

## Male Same-Sex Desire in the Romances of de Troyes

Basil A. Clark

*Saginaw Valley State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

### Recommended Citation

Clark, Basil A. "Male Same-Sex Desire in the Romances of de Troyes." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.4 (2013): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2003>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 891 times as of 11/07/19.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 15 Issue 4 (December 2013) Article 9**  
**Basil A. Clark,**  
**"Male Same-Sex Desire in the Romances of de Troyes"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss4/9>>

---

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 15.4 (2013)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss4/>>

---

**Abstract:** In his article "Male Same-Sex Desire in the Romances of de Troyes" Basil A. Clark extends René Girard's theory of mimetic desire to explore a homocentric subtext in Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec and Enide*, *Lancelot or The Knight of the Cart*, *The Knight with the Lion or Yvain*, and *The Story of the Grail or Perceval*. While male same-sex desire in these narratives is consistently latent, an argument for its presence is made through Girard's hermeneutic, which postulates that someone (the subject) desires someone or something (the object) not only for its own sake but because someone else (the mediator) desires it also, and this third party's desires can expand to include desire for this person himself. In the case of both a male subject and a male mediator, this desire is axiomatically homocentric as in the case of a courtly knight's love suit of a lady: the knight's desire for the lady is intensified by that of the other male and is read as a liminal desire for the other male himself.

**Basil A. CLARK**

### **Male Same-Sex Desire in the Romances of de Troyes**

The subtle fluidity of heterocentric and homocentric perspective in medieval literature has been amply demonstrated. For example, Elizabeth Kaiser in *Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia: The Legitimation of Sexual Pleasure in "Cleanness" and Its Contexts* studies fourteenth-century poetry against early writing on sexuality to "discern the logic" of what in the poet's view is "licit and what is forbidden in sexual desire" (71). Martin Irvine argues in "Abelard and (Re)writing the Male Body" for the presence in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries of a heightened interest in the body and its sexuality. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero assert how "the discourse of masculine friendship has ... been structured, at least since Cicero ... to produce the uneasy relations between masculine homosociality and homosexuality that characterize military culture and, in some accounts, modernity" ("Introduction" xvii). Simon Gaunt, while recognizing "theoretical problems" inherent in making a "hetero/homo distinction in a premodern culture," maintains that a "hetero/homo dialectic, similar though not identical to that which, according to many gay-affirmative writers, structures and regulates modern Western societies, manifests itself in medieval culture" (157). In *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England* Derek Neal discusses issues of male sex and gender including extensive commentary upon desire and masculinity in Middle English romance. In *Queering Medieval Genres* Tison Pugh analyses Arthurian romance and a reading from queer perspective of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which enables "a better understanding of Christianity through the dynamics of a sadomasochistic relationship with the Christian divine" (108; further, on queer theory and medieval literature, see e.g., Burger and Kruger; Burgwinkle; Klosowska Roberts; Wilsbacher; on linguistics and the medieval romance see, e.g., Vasvári <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1290>>; on landscape ethnicities in medieval literature, see, e.g., Segol <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1230>>).

My study is based in particular on Carolyn Dinshaw's "Getting Medieval: *Pulp Fiction*, Gawain, Foucault." Citing the triangular relationship among Gawain, Bertilak, and Bertilak's lady, Dinshaw recognizes Gawain's passivity in the bedroom scenes and the lady's aggressiveness, a scenario that, she argues, feminizes Gawain who subsequently kisses his host in imitation of kissing a lady. Dinshaw is sensitive to the challenge of performing a queer reading of a fourteenth-century romance, recognizing that "no perspective of ecstatic, subversive disaggregation is allowed to Gawain: the poet insists on only one model of identity for him, and that is his armor with its much desired, even longed-for, but elusive pentangle" (135-36). Nonetheless, through close reading and careful attention to the poem's imagery, Dinshaw lays out a convincing case for its homonormativity. I follow Dinshaw's lead, especially her attention to triangular relationships, to identify latent homosocial or homosexual scenes primarily in three romances by Chrétien de Troyes: *Erec and Enide*, *Lancelot or The Knight of the Cart*, and *The Knight with the Lion or Yvain*, and briefly in a fourth, *The Story of the Grail or Perceval*, where a scene with liminal homosexual subtext develops between an older knight and a younger whom the older initiates into chivalry. "Triangulation," as I use the term, means the relationship theorized by René Girard in his concept of mimetic desire: subject > model (mediator) > object. Girard postulates that the subject does not desire the object (thing, condition, or abstraction) for its own sake, but because the object is possessed by or desired by an intermediary, the model: "we tend to desire what our neighbor has or what our neighbor desires" (*I See Satan* 8).

An individual's desire for what the model has or desires develops from an admiration of the model and a wish to be like the model; in turn, however, it can lead to envy and jealousy of the model resulting in hostility between subject and model. Further, if multiple subjects compete to be like the model, these subjects can become hostile toward one another, as James Williams explains: "If our desire to be like a model is strong enough, if we identify with that person closely enough, we will want to have what the model has or be what the model is. If this is carried far enough and if there are no safeguards braking desire (one of the functions of religion and culture), then we become rivals of our models. Or we compete with one another to become better imitators of the same model, and we imitate our rivals even as we compete with them" (xi). In romance, rivalry

between men is typically over a woman, but it can evidence same-sex desire as well and a closer examination of the combats and friendships of Chrétien de Troyes's knights reveals complex attachments and raises the question of who or what is really desired.

Early in *Erec and Enide*, Erec, Queen Guinevere, and her female attendant encounter an aggressive knight along with his lady who is described in a terse phrase only as "a fine-looking maiden"(144) ("une pucele de bel ester" [144]), and a surly dwarf on the road ahead of them. As Erec approaches the party of three, the dwarf's aggression toward him mirrors that which he has just shown to the Queen's attendant. The dwarf bars Erec's passage and strikes Erec on the neck and face raising great welts on his body. Erec does not retaliate because he is unarmed and he fears that the dwarf's master will kill him if he strikes the dwarf in the knight's presence. Erec, no more effective than the Queen's attendant, is left the passive male in this encounter, feminized and vowing revenge. Soon he will discover an opportunity to have it. Next, Erec pursues the knight, the lady, and the dwarf to a beautiful fortified town where he finds a crowd of barons and their entourage assembled for a festival next day when knights will have the opportunity to challenge one another, each attempting to champion his own lady as most wise, beautiful, and pure. At the appointed time, a beautiful young sparrow hawk will be set on a silver perch in plain sight. The knight who claims his lady as most beautiful will invite her to remove the sparrow hawk from the perch and he will defend the lady's right to do so against all. Erec defends his host's beautiful daughter, Enide, challenging Yder, the arrogant knight with the dwarf and lady. In Girard's terms, this clash may be read as an encounter between two subjects (Erec and Yder) for the right to claim the same object (recognition of his lady as most beautiful). It is not that Erec desires his opponent's own lady, but if she and Erec's lady are read generically as beautiful women, then the two are interchangeable. Yder desires beauty in the abstract and Erec desires it as well both for its own sake and because it is desired by Yder. By metaphorical extension, desire for what Erec's model desires becomes desire for the model and, hence, homocentric. But Erec's situation is even more complex: stronger than his desire to assert a beautiful woman's excellence is his desire to avenge the humiliation he suffered on the road from Yder's dwarf.

Erec knows that Yder has twice prevailed in defending his lady's eminence in beauty and grace: if he succeeds this time, his record will be permanent and he can retire from the field. His defeat now would make Erec's revenge especially sweet. To challenge Yder, Erec needs a suitable lady and his host's daughter, Enide, however lovely and desirable in her own right, becomes a means to this end: "Then Erec said that he wanted / to contend for the sparrow-hawk by means of his daughter, / for in truth no other maiden would be there /who was the hundredth part as beautiful, / and if he took her there with him, / he would be perfectly justified / in contending and in claiming / that she should carry off the sparrow-hawk" (639-46) ("Lors dist Erec que l'esprevier / vialt par sa fille desresnier, / car por voir n'i avra pucele / qui la centiesme part soit bele, / et se il avoec lui l'an mainne, / reason avra droite et certaine / de desresnier et de mostrer / qu'ele an doit l'esprevier porter" [639-46]). In these circumstances, there are no checks on Erec's desire, both for revenge and for Yder himself. A brutal encounter follows between the two knights. In a figurative rape, their bodies are penetrated and fluid released. Yder surrenders and in a phallic gesture offers Erec his sword which Erec declines contemptuously to accept, his desire now satisfied. Triangulated desire continues in the story: Erec, who is a knight of the Round Table, instructs Yder to ride to Cardigan where he will find the Queen. Once there, he must yield himself to her along with his maiden and his dwarf (1030-37). Doing so establishes a bond between the two knights: Erec enjoys the Queen's favor and Yder desires it. In Girard's terms, Yder, the subject, desires what Erec, the model, already has. It is a short distance from desiring what someone else has to idealizing and desiring this other person. When the two are same-sex, then a homosocial bond is formed.

A further case for homosocial if not homoerotic triangulation is evident in Erec's hedonistic gratification of desire for Enide following their marriage and his subsequent shifting of the locus of desire. At first, his absorption in her is complete: "Erec was so in love with her / that he cared no more for arms, / nor did he go to tournaments. / He no longer cared for / tourneying: / ... / He turned all his attention to her, / to embracing and kissing; / he sought no other delight" (2396-404) ("tant l'ama Erec d'amors / que d'armes mes ne li chaloit, / ne a tornoiemant n'aloit. / N'avoit mes soing de tornoier: / ... / En li a mise s'andendue, / en acoler et an beisier; / ne se queroit d'el

aeisier" [2396-404]). Erec's companions are distressed by this state of affairs because his love for Enide has made him unavailable to them. He sends them richly appointed to tournaments, but does not accompany them and his knights and men-at-arms all blame him for his dereliction of responsibility. When Enide finally confronts him with local gossip, he is abashed and resolves to act immediately. His companions are overjoyed by the prospect of his reengagement with them and eagerly offer him their service. As the scene concludes, we see through Girard's paradigm a radical relocation of Erec's direct desire for Enide (no model or mediator is present) as an abstraction, namely chivalric respect. When in a moment of clarity Erec realizes he has lost the respect of his fellow knights, he desires to regain it, that is, a homosocial desire for what his peers value and that supplants his desire for Enide. His desire to bond with his fellow knights is stronger than that for his wife. While questing about the countryside with Enide — whom he has forbidden to speak unless he speaks to her first — Erec meets Count Galoain and his entourage. Aroused by desire for Enide, Galoain assures Erec of his wish to serve the lady and to do whatever might please her out of love for Erec himself. In this scene, Girard's triangle is curiously perverted: the Count and Erec both desire the same object, Enide, but the Count uses a feigned desire for Erec to trick him into lowering his guard against treachery to his great personal danger. Enide intervenes, however, and prevents the Count from succeeding in his design.

The first part of *The Knight of the Cart*, before Lancelot reaches and crosses the Sword Bridge, is distinguished by a number of encounters between himself and various ladies and knights, the fourth of which invites attention for what it says about same-sex desire. At this point in the story Lancelot has awakened in the morning following a staged attempted rape of an anonymous maiden and his resistance to her demand that he sleep with her. At daybreak, Lancelot and the maiden rise promptly, having spent the night in separate rooms, and Lancelot arms himself to leave. The maiden offers to accompany him provided that he observe the traditional custom of escort in the Kingdom of Logres: if a lady or maid-in-waiting is traveling alone unaccompanied, she is safe from harm from any passing knight, and to assault her under these circumstances would be to disgrace the assailant. However, if the lady is escorted by a knight, another knight may challenge him, and if the challenger wins, he may do what he wants with her without censure or blame (1302-16). If the lady proposes, Lancelot dares to ride with her under these circumstances, then she will go with him. Lancelot accepts her invitation. What this custom invites the lady to do, then, is to assume a passive role and offer herself as a prize. Unaccompanied and protected by chivalric code, she can be of no interest to a knight; with a protector, however, she provides an occasion for the one knight to engage with the other and we see where Lancelot's true interest lies. It is not the lady, finally, who captivates him, but the other man. In Girard's paradigm, the subject knight desires the lady, the object of desire, because the model (mediator) knight has her, and this desire becomes hostile. The subject knight wants to be the model knight and the male wants to be the other male and thus desire becomes homocentric.

Lancelot and the maiden meet an unusually aggressive knight — Meleagant — who seizes the bridle of the lady's horse and exults that he can at last take her away with him. Not so, she counters, for her escort can protect her. The challenger boasts that he has never met a man whom he could not win a woman from and that he will lead her away in spite of any attempt to prevent his doing so. Only through his father's intervention is the challenger deterred from combat with Lancelot and then only under physical restraint by his father's retainers. That this anonymous knight professes his ardent love for the lady and that she is keenly aware of his unwelcome advances intensify his passion toward Lancelot, who possesses the desired object, and his desire to overpower Lancelot just as he desires to possess the lady sexually. By extension, the challenger desires to be Lancelot because of what he has, and this desire becomes homoerotically suggestive.

To rescue Guinevere, the purpose for his quest, Lancelot must cross the menacing sword bridge over a river separating him from King Bademagu's castle where the Queen is being held. Bademagu, an admirer of chivalric virtue, is pleased by Lancelot's success, but Meleagant not at all. Lancelot and Meleagant are linked by their rivalry for the Queen, Meleagant has possession of her, and Lancelot intends to take her back. Meleagant's motive for abducting her, however, is not clear. He seems not to desire her for herself, but as a means for enhancing his own reputation. He has desire for the lady because she is Lancelot's; moreover, he desires Lancelot's reputation, an

abstraction in the triangle. There are no courtship scenes between Meleagant and Guinevere: she represents his prize. When he discovers blood on her sheets in a later scene, it is not loss of herself which so distresses him, but the thought that someone else has enjoyed her. Thus he is consumed by jealousy because he does not have what Lancelot has. Nor does he have what he mistakenly believes Lancelot's fellow knight Kay has, to whom he attributes blame for the bloody sheets: Kay, wounded in an encounter with Meleagant at the beginning of the story, had been innocently billeted in Guinevere's bedchamber. What Meleagant desires is what Lancelot desires: to possess Guinevere. However, he also desires to take Lancelot's place relative to Guinevere, which would make him Lancelot. A same-sex desire becomes a same-sex threat to be resolved only by Lancelot's killing his adversary at King Arthur's court in a scene colored by latent homosexual imagery in gory penetration of the body. In the scene, the homoerotic quality is identifiable by what Neal recognizes as "the other side of dread," desire: "The oscillation between dread and desire, the sensual lingering over the axe blows [in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*], the pivoting alternations of power: all these combine with that feeling of compulsion to give the violence, threatened and achieved, a perverse necessity, sadomasochistic, like that teasing [beheading] game" (235). A knight who engages another in a brutal encounter may dread the thought of being bruised, maimed, even killed, but he desires the relief that comes from prevailing over his opponent and the knowledge that what is feared is vanquished in a sadomasochistic encounter. The knight both fears his opponent and desires him and the challenge which he offers: to prevail over him by battle offers something analogous to prevailing over him sexually and experiencing the relief which comes from sexual release.

*Yvain* opens with a nostalgic longing for an earlier time when love's order flourished: "These days, love has fallen into disrepute, a far cry from when / those who loved.../ were known to be courtly / and valiant and generous and honorable" (21-23) ("cil qui soloient amer / se feisoient cortois clamer / et preu et large et enorable" [21-23]). The time is Pentecost and Arthur is holding court in Carlisle: to the disappointment of his companions, he rises early from their fellowship to retire to his chamber where the Queen waits for him. Outside the chamber in the presence of Yvain and the others, Sir Calogrenant begins a tale of adventure and the Queen leaves Arthur's side and enters the hall to listen. After being interrupted by Kay, Calogrenant continues reluctantly. As a knight errant, he passed through the Forest of Broceliande and came to an open plain upon which not more than half a Welsh league away, he saw a wooden tower with a deep, wide moat. On the drawbridge stood the lord of the castle holding a hooded goshawk, a sign of nonaggression. Their encounter is unexpectedly friendly and Calogrenant's host tells him that "more than seven straight times / that blessed was the way / by which [he] had come therein" (206-08) ("plus de .vii. foiz en un tenant, / que beneoite fust la voie / par ou leanz entrez estoie" [206-08]). What follows is a complex set of attractions: Calogrenant's for his vavasor host's daughter and the vavasor's for Calogrenant. The lord continues to press his hospitality treating Calogrenant to an evening meal and affirming his pleasure in providing lodging to an itinerant knight after he knows not how long a time: "After dining the vavasor told [him] / that he didn't know how long it had been / since he had given lodging to a knight errant / who was riding in search of adventure" (256-60) ("Après mangier itant me dist / li vavasors qu'il ne savoit / le terme puis qu'it avoit / herbergié chevalier errant / qui aventure alast querant" [256-60]).

Calogrenant, however, does not return his host's warmth; rather, he describes his pleasure in the company of the maiden whom he finds talented, gracious, and comforting. So delighted is he by her company that when the vavasor comes to call him to supper he interprets the intrusion as a hostile act: "that night the vavasor made war upon me / by coming to fetch me / when it was the time and hour to sup" (247-49) ("mes tant me fist, la nuit, de guerre / li vavasors, qu'il me vint querre, / qant de soper fu tans et ore" [247-49]). In Girard's paradigm, these conflicting desires can be described like this: Calogrenant (subject) desires the vavasor's daughter (object) directly, and as a young and virile man he can make himself pleasing to her and while he desires her he also desires and possesses those qualities: youth, vitality, and sensuality. Thus, he has dual desires. The vavasor (subject) does not desire his daughter, but youth, vitality, and sensuality and he desires the one who embodies these qualities: Calogrenant himself. In pressing his hospitality upon Calogrenant and in urging him to visit again on his return journey, the vavasor exerts the power of

his seniority and lordship of the household against Calogrenant's chivalric strength and virility. He thus becomes Calogrenant's adversary, as well as his host.

Calogrenant's quest for adventure leads him to a bubbling spring beneath a tree where a basin hangs from a chain. From an impossibly tall and ugly peasant whom he has met he has learned that if he takes water in the basin and casts it upon a stone beside the spring an almost irresistible tempest will develop: it does, but Calogrenant courageously holds place and soon the storm abates. A fierce knight soon appears to challenge Calogrenant for calling down weather without first issuing a proper challenge. The knight unhorses Calogrenant and then rides off leaving him defeated and ashamed. Disoriented, he returns to the vavasor's castle, where both the vavasor and his daughter are glad to see him. Upon hearing this story, Yvain determines to ride alone to replicate Calogrenant's experience at the spring. Like Calogrenant, Yvain discovers the spring shaded by a tree and a golden basin hanging by a chain. Like Calogrenant, he fills the basin and pours water over the marvelous emerald stone beside the spring and like what happened to Calogrenant, a violent storm springs up, spends itself, and suddenly abates. As it does so, just as in Calogrenant's experience, a fierce knight comes charging "more burning with anger / than a glowing coal, making as much racket / as if he were pursuing a rutting stag" (812-14) ("d'ire plus ardanz que breise, / uns chevaliers, a si grant bruit / con s'il chaçast .i. cerf de ruit" [812-14]). The sexual imagery is strong here: unlike Calogrenant, however, Yvain wounds his opponent mortally by splitting open his head and sending him fleeing back toward the town from which he has come, with himself in pursuit. The knight, Esclados the Red, husband of the Lady Laudine of Landuc, dies from his injury and Landuc is grief-stricken. Through complex circumstances, Yvain becomes enamored of her and marries her himself thereby becoming figuratively one with Esclados and becoming her champion at the spring. To establish a homoerotic bond between Yvain and Esclados requires hindsight. In Girard's paradigm, Esclados is the model, desiring and possessing the object, Lady Landuc, whom Yvain comes later to desire and possess. Esclados's desire to serve his lady draws him to Yvain in a mutually hostile relationship. He responds to Yvain's challenge to the boundary of the lady's domain (the spring) and only later, following the death of Esclados and Yvain's acceptance by the lady and her court, does Yvain fully appreciate the bond, unavoidably same-sex, between himself and Esclados.

The narrative at this point is charged erotically: in response to the lady's question about what has overpowered him, Yvain responds: "My lady ... the power comes / from my heart, / which is set on you; / my heart has given me this desire" (2019-21) ("Dame ... la force vient / de mon cuer, qui a vos se tient; / an ce vouloir m'a mes cuers mis" [2019-21]). The lady is responsive to him and with the approval of her court marries him "and the dead knight is fully forgotten; / he who killed him is married: / he has taken his wife and they slept together, / and the people love and esteem more / the living knight than ever they did the dead (2169-73) ("et li morz est toz obliez; / cil qui l'ocist est mariez; / sa fame a et ensamble gisent, / et les genz aimment plus et present / le vif c'onques le mort ne firent [2169-73]). Thus, Yvain eclipses the lady's memory of Esclados and Yvain absorbs Esclados into himself sexually. They have shared the same marriage bed and they have consummated a marriage with the same woman, their genitalia bonded by a common penetration of a third genital organ. The marriage, however, also transforms Yvain's liminal homoerotic bond with Esclados into a heterosexual union with Lady Landuc by whom King Arthur and his knights have been entertained for a week: when the time comes to leave, his men beg Arthur to take Yvain with them. Gawain appeals to Yvain's pride as a man and as a knight: "What! Would you be one of those men, / ... / who are worth less because of their wives? / ... / Break the leash and yoke / and let us, you and me, go to the tourneys, / so no one can call you a jealous husband. / ... / See to it / that our friendship / does not end, fair companion, because of you, / for it will never fail on my account" (2488-516) ("Comant! Seroiz vos or de çax, / ... / Qui por leur fames valent mains? / ... / Ronpez le frain et le chevoistre, / s'irons tornoier moi et vos, / que l'en ne vos apiaut jalos / ... / Gardez quë en vos ne remoingne, / biax conpainz, nostre conpaignie, / qu'en moi ne faura ele mie" [2488-516]).

Gawain prevails and Yvain desires what Gawain has: freedom to act as a man and as a knight. Gawain's situation is like what Girard finds in Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, where young men growing up together share virtually everything and agree on just about everything:

"This perpetual convergence ... depends upon a mutual imitation so spontaneous and constant that it remains unconscious" (*Theater* 9). Erotic love, however, cannot be shared: in a frustrated attempt to imitate Valentine and his love for Silvia, Proteus abandons his own lady, Julia, to court Silvia in a conflicted mimesis. In other words, Proteus desires what Valentine has so that their mimetic bond will continue although this desire will bring the men into conflict. The situation between Gawain and Yvain is different in its outcome, but Gawain's motive for seducing Yvain away from Lady Landuc is similar to Proteus's motive for courting Silvia. Gawain desires to restore the mimetic relationship with Yvain which Yvain's marriage has disrupted: he pursues this desire to draw Yvain back into an adolescent stasis, which is liminally homosexual. Yvain secures his wife's permission to leave with Gawain and becomes so bonded with him that he violates Laudine's stipulation to return to her at the end of one year, thereby invoking her jealous rage and rejection of himself, to his immense grief and humiliation.

The intimacy between Gawain and Yvain is underscored by their preferred living arrangements upon returning from a tournament to Chester where Arthur is holding court: "The story tells, I believe, / that neither of the two companions / wanted to take lodgings in the town, / but had their tent set up instead / outside the town and held court there" (2689-93) (*Ce dit li contes, ce me sanble, / que li diu chevalier ansamble / ne vostrent en vile descendre, / einz firent lor paveillon tender / fors de la vile et cort i tindrent* [2689-93]). At the end of their time together, the two men have become so close they withdraw into their own lodgings apart from court. Their presence attracts the best knights, as well, and even the king himself. Ironically, it is then that Yvain remembers his abandoned promise to his wife. Desire for her reasserts itself against his desire for what Gawain desires, the freedom of bachelorhood: his desire to be like Gawain.

Another scene in *Yvain* is also homoerotically suggestive, although it does not accommodate Girard's paradigm since mimetic desire is absent. Rather, the desire of the narrator — and, by extension, the desire of the reader — becomes of interest. Questing on his journey, Yvain comes to a castle ravaged by a savage giant, Harpin of the Mountain. The giant has seized the lord's six sons, nephews of Sir Gawain, and killed two of them before their father's eyes and threatens to kill the remaining four unless the lord can enlist a champion to defend the young men or unless he hands his daughter over to the giant to be raped by the giant's foulest male servants. The scene is sadistic and homoerotic. The giant, accompanied by an ugly dwarf, arrives leading the captives to carry out his threat: "From his neck there hung / a large, squared stave, pointed in front, / with which he often prodded them; / and they weren't wearing / anything worth a straw, / only filthy, dirty shirts" (4094-99) ("Et .i. pel a son col tenoit, / grant et quarré, agu devant, / dom il les bousoit molt sovant; / et il n'avoient pas vestu / de robes vaillant .i. festu, / fors chemises sales et ordes" [4094-99]). Hands and feet bound, the prisoners are borne by four thin and worn-out horses and the dwarf walking beside them "did not stop / beating them constantly / with a six-knot whip...until they were all bloodied" (4108-11) ("ne les fina de batre / d'unnes corgiees a .vi. neuz / ... / Les batoit si que tuït seinnoient" [4108-11]).

The young men's near nudity becomes a trope for their vulnerability: without clothing, let alone without armor, they are defenseless and bound hand and foot they are not only exposed, but denied mobility. Rendered passive before the giant's and the dwarf's male aggressiveness, they are feminized. Whether their condition is erogenous for the giant is uncertain; however, the pointed stave has phallic symbolism. Figuratively, the young men are being homosexually violated while at the same time their sister is threatened with heterosexual rape by the giant's minions. The rape is prevented and her brothers released by Yvain, who defeats the giant cutting off his shoulder and penetrating his liver with his sword. Yvain then sends the dwarf with the lord and his four sons back to Gawain to tell him what happened.

Next, let us take a brief look at a scene from *The Story of the Grail or Perceval*. Here, Gornemant de Gohort (Gornemanz de Goorz) becomes Perceval's mentor and teaches him the fundamentals of chivalry, for Gornemant is skilled in the art: "The gentleman was very experienced / with shield, horse, and lance, / for he had practiced with them since boyhood" (1426-28) ("Li prodrom sot mout de l'escu / Et del cheval et de la lance, / Car il l'ot apris des anface" [1426-28]). Gornemant greets Perceval affectionately and after finishing the lesson walks off with him, the two men hand in hand, older mentor with younger pupil. So taken is Gornemant by Perceval that he

would have been glad to detain him for a year if Perceval had desired further instruction. Perceval, however, must be on his way at dawn. Beds are prepared and the two retire, albeit in separate chambers. In the morning, Gornemant bestows intimate pieces of clothing upon his guest: a shirt, breeches, leggings, and a tunic. Perceval resists accepting these gifts as inferior to the clothes his mother made him, but Gornemant asserts decidedly that they are not: "by my head, yours are worse" (1595) ("foi que je doi ma teste, / ... ainz valent pis" [1594-95]). Although these details may suggest nothing more than a wise and generous-spirited older man's observance of chivalric custom, they seem overly friendly and solicitous, intimate, and seductive.

A reading of the above scene against Girard's theory of mimetic desire is instructive for both Perceval and Gornemant the locus (object) of desire is chivalric expertise and elegance: Perceval wants to become an accomplished knight and Gornemant wants to affirm his own chivalric expertise. Which of the two men is the subject of triangulation and which is the mediator (model) is debatable? Or is the mediator neither but something more abstract? Speaking of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Girard writes that "the disciple [Don Quixote] pursues objects which are determined for him, or at least seem to be determined for him, by the model of all chivalry [Amadis of Gaul]. We shall call this model the mediator of desire" (*Deceit* 2). Gornemant does not have such a finite model, at least not that we are aware of: unlike Don Quixote, he does not cite a paragon of knighthood to his own disciple. Rather, through what he demonstrates to Perceval about the values and skills of knighthood, he achieves the pure knighthood of his desire, his object. Or more explicitly, Gornemant (subject) > instruction of Perceval (mediator) > ideal knighthood (object). The distance, however, between instruction and instructed, Perceval, is close. If it is close enough for the two to be confused and for Perceval, himself, to become the mediator of Gornemant's instruction, then a liminal homoerotic relationship may surface with Perceval being the object of Gornemant's desire. Desire for chivalric expertise provides for Gornemant, in Girard's words, "a means of reaching the mediator" (*Deceit* 53). That being the case, "the desire is aimed at the mediator's *being*" (Girard, *Deceit* 53). It is Proust, Girard reminds us "who compares this terrible desire to be the Other with thirst: 'Thirst — like that which burns a parched land — for a life which would be a more perfect drink for my soul to absorb in long gulps, all the more greedily because it has never tasted a single drop'" (*Deceit* 53). If Perceval is the object of Gornemant's great thirst, then Gornemant's desire is immensely powerful and sensual.

In her discussion of heroic love, Peggy McCracken points out that "the association of prowess and sexual reward is rarely interrogated within courtly narrative — most romances accept this relationship as a natural one. Women desire great warriors, knights desire beautiful ladies; sexual desire is both heterosexual and reciprocal" (125). Challenges to this perception, she maintains, are "usually contained within the narrative by explanations, allegorical appropriations, or triangulated structures of desire" (125). Although these challenges "may trouble the association of prowess and love in medieval romance," she concludes that "they are ultimately incorporated into a narrative structure in which masculine prowess merits the sexual reward offered by the bodies of women" (125). Although this does seem to be the case, a queer eye for affirmation of the homoerotic and homosocial within romance can be rewarded by detection of many episodes which resist heterocentricity. As Pugh observes, "queering genres is not an exclusive tactic of homosexual authors: queering writers realize the potential of the queer to play with, subvert, or undermine the precarious limits of heteronormative identity, regardless of their own sexual orientation ... Against [a] backdrop of an ideological hegemony of heteronormativity, straight authors in search of innovation, shock, and surprise might well turn to the queer" (12). Beneath a heteronormative text can lie homosexual subtexts which, when identified, allow the narrative to speak with greater authority about the whole range of human sexual desire. In conclusion, I postulate that in the works of Chrétien de Troyes beneath Catholic dogma and proscription and beneath a contemporary cultural norm lies an intimation of inexpressible desires, whether or not this was his conscious intent.

#### **Works Cited**

Burger, Glenn, and Steven F. Kruger, eds. *Queering the Middle Ages*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001.

- Burgwinkle, Bill. *Etat présent: Queer Theory and the Middle Ages*. *French Studies* 60.1 (2006): 79-88.
- Chrétien de Troyes. *Erec and Enide*. Ed. and trans. Carleton W. Carroll. New York: Garland, 1987.
- Chrétien de Troyes. *Lancelot or The Knight of the Cart*. Ed. and trans. William W. Kibler. New York: Garland, 1981.
- Chrétien de Troyes. *The Knight with the Lion or Yvain*. Ed. and trans. William W. Kibler. New York: Garland, 1985.
- Chrétien de Troyes. *The Story of the Grail or Perceval*. Ed. Rupert T. Pickens. Trans. William W. Kibler. New York: Garland, 1990.
- Dinshaw, Carolyn. "Getting Medieval: *Pulp Fiction*, Gawain, Foucault." *The Book and the Body*. Ed. Dolores Warwick Frese and Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe. South Bend: U of Notre Dame P, 1997. 116-63.
- Fradenburg, Louise, and Carla Freccero. "Introduction: Caxton, Foucault, and the Pleasures of History." *Premodern Sexualities*. Ed. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero. London: Routledge, 1996. xiii-xxiv.
- Gaunt, Simon. "Straight Minds / 'Queer' Wishes in Old French Hagiography: *La Vie de Sainte Euphrosine*." *Premodern Sexualities*. Ed. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero. London: Routledge, 1996. 155-73.
- Girard, René. *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*. Trans. B. Vincent. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991.
- Girard, René. *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Trans. Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1965.
- Girard, René. *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*. Trans. James G. Williams. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001.
- Irvine, Martin. "Abelard and (Re)writing the Male Body: Castration, Identity, and Remasculinization." *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Jeffrey Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler. New York: Garland, 1997. 87-106.
- Kaiser, Elizabeth. *Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia: The Legitimation of Sexual Pleasure in "Cleanness" and Its Contexts*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1997.
- Klosowska Roberts, Anna. *Queer Love in the Middle Ages*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- McCracken, Peggy. "Chaste Subjects: Gender, Heroism, and Desire in the Grail Quest." *Queering the Middle Ages*. Ed. Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001. 123-42.
- Neal, Derek. *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008.
- Pugh, Tison. *Queering Medieval Genres*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Segol, Marla. "Medieval Cosmopolitanism and the Saracen-Christian Ethos." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 6.2 (2004): <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1230>>.
- Vasvári, Louise O. "Queer Theory and Discourses of Desire." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 8.1 (2006): <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1290>>.
- Williams, James G. "Foreward." *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*. By René Girard. Trans. James G. Williams. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001. ix-xxiv.
- Wilsbacher, Greg J. "Something Queer is Going On: Sex and Methodology in the Middle Ages." *College Literature* 30.2 (2003): 195-203.

Author's profile: Basil A. Clark teaches medieval and early modern English literature including Chaucer and Malory at Saginaw Valley State University. His interests in research include *The Canterbury Tales* and gender issues in Arthurian romance. In addition to numerous articles, his book publications include *Saginaw Valley State University: The Early and Formative Years, 1963-1989* (1998). E-mail: <[baclark@svsu.edu](mailto:baclark@svsu.edu)>