

*Par fiance bien tenir:*  
Medieval Same-Sex Chosen Kinship and Sworn  
Brotherhood in the *Roman de Thèbes*  
Elizabeth Hubble

AS THE UNITED STATES witnesses an ever-growing number of states approving same-sex marriage statutes as part of the current movement for civil rights for LGBTQQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex) individuals, we, as scholars, must continue to demonstrate that this vital struggle for human rights is a reflection of modern constructions of gender, sexuality, and family. Using current political and theoretical writings on same-sex marriage as a lens, in this article I build on the work of John Boswell, Alan Bray, C. Stephen Jaeger, and other medievalist and early modern scholars to show that our modern construction of marriage and family as THE privileged kinship relationship is not ahistorical and natural, but is a historical and cultural construction that does not hold across time and place.<sup>1</sup> To this end, my article expands critical work on an often overlooked medieval French romance, the *Roman de Thèbes* (ca. 1150). Scholars have privileged the slightly later *Roman d'Enéas* in research about medieval homosexuality and same-sex friendships.<sup>2</sup> It is true that *Enéas* features Amata's famous homophobic diatribe against Enéas along with the friendships between Nisus and Euryalus, Camilla and Turnus, and Pallas and Enéas. However, it is not the only early medieval romance to feature same-sex relationships, and, in fact, an analysis of the friendship between Tydeus and Polynices in *Thèbes* provides some important insights into how masculinity, male friendship, and chosen kinship were constructed and reconstructed in the dynamic twelfth century. As the scholars referenced above have shown, heterosexual marriage was not the only chosen kinship system in the premodern era. Given the current debate on marriage equality, it is vital to continue to

add to the existing archive with previously unexamined voluntary kinship examples. Similarly to today, the twelfth century was also an era when the church, state, and society were debating marriage and kinship in ways that changed the shape of those institutions in the West. Texts such as the *Roman de Thèbes* were part of that debate. In fact, *Thèbes* offers perhaps the only representation of a formal ceremony binding two knights to each other in Old French literature, and, for that reason, it deserves additional attention and analysis.

An important issue needs to be addressed from the outset: what to call the same-sex relationships that appear in medieval history and literature? Bray argues that these friendships were so common as to not need explanation within the texts, and while that may be the case, it also means that modern scholars can only guess at what to call them. Bray settles on the term “friend,” while Boswell calls the relationship between the men joined by the Eastern Orthodox *adelphopoiesis* rite “same-sex unions.” Critics of Boswell have accurately pointed out that the unions he identified were not sexual unions (or at least the Church would have forbidden such a thing as a part of the *adelphopoiesis*), but Bray counters that the sexual does at least brush up against discussions of same-sex friendships. In a Western context (versus Eastern Orthodox Christianity), Jaeger rejects the sexual as inherent to these relationships and calls these relationships “sworn brotherhoods” whose purpose was to posit a public, ethical love that gave virtue to the participants and has only since been conflated with private, romantic, sexual love.

The terms brotherhood and friendship have taken on quite different connotations in the intervening centuries, and any modern discussion of medieval uses of these terms must carefully consider how understandings of these concepts have shifted. Although not medieval in focus, in her article “Gay Marriage: An American and Feminist Dilemma,” Ann Ferguson argues for the term “chosen kinship” as a way to shift from the heterosexual, nuclear family model to “a range of queer choices.”<sup>3</sup> Here the word “queer” can be argued to refer to any nonnormative relationship and is not necessarily restricted to sexual relationships. Keeping these problematics in mind, I am going to primarily use the term “brotherhood,” especially given that Tydeus and Polynices become actual brothers-in-law when they marry sisters, while accepting

Ferguson's "chosen kinship" as an umbrella term which has less cultural baggage than terms like friendship.

Despite its early date and its complex relationship to medieval constructions of gender and genre, the *Roman de Thèbes* has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. This oversight may be partially due to its length (between 12,000 and 14,000 lines), its manuscript tradition, and the fact that no readily available English translation exists, although there are a few modern French translations of its various manuscripts. The manuscript tradition does pose some significant problems as the story exists in a long and short form in five manuscripts, each of which has some significant differences one from the other.<sup>4</sup>

*Thèbes* is classified as a romance of Antiquity which distinguishes it from the medieval Arthurian romances in that it derives its story from classical sources. Today, few people have heard of the first-century Roman poet Statius and his *Thebaid*, although almost everyone is familiar with at least part of *Thèbes*'s story—the tale of Oedipus. In contrast, stories of Thebes were popular in the Middle Ages, and most of the retellings were based on Statius's *Thebaid*, from Boccaccio to John Lydgate to Chaucer. Statius's work tells the story of the sons born of the incestuous union of Oedipus and Jocasta, Eteocles and Polynices, who battle for their father's realm after the failure of their agreement to share rule with each other in alternating years. When Eteocles refuses to cede the throne, Polynices travels to Argos/Greece where he allies himself with Tydeus and King Adrastus and marries Adrastus's daughter Argia. Together, they march on Thebes, and both sides are destroyed.<sup>5</sup>

Statius's work was rewritten in the mid twelfth century (ca. 1150) into an Old French dialect by an anonymous poet who reframed the narrative to reflect twelfth-century concerns. The date of the *Roman de Thèbes* makes it one of the first medieval romances, or, at the least, a proto-romance. It does, in fact, feature a number of romance elements such as extended portraits of various characters, in particular the daughters of King Adrastus. *Thèbes* was probably written in western France under the rule of Henry II Plantagenet, and many scholars have looked at its depiction of civil war as a pacifist commentary on "the impending civil strife, either between Henry II Plantagenet and King Louis VII of France, or among Henry's five sons."<sup>6</sup> In Dominique Battles's 2004 book *The*

*Medieval Tradition of Thebes*, she argues that whatever nascent romance elements and critiques of civil strife *Thebes* contains, it is actually a re-writing and reframing of crusader chronicles which makes it an important source for analyzing constructions of masculinity in the twelfth century. That said, one of the scenes in *Thebes* that is not substantially changed from Statius is the battle between the knights Tydeus and Polynices which ends with a formal swearing of brotherhood.

In *Thebes*, as in Statius's Latin *Thebaid*, Polynices and Tydeus meet in Greece, both fleeing from their homelands. They have chosen the same shelter for the night. As might be expected between two knights who don't know each other, they fight to decide who has the right to stay the night in this shelter. The fierce battle that ensues reveals them to be equally matched in prowess and bravery, and the text states that had they been introduced, they would not have fought (lines 820-21). Their descriptions, however, reveal that they are physically quite dissimilar. While both are described as "proz et vaillantz" (brave and valiant), their bodies are described as "molt dessemblantz" (very dissimilar, lines 818-19). The text goes on to describe them as such:

Polynicés est genz et granz,  
Chevals ad blois recercelanz;  
Cler ot le vis et colouré,  
Espalles large et peiz lé,  
Les costé longs, les flans sotils,  
Les hanches grosses et barnils,  
A fourcheüre dreit et grant:  
Rien n'i aveit mesavenant.  
Juvenceals est, n'ad pas vint ans;  
Chevaliers est proz et vaillans.  
D'aage est maire Tydeüs,  
Cors ad menor, mais fort fu plus;  
Chevels ot neirs, barbe et gernons,  
Fier ad le vis come uns leons;  
Le cors ad brief et le cuer grant:  
De proece semble Rollant.  
(lines 818-33)<sup>7</sup>

(Polynices is tall and well-bred with curly, blond hair. His face is clear and rosy. He has large shoulders and chest with long sides and thin flanks. His hips are large and powerful, his seat straight and strong. In him, nothing was displeasing. He was young, not even twenty years old. He is a brave and valiant knight. Tydeus is older with a smaller body but he is stronger. His hair, beard and moustache are black. His face was as fierce as a lion. His body was small but his heart was great. In prowess, he resembled Roland.)<sup>8</sup>

Contrary to what is seen in other representations of male friendships in medieval literature, such as that of the much more well-known Ami and Amile,<sup>9</sup> these two knights are not presented as twins but as opposites in appearance. Their age difference also seems to point to the pederastic Greek tradition seen in the Roman Virgil's presentation of the sworn friends Nisus and Euryalus (whose age difference is elided in the Old French *Roman d'Enéas*). However, the age difference between Tydeus and Polynices is never again mentioned, and the knights are presented throughout the text as equals. Nonetheless, the text seems to posit a tension between a more epic mode of description and a nascent romance mode in this passage through the comparison of Tydeus to the epic hero Roland and the description of Polynices as blond and rosy-faced, common features of romance heroes and heroines.<sup>10</sup> In *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature*, Simon Gaunt argues that the slightly later (ca. 1160) *Roman d'Enéas*, another romance of Antiquity, marks the move from the monologic masculinity of epic to the more nuanced, dialogic representation of gender in romance. Gaunt points to the deaths of Nisus and Euryalus in *Enéas* as the destruction of epic masculinity, replaced with medieval romance's version of heterosexuality in the love relationship between Enéas and Lavinia. *Thèbes* seems to be participating in a similar, if more subtle, move in the contrast between Tydeus and Polynices. The relationship between the two friends is similarly a site of negotiation of both gender and genre as embodied by male friendship but without recourse to femininity and heterosexuality. *Thèbes* is acknowledging shifting and competing (rather than monologic) constructions of masculinity within a homosocial world rather than positing a binary opposition between masculinity and femininity.

This acknowledgment hints at an awareness of the performative and historical nature of constructions of gender in this twelfth-century period of change. As William Burgwinkle states, “[In the twelfth century], increased attention to celibacy, monastic rules, marriage practices, and the status of knighthood had the effect of calling attention to the performative nature of masculinity, to its ritualization and theatricalization.”<sup>11</sup> Other critics agree that the twelfth century is the era when male friendship becomes problematic, or, as Jaeger puts it, the twelfth century is when “the discourse of ennobling love lost its innocence.”<sup>12</sup> Tydeus and Polynices’s relationship speaks to this transition as the description of the battle continues.

The noise of the battle between the two knights awakens the Argive court, and King Adrastus arrives on the scene to punish the two knights who have disturbed the peace. As Adrastus places himself between the two knights, he realizes they may be the fulfillment of a divine prophecy about his future sons-in-law—that a boar and a lion will marry his daughters. He asks them who they are and where they are from. Tydeus immediately responds that he is from Calydon, the son of King Oeneus, and that he has come to Argos to enter Adrastus’s service. Even more importantly, the text reveals (line 752) that Tydeus was exiled for killing one of his brothers—something Polynices must also do, further establishing parallels between the two knights. Polynices hesitates to name his lineage, “being the brother of his father,” as the text states (line 929). Adrastus knows immediately who he is and puts his mind at ease. Adrastus is quick to ally himself with the two knights and to ally them to each other in a surprising scene with much to contribute to discussions of same-sex relationships and chosen kinship, both in medieval studies and the current LGBTQQI civil rights movement:

Pois lor fait jurer et plevir  
Et par fiance bien tenir  
Que tant come il jamais vivront,  
Ami et compaignon serront.  
Pyritoüs ne Theseüs  
Ne s’entramèrent onques plus,  
Ne Pyladés ne Orestés,

Ne Patroclus ne Achillés.  
Al perron, desouz l'olivier,  
Se desarment li chevalier;  
Il se desarment: assez fut  
Qui lor armes prist et resçut.  
Il n'orent males ne conrei:  
Desfublé sont davant le rei;  
Mais lor cors sont genz et bien faitz,  
Bien ressemblent contes de palaiz;  
Et orent senglement vestu  
L'uns un samiz, l'autre un bofu,  
Et sount bien chaucié li meschine  
Chascun d'un paile alexandrine.  
(lines 954-73)

(Then he [King Adrastus] made them [Tydeus and Polynices] swear, promise, and certify, by solemn oath, that as long as they will live, that they would remain friends and companions. Pirithous and Theseus never knew a greater friendship, nor did Pylades and Orestes, or Patroclus and Achilles. On a stone, under an olive tree, the knights disarmed each other [or themselves]. There was a crowd to take and receive their arms. They didn't have trunks or baggage; they were disarmed before the king. But their bodies are handsome and well-made; they resembled palatine counts. They are simply dressed, one in embroidered silk and the other in golden silk. They are both well-shod in Alexandrian silk.)<sup>13</sup>

In this momentous yet previously unanalyzed scene, the two knights swear eternal friendship under an olive tree (symbolizing peace) on a stone altar before a king—here is a literary representation of a sworn male friendship ceremony that formalizes affective bonds between knights.<sup>14</sup> This is a rare, if not unique, scene in medieval French literature. Other Old French epics and romances depict similar friendships but no such formal ceremony: for example, Roland and Olivier (ca. 1050-1100), Pallas and Enéas (ca. 1160), Yvain and Gawain (ca. 1170), Erec and Guivret (ca.

1170), and Ami and Amile (ca. 1200). It is not until the fourteenth-century (ca. 1330) Middle English rewriting of the Ami and Amile story, *Amis and Amiloun*, that two knights swear a formal troth-plight similar to this one in a literary text.<sup>15</sup>

Although few literary texts feature such a formal ceremony, sworn male friendship as a historical phenomenon absolutely existed in the Middle Ages. This scene mirrors some of those discussed by Bray in his book *The Friend*, in particular, the union between John Winter and Nicholas Molneux, two English knights in the army of Henry V who swear to be brothers-in-arms in the church of St. Martin at Harfleur on July 12, 1421, almost 300 years after *Thèbes*.<sup>16</sup> Different historians and literary critics have offered violence, profit, and love as the motives for such historical sworn brotherhoods. Brent D. Shaw argues that such “artificial brotherhoods” were not affective but were political, and, in fact, some of that motive is seen in *Thèbes*, both here and in Polynices’s friendship with the son of Daire le Roux.<sup>17</sup> With Tydeus and Polynices, Adrastus will use his power to put an end to an unnecessary battle by bonding the knights to himself and to each other—thus sworn brotherhood works as a form of social control in the feudal system, putting an end to unnecessary violence. And, in fact, moderation, especially of violence, is a theme of *Thèbes*. Adrastus’s interference in the combat between the two knights points to the efforts by monarchs to assert control over their feudal vassals. Citing R. Howard Bloch, Burgwinkle points to the move from trial by combat to trial by inquest as a problem for how the feudal aristocracy defined their roles in society.<sup>18</sup> This uncertainty about how aristocratic masculinity was to be defined is at the heart of *Thèbes*, as is demonstrated by the competing descriptions of Tydeus, Polynices, Eteocles, and other knights throughout the text. As Bray points out, the three motives for male friendship were not mutually exclusive and, in fact, sworn brotherhood cannot be adequately explained by any of them in isolation. For example, in the case of Winter and Molneux, there is little doubt that affection played a role in the union of the two as brothers-in-arms.<sup>19</sup> And, in fact, all three motives play a role in *Thèbes*.

The bond between Tydeus and Polynices is further solemnized by their marriages to the daughters of Adrastus, Argia and Deiphyle. Adrastus quickly offers his daughters to the knights in order to bond



the knights to his service and to fulfill the prophecy. The two friends' negotiation with each other for the women reveals not only the profit motive of sworn male friendship but also the valorization of masculine bonds over heterosexual marriage in this text. With his daughters as coheireses, Adrastus offers to split his realm between the two knights (and the reader is left to wonder if it will work here when it didn't with the two brothers, Eteocles and Polynices). With the king's offer, Tydeus turns to his friend and says:

Cest plait, fait il, je ne refus,  
Que volentiers n'en prenge l'une;  
Mais por ceo que n'i ait rancune,  
Mis compains eslise devant mei:  
L'aisné prenge, et je l'otrei.  
(lines 1165-69)

("That is pleasing to me," he said, "I won't refuse to willingly take one of them. But so that there isn't any anger, my companion should choose before me. If he takes the elder, I will not object.")

The text explicitly posits the daughters as objects—objects of extensive description and objects of exchange between the king and his knights and between the two knights themselves. The knights' friendship is valorized over the marriages, pointing to the centrality of masculine bonds in the society which produced this text. Mathew Kuefler argues that the twelfth century witnesses a move from male bonds to male rivalry as female love interests are inserted into texts to alleviate accusations of sodomy between male friends, such as is seen in the *Roman d'Enéas* with Enéas and Lavinia. The slightly earlier *Thèbes* shows no such obvious concern with sodomy and consistently privileges male bonds over heterosexual love interests. Rather than creating or continuing a rivalry, the marriages serve to further bond the two knights to each other and to the king. Polynices's and Tydeus's marriages to the princesses do not feature any proclamations of love or desire but are merely an aspect of the homosociality bonding the two knights to Adrastus and to each other.

Nonetheless, Polynices's most important bond is not that with Tydeus or that with his wife—his relationship with his brother Eteocles centers the plot of the story from the opening lines to the last. However, his bond of love with Tydeus reflects his bond of hate with his brother, just as the descriptions of the two knights are opposites of each other. Rather than positioning a heterosexual love interest as the counterpoint to male bonds, *Thèbes* features a chosen same-sex kinship in opposition to an involuntary blood kinship between brothers. In other words, the sworn friendship and the character of Tydeus are key to understanding the two brothers and to understanding how *Thèbes* is participating in debates about kinship and masculinity. Thus, the character of Tydeus plays a pivotal role in the text's construction of masculinities. In another article I examined how the monstrously violent relationship between the two brothers is mirrored in the monsters that abound in the French Theban landscape, from the Sphinx to Astarot (the Sphinx's avatar) to the monstrous anger of Eteocles, and ultimately Polynices.<sup>20</sup> What is fascinating is the fact that one of the potentially monstrous characters whose monstrosity is erased in the Old French version is Tydeus. The monstrous Tydeus of antiquity is replaced with a paragon of a certain brand of medieval masculinity that *Thèbes* is privileging. The Old French author rewrote the character of Tydeus as a worthy brother-in-arms.

Tydeus's story from Greek myth is nothing if not horrific and monstrous. As he told Adrastus, his father is Oeneus, and, in *Thèbes*, he has been exiled for killing his brother, thus a fratricide. In the Greek and Latin stories, Adrastus agrees to help Polynices regain Thebes before he helps Tydeus attack Calydon, and, thus, Tydeus becomes one of the Seven Against Thebes, although this phrase is not used in *Thèbes*. During the battle for Thebes, Tydeus is mortally wounded by Melanippus, but, in the ancient story, Tydeus kills him before he himself dies. And here is where the Old French rewriting diverges radically from its source. In Statius's work and other ancient myths, Tydeus then feasts on Melanippus's brains which so horrifies the goddess Athena that she decides not to make Tydeus immortal as she had planned.<sup>21</sup> This battlefield cannibalism can be read as an ingestion of the power of his opponent and the ultimate enactment of revenge (and an embodiment of immoderate

hypermasculinity), but that does not negate its horror or the reaction of those who witness it.

The description of Tydeus's death in *Thèbes* reveals a much different character than the Tydeus of antiquity. Melanippus still kills him in a cowardly way, hiding in the bushes. But Tydeus does not turn to kill Melanippus and then ingest his brains. Rather, in the Old French version, Tydeus falls to the ground, and his companions cut off Melanippus's head to avenge him (lines 7283-96). The Old French author transforms the ferocious cannibal into a courtly knight whose death calls to mind the deaths of other romance and epic heroes. There is no hint of cannibalism here, no words of condemnation of this noble hero and friend. In fact, throughout *Thèbes*, the Old French Tydeus is an honorable knight—in this scene he does not even participate in the death of less-than-noble Melanippus. Similarly, earlier in the text, he expresses great remorse when he kills the young knight Atys on the battlefield. He sees no honor in killing the young boy and laments that Atys still belongs in the women's chambers, being a boy whose beard has barely started to show (lines 6677-6714).

This shift in the representation of Tydeus is especially telling given the addition of a variety of monstrous characters to the Old French text, in particular Astarot, a hermaphroditic creature who guards the pass between Greece and Thebes after the Sphinx's defeat at Oedipus's hands. After the death of Astarot, the noble Tydeus himself occupies the Sphinx's lair during a certain part of the text. Prior to the war, Tydeus served as Polynices's messenger to Eteocles's court and further proved his bond to Polynices by battling and defeating a large number of Eteocles's men from his hiding spot in the Sphinx's lair. To achieve this feat, Tydeus took the Sphinx's place and demonstrated almost supernatural powers in overcoming impossible odds (not that a knight overcoming impossible odds is an anomaly in romance or epic). However, to do so, Tydeus inhabited the same monstrous space as both the Sphinx and Astarot. He attacked Eteocles's men from the monsters' mountain lair, not with his sword and lance, but by throwing rocks upon them. And, yet, what is highlighted is his prowess, not any monstrosity or transgression or unchivalric behavior. In fact, it is Eteocles's attack on his brother's messenger which is coded as transgressive.

Was the Old French author simply worried about his audience's reaction to a monstrous hero who cannibalizes his foe? Given the bloody, immoderate violence of the rest of the text, that seems unlikely. The story of Thebes was immensely popular in the Middle Ages, and the original audience could potentially have been aware of the story of Tydeus and his cannibalistic death. Thus, the transformation of the character of Tydeus from monstrous to heroic takes on added weight, as does his relationship to Polynices. When Polynices sees Tydeus's body, he is unsurprisingly grieved, and he faints, sighs, and cries. His lament lasts several pages and features many avowals of his love for Tydeus. He states, "Vous m'estiez certains amys" (you were my sure friend, line 7341), reminding the reader of their sworn bond. He goes on to say:

Mei soleiez forment choser  
quant je voloie chevalcher;  
car voux m'aviez ytant chier  
ne voloiez que mal traisisse,  
ne que de rien m'entremeisse.

(lines 7350-54)

(You were accustomed to advise me not to go when I wanted to ride forth because you held me so dear that you didn't want me to get hurt or to get caught up in anything.)

Here we see that Tydeus advised Polynices to moderate his violence. Eteocles does not have a similar friend, and is consequently represented throughout the text as immoderately angry and violent, traits the brothers share through their fatal destiny as the sons of incest. Tydeus serves as an ennobling influence on his friend in the Ciceronian tradition, as Jaeger would argue.<sup>22</sup> At the end of his lament, Polynices attempts suicide so as not to have to live without his friend:

"Quant premier en Grece venismes,  
Por les hostals nous mesprismes;  
A Arges, al perron reial,  
Nous combatismes por l'ostal;

Le reis l'oït de son palais,  
Entre nous myst concorde et pais:  
Onc puis n'amastes vers mei rien,  
Ne frère ne cosin germain.  
Pois vostre mort vivre ne quier."  
Atant il trait le brant d'acier;  
Par mie le cors s'en volt ferir,  
Quant le reis le li court tolir.  
(lines 7387-98)

("When we first came to Greece, we fought over our camping place, at Argos, near the royal seat, we fought for our spot. The king heard from the palace. He came and made peace and accord between us. Since then, you have loved me more than anyone, more than any brother or cousin. I cannot live if you are dead." He pulled his steel sword and wanted to plunge it into his body when the king [Adrastus] ran up and took it from him.)

Parallels of this lament of one man for a fallen comrade in arms are witnessed in other epics and romances, for example in the *Roman d'Enéas* with the deaths of Nisus and Euryalus and the laments of Turnus for Camilla and Enéas for Pallas. But in *Thèbes*, the reference to loving Tydeus more than any brother (i.e., Eteocles) takes on an added weight, and the reason for the transformation of the cannibal Tydeus into the noble Tydeus becomes clearer. Rather than representing a monstrous Tydeus whose actions parallel the monstrosity of the rest of the text, this text posits him as a civilizing influence on Polynices—a paragon of virtuous masculinity in contrast to the immoderate violence of Eteocles. Thus, immoderate violence between actual brothers is contrasted with friendship and love between male friends. The representation of Tydeus points to the importance of male bonds between soldiers on the battlefield as a moderating influence on excessive violence (coded in *Thèbes* as monstrous)—questions of moderation and excess are at the heart of *Thèbes* and its moral lesson which is that the two brothers are destroyed because of their lack of *mésure* [moderation].<sup>23</sup> As cited above, Polynices acknowledges this moderating influence in his lament.

In *Thèbes*, the death of Tydeus marks Polynices's shift to a more monstrous and immoderate character who will soon kill his own brother and be killed by him. The text contrasts the voluntary kinship of Tydeus and Polynices as ennobling and moderating with the involuntary blood kinship of Eteocles and Polynices as evil, cursed, and immoderate. As noted above, this reading of *Thèbes* follows Jaeger's work wherein he argues that the medieval construction of male friendship was modeled on Cicero's *De amicitia* and is, thus, an ennobling and moderating influence on the knights involved.<sup>24</sup> Jaeger writes that "[t]he motif of love 'raising the worth' of men is both central to courtly love literature, vernacular and Latin, and to the Ciceronian tradition of ennobling friendship."<sup>25</sup> The problem that occurs in the twelfth century, according to Jaeger, is that this ennobling "love of virtue in another man" becomes confused with erotic heterosexual love.<sup>26</sup> He terms this "the romantic dilemma." *Thèbes* fits into Jaeger's argument by representing a Ciceronian-style friendship that is ennobling but is ultimately destroyed. The friendship of Tydeus and Polynices embodies Jaeger's ennobling love in that its "social function is to show forth virtue in lovers, to raise their inner worth, to increase their honor and enhance their reputation."<sup>27</sup> But it troubles Jaeger's conclusions because the friendship is presented in opposition not to a heterosexual love relationship but to another male relationship, that of brothers; its counterpoint is not a heterosexual love interest that conflates this ennobling love with erotic love, but the brotherhood of Polynices and Eteocles, and that counterpoint is likewise destroyed. Without Tydeus's influence, Polynices cannot escape the battle or the monstrosity of his relationship with his brother. This interpretation points to the necessity of Tydeus's death in this text. Polynices cannot escape his destiny as Oedipus and Jocasta's son—the two brothers have been on this course for 10,000 lines in this story. In fact, all of Polynices's male bonds are destroyed before or with his own death.

Jaeger's argument that the twelfth century witnesses the rise of the "romantic dilemma" resonates with the representations of male friendship in *Thèbes*, but it must be nuanced with an awareness of competing constructions of masculinity. Although *Thèbes* does not feature much that is "romantic," it is "rich in ambiguities, full of tragic, destructive passion," as Jaeger characterizes romance.<sup>28</sup> In the twelfth century,

Jaeger and others argue, the ennobling, virtuous love of male friends comes into direct contact with sexualized, erotic love of men for women. As Jaeger writes, "Virtue and sex formed a precarious union; it was constantly falling apart, showing its destructive nature, crushing those who claimed its ennobling force."<sup>29</sup> *Thèbes* further deconstructs this binary by showing that it is not just erotic love that is in opposition to ennobling male love, but it can also be destructive male bonds such as the fratricidal relationship of Eteocles and Polynices. Similar to today, the social, religious, and political changes that took place in the twelfth century do not just impact relationships between men and women, but also and strikingly between men and men and point to larger questions about men's relationships to the state and other organizing institutions such as the Church.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike the *Enéas* in which Enéas is accused of sodomy because of his friendships with men, there are no accusations of a sexual relationship between Tydeus and Polynices. Nonetheless, the deaths of Tydeus and Polynices hint at the argument that, over the course of the twelfth century, male friendship (male-male bonds) went from normative to transgressive. The transgressive nature of the friendship here is not explicit, but only becomes apparent in its relationship to other bonds in the text. The text does reference acts against nature but not in reference to Tydeus and Polynices and not in reference to sodomy, but rather in reference to Polynices and Eteocles in the last lines of the text:

Por ce vous die : "Prenez en cure,  
Par dreit errez et par mesure;  
Ne faciez rien *countre nature*  
Que ne vingiez a fin dure."  
(12056-57: emphasis added)

(This is why I tell you, "Be careful, act correctly and with measure; do nothing *against nature* so that you will not know such a hard end.")

This passage provides the moral of the story, but goes beyond exhortations for moderation to warn its readers not to act against nature. And

what appears to be posited as “countre nature” here is the fratricidal battle and deaths of the two brothers, perhaps a reference to the historical context of the romance and the struggles of Henry II Plantagenet’s sons. However, “acts against nature” is a loaded phrase in the Middle Ages (and today) that does more than simply hint at the sexual. As Karma Lochrie explains, in the Middle Ages, “Nature . . . defines what is consistent with reason and that means, for sexual practices, what is consistent with the purpose of reproduction. The only natural and desirable sexual act, therefore, is narrowly defined to exclude most heterosexual acts: sex in the appropriate vessels, with the appropriate instruments, in the appropriate position, without inordinate desire.”<sup>31</sup> Lochrie’s definition fits well with a text like *Thèbes* obsessed with moderation and acting correctly. Eteocles and Polynices do not act “with reason” and thus are “unnatural,” but any sexual transgression is not theirs but their parents’. Lochrie argues that modern scholars’ inability to see beyond the modern categories of heterosexual/homosexual and the related heteronormativity flattens analyses of past relationships. As she writes, and as is witnessed in *Thèbes*, “‘Natural’ and ‘unnatural’ . . . were not medieval code words for ‘heterosexual’ and ‘perverse.’”<sup>32</sup> Even the assumption that “acts against nature” must be sexual is perhaps a modern imposition. Lochrie’s contention fits here. The difficulty of defining such terms and identifying alternative chosen kinships in the premodern era can be seen clearly in texts such as *Thèbes* where a formal ceremony between knights has been completely overlooked, and what the text posits as unnatural may be a fratricidal relationship between brothers. The loaded and enigmatic phrase “countre nature” is key to understanding how *Thèbes* represents and participates in the construction of sexuality and gender. If we are to understand “countre nature” as sexual, the two medieval sex acts to which it could apply are sodomy and incest. But the phrase refers to the deaths of two brothers born of incest, not two brothers accused of sodomy or incest themselves, and it could be understood to refer to fratricidal violence.

While sodomy appears not to be an issue in this text, incest most definitely is, although it is mostly unspoken. Nonetheless, incest is a very important unnatural sexual act in the twelfth century. The curse of Oedipus and Jocasta’s incest silently haunts this story. Polynices’s life and



his relationship with his brother are cursed by the sexual transgression of his parents which manifests itself in the destiny of the two brothers. And while the text doesn't feature explicit condemnations of the brothers as the products of incest, it does give hints to the shame of this lineage, for example, both in the last lines of the text and when Polynices hesitates to tell Adrastus who his parents are. For a time, Polynices overcomes this shame and "unnaturalness" through the moderating influence of his friend, only to have the effect of his parents' sins reemerge after Tydeus's death. In his brother Eteocles, unnaturalness is manifested in his immoderate anger and the often irrational violence he perpetrates.

This reading of *Thèbes* points to its role in the twelfth century as part of the institutionalizing force of the Church and nascent State to control marriage, kinship, and violence. As I stated at the beginning of this article, the composition of *Thèbes* in the mid twelfth century coincides not just with increasing debates about the nature of violence and masculinity, but also with debates about the nature of marriage and the role of consent and consummation in the formation of marriage.<sup>33</sup> This text would have resonated with an audience struggling with new canon laws dealing with marriage. The text presents a king's need to control his vassals with the marriage of Tydeus and Polynices to Adrastus's daughters along with a desire to moderate violence born of incest.

*Thèbes* was written in the midst of efforts by church reformers to change the nature of marriage. James Brundage and others point to the late eleventh through mid twelfth centuries in the push for exogamous marriage in Western Europe.<sup>34</sup> *Thèbes* privileges the exogamous marriages of Tydeus and Polynices to the Greek princesses in contrast to the endogamous/incestuous marriage of Polynices's parents. The First (1123) and Second (1139) Lateran Councils reiterated prohibitions against consanguineous marriage within seven degrees of kinship, the standard prohibition since at least the eighth century (which some have estimated would have resulted in up to nearly three thousand prohibited partners).<sup>35</sup> Gratian, the twelfth-century canon lawyer, maintained this standard in his 1140 *Decretum*. However, Gratian and other twelfth-century Church jurists recognized the problems of this limitation on marriage, and the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) reduced the degrees of kinship to four, showing how contested definitions of incest were in

this period. Moreover, the theme of incest is featured in many medieval stories, from the Theban tradition found in *Thèbes*, Chaucer, and John Lydgate, to the *Ovide moralisé*.<sup>36</sup> Surprisingly, it is not obvious that the reference in *Thèbes* to acts “ccontre nature” is, in fact, a reference to the incestuous relationship of Jocasta and Oedipus, and the text forces readers to try to puzzle out this connection themselves through textual and intertextual connections.

In support of this contention of incest as silent but key, another possible reference to both incest and acts against nature can be found in the ultimate description of the city of Thebes where it is turned into a wasteland as a result of Eteocles and Polynices’s war and deaths:

Que deserité en fu la cuntree,  
Eissilé et deguasté.  
(12051-52)

(That the land was deprived of an heir and was ravaged and laid to waste.)

The sexual relationship between mother (Jocasta) and son (Oedipus) cannot be fruitful—it is also a wasteland, as embodied by the deaths of Eteocles and Polynices. But the text doesn’t make this link explicit—it is again a riddle the reader must attempt to solve. As Daniel Poiron puts it, “La question que le lecteur lui-même doit résoudre est celle de la relation entre une malheureuse filiation et la dévastation du pays.”<sup>37</sup> (The question that the reader must resolve is that of the link between a cursed parentage and the devastation of the land.) One hint may be found in the detail that King Adrastus, who arranges exogamous marriages for his daughters, is one of the few characters who is not killed, nor are his daughters. As literary support for the institutional push for exogamy, Kuefler cites the changes to the Ami and Amile story, beginning with the earliest version, the eleventh-century Latin story of Amicus and Amelius, which ends with the two knights taking vows of chastity, compared to the late twelfth-century Old French version where the two men go back to their wives at the end, thus privileging marriage over friendship, but only the right kind of marriage—exogamous unions

such as that of Enéas and Lavinia, and the marriages between Tydeus and Polynices and the daughters of Adrastus.

Through these enigmatic and contradictory representations of gender and kinship, *Thèbes* participates in the complex negotiations occurring in twelfth-century France about what masculinity is and what its relationship is to violence and kinship systems. This text is part of the discussion about how male friendships are going to fit into the shifting social and political arrangements of its time. Tydeus and Polynices are not killed because of their friendship, but, like *Enéas's* Nisus and Euryalus (and Eteocles and Polynices), they are both destroyed by immoderate violence and war. Burgwinkle argues that those twelfth-century shifts are focused on constructing and maintaining new models “of heroic and highly monitored masculinity” which he, among others, argue, center around the “invention of sodomy.”<sup>38</sup> Critics such as Gaunt and Kuefler offer the *Enéas* as a key text in this shift. Kuefler agrees with Gaunt’s argument about the role of these early romances in these debates, and writes “The *Roman d’Enéas* also demonstrates that what was being challenged in the twelfth century, through the suspicion of sodomy, was military culture and the bonds of solidarity between men that were necessary for the cohesion of military culture.”<sup>39</sup> It is just those bonds that we see between Tydeus and Polynices, but not being challenged through accusations of sodomy, but rather promoted or valorized only to be proven untenable in the face of “acts against nature” whether we read those acts as fratricidal violence or as the wasteland of incestuous offspring.

*Thèbes* doesn’t offer the same answers the *Enéas* does. It doesn’t posit the relationship between the two friends in contrast to a heterosexual relationship. Rather, one form of masculine bond is contrasted to another, and ultimately they are all destroyed. It is not the male friendship that is coded as transgressive, it is the entire text which seems to exist on the borders of epic and romance and on the borders of differing constructions of masculinity. As Poiron argues, the organizing theme of the text may in fact be intentionally enigmatic or a riddle (in French, *l’énigme*), beginning with the riddle of the Sphinx through the many oracles to the deaths of the two brothers whose ashes continue to battle after their deaths. In fact, I would argue that it is not the friendship between Polynices and Tydeus that is transgressive but the entire text. The entire text would,

thus, be “countre nature” which could perhaps account for its unstable manuscript tradition—its narrative is difficult to recount.

The enigmatic nature of the text is reflected on many levels, from content to form. The additions of any romance elements to *Thèbes* are few. The descriptions of the Greek princesses, Argie and Deiphyle, are one such place, as is the relationship between Oedipus’s daughter Antigone and the Greek knight Parthonopeus, an invention of the *Thèbes* poet. But these additions are awkward. For example, the text posits a courtly relationship between Parthonopeus and Antigone only to erase it when he dies. In his death scene, all of his thoughts are for his young mother with not a word for his beloved, thus, erasing Antigone as a romance heroine (11087–154).<sup>40</sup> The relationship between the young Theban knight Atys and Oedipus’s other daughter, Ismène, functions in a similar way, although the text does feature her lament for him. The text’s main focus remains on homosocial masculine bonds between knights, vassals, and kings, but not a monologic masculinity. The contrasting characters of Tydeus and Eteocles embody a tension between competing constructions of masculinity with Polynices pulled between the two. The immoderate hypermasculinity of ancient Tydeus is replaced with an ennobling moderating version of masculinity, and Tydeus’s sworn brotherhood with Polynices is key to this negotiation.

I would posit that the sworn brotherhood ceremony featured in *Thèbes* cannot be explained as a literary anomaly but reflects an early concern about constructions of masculinity and passionate male friendships seen in later romances. Scholars have perhaps overlooked this scene because it does not fit nicely into existing arguments about gender and genre that problematically position masculinity in a binary with femininity, and heterosexuality with homosexuality, as Lochrie argues. What this scene (and thus the text itself) *does* is bring a formal aspect to the friendships of the Ciceronian tradition as romance begins to compete for the audience and problematizes male/male bonds. It emphasizes the competing connections between men while leaving heterosexual relationships in their shadow, illustrating the homosociality of the world that produced this work. In *Thèbes* with the death of Tydeus, the reader is witnessing an aspect of the end to the innocence described by Jaeger, replaced a

mere decade later by the romantic dilemma of the dialogic masculinity and femininity of the *Roman d'Enéas*.

While the sworn brotherhood between Tydeus and Polynices is not problematized in the same ways that the slightly later friendship between Enéas and Pallas is, there are still hints of a political shift in how male bonds are represented. The masculinities of *Thèbes* are embodied and performed by men who die in ignominious ways, and ultimately the city of Thebes is destroyed by an army of widows who tear it apart with their fingernails, the ultimate destruction of the text's masculinities—and one of the few places in the text where masculinity is in dialogue with femininity. Ultimately, however, I would argue that the representation of the masculinities of *Thèbes* demonstrates that chosen same-sex kinships, while at risk in a violent world, can be as, if not more, ennobling and “natural” than blood relationships and heterosexual marriage. Such a message speaks to twenty-first-century debates about these very issues.

Judith Butler argues that without maintaining a critical perspective on the issue of same-sex unions and gay marriage, we risk a political claim that “naturalizes the options that figure most legibly within the sexual field.”<sup>41</sup> Certain feminist and queer scholars argue that the current push for recognition of same-sex marriage does just that, and that it is part of a neoliberal, homonormative agenda that does not adequately problematize the institution of marriage as an inherently unequal and oppressive institution.<sup>42</sup> Theorists such as Butler contend that the liberal queer push for equal rights ignores or even erases the radical queer and feminist aims of transforming how our society constructs kinship and sexuality.<sup>43</sup> Identity positions and relationships that exist in the margins/borders of the political claim for same-sex marriage (a claim that reifies the binary of legitimate and illegitimate) are a site of “uncertain ontology, difficult nomination.”<sup>44</sup> Given this argument, the fact that previous scholars working on same-sex kinships in medieval Europe have overlooked the formal union of Tydeus and Polynices makes it all the more important to analyze. It is a union that troubles previous ontologies and nominations of medieval same-sex unions—witness my own difficulty in figuring out what to term the knights' relationship and the complexities of positing its relationship to other gender formations. It is a key relationship from a medieval text that does not fit into

modern dominant understandings of chosen kinships, thus supporting Butler's argument about the importance of naming other options. This article, thus, nuances and problematizes the already existing archive on medieval same-sex relationships and continues the work of scholars such as Boswell, and ultimately it contributes to the scholarly discussion of the extant historical and literary evidence which gives a voice, a name, to alternative sexual and kinship relations. Examples of premodern formalized friendships such as that between Tydeus and Polynices provide a way to bring awareness to and name alternative kinship systems that have been erased by our modern society. The existence of such unions, both literary and historical, demonstrates that our oppressively restrictive definitions of family and marriage are a modern invention, that definitions of kinship and family shift and change over time, and that even within a given culture, those definitions are not universal and static.

*University of Montana*

∞ END NOTES

1. See John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, 1st ed. (New York: Villard Books, 1994); Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); C. Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility*, The Middle Ages series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

2. See, for example, Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature*, Cambridge studies in French (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

3. See Ann Ferguson, "Gay Marriage: An American and Feminist Dilemma," *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 39-57.

4. I am relying primarily on the Lettres gothiques edition which is based on Manuscript S, London, British Library, Add. 34114. Most scholars agree that this manuscript, although dated quite late (late fourteenth century), is based on the earliest known redaction of the text. It is argued to be the most faithful to the twelfth-century language of the author. I have compared this edition to the Classiques du Moyen Âge edition of Manuscript C, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 784. For a discussion of the manuscript

tradition see Francine Mora-Lebrun, "Introduction," in *Le Roman de Thèbes* (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1995). See also Aimé Petit, "Le Planctus d'Ysmaïne dans le manuscrit P du Roman de Thèbes," in *Miscellanea Mediaevalia*, t. 2: *Mélanges offerts à Philippe Ménard*, ed. Alain Labbé, J. Claude Faucon, and Danielle Quéruef (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1998).

5. This story is also told in the fifth-century BCE play by Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*. Aeschylus would not have been known to a twelfth-century author.

6. Dominique Battles, *The Medieval Tradition of Thebes: History and Narrative in the OF Roman de Thèbes, Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Lydgate* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 19.

7. Anonymous, *Le Roman de Thèbes*, trans. Francine Mora-Lebrun, *Lettres gothiques* (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1995), edition of manuscript S (London, British Library, Add. 34114) with translation and notes.

8. All translations are my own.

9. Anonymous, *Ami et Amile: Chanson de geste*, ed. Peter F. Dembowski, *Les Classiques français du moyen âge* (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1969), lines 38-43.

10. See Alice M. Colby, *The Portrait in Twelfth-Century French Literature: An Example of the Stylistic Originality of Chrétien de Troyes* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1965) for the classic discussion of romance tropes of description.

11. William E. Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity, and Law in Medieval Literature: France and England, 1050-1230*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 200.

12. Jaeger, *Ennobling Love*, 157.

13. This is a close translation of the Latin: Then kindly Adrastus: "Nay come, put aside the threats that night and sudden valor or sudden wrath inspired, and pass under my roof. Let your right hands now join and pledge your hearts. This that has passed is not in vain, nor were the gods elsewhere. It may even be that your anger is harbinger of amity to come, to be pleasant in memory." Nor was the old man's prophesy idle. For 'tis said that after these wounds they were bonded in such loyalty as made Theseus share the worst with reckless Piritous, or Pylades face Megaera's fury to shield a mad-dened Orestes. P. Papinius Statius, *Thebaid, Books I-VII*, ed. and trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Loeb Classical Library 207* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), Bk. 1, lines 467-77.

14. It should be noted that same-sex unions are part of the Theban tradition. As Plutarch recounts, the Theban army of the fourth century BCE was

led by the Sacred Band of Thebes which featured 150 pairs of sworn-brother/lover soldiers. Plutarch, "Life of Pelopidas," Internet Classics Archive, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/pelopida.html>.

15. John C. Ford, "Merry Married Brothers: Wedded Friendship, Lovers' Language and Male Matrimonials in Two Middle English Romances," *Medieval Forum* 3 (2003), <http://www.sfsu.edu/~medieval/Volume3/Brothers.html>.

16. See Bray, *The Friend*, 35.

17. Brent D. Shaw, "Ritual Brotherhood in Roman and Post-Roman Society," *Traditio* 52 (1997), 327-55.

18. Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity and Law*, 122. Burgwinkle cites R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval French Literature and Law* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

19. See Bray, *The Friend*, 38-39.

20. Elizabeth A. Hubble, "Hideous a desmesure: Monsters and Monstrous Knights in Early French Romance," *Comitatus* 35 (2004): 45-70.

21. As an aside, one of the greatest shifts from Statius's work to the Old French text is the role of the gods—they are virtually absent from the *Roman de Thèbes* allowing the focus to be on knighthood rather than the relationship of divine forces to humankind.

22. I discussed this scene with Professor Jaeger at the 2008 International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University when he attended a panel where I presented part of this research, and he very graciously and helpfully acknowledged that he had overlooked this scene.

23. See the last four lines of the romance, cited below.

24. See Jaeger, *Ennobling Love*.

25. *Ibid.*, 153.

26. *Ibid.*, 29.

27. *Ibid.*, 6.

28. *Ibid.*, 7.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Thèbes* does not offer much in terms of relationships between women. Jocasta is represented as "proz et sage" (line 4095) which posits her in a masculine framework connected to such descriptions as that of Roland and Olivier in *La Chanson de Roland* (line 1093). One place to look for relationships between women would be the letters of Heloise. See Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).



31. Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies*, xxiii.
32. *Ibid.*, xxii.
33. See James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 234-54.
34. *Ibid.*, especially chapter 5.
35. *Ibid.*, 29 citing Jean-Louis Flandrin, *Families in Former Times: Kinship, Household, and Sexuality*, trans. Richard Southern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
36. See Elizabeth Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).
37. Daniel Poiron, "Édyppus et l'énigme du roman médiéval," in *Qui des sept arz set rien entendre. . . : Études sur le Roman de Thèbes*, ed. Bernard Ribémont, *Medievalia*, no. 43 (Orléans: Paradigme, 2002), 148.
38. Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity and Law*, 2.
39. Mathew Kuefler, "Male Friendship and the Suspicion of Sodomy in Twelfth-Century France," in *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, ed. Mathew Kuefler (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 186.
40. The relationship between Parthonopeus and Antigone is an invention of the *Thèbes* poet. Thus, this omission could be the result of too much reliance on the source material.
41. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York : Routledge, 2004).
42. See, for example, "Session Title: The Contested Terrain of Queer, Feminist Debates about Same-Sex Marriage," in *National Women's Studies Association Annual Conference* (Denver, CO, 2010). This session featured a number of speakers who were troubled by the normalization of marriage as THE political claim.
43. Butler, *Undoing Gender*. See in particular the chapter "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?," 108-30.
44. *Ibid.*, 108.