilak tries, in accordance with the elaborate traditional customs of the hunt, to subdue animals; Gawain tries, in accordance with various formalized and ceremonious patterns of behavior, to fight the temptations of the flesh. But also, of course, Gawain

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<sup>6</sup> Fisher 86.

is the hunted, since he is pursued by Bertilak's wife in just the way that the animals are pursued by Bertilak.<sup>7</sup>

Once again, Gawain stops short of an act. Unlike the animals who are caught by the Lord's dogs, Gawain escapes the lady unscathed. Although Fisher does not argue this, one might see Gawain as the animal who gets away.

For Gawain, chivalry and chastity are intimately connected. His vow of chastity helps him refrain from adultery with his host's wife, which would be a deadly breach of honor. In the end, Gawain is commended for his victory over sexual temptation. Although he seems, at times, oblivious to desire and lust, the poet reveals that he is indeed tempted. Yet, he succeeds, though sometimes with difficulty, in avoiding and extricating himself from the variety of traps which she lays for him. Gawain proves Arthurian manhood by not ignoring bodily male desires. He derives strength from his faith in God and his dedication to propriety.

Gawain maintains his chastity with the help of the Virgin Mary and God Himself. When Sir Gawain prepares to leave Arthur's round table, Arthur gives him a shield on which the inside panel bears a depiction of the Virgin. Thus, the shield that protects him in battle will also protect him from temptation. To the Arthurian knight, armor provides both physical and sexual protection. When Gawain lays down his shield and sheds his armor at Bertilak's castle, his danger of destruction is at its greatest. The idea of a warrior using abstinence to conserve masculine power and energy is not new; but in Sir Gawain, it is his defining characteristic. Sir Gawain upholds the Arthurian ideal of masculinity by passing tests of his honor and chastity, as well as his strength and bravery. Rather than

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<sup>7</sup> Fox 11

succumb to the temptations of the Lady, he skillfully avoids impropriety without insulting his host.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

By examining these works, my goal has been to better understand masculinity in the Middle Ages. In the Middle Ages a man had to prove his masculinity through action. Because masculinity carried such a powerful meaning, its influence has carried on since the Middle Ages and even now as modern scholars further delve into its meaning and purpose with various other literary texts. Gender theorists such as Foucault and Butler have postulated that the identity we assume to be our own does not arise from some central, determinate self. In other words, identity doesn't have to be fixed to what culture and society deem as a gender appropriate behavior. Throughout the years and now, masculinity has become a spectrum of acceptable gender behaviors. Gender is even less fixed and definable today than in the Middle Ages. There is a blurring of genders through actions such as performing, dressing, writing, and various other actions that have made available the opportunity for men and women to express themselves and not specifically their gender. Masculinity will continue to be reinvented, replenished, and reconstructed through various factors such as the action and even non-action such as celibacy and chastity. Ideas of masculinity splinter into various types of masculinities. Cultural categories built upon notions of "otherness" refuse to remain distinct.

With regards to the texts I have discussed, actions can create new forms of masculine identities. Chaucer's Pardoner was one of the first characters that provoked thought about the construction of masculinity through the ambiguous gender figure. Chaucer set the foundation for blurring traditional male roles in literature. As the most examined ambiguous male character in medieval texts, he has provoked thought concerning gender for modern scholars, leading them to reexamine masculinity in other medieval male figures. Abelard is a figure of phallic/lack versus wholeness since his castration motivated him to reclaim his masculine identity through the act of writing. Abelard demonstrates that one can re-make his own gender identity through action such as writing. Dante's sodomites are defined by common sinful action. They represent masculinity defined by perversion. He is also taking the readers on an emotional journey with the Pilgrim by complicating the idea of sin and its consequences. Dante inadvertently challenges the norms of medieval masculinity by provoking thought about these issues in his text. The sodomites are homosexuals whose actions identify them as a group. Lastly, with Sir Gawain, it is his lack of sexual action and his chastity that prove his Arthurian masculinity.

By examining the male characters in medieval literary works, a reader can ascertain specific qualities the author intends to convey, whether the author is presenting a castratus, a sodomite in Hell, or a chaste knight. My modern reading of these texts suggests that authors of the Middle Ages struggled to challenge and define masculinity. Their characters' actions provoke thought about different types of masculinities in the Middle Ages. Through examination of the above works, Abelard's letters, Dante's *Inferno*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, medieval masculinity can be said to be

united by the finding that in each work, a man's masculinity was not simply innate but defined by his sexual action, whether it was Abelard's compensation through the sexual act of writing, Dante's sodomites' perverse acts or Gawain's noble ability to control his action.

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