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Queer historicism as literary theory: an exploration of three texts

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QUEER HISTORICISM AS LITERARY THEORY: AN EXPLORATION OF THREE
TEXTS

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Introduction

In the current academic and political climate, inquiry into queer topics and scholarship has become more relevant than ever. The modern world has gradually become more accepting of queer identities, but with that increased awareness has come the task of rediscovering the history and provenance of queer identity. Where did queer culture come from, and what circumstances prompted its creation? The academic field of queer historicism is dedicated to answering precisely that question. It is, however, a field fraught with institutionalized homophobia and scholars who are resistant to change. Queer historical work has been repeatedly marginalized and the work produced by preeminent queer historicists is often controversial at best. Given the divided and fragmentary nature of queer historicist scholarship, it is advisable to return to basics and begin to build a base of reference for queer historicism as a functional literary theory. By establishing queer historicism's credentials and providing examples of its use as an analytical tool, we can begin to pick apart the tangled web of queer historicist scholarship and establish its identity within literary theory.

This thesis will analyze three different texts to display the applicability of queer historicism as a literary analysis: Geoffrey Chaucer's "A Knight's Tale," Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia." In order to explore the applications of queer historicism in an accessible way, this thesis will address each text first via conventional queer theory. Each chapter will begin with an analysis using queer theoretical methodologies before moving on to give an overview of the general socio-political environment surrounding homosexuality in the era in which that text was written. Finally, with both the queer theory and the relevant historical information

addressed, the chapter will conclude with an overview of queer historicism as a literary analysis tool and address the ways in which it differs from the queer theory interpretation. The chapters are arranged in a linear progression, moving from the earliest date of publication to the latest. Readers may note that there is a large gap between the 14th and 18th centuries, and this is due to the enormity of the discussions surrounding homosexual culture and literature in the Early Modern era. To give a fair and weighted opinion on the available scholarship would necessitate its own thesis-length project, so it has been omitted from the timeline for brevity's sake.

The choice of Chaucer, Austen, and Doyle in particular was derived from three key factors. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, they are all British authors. This allows for a more concentrated study of English and European historical attitudes towards homosexual culture and a more consistent narrative as we progress through the centuries. Secondly, all of these authors are beloved staples of the popular canon, and therefore represent an accessible point of entry for discussing new scholarship and theoretical frameworks. This also serves to challenge the popular preconception that queer theoretical work must be limited to identifiably queer authors. Finally, "The Knight's Tale," *Persuasion*, and "A Scandal in Bohemia" are all from different genres and are structurally diverse, representing poetic epics of courtly love, female-driven character study romances, and crime drama serial publications respectively. By addressing such a broad range of mediums, this thesis will serve to further prove the applicability of queer historicism as a valid theoretical framework.

There is, however, an unfortunately limited collection of theoretical work dealing with these texts from either a queer theory, new historicist, or queer historicist

perspective. This is one of the primary motivations for the subject matter of this thesis, but it also presents a unique challenge when assembling the relevant research. A majority of the collected works referenced in this thesis utilize modern, conventional queer theory rather than any form of queer historicism. In the areas of queer theory and philosophy, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work *The Epistemology of the Closet* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* have defined the playing field of queer analysis, establishing the basis on which most of the queer theoretical work currently used in academic analysis is built. Further works on the subject by Ki Namaste and John Ike Sewell have examined the deconstructive possibilities of queer theory and allowed for broader and more interdisciplinary use of queer theoretical principles. Sedgwick's and Butler's work have inspired many other literary scholars in their analysis of the texts included in this thesis, including Elaine Tuttle Hansen's *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, Edward Kozaczka's "Queer Temporality, Spatiality, and Memory in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*," and Pascale Krumm's "'A Scandal in Bohemia' and Sherlock Holmes's Ultimate Mystery Solved." These works provide the groundwork upon which the queer theoretical portions of this thesis are based and represent some of the most relevant work published in the last few decades.

While there are not many literary scholars discussing the use of queer historicism in media analysis, there are three preeminent theorists whose work with queer historicism has provided the most valuable information for the purposes of this analysis. These three authors have each specialized in a particular time period, and their work in collecting, disseminating, and analyzing historical modes of homosexuality is unparalleled. In his work *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, John Boswell has done the

work of compiling massive amounts of historical data and documentation detailing the rise and fall of homosexual subcultures from the Roman empire to the end of the Middle Ages. He is chiefly concerned with the interaction of religion and homosexual desire in the period, and his information regarding specific case examples and narratives of divine love informed a number of the conclusions drawn in the section on “The Knight’s Tale.” Moving forward in time to the 18th century, Rictor Norton’s work has been invaluable in assembling a more complete picture of life for the historical homosexual. His book *Myth of the Modern Homosexual: Queer History and the Search for Cultural Unity* is an essentialist queer historicist manifesto, going to great lengths to challenge and disprove the theses of social constructionism theorists by providing reams of historical evidence. His online sourcebook, “Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England” was also invaluable as a resource for primary source material, featuring everything from newspaper articles to trial proceedings, bawdy poetry, and love letters. The material included in both his book and his online databases was vital in establishing the contemporary attitudes and language modes used in the 18th century, providing a firm basis for the chapter on Austen’s *Persuasion*. Finally, Graham Robb’s book *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century* was the ultimate resource in gathering data on Victorian queer culture, and one of the initial inspirations for this thesis. His empathetic, wide-ranging, and expertly researched treatise on historical modes of homosexual behavior provided the necessary documentation to examine the legal and medical realities of life as a Victorian queer in the section dealing with Doyle’s “A Scandal in Bohemia.” All three of these authors are essentialist queer historians, and their vast amounts of effort compiling source material and combing through thousands of

historical documents has enabled the scholarly literary analysis contained within this thesis. Their theories provide the basis for the following work.

The first chapter will develop and explicate the theory of queer historicism and serve as a guideline for its later application. The process will begin with queer historicism's antecedents — queer theory and new historicism — and examine how these two theories combine to shape the unique methodologies of queer historicist analysis. This section will also touch on the ongoing conflict between those queer historians who adhere to social constructionist philosophy and those who adhere to essentialist philosophy and attempt to explain the roots of this conflict and the impacts it has had on queer historicism as an academic discipline. This includes a brief case study in how essentialist theorists and authors have been ostracized from mainstream queer theory and outlines the reasoning behind highlighting essentialism as a core tenet of this thesis.

The second chapter begins our study of historical literature in the 14th century, with Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale," the courtly romance featuring a trio of lovers taken from *The Canterbury Tales*. To lay the groundwork for later queer historical analysis, this chapter will first establish an argument for a queer theoretical reading of this text. This analysis will touch on the characters of Arcite, Palamoun, and Emelye and facilitate queer readings of their interpersonal connections as well as their relationships to gender presentation before moving on to a broader examination of the setting in an exploration of how spatial relations queer the text. After that analysis is complete, the chapter will shift to provide the relevant historical background for medieval England, focusing specifically on the queer experience and on the interaction between homosexuality and the Christian church. Finally, once both the queer theory and

historical information have been established, it is possible to address a queer historical analysis of “The Knight’s Tale” and explain how outlawry, medieval courtly romance, the weight of pagan stories in religious times, and the impact of the crusades all effect a contextual queer reading of Chaucer’s work.

The third chapter brings us forward in time to the late 18th and early 19th century with Jane Austen’s novel *Persuasion*, the story of an unmarried Regency woman suddenly confronted with the presence of a man she was previously engaged to. Beginning again with a queer theoretical reading, this chapter will focus not only on Austen’s challenging perspective on gender performance and physical appearance but also the intersection between queer theory and disability theory as seen in the characters Louisa Musgrove and Mrs. Smith. Once the queer theoretical perspective has been established the historical context section will address the ways in which both tolerance and intolerance were displayed in period newspapers and discuss the particularly queer history of the British Navy. Using that historical information, the section on queer historicism will examine the relationship between the queer institution of naval wives and Anne’s final choice, as well as the historical treatment of queer women and their relative isolation in comparison to gay men. This will provide a new way of addressing Anne’s socially distant experiences and her comfortability with life on the sea.

We finish in the fourth chapter with the late 19th century and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s “A Scandal in Bohemia,” one of his most famous stories featuring the detective Sherlock Holmes. Beginning with a queer theory reading, this chapter will focus on the phenomenon of popularized literature fading from academic scrutiny, discussing how scholarly works featuring queer theory must then turn to popular media adaptations of

classic works for a fuller understanding of their reception and interpretation. This section draws attention not only to textual queer nuance between Holmes and Watson but also the way they have continued to be portrayed as queer in modern film and television adaptations. Following that analysis, the section on historical context illuminates the beginnings of modern homosexual culture in Victorian England and details the process of medicalization that occurred in the 1870's, while also addressing the growing cultural awareness of homosexuality. With this understanding of the queer landscape in the 19th century, the chapter moves to a queer historicist reading of "A Scandal in Bohemia," taking care to address the potential queer character inspirations for Holmes, the period-specific encoded language used to discuss queerness, and the remarkable figure of Irene Adler as a queer disruptor. All of these elements and more combine to form a uniquely queer historicist analysis of the famous detective and his companions.

Chapter 1: Queer Historicism

Queer historicism is a relatively new term, having achieved limited recognition in either historical research or literary analysis. Occupying the territory between queer theory and new historicism, queer historicism orients itself towards uncovering, understanding, and reintegrating queer cultures of the past. Queer theory and new historicism are rarely employed simultaneously because resulting scholarship often invites claims of ahistoricism or concern over ‘rewriting’ history. These fears are often unfounded and result instead in a brand of unsupported, generalized anxiety about change that does not belong in professional academia. There has been a decades-long effort by scholars to find, document, and safeguard the very real queer stories in our history. While this work is far from complete, it nonetheless unveils the reality that homosexual, transvestite, gender-nonconforming, and queer communities have existed for centuries. As Rictor Norton so clearly summarizes in *Myth of the Modern Homosexual*, “Queer readings do not have to be projected backwards – they only have to be rediscovered” (142). We may have been here for a long time, but the academic community has been slow to accept, integrate, and utilize that fact. It is impossible to ignore that, as Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt write, “marginalized identities are often written out of the historical record by those with the privilege of formulating historical truth” (19). This section will detail more thoroughly the methodology of queer theory, discuss the two most popular approaches to queer historicism, and elaborate on its uses not only as a tool for historians and archivists but as a lens for use in literary analysis.

Queer theory’s actively deconstructive principles paired with the practical and traditional bent of new historicist work appear as though they ought to create an

incomprehensible and self-contradictory mess of a theory, but in practice the two theories pair quite beautifully. Queer theory itself is already an inherently intersectional field, often describing the overlap between multiple different subcultural identities. It has a long-standing history in collaboration with race theory, feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and disability or crip theory to name only a few. Concerned with the non-normative, the binary breaking, and the countercultural, queer theory embraces not only the identity spectrum of LGBTQ+ individuals but also that which is strange, peculiar, and challenging. It is a theory focused on homosexual and gender non-conforming presence as well as the interplay between cultural definitions of normal and abnormal: that which is 'queer' in the most traditional sense of the term. Because of this focus, it often plays a highly deconstructive role in literary analysis, occupying a very Derridean, post-structural position wherein queer theory cannot be truly defined and exists in an "infinite state of flux" (Sewell 302). Queer theory, even its most basic form, is constantly shifting, continuously evolving, and impossible to pin down.

The use of queer theory in academia first originated in the AIDS protests and gay liberation movements of the '80s and '90s. Beginning with Queer Nation's reclamation of the word queer in their 1990 pamphlet "Queers Read This," the concept of a queer community rather than atomized individual gay subcultures became popularized. The term "queer theory" was coined by Teresa de Lauretis in 1990 for a conference title, a choice made to purposefully disrupt the terminology "gay and lesbian studies" and open the door for more diverse participation in the field. The early precepts of queer theory were based heavily on Michel Foucault's work on the history of sexuality, and his social constructionist, anti-essentialist point of view. The theoretical field has since been further

developed by such giants in the field as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lauren Berlant, and Michael Warner. It has continued to evolve into a more diverse and deconstructionist field, with works by theorists like Sara Ahmed proposing far more philosophical, spatial modes of queer discourse. Theorists have, however, struggled with the gradual defanging of queer theory's politically charged and deliberately transgressive intentions. In his article, "The Normalization of Queer Theory," David Halperin observes that "as queer theory becomes more widely diffused throughout the disciplines, it becomes harder to figure out what's so very queer about it" (342). Queer theory's broad, interdisciplinary usage also has the double-edged effect of diluting its effectiveness over time and turning it into merely another word for deconstruction. Despite these internal struggles, the use of queer theory in academic work has only grown over recent years, and its continued evolution is the subject of rigorous scholarly debate.

At first glance, this more philosophical, semiotics-focused approach might seem to be the complete antithesis of the grounded, evidence-based new historicist theory, but in reality, new historicism itself is inherently deconstructive. Traditional historicism is primarily concerned with broad, sweeping narratives of history, which inevitably skew white, upper class, Western, and colonial because of the biases most often present in academic historical work. New historicism arose as a way to challenge that way of thinking, seeking to champion "history that is nuanced, imbued with emotion and written from the perspective of ordinary people (indeed, those often considered marginal) who are coping with extraordinary world-changing events" (Hickling 55). This theory's ultimate goal is to allow scholars to admit our own biases in the work we produce and attempt to reduce the impact they produce in historical analysis.

Stephen Greenblatt, the acknowledged creator of new historicism, introduced the first concepts in the 1980s before the theory gained momentum and popularity in the 1990s. Influential scholars in the field include Stephen Orgel, John Brannigan, and Lynn Hunt. This theory is context-driven, recognizing that any interpretations we apply to a text will inevitably be shaped by our current cultural context, just as the original material itself was shaped by the cultural context in which it was created. By endeavoring to establish historical information as faithfully as possible, new historicism contends that we can gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding when these principles are applied to a given text. This theory contains influences of both its traditional historicist predecessor as well as theories of post-structuralism and deconstruction, drawing heavily from Foucauldian principles of social constructionism. There are also a number of scholars who have worked in both new historicist and queer theoretical fields, such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Marjorie Garber, and Michel Foucault himself. Given this range of influences, it is possible to begin to see where queer theory and new historicism overlap and how they might work together.

Queer theory and new historicism both share a deconstructive attitude towards literary work, acknowledging that there is no unified external truth against which to compare individual elements of cultures or texts. Everything is contingent on its context; every product is endemic to its own system and cannot be cleanly removed or wholly interpreted without its original surroundings. This concept is frequently espoused in queer theory as the relevant criteria for queer identity, which social constructionists claim cannot exist in a vacuum. This Foucauldian philosophy believes queerness to be an ever evolving political, cultural, and deeply personal entity continually impacted by the

environment within which it is constructed. New historicism argues that similar criteria exist for any cultural products of a given era, placing emphasis on how the conditions and circumstances of their creation irrevocably shape the final product. It is, of course, possible to interpret these texts outside of their native context, but new historicism argues that we lose something vital and irreplaceable in the process. Queer historicism takes these two complementary principles to their natural conclusion, arguing that queer history cannot be interpreted without an understanding of the historical culture in which it was situated. Attempting to judge, categorize, or even dismiss these stories based on a modern conceptualization of queerness will result in an utter failure to comprehend the material. Queer cultures of the past bear many remarkable similarities to the communities of the 20th and 21st centuries, but we will never successfully uncover the stories of our ancestors unless we approach the surviving material through a culturally and contextually conscious methodology.

Social Constructionism vs. Essentialism

There are two competing perspectives that exist not only in the body of work on queer theory but within the specific field of queer historicism. These rival camps can be reconciled, but more often than not they are pitched against each other in any given academic debate. These groups consist, broadly, of those who believe in a social constructionist model of queer identity, and those who support an essentialist model of queer identity. This thesis will focus particularly on essentialist philosophy, but it is useful to have a thorough comprehension of both groups in order to understand both the covered material and the current state of the academic field.

The theory of social constructionism as it relates to queer theory, and later queer historicism, was popularized by Michel Foucault in his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. In this work he attests that the homosexual identity was created along with the advent of the term “homosexual” in the 1870’s. This period in particular saw the rise of medicalization of homosexual intercourse, same-sex attraction, and gender-nonconforming behavior, prompting a veritable Cambrian Explosion of patient interviews, medical textbooks, and pseudoscientific theorizing. Subsequently, this terminology entered the medical vernacular, then the popular vernacular, before evolving into the terms we are the most familiar with today. Before that time, Foucault argues that homosexual ‘activities’ were executed, but that the subcultural identity did not become a fixed object until it was named, or as he says, “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration, the homosexual was now a species” (43). This attitude inspired a significant quantity of the work which has already been completed on historical queer culture, and often leads to conclusions that queer history is too vague and unknowable to even be called queer history, and that historical figures fall too far outside our modern conceptualization to ever be successfully identified.

What the historical evidence shows, however, is that the invention of the term ‘homosexuality’ had much less to do with identity creation, and much more to do with a shift from religious persecution to secular criminalization. It was not a bold new frontier for gay individuals rather “the terminological shift to ‘homosexuality’ from ‘sodomy’ was . . . a shift to a conception of same-sex desire as pathological and pedophilic rather than sinful” (Wade 290). This does not even begin to cover the lack of scholarly attention towards queer women and gender non-conforming individuals and their process of

identity creation during both the Victorian medicalization boom and the modern historical efforts to contextualize it. When it comes to categorizing homosexuality, it may not be as easy as identifying and dating the language we use to describe it.

The essentialist faction of queer historicism challenges the idea that queerness was fragmented and incoherent prior to its codification in the 19th century and instead argues that queerness is an essential expression of the human experience. This theory acknowledges that subcultures do define themselves in opposition to the dominant culture while also challenging the idea that same sex attraction and gender non-conformity arise purely from cultural exposure. Put simply, there are queers no matter where or when you are, whether the names they do or do not choose to call themselves are familiar to us or not. It is the unfortunate reality that many arguments against essentialism stem from homophobic and transphobic sentiments, ranged against the idea that these concepts are anything more than a “social contagion” spread via subcultural propaganda. In reality, this theory is protective and celebratory, intent on centering real, lived, queer experiences rather than the draconian laws against them. Rictor Norton, a stalwart proponent of essentialist queer historicism summarizes it beautifully: “Queer history is about queer experience, not about straight attitudes; queer history is about love among queers, not laws against queers; queer history relies more on information *from* queers than information *about* queers” (132). While social constructionism remains a fascinating and useful facet of queer theory and queer historicist scholarship, it has yet to respond to the changing times and the continual discovery of evidence left by a queer past. It is entirely possible for these two facets to work together, but for now they remain definitively at odds.

This conflict is made shockingly clear by the attitudes surrounding queer historical work that does not obey the precepts of social constructionism. The field of historicism remains, despite the advent of new historicism, a field built upon white, heterosexual, cisgendered, male, Anglo-Saxon, Christian, and Western sensibilities. The need for diverse representation within academia is more pressing than ever, and unfortunately many institutional barriers remain that impede this progress. Academia on the whole is unprepared to accept emotionality or personal stakes in scholarly work, even if it does not impact the intellectual value of the piece. Unsurprisingly, a majority of queer historicist researchers are themselves on the spectrum of queer identity, and this fact alone is frequently used to counter any and all claims said researcher may introduce. Even books that are widely considered anti-feminist theory and anti-queer theory in their attitudes, such as Allen Frantzen's *Before the Closet*, were excoriated for their perceived bias merely because the author themselves identified as homosexual (Wade 297).

The reception to noted queer historicist John Boswell's book *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* is a standout example of this kind of homophobic backlash. Published in 1994, fourteen years after the release of his award-winning book *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, his final work was broadly condemned as ahistorical, biased, and shoddily supported. Boswell, himself a gay and religious man, put in an enormous amount of work tracking down, translating, and compiling a broad range of primary sources to support his theory that same-sex unions in the Middle Ages were occasionally ritually codified through Christian rites of brotherhood. The reception to his scholarship was vitriolic, condescending, and suspicious, with one review concluding that Boswell's book "creates a world that never existed, misrepresents Christian practice, and

distorts the past” (Wilken 26). Few reviewers defended him at the time, and even now articles are tentative when suggesting that his work might warrant a closer inspection. In his 2010 article “On Rereading John Boswell's *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*,” Craig Stephenson concedes that it is a “useful” book, but nevertheless amends that statement by adding that it “suffers from a defensive tone” (10). Boswell has not had the chance to continue to expand on his theses or defend his scholarship, as he passed on due to complications from AIDS in the same year *Same-Sex Unions* was published. It is clear that his work was resonant and relevant to his own life experiences, but his passion and fervor were criticized because of the personal stakes he invested in his scholarship. This is just one example of the kind of tone-policing and blatant queerphobia that queer historicist authors are subject to.

Backlash from other academics is not limited merely to queer individuals proposing theory, but to any scholarship proposing the existence of historical queer identity. Especially prevalent in the ‘80s and ‘90s during the height of the AIDS epidemic, scholars were quick to eschew any historical connection to homosexuality, illness, or remotely queer attitudes. In the 1990s, dozens of academic pieces were published to decry an influx of work representing King Alfred the Great as a homosexual man. The issue with this discourse was that it was entirely fictional: there were no scholars at the time making insinuations about the King, only one non-scholarly article which jokingly referenced the possibility (Wade 282). The extreme reactivity on display in that example is not an isolated instance and it has not been left in the 20th century. Foucault’s theory of social constructionism has been repurposed and refitted to serve as a gay-bashing tool, a stylish rhetoric to denounce the “outdated” ways of essentialists and

espouse the “enlightened” and nuanced methodology of the constructionists (Stephenson 11).

It is precisely the nuance of language, however, that has been lost through repeated misuse of social constructionist theory. Any incidence of vague terminology on the part of historical figures, any recorded denial of queer sensibility, any evidence that a historical relationship may have been more than an explicitly gay, male, sexual and romantic relationship is presented as proof of the unreliability of queer historicism. In short, it is nigh impossible for queer historicism to win. Queer scholarship is framed as either far too personal, suffering from strictly modern perspectives on queer theory, supposing too much based on the available evidence, or being somehow too supportive of the notion that extant time periods had unique ways of expressing variant sexual and gender identities. Queer historicism is a fascinating and useful tool to wield in academic discussion, but its real-world impact and social implications must not be ignored.

Queer historicist literary analysis

We already know how to apply queer historicism to things that are considered “legitimately” queer. What has yet to be done is to use queer historicism as a broadly applicable theory, not for uncovering secret homosexual desires in the heart of Geoffrey Chaucer, Jane Austen, or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, but to analyze the cultural impact of queerness throughout time. Queer theory has often been used effectively to analyze texts which contain no significant evidence of queer identity, instead isolating and discussing elements of non-normativity, liminality, self-conception of identity, and cultural rebellion. There are several excellent examples of this methodology just in the topic areas chosen for this thesis, such as Roberta Magnani’s “Policing the Queer: Narratives of

Dissent and Containment in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*," and Edward Kozaczka's "Queer Temporality, Spatiality, and Memory in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*." Both works analyze their chosen texts through a queer theoretical lens by observing themes of othering, spatial liminality, physical confinement, and social judgement. Queer historicism takes queer theoretical principles a step further, using a new historicist emphasis on cultural relativity to ask how transgressive behavior manifests in the time period in which a text was created and how both those broader philosophical themes of queerness and the more essential realities of gender and sexual expression impact its interpretation.

Queer historicism allows us to challenge the idea that 20th and 21st century queer studies have only now unlocked the universal truth of same-sex attraction, gender expression, and queer identity. The concentrated application of this theory invites the rather more complex and humbling idea that our ability to conceive of these facets of human connection is just as limited and culture specific as those of an 18th century Englishman. These identity matrices will undoubtedly evolve and change, just as they have continued to do up until this point in time. Given that data, it is more practically useful to conceive of the queer community a continuously shifting and adapting set of subcultures that have existed in some permutation throughout recorded history rather than a series of separate phenomenon invented anew every 100 years. This allows not only for a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the past, but also for the modern queer to begin to conceive of themselves as existing within a larger minority with its own history and identity. Rictor Norton compares this to the experiences of other minority identities, including racialized groups, stating that queers too "draw strength from an awareness of

their own culture and history” (6). Queer historicism is not only an undertaking of academic importance, but also a tangible way to give back to a minority group that has faced widespread erasure and loss of identity.

It is clear when evaluating the field of queer historicism as a whole that the social constructionist perspective is representative of a broader theme present in both the modern academic work on queer history and in historical attitudes towards documenting queer life. By centering the medical field’s invention of queer taxonomy, Foucault is implying that homosexual subculture could not exist until the dominant hegemony acknowledged it and legitimized it in some way. A broad, culture-wide term in popular circulation is only a marker for change on a mainstream level and in no way indicates whether or not that subculture existed beforehand. Queerness in the West has been penalized legally, socially, and physically for centuries. Records of queer existence have been purposefully and willfully erased, the remnants of queer culture have been forcefully sent underground, and at best queerness has been silently and knowingly ignored. Is it any wonder now that scholars find it difficult to find incontrovertible evidence that we existed prior to the 20th century? It has been posed to us that the only records that remain are records of queer prosecution, queer medicalization, and queer execution. In fact, those are merely what the academy has deemed acceptable and appropriate evidence of queer existence. New evidence of queer joy, queer love, queer life, and queer culture continues to be uncovered, and it is no longer possible to ignore the reality that we have always been here. Responsible queer historicism embraces that fact and allows us to read between the holes in the library stacks and the archival databases and elevate the queer histories that survive.

Chapter 2: Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale"

The application of queer theory to medieval studies has long been a subject of controversy and debate. Due to the previously mentioned prevalence of social constructionist principles in premodern historical scholarship and the undeniable presence of homophobic and transphobic sentiment, medieval literature has not developed a large catalogue of queer theoretical scholarship. In his article "Skeletons in the Closet: Scholarly Erasure of Queer and Trans Themes in Early Medieval English Texts," Eric Wade attests that "rather than becoming increasingly aware of same-sex desire and gender nonconformity over the last two hundred years, medievalists have moved from acknowledging these themes to suggesting that they are ahistorical and anachronistic" (283). This attitude can be seen in queer historicist work but seems to be especially concentrated in anything predating the modern era. In Chaucerian scholarship specifically there have been fascinating analyses done on the homosocial and homosexual subtexts in such stories as "The Knight's Tale" but almost all of them focus on a purely modern queer theoretical lens, and do not attempt to analyze the text using queer historicist modalities. A critical analysis of "The Knight's Tale" through the lens of queer historicism must necessarily include both an examination of the individual characters and their queer readings from a modern perspective as well as a broader analysis on the more subtle cultural queerness present in the events, social structures, and themes of the tale itself.

The Story

"The Knight's Tale," chronologically the first story from the larger collection of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, concerns the story of Arcite and Palamoun and their

shared adoration of the woman Emelye. The two men are cousins, knights injured on the battlefield fighting against Duke Theseus of Athens. Being discovered by Duke Theseus' troops alive and of obviously noble birth, the two are taken as prisoners of war and locked in a tower overlooking the duke's estate. While there, they are able to peer into Theseus' garden and observe his wife's sister Emelye there. They both fall madly in love with her and enter into a feud over her affection. Arcite's sentence is reduced from imprisonment to exile when a visiting friend vouches for him to Duke Theseus, while Palamoun remains locked away. Arcite disobeys the terms of his release and enters the duke's court in disguise as a servant. Years later, Palamoun himself breaks out of prison and chances across Arcite in a grove outside of the city. They agree to fight over Emelye the next day but are interrupted in their duel by the duke's hunting party. After persuasion by the ladies present, Duke Theseus does not punish the men but instead sanctions their duel on a much grander scale. One year later they are to return with 100 men each and battle each other in a tournament, to be fought in an arena erected on the same site. At that appointed time Theseus throws a great feast, and the triumvirate all go to their chosen deity to pray for their desired outcome. Arcite prays to Mars for victory on the battlefield, Palamoun prays to Venus for victory in love, and Emelye prays to Diana to allow her to remain single and virginal. After the fight, Arcite is declared the victor, but due to an intervention from the god Saturn, who has been persuaded by Venus to help her chosen suitor, he is killed by a freak accident. His final wish is for Emelye and Palamoun to marry. After he is mourned and celebrated as a great hero, Duke Theseus sanctions his sister-in-law's marriage to Palamoun, and they are wed.

Modern Queer Theory

To analyze the larger thematic elements of “The Knight’s Tale” using queer theory, it is useful to first discuss the characters themselves. A significant portion of the academic work relating queer theory to this text focuses on Palamoun and Arcite, placing them in the same position of importance as the story itself does. They are the primary subjects of this story, the pawns which both Duke Theseus and the gods themselves move throughout the narrative to create tension and intrigue. Emelye’s presence serves as the inciting incident; she is the object which motivates them to move from act to act, but she is not allowed to play an active character role in this story. From the perspective of feminist theory there are many angles to approach her agency — or lack thereof — but applying a modern queer theory reading allows for fascinating analyses of all three of these characters and their ill-fated love triangle.

Arcite and Palamoun are established from their first introduction as an inseparable pair. They are found “liggyng by and by,” not wholly dead or wholly alive, and their bodies are rescued together, carried together, judged together, transported together, and imprisoned together; as cousins and sworn brothers they are a single unit (Chaucer 1011). The language throughout this section is reverential and serves only to emphasize their closeness, the tone evoking “a fond poignancy often reserved for lovers” (Ingham 26). Their devotion to each other, so clearly illustrated in the text of the tale, heightens the tragedy of their separation and eventual rivalry. Fate, an ever-present force within the story, has conspired to drive them apart with the violent force of their love for Emelye, and in the process it will sunder this admirable brotherly bond.

Their respect, admiration, and love for each other could certainly be attributed to their relationship as cousins and their profession as knights of Thebes that serve together,

but that is not the only interpretation available to us. If one chooses to read them as having either engaged in or wishing to engage in a sexual or romantic relationship with each other, their motives and frustrations become laden with double meaning. Their mutual love at first sight upon spying Emelye can subsequently become the most convenient outlet for their frustrated and repressed desire for each other. If these characters are struggling with repressed identities and wish to express love for each other outside their normative chivalric codes, Emelye presents an attractive safety valve to release those homoerotic tensions. There is a concept in queer anthropology known as compulsive heterosexuality, a phenomenon occurring in closeted queer folk who feel pressured to feel attraction to members of the opposite gender. This can exhibit itself in “crushes” on conventionally attractive and unreachable celebrities that are “safe” due to their unattainable nature. A controversial concept in itself, it is still possible to frame the knights’ attraction to Emelye in such a light, reframing their immediate rivalry as an expression of sexually charged tension and repression. It is far safer to transfer those feelings of lovelorn pining onto a conventional and safe object of desire rather than allowing them to rest on each other in an illicit show of affection.

Further exploring themes of repression and violent redirection of passionate feelings, analysis will naturally fall upon the fight in the grove outside Athens. The fight itself is easy to construe in a homosexual light; violent metaphors are used throughout *The Canterbury Tales* to describe sex, and there is certainly detectable innuendo in a clandestine “swordfight.” Even in the midst of this violent “penetrating” act, and despite their declared mutual animosity, the knights exhibit a great deal of care for each other. It is easy on one hand to interpret this as Chaucer’s satirical exaggeration of chivalric

codes. How utterly noble to the point of ridicule is the act of clothing, arming, and feeding your enemy the night before you are meant to battle him to the death? However, a queer reading of this scene yields some very interesting results. Again, we see the theme of emotional repression released in externalized bouts of passion. Here their declarations of love for Emelye have escalated to the physical and they are ready to fight the other in mortal combat to prove their worthiness and eliminate their opponent. As Hansen describes, there is a mutual understanding between them prior to the fight that they are each “a man who betrays male bonds in order to pursue (uselessly) his identity through heterosexual love” (212). In a less seriously minded reading, this could additionally become a humorous and double entendre-laden joke at the expense of the knightly profession and the homosociality codified within it. All three interpretations leave the reader with the distinct impression that something queer is going on.

The time and place of this encounter have interesting connotations as well. Arcite has left to go “maying,” the practice of observing springtime by wandering throughout the countryside and taking in the delights of nature. Maying, coincidentally, is also historically a time where lovers have ample opportunity to engage in trysts and out-of-doors clandestine meetings. Intentional or otherwise, the act of Arcite and Palamoun meeting in a grove during a maying, whereupon they promise to fight but also share an evening together with food and drink, frames their meeting as not only violent but sexual in nature. Arcite emphasizes this chivalric caretaking by saying too that he will “bryngen harneys right ynough for thee / And chese the best and leve the worste for me” (Chaucer 1613-1614). In the midst of proposing a fight to the death, Arcite goes out of his way to provide Palamoun with better armor than himself, personally ensure that he consumes

both meat and drink, and double check that he has appropriate bedclothes for his night in the woods. There is an ideal of servitude exemplified here, the worth of which we see emphasized multiple times throughout the text, as the knights' mutual wish is to "love and serve" Emelye (64). This mirrors the established tradition of courtly love, that love and service go hand in hand. Here, instead of its typical portrayal as an act of devotion from a knight to his love, we see servitude as a chivalric and brotherly act, tacitly implying that this act of great service must also suppose the presence of a great love.

The examination of queerness within Chaucer's characters would not be complete without a discussion of Emelye. A difficult character to analyze due to her lack of dialogue and agency in the text, Emelye nonetheless presents a fascinating potential for queer reading. Queer theory encompasses not only the explicitly gay, but all that falls outside the binaries of gender, sex, and sexuality. Here she breaks with tradition by going praying to the gods to prevent her marriage, refusing to go into a heterosexual coupling that she does not consent to without some measure of protest. She is defying not only the expectations her culture has placed on her sexuality, but also those placed on her gender.

Emelye presents a willfulness that could be interpreted as quite masculine by the precedents set in the text. She does not plead to the duke to change his mind about the marriage but goes straight to the gods themselves to intervene. It is established in the story that men do, and women plead. Twice Theseus is swayed by the supplication of a female audience, and on each of these occasions it is not the act of the women begging that Chaucer highlights, but the magnanimous consent of Duke Theseus to listen to them. The women may propose the action or feel the first prickings of mercy, but Theseus must execute the subsequent actions inspired by these thoughts. Here then, in contrast, Emelye

is taking charge of her own fate with the tools available to her. She refuses to plead to a man, and instead turns to a fellow woman, a goddess of the green spaces she loves so much, and attempts to gain agency over her situation.

Even once she is given the news that the affairs of the gods are bigger than her own struggles she does not concede her ability to choose for herself, asking Diana to “sende me hym that moost desireth me” (Chaucer 2325). She may be married off to the winner of the tournament, but she is immediately stating her preference for a love match. What could be read as a lack of will or assertiveness could also be interpreted as clever adaptation. She is not expecting powers or privileges she knows she does not have, but is instead exerting her control in intelligently subversive ways. She is a stranger in a strange land, and her lack of interest in marriage paired with her quiet assertiveness only serve to emphasize her externality and queerness.

We also know that Emelye spends the majority of her time in the gardens of the castle, even though in her prayer we hear her longing for wild spaces and the hunt. These desires for traditionally masculine activities serve to further emphasize her nonconformity. When there is little information on a character, that which is provided becomes all the more important. The majority of Emelye’s lines in this tale are pleas to avoid marriage and live a life free to pursue the masculine Amazonian pastimes she so loves. With all this information, we can deduce that her foremost desire is the life of a wealthy male bachelor: freedom from traditional feminine expectations of marriage and childbirth, and the ability to participate in forest-craft without restraint.

While Emelye may be a character of few words in this story, what we do know about her speaks volumes. We know that Emelye is an Amazonian, a warrior woman, and

that she has come to Athens with her sister, who has been taken as a spoil of war. The Amazons are established in historical literary tradition as “the epitome of unruly femininity. . . agents of chaos who threaten the heteronormative order predicated upon manly governance and female silencing” (Magnani 93). They are the transgressors, the queers who must be effectively contained, and over which Theseus gains victory. We are told on the very first page that Theseus has both “conquered” and “wonne[n] the regne of Femenye” (Chaucer 866). This land of warrior women has been efficiently dominated by the ever-conquering Duke, and their agency and power are taken away before they have even had the chance to be established. Immediately these characters are externalized and marginalized. They are the subjects that Theseus conquers, and the objects carted home as trophies, foreign queer bodies imported from exotic lands. There is no real need to argue for the existence of a queer otherness to this character; it is presented to us in the first few lines of the tale itself.

Now with an established reference point of the individual characters’ relation to queer theory, it is possible to examine the broader queer themes present in the text itself. “The Knight’s Tale” is noted for its specific and excessive use of structure, an identifiably different format than the rest of the tales. This serves “The Knight’s Tale” well; the focus on consequences resulting from characters’ actions, the wheel of fortune ever turning, and the strict control Theseus exerts on every aspect of the story all serve to mirror and reinforce this structure. This is a tale about justice and fate; it is as structured and predictable as possible with very little room for disruptive behavior or independent actors. Given all of this information — the tale’s emphasis on justice and law, and the

highly structured and immutable fate of the characters within it — the primary characters spend a shocking amount of time on the fringes of society.

Arcite, Palamoun, and Emelye, as illustrated above, are all operating outside the bounds of the dominant culture in “The Knight’s Tale.” From a structural standpoint, this is what makes them active elements in the story, as it is their incongruity and desire for change or transgression that creates the tension that drives the story forward. In a queer theory reading, they are constantly at odds with the expectations placed upon them.

Palamoun and Arcite both defy their eternal imprisonment, Arcite defies his banishment, and they both break the laws of Athens and their sworn oaths of brotherhood. Emelye defies both her prescribed duty to marry whomever Theseus sees fit and the gender roles associated with her position as a noblewoman. A queer reading of this story includes not only homosexual or gender non-conforming interpretations of these characters, but also an acknowledgement of the way their roles in the story itself defy the structure imposed by Duke Theseus and Chaucer himself. They are transgressive not only in their loves and desires, but in their actions and roles within the larger narrative.

Arcite specifically undergoes a physical transformation in this text that allows him to break his exile and return to Athens. He begins to fade away, forced to be apart from his love and suffering exactly as the tradition of the courtly love story dictates he must do. As Elaine Tuttle Hansen puts it, “The transformation that Arcite suffers when he is exiled to Thebes. . . suggests the threat to selfhood and manhood, to both class and gender identity” (211). It is possible to question whose absence truly wounds him the most, Palamoun’s or Emelye’s, but that is not the most notably queer facet of this story.

Arcite takes the most ultimately transgressive action by actively disguising his identity and living under a new name and persona in the same city he was banished from. His change of appearance was mostly involuntary, the result of depriving himself of food and sleep and pining after Emelye, but the choice to utilize it in order to actively deceive others is most notable. His is an inherently queer undertaking. He uses his new looks to pass as an entirely fictional person in front of those who should otherwise know him. He is re-entering society, aware and accepting of the fact that he is an outlaw in mortal peril, and operating under a false pretense to both achieve a forbidden love and hide his illegal identity. He is actively flouting the structures and laws set in place by Theseus and undermining the duke's seemingly total control over his environment, placing the cultural hegemony at risk. The thematic nature of this act is queer, but it does not seem to be an accident that it is also morally questionable or even reprehensible.

Chaucer is not subtle in his attitude that queerness is an undesirable character trait and that it is to be either ridiculed, laughed at, or criminalized. Pugh theorizes that "these particular bonds of brotherhood carried with them the likely possibility of erotic queerness" and that Chaucer's endemic portrayal of brotherly betrayal hints at a "suspicion" of close male friendships in courtly contexts (65). These are not identities usually sanctioned by the church or state, as was established early in this paper, and queer identities are intentionally non-normative and disruptive. Nothing in *The Canterbury Tales* is an endorsement of queer attitudes, merely a subtextual indictment of whatever character or thematic element the queer elements happen to describe. These historical themes can, however, lead us to deeper understandings of Chaucer's canon and the

cultural circumstances which influenced both his personal feelings and choice of subject matter.

Historical Context

In 14th century Europe, attitudes towards homosexuality were almost entirely comprised of rising Christian anti-queer sentiment. The overwhelming religiosity of the period meant that almost all of the dominant cultural attitudes on morality, sexuality, and personal identity were influenced heavily by the precepts of the church. As John Boswell explains,

Between the beginning of the Christian Era and the end of the Middle Ages, European attitudes toward a number of minorities underwent profound transformations. Many groups of people passed from constituting undistinguished parts of the mainstream society to compromising segregated, despised, and sometimes severely oppressed fringe groups. (3)

However, Boswell is very clear in articulating that, in his opinion, this religious intolerance of homosexuality is not solely rooted in specific Christian doctrine, but in a broader cultural move towards conservatism and conformity. In fact, less than 200 years earlier, the church was a remarkably homosexual institution. To understand this shift, it is useful to look at a longer timeline of cultural development through the Middle Ages.

For the majority of the Roman Empire's existence, same-sex relationships were incredibly common and legally unremarkable. It was only during and after the fall of the Empire that the majority of Europe became economically depressed and increasingly ruralized and caused homosexual relations to fall out of fashion. The decentralization of much of the population meant that there were fewer cultural hubs, and consequentially

fewer opportunities to build queer communities. Through a number of factors such as increased stability, population growth, climate change, and advancements in technology, Europe experienced an urban revival beginning in the 10th century. This revival was instrumental in revitalizing the gay subcultures of Europe, and from approximately 1150 to 1250 there was a wave of homosexual art, culture, and literature that “had not been seen in Europe since the first century AD and would not be encountered again until the nineteenth” (Boswell 243). This unexpected, thriving culture of gay love directly challenges modern notions of the medieval period as regressive, backwards, or barbaric.

Perhaps even more challenging is the fact that a majority of the surviving works from this period which dealt in homosexual love were written by, for, and about members of the church. Some of the most enduring and influential love poetry from the High to Late Middle Ages originates from letters between “romantic friends,” a term for a kind of homoerotic, homosocial connection borrowed from the classical period. A large number of these “friends” were clerics, monastic nuns, bishops, and even Christian saints. Exactly how physical some of these relationships became is a detail lost to history, but several letters include very blatant references to intimacy, such as a 12th century nun who wrote “When I recall the kisses you gave me, / And how with tender words you caressed my little breasts” (Boswell 220). A majority of the works penned by medieval clerics touched on the subject of divine love, and explored the sacred connections between individuals of the same sex in a homoerotically religious way. While these erotic relationships were almost always referred to as “friendships,” the level of intimacy, connection, love, and devotion displayed by the participants is on par with the most romantic works of any other age.

It is important, however, not to represent the period as wholly tolerant and accepting. There were still large factions of religious officials who campaigned against the sin of homosexuality and were fierce opponents of its normalization. In 1102 the Catholic Council of London convened under Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, to create ecclesiastical legislation informing the public that in the future sodomy ought to be confessed as a sin (Boswell 215). This, ironically, from Anselm who himself wrote several of the erotically charged letters mentioned above. Rather than imagine an entirely permissive society with no repercussions for homosexuality, it may be more useful to conceive of this period as having happened to occur before the most draconian provisions against homosexual relations. The combination of new, thriving urban environments which allowed groups of individuals to gather together and regenerate subcultures that had long laid dormant and the fact that Christian doctrine had yet to specifically target sodomy as the most heinous of sins created the perfect conditions for this homosexual revival.

This golden era of homosexual visibility did not last and was promptly snuffed out by the 13th and 14th centuries. It is uncertain what factors precisely contributed to the decline in general acceptance and the rise of anti-gay legislation, but there are a few possibilities. Overall, there was a broader cultural shift towards conformity and order, evident in both cultural and religious spheres. This also coincided with the political and religious messaging during the crusades, associating sodomy and homosexual desire with the enemy. Period documents are rife with claims that the “filthy customs of the pagans” were often accompanied by wild and lustful sodomitical tendencies (Boswell 281). Xenophobic and antisemitic dogma was also universally anti-gay, and the oppression of

one group would inevitably lead to a sweeping condemnation of all identities external to the church. Between 1250 and 1300, homosexual acts went from broadly legal in most of Europe to being punishable by death in almost every country. By the time Chaucer was born, homosexual culture was broadly eradicated in medieval Europe, and the brief bloom of tolerance was trampled by religious reform and a punishing fear of nonconformity.

Queer Historicism

With a grounding in the cultural attitudes towards homosexuality during Chaucer's life, we can now turn our attention to the effect this queer historicist information has on an analytical reading of "The Knight's Tale." Several of the themes of gender deviance, homosexual subtext, and general mistrust of the "other" have already been covered in the previous section on queer theory. These are the areas in which queer theory and queer historicism often overlap, as there are a number of similarities between period and modern queer subcultures. This section will elaborate on the areas which fall just outside the notice of most queer theoretical work on the medieval period and use the available historical information to deepen our understanding of this text.

Arcite and Palamoun's fraught relationship is full of queer subtext, as many scholars have already pointed out, but it also contains echoes of Chaucer's recent queer past. The knights' relationship is representative of a homosocial norm in knightly conduct and courtly romances of the period that extends back into that golden era of homosexual literature. These sworn pacts of brotherhood are the subject of much scrutiny and scholarship in queer medieval studies, but it is important to also examine the queer significance they carried to period readers. In the 12th century the French romance *Amis*

et Amiles was highly popular and featured an intensely devoted friendship between two knights whose mutual sacrifices are central to the theme of the story. Developed from older narratives as far back as the 10th century, the story was popularized in the height of the homosexual urban revival and was circulated in France where homoerotically explicit literature was being taught in schools (Boswell 293). Despite being a heterosexual romance story written in the courtly love tradition, it nonetheless bears the hallmarks of the romantic friendships typical of the period. This piece leads us to the question: How many of the stories depicting knights in highly devoted pacts of brotherhood are consciously following in this homoerotic tradition? It is impossible to know precisely, but it is no accident that the genre gained the popularity that it did during this specific time period. While we cannot know what Chaucer's direct inspiration for Arcite and Palamoun's characterization is, it is vital to understand that the narrative tradition they are modeled after is often explicitly homoromantic and homoerotic.

Despite choosing to depict them in "The Knight's Tale," Chaucer questions and satirizes these knightly, erotic bonds for their ambiguity and the liminal space they occupy between the culturally acceptable and the quietly homosexual. During this period, following the literary traditions of romantic language fraught with homosexual undertones, Chaucer may be taking this opportunity to satirize and comment upon the genre's peculiarities. As Pugh elaborates in a chapter addressing this phenomenon in Chaucerian canon, "Brotherhood oaths potentially incarnate both normativity and queerness, as these ideologically sanctioned homosocial pacts allow two men to join in a courtly relationship in which their primary allegiance is to each other" (70). This flimsy boundary between brotherhood and romantic affection viewed alongside the medieval

tradition of erotic friendships illuminates the potential such oaths and relationships have for masking homosexual love and devotion. This makes such relationships naturally suspicious in a culture for which this behavior is non-normative and increasingly persecuted.

As we take the short step from public condemnation to legal persecution of non-normative individuals, it is useful to turn now to the concept of outlawry in medieval England. In her article on Chaucer's use of this legal outcast system in his narratives on chivalry, Carolyn Gonzalez discusses the consequences of being declared an outlaw by the legal system of the time. Once convicted of a serious enough crime, an outlawed individual was deprived of protection under the law, which placed them in a position of danger at the hands of anyone who came across them. The crimes which attracted such rulings ranged from outright criminal activity, to mental and physical disabilities, to heresy and sin (Gonzales 2-3). With such a broad number of potential cases ending in the verdict of outlawry, there are numerous reasons any given individual could end up classified as an outlaw.

In "The Knight's Tale," Palamoun and Arcite are "out of the law" as soon as they appear in the tale. They are prisoners of war, never to be ransomed or returned home, and this state is meant to continue until such indeterminable time as Theseus decides otherwise. Arcite is vouched for by a visiting friend of both his and Duke Theseus, but he is expelled so far outside the law that he is not allowed reentry into the duke's lands. His identity necessitated his physical removal from Athens; it is his very presence that is unlawful. Both Arcite and Palamoun escape even further outside the law at a later date when Arcite breaks his exile by re-entering Athens under a pretense and Palamoun

orchestrates a prison break. At multiple times, in multiple different ways throughout the text, Palamoun and Arcite are outlaws. It is not until Duke Theseus pardons their behavior in the woods and charges them with the task of preparing to fight that they regain any sort of legitimate presence. They are not quite people until he acknowledges them, existing in a transitive state outside of his law but not physically contained within the bounds of their former prison. Both Palamoun and Arcite occupy an area of liminality and an indefinable state of personhood via their outlawed status.

Notably absent both in Gonzales' article and in the previous list of outlawed offenses are any mention of sodomy or transvestism. As discussed throughout the historical context above, the laws against homosexuality in the 1300's were both relatively newly implemented, and far more severe than they had been in the preceding centuries. While the change had not occurred within Chaucer's lifetime, the overwhelming sentiment in Europe for the previous one hundred years had turned increasingly hostile and deadly to those accused of homosexual behavior. In "The Knight's Tale," Palamoun and Arcite are imprisoned because of who they are. As enemy combatants their mere existence is inherently punishable by imprisonment, just as queer existence was punishable by death. These factors, combined with a sufficiently suspicious bond of brotherhood, allow for a distinctly queer historicist reading of their status outside of the law.

The explicit affection between Arcite and Palamoun also exemplifies the Greco-Roman sensibilities suffusing the Athenian setting of "The Knight's Tale." It is impossible to know exactly how much exposure Chaucer might have had to Greek myth, but the mere fact that he is reproducing a variation of a Duke Theseus and Queen

Hippolyta myth indicates he must have had a decently robust understanding. This specific choice of setting has fascinating implications for queer historicist readings of the text.

The origin of so many facets of enduring homosexual culture throughout the ages, Ancient Greece is the epicenter of gay literature and philosophy. For centuries, the act of expressing particular interest in Greek mythology or culture was considered a signifier of homosexual tendencies (Robb 258). The choice to place this courtly romance in a pagan and homoerotically charged environment impacts both the context of the sexuality expressed in “The Knight’s Tale” and its religious overtones.

The courtly love genre itself was inherently challenging to the religious schemas of the time. These popular dramatic romances elevated the kind of passionate love that the Church discouraged even between married couples. Courtly romances are filled with ultimate sacrifices, lovers running mad from the strength of their affections, and healthy young people wasting away from separation. To the medieval church, courtly love “represented the willful (and wicked) subjection of that highest of human faculties (reason) to an unruly passion” (Hood 21). This was also most certainly a condemnation of the sexuality in these tales. As will become increasingly apparent throughout this work, any aberrant sexuality or gender nonconforming behavior is antithetical to the production of hegemonic unity. In other words, anything that doesn’t suit the specific standards of the dominant culture in a given time period is already queer by association. Everything other is also queer. Chaucer, however, successfully avoided the most constricting elements of his own contemporary religious surroundings by placing his romance in an explicitly pagan era, outside of his own cultural expectations.

The 14th century in Europe was an overwhelmingly Christian time period, typified by increasing levels of rigidity and conformity in both social and religious expression. Given this constrictive atmosphere, there is something innately freeing in Chaucer's choice to set "The Knight's Tale" in a pre-Christian era. The pagan gods are not only present in the narrative, but they are also inescapable, interfering in the fairly won contests of man to bring about their own desired results. What, in another tale, might be devout pleas from Christian knights begging for divine intervention from the Christian God are instead pagan rituals executed at the feet of idolatrous statues in polytheistic temples erected to sexuality and gender-bending deities. These knights are warriors of obviously medieval English tradition, uprooted from their context and placed in a heathen world with no Saracens to fight and no God to judge them for their love.

There are, however, potential stand-ins for these heathens within the structure of "The Knight's Tale." The conflict which exemplifies these attitudes is not the one between Athens and Creon which precedes Arcite and Palamoun's capture, but rather the conflict that occurs just prior to the beginning of the tale: Theseus' defeat of the Amazons. These are Chaucer's heathenous population, not made different by function of their religion, but by the function of their aberrant femininity. As has already been established, the Amazonian women are blatantly queer through a queer theory analysis, but so too are they queer in a queer historicist analysis. What changes is the additional historical context: xenophobic rhetoric surrounding foreign conflict used sodomitical and pederastic stereotypes to fearmonger amongst the English populations. The categories of foreigner, pagan, and sodomite were forcibly grouped and subsequently all simultaneously othered and inter-connected. Emelye, in all her pure beauty, is

nonetheless associated with these groups merely by being Amazonian. She is queer not only in the ways already discussed, but via historical propaganda.

There is an additional complicating element regarding the framing narrative of *The Canterbury Tales* when it comes to deconstructing and analyzing it in a queer historicist fashion. The Knight, who leads the rest of the pilgrims in sharing his chosen story, is “a verray, parfit, gentil knyght” who has successfully crusaded in heathen lands abroad. It is unclear exactly how this element may or may not impact any potential queer historicist readings on “The Knight’s Tale,” but deconstructing the framing narrative at this time is a step too far outside the scope of this scholarship. Potential future work could include a deeper examination of the implications within this religious narrative interplay.

Conclusion

Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Knight’s Tale” is a well-researched, deeply plumbed piece of classic literature, so much so that it is not uncommon to see scholars’ question: what is there left to explore? This summary of queer theoretical and queer historicist analyses should indicate that there is, in fact, so much more to be done. The continual suppression of queer historicist thought has left a hole in the patchwork of academic research that this piece can only hope to provide a suggestion on how to begin to fill. Deep, historically grounded queer readings of this text can reveal fascinating information often left out of broader historical work and participate in the effort to promote the preservation of queer history. The work above is only the beginning of a much longer, deeper, and more thorough conversation that must be had within the field of medieval studies.

Chapter 3: Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

Jane Austen's legacy as a writer has inspired a great deal of literary criticism surrounding her most popular works, but *Persuasion* remains relatively untouched in comparison to works like *Pride & Prejudice* and *Sense & Sensibility*. Her final publication, *Persuasion* is a more sedate, mature, and subtle work, focused on the inner life of a single female character rather than an engaging cast of misfits. It is exactly this isolation and self-reflection that makes *Persuasion* a fascinating subject for further analysis. However, much as there is resistance in medievalist circles surrounding the queering of notable canon figures, there is a reluctance to read too queerly into Austen's work for fear of historical misrepresentation. This fear is easily assuaged with appropriate application of queer historicism. With a queer historicist analysis, it is possible to reunite Anne Elliot with her queer contemporaries and situate her within a world of other forgotten women. It is also possible to examine the sea as a transitive, liminal, and queer space by examining the homosexual history surrounding the British navy during the Napoleonic Wars.

The Story

Persuasion begins with a change of the status quo for Anne Elliot and her family. Facing financial pressures, the Elliot family, along with family friend and companion to Anne's sister Elizabeth, the widowed Mrs. Clay, decide to rent out their family home, Kellynch Hall, and move to cheaper accommodations in Bath. The couple they find to lease their home, Admiral and Mrs. Croft, are relatives of Anne's one-time love interest Captain Wentworth. Eight years prior to the events of the novel she was dissuaded from marrying him because of his low social status and lack of funds, despite the fact that

theirs was a love match. Lady Russel, a friend of the deceased Lady Elliot, was the primary advisor behind Anne's decision to refuse Wentworth. Now a successful naval Captain, he suddenly reappears in Anne's life following the presence of the Crofts, and the tension of their previous relationship hangs over their heads. Anne travels to stay with her hypochondriac married sister Mary and her family, the Musgroves. When Captain Wentworth enters their social circle on a visit, the unmarried Musgrove sisters vie for his attention, Louisa far more successfully than Henrietta, who is already in an agreement with her cousin, a local clergyman. On a visit to see some of Captain Wentworth's fellow officers in the seaside town of Lyme Regis, Anne encounters Mr. Elliot, her estranged cousin and heir to the Elliot estate. In a tragic turn of events, on the same trip Louisa has an accident and acquires a severe brain injury, rendering her bedridden and barely herself. After her stay with the Musgroves, Anne returns to her family in Bath and again encounters Mr. Elliot, who makes it clear that he is courting her. She is torn between a potential rekindling of her relationship with Wentworth and the attentions of Mr. Elliot. Lady Russel wants Anne to marry Mr. Elliot, wanting to see her friend's daughter established in Kellynch Hall as she ought to be. It is in visiting Mrs. Smith, an old school friend who has fallen on hard times, that she hears of Mr. Elliot's true character and how he was instrumental in ruining Mrs. Smith's late husband. The Crofts arrive in Bath and tell Anne that Louisa is engaged, but not to Captain Wentworth. Instead, she has fallen in love with one of his friends in Lyme Regis, Captain Benwick, who was there during her recovery from injury. In a visit with Captain Wentworth, his friend Captain Harville, and Musgroves, who have come to Bath to shop for the approaching nuptials, Anne discusses the constancy of a woman's heart and affections. Moved by her speech, Wentworth

leaves a written note for her declaring that his affections remain unchanged. They meet on the street outside and renew their vows of love. They marry, and Anne becomes a naval wife, while Mr. Elliot finds a new match, Elizabeth's companion Mrs. Clay, who will be the future mistress of Kellynch Hall.

Modern Queer Theory

Applied to *Persuasion*, queer theory highlights the societal delineations that are so deeply ingrained in Regency life. There is an identifiable "outside" of this culture, and it takes very little for characters to be shunted into this space. Anne Elliot, being an unattached woman in her late 20s from a socially stunted family, has landed just at the border of this external space and constantly feels the threat of that encroaching boundary throughout the book. Anne is not the only character aware and afraid of this delicate balance, however; the slightly paranoid and over-persuasive machinations of Lady Russell are a testament to what lengths these characters will go to enforce the roles prescribed by the cultural standard. On the other side of this spectrum of performance are the sailors, characters who often range into that queer place external to society – in no small part due to being so often physically distant from cultural centers. They transgress social status, occupy different lifestyle patterns, receive less cultural oversight, and handle the division of gender roles in a unique way. By encountering, and loving, so many of these characters who are comfortable in that unsupervised and queered space, Anne is more keenly aware of the artificiality of the society she is attempting to conform to. By observing the genuine love and respect of two characters inhabiting this queered space, the Crofts, she also receives a positive role model for her own potential life as someone willing to embrace that externality. Through this progression and exploration,

Anne is able to cultivate a better understanding of self, and a true appreciation for those who may be occasionally discomposd in the eyes of society. With the use of a queer theory lens, we can better examine the love, gender roles, and challenges to societal prescriptions within this unconventional romance.

Lady Russell's and the Elliot family's preoccupation with various kinds of performance are evident throughout *Persuasion*, and it consistently impacts Anne's narrative arc. We see it in the very first lines of the book: "Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch Hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the *Baronetage*" (Austen 1). The *Baronetage* contains no information that Sir Walter does not already possess, merely the lineage of his family and their list of patents. It is an empty signifier of status, but it is Sir Walter's most dear comfort and his favorite pastime. His love of performing the expectations of his class, along with his devotion to the aesthetic and fastidious dislike of anything unappealing, expose him as a man almost entirely composed of façade.

When Sir Walter criticizes Anne's appearance and her performance of their social class, it impacts Anne's self-confidence and self-respect and pressures her into appealing to his and her sister Elizabeth's tastes. Lady Russell, in a similar vein, made a surface-level judgement of Anne's attachment to Wentworth. Her argument against their future marriage is predicated on her perception of Wentworth's lack of potential. She does not believe that he can attain desirable ascension through the echelons of Regency society or the ranks of the Navy. In disregarding his ability to succeed, she dismisses his character fully; if he is not successful, he is not anyone. However, by the end of the novel, the preconceptions these characters held about Wentworth are proved to be completely

inconsequential; he is still a good, kind, and successful man whom Anne chooses to marry anyway. By allowing Anne and Wentworth's genuine connection to prevail over the elitist prejudices of Anne's family, Austen does not represent these character traits as being anything other than a flaw.

In inviting comparison between the kind, generous, yet weathered Admiral Croft, whom Sir Walter is ready to despise for the possibility that he might be unpleasant to look at, and the prideful, shallow, and self-centered Sir Walter, Austen is unambiguously condemning Sir Walter's point of view. This novel is not circumspect about reinforcing the theme of appearances deceiving, and right away the idea that beauty has no attachment to goodness is emphasized. That queering of appearance and societal expectation is pivotal in *Persuasion* and highlights a key facet of the externality that is so prevalent throughout the text. Sir Walter and Lady Russell's mutual preoccupation with pitch-perfect performances of gender and social roles leave them vulnerable to deception by practiced actors, exemplified in this text by the characters of Mrs. Clay and Mr. Elliot.

Mr. Elliot, Anne's cousin and potential suitor, is at the center of many of Anne's internal debates around performative love and facile attentions. Lady Russell approves of his adherence to his appropriate gender and class performance rather than choosing to examine the man beneath, whereas Anne immediately registers his mannerisms as too practiced to be entirely sincere. When Anne travels to Bath to reunite with her family she is happy but startled to discover exactly how solicitous Mr. Elliot has been of her father and sister, "Still, however, she had the sensation of there being something more than immediately appeared, in Mr. Elliot's wishing, after an interval of so many years, to be

well received by them” (Austen 146). Lady Russell, on the other hand, is not at all surprised by his behavior, and Anne remarks that she is not surprised that,

Lady Russell should see nothing suspicious or inconsistent, nothing to require more motives than appeared, in Mr. Elliot’s great desire of a reconciliation. In Lady Russell’s view, it was perfectly natural that Mr. Elliot, at a mature time of life, should feel it a most desirable object, and what would very generally recommend him among all sensible people, to be on good terms with the head of his family . . .(Austen 154)

Lady Russell attempts to convince Anne to submit to his courtship, and while Anne is enamored with the idea of taking over Kellynch Hall and stepping into her deceased mother’s shoes, she is quickly put off by the thought that she must engage with Mr. Elliot’s pretense in order to do so. Anne also perceives the modesty and obliging nature of Mrs. Clay as patently false and sees her social ladder climbing for what it is even while her family remains blissfully unaware.

Through these interactions, we are shown that Anne has a visceral and unshakable dislike for the social and romantic games being played around her and that she is consistently out of step with her family because of it. Anne realizes her own preferences towards the end of the novel and has a moment of self-reflection:

She prized the frank, the open-hearted, the eager character beyond all others. Warmth and enthusiasm did captivate her still. She felt that she could so much more depend upon the sincerity of those who sometimes looked or said a careless

or a hasty thing, than of those whose presence of mind never varied, whose tongue never slipped. (Austen 170)

This is one of the many ways in which Anne does not adhere to the precepts of sex and gender so carefully laid out for her, and it deftly shows the reader how far she sits outside the standard societal perspective.

Anne's outsider perspective also renders her one of the most practical, reality-based, and competent characters in the text. While her peers and family are primarily concerned with the production of an appearance of goodness and civility, Anne is actually doing kind acts. Anne's sister Mary consistently desires a more convincing performance of affection from her family, but simultaneously undervalues the actual presence of Anne's consistent and tangible care. In the case of Louisa's accident, while genuine feelings of panic and anxiety abound amongst the other members of the party, only Anne is sensible and level-headed enough to direct the necessary emergency care. She is the one most consulted in Lady Russell's budgeting for the Elliot estate, she is the caretaker of Mary's injured child, and she is the most desired nursemaid for Louisa during her illness; in almost every instance of her life, she is performing an act of service or providing an element of usefulness. She is placed within this inherently lower-class position as an unwed woman, but the manual labor that is so external to Regency culture has made her the most valuable member of her peer group.

The sailors represent a subculture that does not need to adhere so strongly to cultural norms, and they become a complicating presence in Anne's life because of it. They are more externalized than even Anne herself, and we see parallels drawn between her and the sailors in Lord Elliot's immediate condemnation of an Admiral as a potential

tenant. In his tirade he says “it is in two points offensive to me; First, as being the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction . . .and secondly, as it cuts up a man’s youth and vigour most horribly” (Austen 19). His complaints regarding the inability of naval officers to meet his standards of aesthetic and class mirror those same complaints he has of Anne no longer being in the bloom of her youth, and therefore not likely to marry and be written down in his favorite book, *The Baronetage*. They are immediately cast as narrative parallels, a device used not only to show the suitability of Captain Wentworth as a husband but to highlight where her intended found family lies. She is not part of the culture of the Elliots; she is part of the culture of the sea.

Illustrating that distinction even more clearly are the Admiral and Mrs. Croft. Their genuine affection and regard for each other are presented in stark contrast to the shallow shows of affection exhibited by members of Anne’s inner circle. In this way, it is entirely possible to view the Crofts as a queer relationship in relation to the other modes of marriage in the text. Again, the production of seemly attraction is more valued in this society than the need for any genuine appreciation between partners. It is almost more shocking to find a couple who are in love and content to keep each other’s company than a couple who perform decorous love in public. By subverting this standard and quite obviously enjoying each other’s company, the Crofts become transgressive in their affection. So too does Mrs. Croft become gender-variant as a seafaring woman and wife of an Admiral. She has spent a considerable amount of her life surrounded entirely by men aboard her husband’s ships, an unthinkable kind of isolation for an upper-class Regency woman, and she not only welcomes that state of affairs but prefers it to being left ashore. She does not conform to the markers of gender performance laid out so

precisely in her culture which remain preserved in published books of etiquette designed to train well-bred young women for their respective roles. One such text, William Kenrick's *The Whole Duty of a Woman*, "denigrates women who express sexual interest," which also calls into question Mrs. Croft's unmasked affection for her husband, and her desire to be close to him (Rhone 3). Her lived experiences show her to be made of the same practical and world-wise stuff as Anne and create a parallel of external womanhood in contrast to the nubile young debutantes Henrietta and Louisa. The sexuality and gender expression displayed by the Crofts, while relatively unremarkable by modern standards, are notably queer when situated within a Regency context.

Focusing on the interdisciplinary aspect of queer theory, there is a remarkable overlap within *Persuasion* between queer theory and disability theory. The themes of containment, isolation, othering, non-normative presentation, and cultural disdain are mutually resonant. Anne spends a significant amount of time within the story nursing others back to health. She is called to her sister Mary's house to attend to one of her many hypochondriac episodes, and while there becomes the primary nursemaid for Mary's wounded son when he suffers an injury. She becomes a genuine friend to Captain Benwick; she is the primary voice of reason and source of aid when Louisa has her accident; she is the one friend who continues to visit and socialize with Mrs. Smith despite her poverty and disability. Because Anne is *Persuasion's* central character and she herself is kind and empathetic, it frames these sick characters as being similarly sympathetic. We are encouraged to care for their well-being because Anne does. Anne is our gateway into perceiving these external characters as similar to herself, individuals who are also adrift on the fringes of society in that queer, liminal space.

Louisa Musgrove is the first central character to become injured in the space of the text. While the injury of Mary's son precedes and foreshadows her fall, it is not handled with nearly the narrative weight of Louisa's accident. From a genre perspective, it makes complete sense for Anne's primary romantic rival to be disposed of in some dramatic fashion, and a tragic injury is perfectly on par with romance conventions of the time. What stands out in the case of Louisa is, once again, the narrative compassion shown for her situation and the distinct lack of satisfaction her removal from Wentworth's life brings to Anne. Louisa is framed as a headstrong and impulsive girl but certainly not a spiteful or mean-spirited one – not a suitable enemy for someone as accommodating and non-confrontational as Anne. Because she is not set up to be the villain of the piece, her accident does not read as karmic punishment for daring to be a secondary character in a monogamous romance novel. Instead, it is a startling and upsetting tonal shift away from a period of delighting in newfound societal connections to crisis management and anxious grief.

Most startling and genre-defying of all is that Louisa is not punished with single life for becoming disabled. Being ill or physically disabled is often wielded as a subtextual tool, meted out to characters that the author decides either deserve to be hurt or who need to serve the narrative by suffering bravely. Louisa's injury serves a purpose within the text, but she is not treated merely as a plot device once she becomes injured. After she is recovered, she is allowed to continue to be an active player in Austen's world, rather than a prop or martyr to be appropriately pitied. She is not relegated to a non-sexual and unfeminine figure either, and while it occurs off the page, her engagement with Benwick is written to be a genuine love match. She gets to keep her

womanhood and her sexuality even with a traumatic brain injury that has left her with lasting physiological and psychological marks. Romance and sexuality for disabled individuals is an inherently queer thing, as once again the cultural ideal of what a marriage ought to resemble has been challenged. Both Louisa and Benwick are disabled, Benwick suffering from depression and even possibly Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and their affections arose for each other not out of society balls but out of intimate personal time spent together. They do not marry for social convenience but for mutual affection, placing them in that queer category of couples alongside the Crofts, Anne, and Wentworth.

The character perhaps impacted most by disability and othering in *Persuasion* is Mrs. Smith, the widowed school friend of Anne who suffers from a chronic illness brought about by rheumatic fever and who has no monetary means to treat it. With no recourse to make her own income and no inheritance left by her deceased husband, Mrs. Smith is reliant on her friends for any unmet needs. Despite this poverty of wealth and social connection, she is one of the more cheerful and contented characters in *Persuasion*. While Mrs. Smith has been defined by others as “old and sickly” and a “disgusting associate,” she is able to advise Anne in her hour of need because of, not in despite of, her disability (Austen 166). It is her status as a figure outside society, a wise outcast, that allows her to perceive the true character of Mr. Elliot and warn Anne of what she has seen. It is precisely because of her externality, both disabled and queer in this way, that she provides value to both Anne and the narrative.

Through all of these events, Anne is drawn to these injured and ill characters, not only as a nurse but as a confidant and friend. It is not completely irrational to posit that

Anne herself may experience some symptoms of PTSD — such as heightened reactivity to the presence of certain persons, social withdrawal and personality sublimation, and periods of intense emotion following triggering events — and therefore relate intimately with the struggles shared by both her veteran and civilian companions. Even disregarding armchair diagnoses of fictional characters, Anne shares a connection with these disabled individuals through their mutual continual isolation. She too is denied opportunities and support that others are given freely, and she faces much of the same stigma and societal disregard as her disabled friends. This air of invisibility is exactly that queer otherness that Anne feels so deeply throughout the text. Throughout the text, Austen highlights those who are left behind by the culture that values, above all else, an individual's ability to conform. These non-conformist, queer characters are the heart and soul of her story.

Historical Context

In the transition period between the 18th and 19th centuries, the general attitude towards queerness in European countries remained much the same as it was in previous centuries. Increased urbanization meant that queer communities were still able to locate each other in some instances, but public opinion was low and legal persecution was high. The most distinct and noteworthy change over the hundreds of years since the medieval period is the proliferation of publicly available newspapers. Scandalous, and rabidly popular as gossip material, sodomy and crossdressing trials were highly publicized spectacles during the time period in which Austen was writing. The use of a pillory as part of the sentencing for these crimes also meant that the punishment of these individuals was a public activity, and there are multiple reports of queer individuals dying in the wooden shackles after being viciously assaulted by gathered mobs.

Because of this increased visibility, the majority of the documentation that survives is in some way related to criminal proceedings rather than the personal lives of queer individuals. In his article on homosexuality in the 18th century, Randolph Trumbach summarizes this succinctly, saying, “The principal source of information on sodomy always came from the printed trials, which with their accounts of rapes and robberies were a kind of legitimized pornography” (13). This legal focus is inevitable when dealing with a secretive, persecuted subculture, but relying too heavily on material dealing only with crime can skew modern perceptions of historical homosexual society. This section will endeavor to balance the virulently hateful criminal records with more even-handed and bibliographic period information, to avoid, as Rictor Norton puts it, “failing to distinguish adequately between homosexuality and homophobia” (134).

Many of the trials of this period were covered in the most vile and vitriolic tone, with nothing but the utmost disdain expressed for the accused. In 1792, a scandal involving the arrest of an entire community of crossdressers garnered a great deal of news coverage, the main article of which opened with this provocative description: “Tuesday a gang of the most infamous wretches that ever disgraced society, were brought before W. Addington, Esq. and charged with being persons of the most notorious and abandoned characters, committing, with impunity, every species of offence, both against laws, moral, and divine” (“Newspaper Reports”). This morally outraged narrative was commonplace when it came to trial coverage and is representative of the usual media attention that such individuals garnered. Other media coverage included fearmongering pieces designed to assist readers in detecting homosexuals in the wild, a practice that would continue to be built upon in the coming century. These pieces included places to

avoid, such as St. James Park, and a codex of how to decipher the non-verbal homosexual cruising language. One article offers a list of possible signs: “If one of them sits on a bench, he pats the backs of his hands; if you follow them, they put a white handkerchief thro' the skirts of their coat, and wave it to and fro; but if they are met by you, their thumbs are stuck in the arm-pits of their waistcoats, and they play their fingers upon their breasts” (“Madge Culls”).

Not all trials were used solely as grounds to bash the queer defendants, however. A shocking series of testimonies from 1732 concerning one John Cooper, an individual accused of crossdressing and attempting to solicit a man for gay sex, revealed far more community support than one might expect from the time period. These testimonies came from a local washerwoman and from Mary Poplet, the proprietor of a public house in the area. Both women attested that almost everyone in their neighborhood knew of Cooper’s crossdressing and knew them by the name “Princess Seraphina.” Mary Poplet’s speech is such an affirmative and supportive statement that it deserves to be repeated here,

I have known her Highness a pretty while, she us'd to come to my House from Mr. Tull, to enquire after some Gentlemen of no very good Character; I have seen her several times in Women's Cloaths, she commonly us'd to wear a white Gown, and a scarlet Cloak, with her Hair frizzled and curl'd all round her Forehead; and then she would so flutter her Fan, and make such fine Curt'sies, that you would not have known her from a Woman: She takes great Delight in Balls and Masquerades, and always chuses to appear at them in a Female Dress, that she may have the Satisfaction of dancing with fine Gentlemen . . .I never heard that she had any other Name than the Princess Seraphina. (Norton 134)

Not only does Poplet seem to openly admire Princess Seraphina, but she also specifically chooses to refer to her with female pronouns. This account is a small glimpse into the possibility of far more tolerant world of the everyday queer citizen in the 18th century. As is proposed to be the case by some queer historicist scholars, it would seem that life outside the highly publicized criminal proceedings may not have been so deeply intolerant as we imagine it to be.

Further proof of this slowly increasing level of tolerance can be found in other types of period news coverage which lauded some remarkable queer individuals. Some of the most well-known historical queers from this time period are the Ladies of Llangollyn, Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Sarah Ponsonby, two women who refused all offers of marriage and left their family estates to live together. Newspapers of the time referred to theirs as a case of “extraordinary female affection” between women who “bear a strange antipathy to the male sex.” However, even these milder terms caused the women to reach out to a local politician to solicit his advice on taking legal action against the paper for libel (“Extraordinary Female Affection”). The two women were adamant that their relationship was a platonic one, but even famous historical queer figures, such as Anne Lister who visited the ladies in 1822, doubted the veracity of that claim. The true nature of their relationship has been the subject of debate in both 18th century literature and modern queer historicist and social constructionist circles. Some argue that their relationship was merely platonic, but some believe the insistence on the purity of their relationship is a form of “retroactive censorship” (Robb 116). Regardless of the exact formulation of their relationship and affection towards each other, the advertisement of their purported chasteness was non-threatening enough and their attitudes so were

charming and placid that they were the ideal poster children for acceptable queerness in the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Queer Historicism

Examining *Persuasion*, as Austen's last published novel, through the lens of queer historicism offers us some intriguing analytical possibilities. We can infer some sense of maturity of subject matter and characterization on Austen's part because of this, but it also allows for the broadest possible range of years to analyze in establishing the historical context of the piece. Austen's writing during the Napoleonic wars and choosing to include multiple members of the Navy in this piece in particular allows us to deconstruct the queer history of life at sea. A queer historicist reading can also allow for a more nuanced read of Anne Elliot's isolation through the context of how historically queer women operated in the world.

Naval units seem to have always carried queer implications. The combination of typically all-male crews and extended periods isolated on the sea provided ample opportunity for homosexual activity to take place. In the 17th and 18th centuries, we have recorded evidence of several sodomy trials that specifically involve sailors, most frequently commanding officers taking advantage of younger men and boys on board (Dalton). Some amount of this behavior was undoubtedly due to prolonged periods without the opportunity to see, let alone have sex with, a woman. There was, however, a perception among the general populace that the Naval forces were decidedly queer, as evidenced by the slang phrase "rum, bum, and baccy," which indicated that rum, anal intercourse, and tobacco were the essential ingredients of the Royal Navy (Stanley). While lack of any other sexual partners can certainly explain an amount of this

homosexual behavior, it is also important to consider the risk assessment involved with such activities. Tall ships were historically difficult to hide sexual activity inside of, as the quarters were decidedly cramped. Sodomy was also penalized with lashes in the Navy, so not only were sailors who engaged in sexual activity with each other at risk of detection, they were at risk of severe punishment for it. This combination of factors speaks to either an extreme desperation for sexual release, or a genuine desire to copulate with a fellow sailor. The isolation on the open sea, as discussed earlier, could also be a liberating thing, freeing individuals from the societal strictures of life on land even as it physically confined them on board a ship. This has some fascinating implications for the Naval officers in *Persuasion*.

The general reputation of the Navy being as it was, it is worth considering the effect that sentiment may have on how we read and analyze Wentworth, his companions, and the Crofts. Captain Wentworth, Captain Harville, Captain Benwick, and Admiral Croft are undoubtedly the positive masculine figures in *Persuasion*, displaying generosity, gentleness, and genuine appreciation for Anne outside of her capacity to be useful to them. Benwick and Anne find an immediate friendly connection, and Harville has deeply philosophical conversations with her that acknowledge her strength as an intellectual equal. Admiral Croft acts as a sort of genial older paternal figure, rooting for Anne's success alongside his wife as he grows attached to her. Wentworth remains one of the only people in Anne's life to see her as she is and recognize her worth, attuned to her particular kind of strangeness. Anne's attraction to the members of the Navy speaks to a kind of kinship with their distinctly queer way of life. While it is an interesting proposal to view seafaring life as a queer thing from a queer theory perspective, by examining

exactly the kind of environments that existed in Naval life through queer historicism, we can begin to see the real-world queer subtext emerge.

Now that the men in the story have been sufficiently discussed, it is time to address the feminine queer in the 18th and 19th century, and how that legacy can deeply impact how we choose to read Anne's story. Research on queer women throughout recorded history is incredibly thin on the ground in scholarly queer work. This is due to a combination of persistent misogyny and homophobia in academia, and because there is simply less documentation on queer women in different historical eras. There are some standout exceptions in the 18th and 19th centuries, like the Ladies of Llangollyn and Anne Lister, but on the whole it is difficult to craft a consistent and coherent narrative out of the available information. This lack has not gone unnoticed, however, and while some scholars in queer history choose to simply exclude documentation on female homosexuality and gender variance due to that scarcity, there are others who have explored the phenomenon in more depth. In his article, "London's Sodomites: Homosexual Behavior and Western Culture in the 18th Century," Randolph Trumbach presents a fascinating theory as to why there is such a disparity in documentation between queer men and women

Men who engaged in homosexual behavior constructed around themselves a protective sub-culture. Homosexual women apparently did not do the same. In the absence of any contrary evidence, it is likely that such women, as in our contemporary Western cultures, were women first and lesbians after, that is, they shared with all the women the characteristic that their activities were less likely to result in visible structures than those of men. (15)

This offers a concrete explanation for some of the inconsistencies and trends seen in the historical record and relies on interpreting an absence of evidence. When so much of the historical record has been purposefully censored and erased, it becomes vital to examine the negative space where records ought to be.

The lives of women are on the whole less likely to be recorded than those of men, so it is not surprising that when it comes to documenting a multiply oppressed group such as queer women there is less information to be found. The myriad reasons for that are developed and deepened by Rictor Norton, who posits that, “Lesbian Historiography may require . . . a greater focus upon isolated pair-bonding than upon subcultural networking” (180). This framework separates the queer women from the queer men, recognizing that they are operating on unequal social, historical, and evidentiary footing, and recognizing that different systems of analysis may need to be employed when dealing with the two groups. While femininity and gender ambiguity were undoubtedly part of both male and female homosexual spaces, the socially-gendered women of the 18th and 19th centuries were not afforded the same liberty as the socially-gendered men. Men were able, as Norton mentions, to form protective subcultural communities, comprised of many individuals and often centralized at a single establishment or bar. This social environment inspires more camaraderie and interpersonal communication, increasing the likelihood that information will be written down and shared. Queer women, on the other hand, are more likely to appear throughout history in exceptional pairs or singular epistolary remembrances, isolated from social gatherings and far less free to communicate with other like-minded individuals. This social isolation is exactly the facet of female queer identity that allows us to access Anne from a new perspective.

Jane Austen herself is well known for creating her iconic work with very little space to do it in, writing either from a small portable writing desk or a round side table in public areas. Her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh relates in her memoir, “she had no separate study to retire to, and most of the work must have been done in the general sitting-room, subject to all kinds of casual interruptions” (101). The lack of personal creative space afforded to her is indicative of the sort of difficulty faced by female writers throughout the past several centuries. That marginalization mirrors the sort of social and artistic distance Anne experiences throughout *Persuasion*, sitting at the piano at the edges of the room and not engaging with the social atmosphere — perhaps because she is not invited to do so. Anne by herself is a single social unit: unmarried, not emotionally close with her family, and not even fully welcomed in the family her sister has married into. Though she is more intimate with the Musgroves, she is not fully enveloped in their social circle. She is easily shunted into the caretaker role, the one who stays back from parties, the one who doesn’t mind being left out. In this way, she is operating as a historically queer female social unit. She is disconnected from her female peers because of some internal difference, some innate quality that places her at odds with the women around her.

The woman who Anne connects with completely is Mrs. Sophia Croft, the Admiral’s wife. Mrs. Croft is also at odds with female society, operating as a single female social unit while she is sailing as an Admiral’s wife. Her attitude and disposition also frame her as an outsider in feminine society, as the dinner party scene with the Musgroves so clearly demonstrates. Rather than embodying Anne’s retiring and non-combative nature, Mrs. Croft is incredibly self-possessed and confident, setting herself

apart by vocally disagreeing with Wentworth on his estimation of women. Despite the shocked curiosity of the assembled gentlewomen, she is completely comfortable describing herself as a “rational creature” rather than a “fine lady,” interestingly degendering herself and other such sea wives in the description (Austen 72-73). Anne’s future as a sea wife is foreshadowed here, a home for a rational creature such as herself, where she will be a single female unit alone on a ship among men and completely content. Like the Ladies of Llangolyn, she will retire to nature and keep to her own devices, safe and comfortable outside the bounds of social restrictions.

Conclusion

At the end of *Persuasion*, Anne has discovered not only the love of Wentworth but a genuine familial connection with the Musgroves and Harvilles. These connections are not forged in their appreciation for Anne’s performance of a role, but in appreciation of her individual divergence from it. This divergence is not a character flaw, but an asset that has allowed Anne to navigate a culturally external life and find true companionship along the way. Through a queer historicist reading, we can see not only how her differences set her apart from the society of her own family and the larger Regency community but observe how they facilitate fellowship with similarly external folk. This tribe-building, community-centric approach is an inherently queer concept and mirrors many real-life queer lived experiences. Anne is wise because she is an outlier; Anne is kind because she has seen how unkind her society would like her to be; and Anne is constant of affection because she cannot produce the façade of false love. Despite failing at the performance of her class, gender, and sexuality, Anne succeeds at being a compelling and definably queer character.

Chapter 4: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia"

Applying queer historicism to 19th century literature, and more specifically Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia," allows us to examine a popular piece of literature that falls outside the boundaries previously placed around queer theory, a piece which has undoubtedly been influenced by the homosexual culture of the period. The contextual clues that Doyle has left in the text of Sherlock Holmes' adventures all point to identifiably queer subtexts, and the historical evidence that survives supports the idea that Doyle was not at all unaware of that fact. *A Scandal in Bohemia* also contains one of the most iconic characters of the Sherlock Holmes canon, Miss Irene Adler, whose enduring impact on popular culture cannot be understated given that she made such a comparatively brief appearance in the text itself. The story remains iconic, but there is yet more we can glean from its analysis by applying a queer historicist theoretical lens.

The Story

At the beginning of "A Scandal in Bohemia," Dr. John Watson is married and no longer lives with Mr. Sherlock Holmes at 221B Baker Street. He has a medical practice and a life of his own, but he occasionally walks past his old lodgings to reminisce. On one such evening he stops in to visit Holmes at about the same time as a mysterious man, who is shortly revealed to be the King of Bohemia. The king is about to marry a princess from a traditional and conservative family and says that a former lover of his, opera singer Irene Adler, is threatening his engagement with a photograph of the two of them together. He wishes to engage Sherlock to track down the woman, who he has determined to be in London, and retrieve the photograph. Holmes dons the first of two disguises and

follows Adler throughout the day, unexpectedly being recruited as a witness to a hurried wedding ceremony between her and a man he does not know. Concocting a plan to reveal the location of the photograph, Holmes once again disguises himself, this time as a clergyman, and stages an accident for himself outside of Adler's home. Anticipating that she would not leave a kindly old priest on the street, Holmes is brought inside while Watson remains on the street to shout "Fire!" at the appropriate time. Holmes explains on their walk home, once they have both fled the scene following the panic over the fictitious fire, that under the threat of fire a person will look towards whatever they hold most dear instinctually. He knew that for Adler, this most precious item would be the incriminating photograph, and he believes he now knows where it is hidden. As Watson and Holmes retire for the evening, a young man on the street calls out to them to wish them good night, and Holmes believes he looks familiar. Having sent word to the king to meet them at Adler's home, they arrive to find her gone, a note for Holmes in the hiding place he'd discovered. She reveals that she is happily married, does not wish the king ill, but will be holding on to the photograph as insurance against harassment. She discovered Holmes plans by following the two back to 221B Baker Street in drag and was herself the young man who wished him goodnight. She encloses a photograph of herself as a memento for the king, but when he declines it, Holmes keeps it for himself. He is forever changed in his opinion of women by this incident and refers to her forevermore as "The Woman" in honor of her besting him.

Modern Queer Theory

The character of Sherlock Holmes has long since escaped the clutches of academia and returned to the public sphere of popular media from whence he originated.

The amount of scholarly literary analysis that exists is not proportional to the hundreds upon hundreds of different Holmes adaptations over the decades. The original text has been left mostly alone while iteration after iteration of Sherlock Holmes appears, appearing in different adaptations transplanted to modern eras, science fiction stories, fantasy plots, and even hospital diagnostics wards. The work of analyzing and adapting Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has fallen to the public sphere, so it is both useful and necessary to begin a queer theory analysis by examining what exactly has been done with both him and his associates in the years since his debut. Sherlock Holmes has grown too big for the bounds of his parent texts, and any work done now will inevitably be influenced by the pop-culture specter of Holmes looming over it. By discussing what has been done by non-academics in this space, we can begin to understand why queer theory remains such an important theoretical lens to apply to his adventures.

There is an overwhelming pop-cultural sentiment that Sherlock Holmes is queer in some way or another, either in the original text or in one of the many adaptations that have followed. There are numerous reasons for this phenomenon, but this section aims to deconstruct the few that are most relevant to a queer literary analysis. The concept that Holmes is queer springs almost entirely from the perception of his otherness and his non-normative behavior. Holmes is an oddity, an individual operating on the fringes of society and exceedingly at home there. He is also alien to us, purveyed to audiences by way of Dr. Watson's epistolary impressions and perpetually held at arm's length. His distance from both Watson and the Reader lends an air of mystery, a thrill of genius, and the distinct impression of hidden worlds within his mind. Audiences both contemporary

to Doyle and here in the modern era have perceived Holmes' spatial and narrative queerness and formed distinctly queer impressions of him as a result.

The BBC's show *Sherlock*, in which altered versions of Holmes and Watson solve crime in modern day London, was part of a major revival in pop culture interest in the early 2010's. The show's accessible format allowed it to reach a far broader audience than the stories themselves could garner, and the appeal of the main character leads prompted a tidal wave of fan activity. Some great deal of this fan activity involved communally discussing, creating, and disseminating fan-made artwork, stories, and analyses of the show featuring Holmes and Watson as a couple. Despite the creators' explicitly stated intentions that no homosexual subtext was included, the essential characteristics of Sherlock Holmes, John Watson, and their relationship to each other still read strongly as queer to modern audiences. This has some potential origins in the way Victorian depictions of friendship appear to modern audiences, the specific details of which will be discussed later in this chapter. The fan community's reaction was not only because of any perceived chemistry between the characters, but because, as one article on the subject puts it,

Holmes's queerness is the result of a collection of nonnormative characteristics that exclude him from traditional paradigms of identity and sexuality. His very illegibility may be what appeals to the diverse group of fans who both receive and reciprocate the pleasure of reading (and writing) Holmes as a queer character.

(Valentine 2)

Sherlock, despite translation between mediums, actor interpretation, and explicitly non-queer authorial intent on behalf of the showrunners, is still his Victorian, queer self.

Returning to earlier adaptations of the form, a standout example is Billy Wilder's 1970 film *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*. This adaptation was "promoted as a love story between two men" and did not shy away from insinuating that the connection between Watson and Holmes was more than platonic (Robb 260). Wilder himself later said that he wished he had been more daring and explicit with the implications of Holmes' sexuality in the movie. In an interview he admitted, "I have this theory. I wanted to have Holmes homosexual and not admitting it to anyone, including maybe even himself. The burden of keeping it secret was the reason he took dope" (Gemünden 147). This adaptation leaned into Holmes' misogynistic traits as a clear indicator for his homosexuality. His dislike for women and occasional disparaging remarks about their characters throughout the canon material can be read as stereotypically homosexual. It has been popular for centuries to typify male homosexuality through the hatred of women for centuries, and it remains a common preconception to this day. Read in that light, Holmes' misunderstanding of Irene Adler in "A Scandal in Bohemia" could emanate from the general antipathy towards women so often exhibited by fictional gay men. It remains clear that no matter the medium or message, adapting the case files of Sherlock Holmes means that there will be a consistent element of queer subtext present.

Turning specifically to "A Scandal in Bohemia," despite its relatively short length there are many fascinating elements throughout that can be gainfully analyzed through a queer theoretical lens. The connection between Sherlock and Watson has been discussed briefly above, but the specific circumstances of "Scandal" ought to be addressed. At the

beginning of the story, Watson has been away from Baker Street for some time and has seen little of his friend Holmes because of his marriage. Despite that fact, it takes remarkably little for him to fall back into his old routines with Holmes as soon as he is invited to participate in his latest case. While we have been briefed at the beginning with the information that his new medical practice and his marriage has kept him incredibly busy, he nonetheless does not hesitate for a moment before agreeing to accompany Holmes on a potentially dangerous endeavor. Notably, there is not a single reference of his wife for the rest of the story after his mention of her in the beginning, and his mind does not turn to her once when he says to Holmes that he minds “not in the least” that he may be about to break the law and run the chance of arrest (Doyle 19). While Watson’s wife may be mentioned in the story, the state of his home life seems relatively non-existent as soon as Holmes re-enters his private sphere. His bachelor-like habits and devotion to following Holmes are rapidly re-instated, and it is as if he had never left Baker Street.

Historical Context

When it comes to analyzing homosexual culture in Victorian England, we are lucky to have so much more primary material than in previous centuries. While some of this result is from the obvious — more recent centuries are far easier to research and are more likely to have surviving artefacts — this is also due to the rise in visibility, awareness, and some small semblance of tolerance during this period. Sodomy was still punishable by death in England for the first half of the 19th century, and it was not officially abolished until 1860. However, the last official death sentence for sodomy was executed in 1835, and while death sentences were ruled in certain cases during the

intervening years, none were carried out. This is the double standard of policing that the average Victorian homosexual experienced, and it wasn't only due to their ability to conceal their presence. There are several recorded instances of both police officers and the general public turning a blind eye to homosexual social gatherings, transvestite prostitutes, and cross-dressing balls. As Graham Robb puts it, "Nineteenth century homosexuals lived under a cloud, but it seldom rained" (30).

The rise in visibility of homosexual culture heralded a push in the medicalization of homosexuality, prompting a widespread need to both categorize and label it. It is in this period that we see the first use of the word "homosexual" to describe men who were sexually active with other men, originating in an 1869 German pamphlet advocating for the abolition of sodomy laws Prussia (Robb 11). This, to modern scholars who subscribe to the social constructionist point of view, is the birth of the homosexual identity, an arbitrary date upon which the homosexual was 'invented' and became a feasible identity to apply either to oneself or others. Other words were frequently used to describe homosexual individuals, such as Urning, Invert, Pederast, and Androgyne, all used alongside the newly coined "homosexuality." Instructional books and pamphlets aimed at assisting the average citizen in spotting a homosexual in the wild or determining their own risk for "internal androgyny" abounded. This is what Graham Robb refers to as "The Identification Game," in which both the nosy and nervous general populace and the isolated and community-seeking queer were attempting to use the mainstream gay stereotypes of the time as a basis to identify 'the other' hiding under their very noses (48).

With this identification game ongoing, the cultural atmosphere of both curiosity and taboo gave rise to complex systems of encoding queer communication. This system of cultural codes allows scholars and historians to more closely examine the literature of the time and begin to uncover allusions and references that may previously remained unscrutinized. This suggestive parlance appeared in both contemporary literature and in more casual venues like personal ads in newspapers. As has been the case for hundreds of years, various versions of “friendship” were emphasized to imply something more than pure platonic attraction, including such epithets as “warm friend” or “energetic companion.” There is such a variety of terminology that it would be impossible to list it all here, from allusions to musicality, Greek mythology, prostitution, or “intensely private” and “enigmatic” personality types. Visual symbols were also utilized, many coming from the world of prostitution. Symbols like red neckties, red boots, green carnations, and exotic hothouse flowers were all used as indications of homosexual preference (150-151 Robb). These signs and signals were frequently co-opted by heterosexuals to then mock the queer communities from which they originated, but the inclusion of them in any capacity provides valuable insight into the linguistic surroundings of the 19th century queer.

In the medical community studying queer symptomology, there was a strong impetus to keep any research projects or case files out of the public eye. Many of the most prominent publications dealing with homosexuality were available only to medical or legal professionals or were otherwise willfully suppressed by the author themselves. Julien Chevalier, who wrote an 1893 study on sexual inversion, told women that they could not read his work, and stated, “I sincerely hope that my book will have limited

publicity and merely local success” (Robb 64). Doctors and “researchers” feared accidentally proliferating the sexual perversions they devoted their time to studying and attempting to cure. Their efforts, however, were not universally successful. Even the act of soliciting participants and case subjects had the unintended effect of bringing a homosexual community together, and what articles were more widely available garnered immediate attention from other queer individuals of the period.

Publications of case files served as “international bulletin boards” for homosexual individuals, and usually contained vast numbers of auto-biographical interviews from participants. The first edition of Richard Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia sexualis* (1886) contained forty-five case studies, whereas the twelfth edition contained 283, and the renowned Magnus Hirschfeld’s *Die Homosexualitat* (1913) was based on more than 10,000 cases. When Otto de Joux’s *Die Enterbten des Liebesgluckes* (1893) was published, he received more than 736 letters thanking him for writing in the defense of homosexuality (Robb 58). Both the letters these authors received and the cases themselves served as confessionals for the 19th century homosexual and provided a kind of literary community for those who may not have known such a community could exist. In one heart-wrenching letter to a Victorian doctor, an anonymous gay man shared, “I was so unhappy, because I thought I was the only such strange creature in existence. . . . Later I spent more time in Paris, Italy and Vienna, and everywhere I found poor creatures like myself!” (Robb 60). Another anonymous man confessed in a letter to Krafft-Ebing, “*No one* suspects my true nature. You, a stranger, are the only one who knows me, and you know me more intimately, in the most important respect, than father, mother, friend or lover. It has done me good to be able to divulge that bizarre, oppressive

secret” (Robb 61). While homosexual subcultures did exist in urban spaces, publications such as this provided an unexpected opportunity for homosexuals in the 19th century to discover that they were not alone.

Queer Historicism

The recently invented genre of private detective fiction was surprisingly queer for the 19th century. Credited as the first such character ever created, Edgar Allan Poe’s Auguste Dupin is an excellent example of this. Dupin is a useful character to study in this way, not only because of the many coded homosexual references present in Poe’s work, but because his detective novels became the blueprint for a majority of the detective fiction genre going forward. Because of this, the coded homosexuality laced throughout Dupin’s character was also passed along from generation to generation of fictional detective, intentionally or otherwise. In his book *In the Company of Strangers*, Barry McCrea addresses this point with his own list of famously single and queer-coded detectives:

It is a peculiar characteristic of detective fiction in general that the detective is almost always single (and often a little queer). As Raymond Chandler himself put it, “a really good detective never gets married,” and that is true of the best fictional detectives: Dupin, Miss Marple, Lord Peter Wimsey, Hercule Poirot, Kay Scarpetta, Philip Marlowe. (82)

This lineage of single, typically chaste, eccentric geniuses are all connected by a peculiar sort of kinship, one which is often obvious to queer and marginalized readers.

This innate otherness is not only a function of their coded nature, but is that which allows them to do what they do. They are representative of what Graham Robb refers to as the “shamanic” city-dwelling homosexual. This is an individual who is keenly aware of the metropolitan layout, savvy in the ways of the underworld, operating on the fringes of society, and powerful because of all these things. These characters have a “special knowledge” and “owe their strange power to secrets” (Robb 267). The special knowledge gained by the queers of Victorian England was less along the lines of solving a whodunnit mystery, and more a matter of survival. This involved being able to safely pass as cisgendered and heterosexual in the street or determine the safety of a particular environment, establishment, or potential partner. Even what we might refer to colloquially in the modern day as “gaydar” — the art of one queer person being able to covertly identify another — was a frightening display of subcultural knowledge to the uninformed and uninitiated in the nineteenth century. New York transvestite Earl Lind described this in quite relevant and familiar terms, “Because of my innate appetencies and avocation of female-impersonator, I was fated to be a Nature-appointed amateur detective” (Robb 268). This seemingly arcane knowledge is a gift of both the queer and the private investigator of the nineteenth century. Barry McCrea describes Holmes as “a mapper of the metropolis, an agent who untangles the secret relationships of the London crowd” (67). This description, taken out of context, could describe any gay man on the boulevard in Victorian London, looking to make a connection; the associated skillsets have a remarkable amount of overlap.

The hidden codes in Auguste Dupin’s adventures range from overt nods at homosexual culture to exceedingly well-buried clues in the specific literary quotes and

references used throughout Poe's work. The most obvious are those that relate to Dupin's personality, appearance, and living arrangements, and it is these specific quirks that Doyle seems to have taken direct inspiration from for his detective, Sherlock Holmes. Both are described as languid and droll, witty and academic, their complexions are pale and their manner effete. Both live near or in city epicenters, and both take lodgings with a trusted, and dearly loved male friend who is, at least initially, single. Holmes is the "intro-spective and pallid dreamer of Baker Street," an oddity and an outsider, and Dupin is an "enigmatic dandy" who leads a life of isolation and mystery (Robb 260). Both Holmes' and Dupin's demeanors are, in almost every way, the image of a homosexual caricature in the nineteenth century.

The other most noteworthy influence on Holmes' character is the queer icon of the nineteenth century, Oscar Wilde. There is a compelling amount of evidence to suggest that Doyle was perhaps influenced by the physical appearance, style, personality, and quite possibly the preferences of Wilde. Their sense of wit, their towering physiques, and their "curious precision of statement" all appear to be quite related, and when Doyle met Wilde at a dinner party in 1889 – three years before the first Sherlock Holmes story would see publication – he claims that the man left an "indelible impression" on him (Robb 261). Both Wilde and Holmes are known as the popular faces of aestheticism in Victorian England, and in both attitude and appearance bear a passing resemblance to each other. Doyle was also not unsympathetic towards Wilde's later plight and legal battle, though he believed it was an issue for the medical profession and not the courts. (Robb 260-261) Doyle also "recognized" Holmes in American actor William Gillette, "a man described as "very handsome,' 'eccentric,' and 'no longer interested in women'"

(Robb 264). This collection of potential influence provides a grounding in exactly the sort of man Sherlock Holmes is intended to be and from whom he derives his most vital character traits.

Before delving further into the curious case of Irene Adler, it is important to lay some further groundwork regarding Holmes, Watson, and the queer underpinnings of their relationship. The story begins by informing us that Watson has been living a happily married life for some time, but that he misses his old bachelor stomping ground of 221B Baker Street. It is when he decides to pay a visit to his old friend Holmes that he becomes once again embroiled in Holmes' detective work. This bachelor existence they led previously is the state in which many people remember Holmes and Watson most vividly. As McCrea puts it, "What seems to engrave itself more than anything else on our reading memories is the domestic life of 221B Baker Street" (68). Holmes and Watson are quite obviously excellent companions and dear friends, which in of itself was most certainly not taboo in the Victorian period. Close male friendships were encouraged and admired, but when the motivations behind close contact and loving glances into each other's eyes shifted to more "sinister genital intentions," closer scrutiny must then be exercised (Robb 269). Watson is already married in this story, supposedly safely aground on the shores of heterosexuality, yet he is rapidly wooed back into the adventuring life of his dearest friend within the first moments of the narrative. It is imperative that their bond be maintained, not only to ensure the structure of Watson's biographical writing stays intact, but so that their devoted connection is not impeded by the bonds of matrimony. In other words, "Watson's queer 'marriage' to Holmes cannot be obliterated so easily by his straight one to Mary" (McCrea 93). Their relationship is both the epicenter of the

emotional stakes and the very thing that blinds Holmes to the inner workings of Irene Adler.

It has already been well established that Holmes is a non-normative actor, both in the text and in the time period in which he was being written, so why then is he unable to match wits with another such outsider in “A Scandal in Bohemia”? It is precisely because of both Adler’s gender and her status as queer outsider that she is able to see through Holmes better than he can see through her. Even so, femininity alone was enough to allow Adler some element of mystery, as “the nineteenth-century woman is seen as alien and alienating, an outsider, or, to use Freud’s term, ‘a dark continent,’ and the element of foreignness, of otherness always associated with that type of woman, is a recurring theme in ‘A Scandal in Bohemia.’” (Krumm 194). It is perhaps another small textual hint at Holmes’ particular predilections when he cannot be bothered to concern himself with the concept of womanhood or courtship. Watson notes that, “as a lover he would have placed himself in a false position,” and that “he was still, as ever, deeply attracted by the study of crime . . .” (Doyle 11). Holmes is then ‘married to his work’ as opposed to any obliging woman and has little reason to educate himself on the intricacies of womanhood. This reckless unwillingness to observe the facts when they relate to a woman is a notable character flaw of Holmes’, one he begins to amend only at the very end of this case. It does, however, reflect the dominant cultural narrative of the period, and provide a useful backdrop on the world which Irene Adler inhabits.

Irene Adler is introduced to us immediately with the telling description, “she has a soul of steel. She has the face of the most beautiful of women, and the mind of the most resolute of men” (Doyle 16). This bi-gendered, multiply sexed woman has already been

established as an agent who falls somewhere outside the binary and is exceptional for it. Androgyny of the spirit or hermaphroditism of the soul were only a few of the nineteenth century medical diagnoses for homosexuality, and this description of Adler would no doubt have struck a familiar chord with period readers (Robb 42). As a character, Irene Adler “is a representation of the devilish hybrid that was central to fin-de-siècle gender discourse: she is a woman with a man’s mind” (Crompton 31). This is, of course, all before Irene herself appears in the clothes of a man towards the conclusion of the story.

Adler’s crossdressing is a deeply important symbol of her agency and freedom as an external operator. As she herself says, “Male costume is nothing new to me. I often take advantage of the freedom which it gives” (Doyle 24). This is not a one-time act of desperation but a carefully crafted persona that Adler assumes regularly, enough that she refers to them as her “walking clothes” (24). Whatever her internal sense of sexuality, it is clear that Irene Adler is a gender rebel, what Constance Crompton refers to as a “non-cisgendered masculine heterosexual woman” (15). This fluidity is also representative of the cultural fears of the time, in a world preoccupied with the notion of spotting a homosexual on the street, a “passing” crossdresser, especially one that does so with regularity, is a threat. Crompton describes it by explaining, “Doyle focuses cultural anxiety about reading the sexed body through Irene Adler’s disguise as a young man, a disguise that troubles the assumption that reading clothing, or indeed reading gender, will necessarily assist sex detection” (6). She exists outside the bounds of what is acceptable, comfortable, desirable, or even legal for a Victorian woman. Crossdressing was very much still a criminal act at this time, making her a repeat offender and a daring criminal to do so under the eyes of the famous Sherlock Holmes himself. Holmes is no stranger to

disguise however, and he rarely goes a single case without some level of deceptive costume, up to and including crossdressing himself as an old woman. Even with his knowledge, Irene bests Holmes at his own game of disguise. She sees through Holmes' disguise as the kindly curate, but she herself passes completely undetected – even after calling out to him personally in the street– when she follows him home dressed as a man. She is “passing” better than Holmes, indicating that her knowledge of the queer arts surpasses his own in this instance.

Much like Holmes possesses that strange shamanic, arcane power of the savvy city-dwelling homosexual, so does Irene. She, however, pushes the bounds even further, existing another step removed from the dominant culture as someone both queer and female. It is with this knowledge that Irene is able to overpower the universally intellectually dominant Holmes. She is even more of a knowledgeable outsider than he is, and able to understand both his actions and those of the people around her. Holmes is a queer entity, leveraging his power of the unknown, unexpected, and unspeakable to navigate both the London underworld and the private affairs of royalty. Irene is much the same, an opera singer and incredibly socially skilled individual, but able to pass more generally unnoticed and unscrutinized as a queer agent because of her sex. Even during the surge of pseudo-science studying homosexuality, women were far less likely to be documented than men, and that lack of visibility gives her power. She sees Holmes for what he is, but he cannot see her before she intentionally reveals herself to him, “He fails to win this case, for his opponent is someone whose mind he cannot understand.” (Krumm 197). However, during the final moments of the case in which he comprehends a fuller scope of Irene's capabilities, he can see her for the external othered individual that

she is. Their mutual respect is then grounded not only in their mutual masculinities, but in their mutual queerness.

Conclusion

Both Holmes and Adler can easily be read through the lens of queer historicism. Doyle was undoubtedly influenced by the cultural environment he was writing within, and better understanding the influences and events surrounding his narrative choices allows us to reveal startling new insights into his beloved characters. In that burgeoning world of homosexual detectives, crossdressing women, and flagrant disregard for the rules of Victorian society, it is easy to see how a general modern consensus finds the works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to be quite queer indeed. As Graham Robb so simply puts it, “Everyone knows instinctively that Holmes is a homosexual” (260). This recognition through the years only mirrors the recognition of the self in the other that both Adler and Holmes experience in “A Scandal in Bohemia.”

Conclusion

As has been demonstrated in the body of this thesis, queer historicism can be used effectively as a tool for literary analysis. Queer historicism is a valuable method for uncovering subtext, analyzing relationships, and placing narratives in context, but it has been overlooked for years in favor of its constituent theories: queer theory and new historicism. What is it exactly about queer historicism that frightens so many scholars away? As has been addressed briefly in a modern context and extensively in a historical context, queer subcultures and identities are often the subject of censure, judgement, hatred, and sometimes even eradication. While Western society has progressed beyond a number of its strictest and most deadly punishments for queer existence, the socio-political backlash towards queer communities remains inescapable. Most first world governments will no longer attempt to kill you if they believe you to be queer, but that does not mean that there are not still thousands of social, economic, familial, and medical barriers to true equality. It is vitally important to recognize that this is the atmosphere into which queer historicist works are being published.

Academic studies have not been immune to these continued homophobic and transphobic attitudes. The tendency for different areas of scholarship to isolate and distance themselves from each other rather than communicate inter-departmentally means that queer scholarship has been left to its own devices rather than being integrated into every department. This may explain some of the reluctance amongst academics to embrace queer historicism, as it naturally necessitates cooperation between the fields of history and queer theory. That reasoning cannot, however, negate the fact that outdated and damaging attitudes towards queer topics continue to be proliferated through

exclusionary teaching practices and critical publications. Academia has the opportunity to become a locus of change, to embrace queer input in a diverse number of fields and recognize both the potential of future queer innovations and the reality of historical queer pasts. However, this change cannot occur unless the inequality in our present circumstances is addressed, and scholars make the conscious choice to seek out queer perspectives.

Both the ongoing effort to change academic attitudes and the work of queer historicism have been impacted by the tremendous difficulty of accessing queer information. Library and archival institutions are partially culpable for the inaccessibility of queer historical information, often making it especially difficult to access records, newspaper articles, and publications that deal with queer subject matter. To make matters worse, events such as Nazi book burnings, which included more than 12,000 books and 35,000 photographs from notable sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld's library, have contributed to the scarcity of historical queer information. Throughout the 20th century, collections of queer material were hidden or locked up in libraries as part of a purposeful effort to keep the "perverse" books safely locked away. American poet and author Judy Grahn related her experiences in trying to research gay and lesbian topics in the 1960's,

The books on such a subject, I was told by indignant, terrified librarians unable to say aloud the word homosexual, were locked away. They showed me a wire cage where the 'special' books were kept in a jail for books. Only professors, doctors, psychiatrists, and lawyers for the criminally insane could see them, check them out, hold them in their hands. (Norton 173)

Some decades later in the early 2000's while he conducted the research for *Strangers*, Graham Robb remembers encountering similar prejudices,

A librarian, whispering to a colleague, referred to the titles I had requested from a closed collection as 'naughty books. . .The Director of the State photographic archive in St Petersburg refused to supply a photograph that would be used in a book about homosexual love. (1)

These institutional prejudices have continued to impede research and in some cases to outright deny access to resources due to their queer material.

This censorship of queer voices is especially dire given the minimal amount of surviving material. Throughout history, the largest threat to gay, lesbian, and gender-nonconforming literature has been the potential for an author's contemporaries to destroy their work after their death. Letters to same-sex lovers were censored to remove the incriminating names and pronouns, and personal journals were burned by family members. In a chilling hypothetical, Graham Robb posits that "to judge by the large number of known destructions (most presumably went unrecorded), at any moment in the 19th century someone, somewhere was burning the papers of a homosexual relative" (137). Some queer individuals even requested the destruction of their writing post-mortem or locked their writing away to prevent its discovery. With the forces ranged against the survival of queer literature, it is remarkable that any of it has survived to the modern day. Despite Robb's pessimistic evaluation, the fact that historical queer literature survives in the quantities that we see today can only be testament to the immense number of queer individuals living and loving throughout the centuries. If only a small percentage of queer people wrote about these affections, and only a small

percentage of those writings survive, we must take it as a sign of the silent majority whose stories have been lost to time.

These facts become lost in the social constructionism vs. essentialism debate that plagues queer historicism. We have the information, the testimonials, the love poems, and the yearning letters to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that humanity has loved and lived queerly for centuries. Whether that love expressed itself sexually or in a queer platonic fashion; whether that love was requited or the fantasies of a closeted queer; whether that love was peacefully borne out in private or criminally prosecuted in public; whether they did or did not possess whatever superficial traits modern scholars deem to be “gay enough,” these are our queer ancestors.

By tapping into this silenced history of queer life, we can gain a new and deeper appreciation for the social dynamics of love, connection, and othering that have influenced literature throughout the ages. The work of queer historicism allows us to interpret the missing pieces of history and ask what information has been sublimated or erased when it encounters nothing where there logically ought to be something. It is not enough for historians to assume that because an author publicly denounces homosexuality or leaves an element of vagueness in their literary work, they must simply not be queer at all. In such hostile, litigious, and socially punishing times it is impossible for us to expect such blatant shows of homosexuality as we see from figures like Oscar Wilde. Neither is it appropriate for us to place modern preconceptions and queer labels on historically queer behavior. The queer community’s current preoccupation with precise and meticulously defined queer taxonomy has slowly calcified our definitions of what it is to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or any other associated identities on

the LGBTQ+ spectrum. By using the word 'queer' as an umbrella term, it is possible to sidestep this issue entirely and instead approach historical expressions of queer behavior on their own terms and in context with their historical environments.

The works of Chaucer, Austen, and Doyle are only the beginning of where queer historicism can lead literary analysis. There is no part of the canon that cannot be enhanced by the application of this theory, and we stand to gain so much from the proliferation of queer academic endeavors. There is, however, still a great deal of cultural resistance to this work, and unless we undertake a concerted effort to reshape the academic landscape it will continue to limit the available opportunities for scholarship. This thesis has laid out the most basic groundwork of how literary analysis can integrate and utilize queer historicism, and it is this author's hope that other scholars will recognize the possibilities within this field. Together, it is possible to change the future of academic queer studies for the better, and open the door for further work to be done.

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EDUCATION

- 2013-2015 **Community College of Vermont**
 Associates of Liberal Studies Degree - GPA 3.87
 Youngest student ever admitted to the Montpelier branch at 15 years old
- 2017-2019 **Acadia University**
 Bachelors of Theater Production - GPA 3.8
 Graduated with the Medal in Theater for highest grades in graduating class
 Made Dean's List twice
- 2021- 2023 **Eastern Washington University**
 Masters of English Literature and Writing - Current GPA 3.9

INTERNSHIPS

- Spring 2022 **Writers' Center Responder**
 EWU, Cheney, WA 99004
 Trained under Writers' Center staff to facilitate one-on-one responder sessions with EWU students and assist them in multiple levels of English language tutoring. Trained on Writers' Center scheduling and client reporting system and received instruction on both face to face and written comment feedback.
- Spring 2022 **Willow Springs Books Copyeditor**
 EWU, Cheney, WA 99004
 Assisted in proofreading and copyediting the fall release for Willow Springs Books. Worked with the editing team to facilitate the best finished product possible. Maintained quick turnaround time for completed manuscript and delivered a high standard of work at all times.

RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS

- Winter 2023 **Spokane Historical-** "The Spokane Mountaineers: From Walking to Summiting," <https://spokanehistorical.org/items/show/938>
- Spring 2023 **Master's Thesis-** "Queer Historicism as Literary Theory"