**Man-Eaters: Cannibalism and Queerness in the Giant–Knight Encounters of the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, the *Roman de Brut*, and the *Roman de Perceforest***

*Abstract*

This article offers new, queer readings of a series of encounters between knights and cannibal giants in medieval texts in French and Latin. After situating them in their wider literary context, it focuses on episodes from three texts in the same historiographical tradition: Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*c.* 1136–8), Wace’s *Roman de Brut* (*c.* 1150–55), and the *Roman de Perceforest* (*c.* 1340–44). Drawing on psychoanalytic and queer theory, I argue that the encounter with the cannibal giant troubles the heterosexual courtly subject due to cannibalism’s intimate relationship with queerness. Accordingly, close readings reveal these encounters, from wrestling matches to armed duels, to be rich in homoerotic language and imagery. Yet, rather than merely corroborating and dramatizing the modern theory, the texts push it further in ways that ask probing questions of medieval constructions of heterosexual subjectivity, namely in their striking representations of the knights all flirting back. Thus, cannibalism emerges from these analyses as a revealing commentary on heterosexuality and on its essentially melancholic structure, which disavows same-sex desires that can, for all that, never be fully excluded.

*Key Words*

Cannibalism; Queer Theory; Psychoanalysis; Giants; Geoffrey of Monmouth; Robert Wace; Roman de Perceforest

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**Introduction**

A problem that consistently attends scholarly inquiry into cannibalism is its largely unpaid debt to the Middle Ages. Indeed, the phenomenon is most frequently considered as one almost inextricably bound up with sixteenth-century Western colonialism. Take, for example, Maggie Kilgour’s 1990 study *From Communion to Cannibalism,* which was highly influential in sparking critical debate on the subject of cannibalism. In it, Kilgourinnovatively identified cannibalism, along with practices such as the Eucharist and sex, as modes of incorporation that trouble the binary structures of interior/exterior, form/content, subject/object. Kilgour herself, however, is no medievalist, and the early to late Middle Ages are covered by a single, thirty-page chapter in *From Communion*. Frank Lestringant, meanwhile, begins his 1994 account of cannibalism with Columbus, who “n’est pas seulement le découvreur de l’Amérique; c’est d’abord l’inventeur du cannibal” (is not only the discoverer of America; he is firstly the inventor of the cannibal; 43).[[1]](#endnote-1) Lestringant’s persuasive argument in this work is that the cannibal has become gradually aestheticized and made central to the European literary imagination (though Lestringant’s points of reference remain primarily French). The plausibility of his argument only serves, however, to render even more bizarre his insistence on 1492 as cannibalism’s inauguration date, an insistence that leads one of his reviewers (Bideaux, 1994) to summarize uncritically: “Le cannibale naît le 4 novembre 1492” (The cannibal is born on the 4th November 1492; 121). Finally, William Arens reasserts, in a 1998 essay, his provocative 1979 hypothesis that cannibalism has only ever been a feature of the Western imaginary rather than a real, documented practice; but it is nevertheless one that is, according to Arens, first projected onto the Caribbean in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Arens 1979; 1998, 40).

But Western engagement with (and occasionally in) cannibalism obviously pre-dates the fifteenth century, and several medievalists have persuasively argued this point. For a start, as Gill Tattersall points out in her 1988 essay, the Middle Ages inherited a wealth of material from classical antiquity describing various man-eating peoples, races, and figures, material that was, over the course of the twelfth century, increasingly translated into the vernacular (241–3). More recently, in her influential *Empire of Magic*, Geraldine Heng (2003) asserts that Western romance literature is itself an attempt to repress the traumatic memory of the acts of cannibalism committed by Christian crusaders at the siege of Ma’arra in 1098 (for a recent historical discussion of this event, see Rubenstein [2008]). This bold argument serves to underline the central importance of the figure of the cannibal to Western culture well before 1492. Similarly, in his work on Marco Polo’s *Devisement du Monde,* Simon Gaunt (2013, 171) points out that cannibals appear “at the heart of civilization” in the court of Kublai Khan himself. Merrall Llywelyn Price (2003) also offers a nuanced account of the various ways in cannibalism is used to articulate cultural identity in the medieval and early modern periods, with examples focusing, among others, on the Eucharist and witchcraft, before turning, of course, to the discovery of the New World. The work of Heather Blurton (2007) has similarly investigated how representations of cannibalism, in her case in English literature from the ninth to fourteenth centuries, are “implicated in the process of articulating cultural and national identity” (2).

What is not, however, taken into account by any of these scholars, whether medievalists or early modernists, are the erotics of cannibalism, and even less its homoerotics.[[2]](#endnote-2) My aim in this article is, therefore, to investigate whether the ways in which these critics have argued cannibalism to be disavowed by, yet central to, Western cultural identity might be usefully translated into sexual terms. I wish, in other words, to interrogate the extent to which cannibalism might act as a telling index of how same-sex desire is disavowed by, and yet central to, heterosexuality. In this, I follow the logic of Judith Butler ([1990] 2006, 105), for whom the exclusory mechanism enacted by taboos such as cannibalism and homosexuality serves only to relocate such practices at the center of dominant culture as its disavowed ground.

Taking a corpus of texts from within the framework of Galfridian historiography, this article develops new readings of the cannibal encounter not only as crucial to the foundation myth of the British Isles, but also as formulating a critical commentary on medieval constructions of male heterosexuality.[[3]](#endnote-3) This corpus includes: Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* of *c.* 1136–8; Robert Wace’s *Roman de Brut* of *c.* 1150–55 (a vernacular adaptation–translation of the *Historia*); and the little-studied but sizeable *Roman de Perceforest* (*c.* 1340–44), written within the framework of Galfridian historiography.[[4]](#endnote-4) My focus, however, centers on three scenes in which a warrior or knight encounters a cannibalistic giant, with the main body of this article developing a series of queer readings of the implicit homoerotic discourses that underlie these encounters. I will first, however, briefly situate the queerness of giants within its wider literary context, before formulating a rigorous queer reading of cannibalism drawing on psychoanalytic and queer theory.

***Size Matters: A Brief History of Giants***

The primary focus of this article is the intimate relationship between cannibalism and queerness; yet, in order to contextualize and justify my textual analyses within the wider field of medieval literature, it is necessary to triangulate my enquiry with a discussion of the condition of gigantism with which cannibalism, in these texts, goes hand in hand. What is the relationship between the gigantic and the human? To what extent to giants “count” as cannibals at all, rather than as simple anthropophagi? And why and how does gigantism so consistently act for medieval writers as a conceptual vehicle for thinking about and articulating the taboos bound up with cannibalism and non-normative sexuality?

Given their prominent place in medieval literature and their complex relationship with medieval notions of humanity, giants have been the subject of much critical attention. In his historiography of the Judeo-Christian tradition of gigantism, David Williams (1996, 117) explains the composite animal, human, and divine nature of giants as the descendants of the union between fallen angels and the half-animal daughters of Cain. For Sylvia Huot (2016), meanwhile, giants in medieval literature act as a “constitutive outside”: they are both excluded and central to medieval notions of subjectivity, civilization, and humanity. Indeed, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1999, xiv) neatly sums up the issue when he writes that “the giant has hybrid status, both within and outside human identity.”

Uncivilized, often sexually deviant, and frequently anthropophagic; it is tempting to categorize giants as flatly animal. However, this categorization is frustrated, apart from anything else, by the very humanoid, bipedal shape of the giant’s body, one that mirrors the human body even as it upsizes it. Between humans and giants there is, in other words, what Kristen Guest (2001, 3) calls the “recognition of corporeal similarity” upon which, she argues, the taboo of cannibalism ultimately rests.

Indeed, giants even sometimes function as a prehistory of the human race itself, as, for example, in the insular French text *Des Grantz Geanz* likely composed in *c*. 1332–4, a text that circulates almost exclusively as a prologue to the so-called Anglo-Norman Prose *Brut*. A shorter redaction of the poem was the basis of a Latin translation, known as *De Origine Gigantum*, likely composed *c*. 1333–8. In these texts, Albion (Britain) is founded by Albina, daughter of a Greek king (or Syrian, depending on the version). As Cohen (1999, 53) notes, Albina and her sisters are impregnated by evil spirits called, in Latin, *incubi* and *demones* (100–10), in French, *malfez* and *deables*,producing offspring that are hideous and huge (439–58). Their size, however, is arguably less a feature of their demonic ancestry than of their human one, since Albina’s family is already described from the outset in both the French and Latin versions not as monstrous or even gigantic, but simply human and very large: “Piere et mere furent grauntz / Auxi devendrent les enfauntz” (Father and mother were big and so became the children; 23–4); “triginta filias admodum speciosas et grandes sicut erat pater et mater earum” (thirty daughters incredibly beautiful and big, just as their father and mother were; 10–11). It seems that, even before their demonic fathering, Albina’s progeny were always going to be giants, like their mother and father before them, but not, for all that, inhuman. In sum, the physical and conceptual similitude of the gigantic humanoid body, coupled with such strands of historiography as *De Origine Gigantum* and *Des Granz Geanz*, amply confirm the use of the term “cannibalism”, as opposed to anthropophagism, in order to describe giants’ consumption of human flesh.

*Des Granz Geanz* and *De Origine Gigantum* are also significant texts for illustrating another characteristic of giants in medieval literature, namely their sexual subversiveness. Here, the founding of Albion is a consequence of the exile of Albina and her sisters from their Greek homeland after their plot to kill the men to whom they have been married. As Leslie Johnson (1995, 32–3) notes, the women’s actions are highly transgressive, even treasonous, and, for Johnson, stem from their inability to be the wives of kings subject to their unconquered father. However, the giantesses’ murderous plot does not merely mark their resistance to feudal demotion: the giantesses seek to translate their father’s political independence into sexual terms, each desiring to be “mestresce / de sun seignur et de qaunt q’il ot” (mistress of her husband and whatever he owned; 59–60), thereby subverting both conventional gender roles and patriarchal kinship structures.

In other texts too, giants who do appear as largely integrated within heteronormative society continue to retain hints of sexual configurations that do not fit within the rigidly straight parameters of courtliness. The half-giant Galehaut is a case in point. In the thirteenth-century *Prose Lancelot*, Galehaut’s narrative trajectory is deeply enmeshed with his love for Lancelot: inscribed on his very tomb are the words “Galehout […] qui por l’amor de Lancelot morut” (Galehaut […] who died for love of Lancelot; II, 212). Notably, Peggy McCracken (2008, 57) has emphasized the reciprocal nature of Lancelot and Galehaut’s love: Lancelot’s transferring of Galehaut’s remains to his own future grave at the Douleureuse Garde mirrors earlier scenes in which Galehaut had joined Lancelot in his bed. Similarly, Miranda Griffin (2005, 136) has pointed out that the main reason Lancelot and Galehaut are never wholly united is “because they are too alike.” The similitude of Lancelot and Galehaut and the reciprocity of their love are points worth bearing in mind when reading the encounters with the cannibal giants, where it is not only the giants’ bodies that are violently samed, but also their desires that are, as we will see, transgressively reciprocated.

***Queering the Cannibal: A Theoretical Enquiry***

The erotics of cannibalism were first investigated by psychoanalytic theory, in which cannibalism is most often figured as a regressive sex–act. For Freudian psychoanalysis, cannibalism is linked to the first stage of psychosexual development: the oral, or, as Freud also terms it, the cannibalistic phase. This phase is where “sexual activity is not yet separated from the ingestion of food” and “the sexual goal consists in the *incorporation* of the object” (Freud [1905] 2006, 173; original emphasis).This physical incorporation of the love–object is then intended to serve as a model for psychic identification in later stages of development. The identificatory process is linked by Freud in a later essay to the mechanisms of melancholia. For Freud, melancholia is characterized by an identification with an object, which is the first stage in the ego’s object–choice, and is expressed by the subject’s assimilation of this object, namely by eating it (Freud [1917] 2005, 209–10). This narcissistic identification then becomes a substitute for the object itself: even if the object is lost, the ego’s love relationship with it is to be maintained. Most important, however, is the fact that this identification is “ambivalent in its manifestation” (Freud [1917] 2005, 209). The internalized object is both loved and hated, both desired and despised. Therefore, post-developmental cannibalism, for Freud, is to be understood not only as a regressive act, literalizing what should now only function as a psychological mechanism, but also as an erotic act, regardless of the genders of eater and eaten.

In Seminar VIII, Lacan’s account of cannibalism has a similarly erotic orientation. Here, it is the “ambivalence première” (primary ambivalence) that underpins a typically Lacanian pun on death and desire: “tu es le désir” (you are desire) and “tuer le désir” (kill desire), meaning, in other words, that for Lacan the desire of every subject is the desire for that desire not to be fulfilled (Lacan [1961] 2001, 243). For Lacan, we are all the male mantis,[[5]](#endnote-5) the cannibalism of whose female partner he describes as “jouissanceaux dépens de l’autre” (*jouissance* at the other’s expense), punning again on *ça* (as pronoun) and *Ça* (as the noun for the Id): “la mante religieuse aime mieux *ça*, la tête de son partenaire, que quoi que ce soit d’autre. […] C’est *ça* qu’elle aime” (the praying mantis prefers that/the Id, the head of her partner, to anything else […] It’s that/the Id that she loves; 257). The cannibalism of the female mantis marks a desire accomplished at the expense of the other, costing her mate his life.

Expanding on Freud and Lacan, Julia Kristeva (1987) also explores the “ambivalence première” in melancholic cannibalism, which functions as a way of destroying the love–object with the express aim of keeping it alive and under the ego’s possession in a disavowal of loss: “Plutôt morcelé, déchiqueté, coupé, avalé, digéré... que perdu. L’imaginaire cannibalique mélancolique est un désaveu de la réalité de la perte” (Rather broken up, torn apart, cut up, swallowed, digested…than lost. The cannibalistic melancholic imaginary is a disavowal of the reality of loss; 21). For Kristeva, melancholic incorporation aims not at obliterating “l’autre intolérable” (the intolerable other), but at internalizing it in order to keep it alive within the body.

For Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva, then, there is always an eroticism at stake in the cannibalistic act; however, it is by turning to queer theory (which itself appropriates these strands of psychoanalytic theory) that we might also glimpse the *homo*eroticism at stake in cannibalism. We might notice it, for example, in light of Lee Edelman’s (2004) call to release queer from the ethical imperatives of humaneness or “good” that are bound up with the heteronormative value of futurity. Here, cannibalism, the “jouissance au dépens de l’autre”, perhaps figures the anti-futurist sex act *par excellence*, and might therefore, in Edelman’s antisocial schema, also be deemed the queerest.

A perhaps more complex way of thinking about the homoerotics of cannibalism might, however, be found in the highly influential work of Judith Butler. In particular, *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993) reworked psychoanalytic theories of ambivalence into Butler’s formulation of melancholic heterosexuality, wherein homosexuality is denied and internalized by the heterosexual imagination, and therefore subsists at its very heart. This theory has been subjected to rigorous critique since its appearance in the early 1990s. Critics like Heather Love (2007), Elizabeth Freeman (2000), and, indeed, Butler herself (1995, 178–9) have argued against its implied binary of melancholic heterosexuality and a supposedly “authentic” or “positive” homosexuality by pointing out the melancholic structure of *all* sexual identity, homosexuality included.[[6]](#endnote-6) Similarly, Jay Prosser (1998, 44) has warned that Butler’s model risks a “hypostatization of queer and heterosexual” that is simply “too neat.”

Nevertheless, Butler’s formulation of melancholic sexuality offers a useful way into thinking about the knight–cannibal encounter in medieval texts, since the ambivalent melancholic incorporation of the love–object might be seen to play out across the bodies of the eater and the eaten. In the case of cross-sex cannibalism, we might locate at once a normative desire for the opposite sex and a parallel revulsion that potentially resembles the dismemberment of the heterosexual. In the case of same-sex cannibalism, meanwhile, a same-sex attachment can be seen as both rejected and transgressively desired. Thus, cannibalism constitutes a regressive literalization of Butler’s melancholic who ambivalently incorporates a sexuality, whether hetero- or homo-, that s/he both desires and abhors. In other words, in its regressively literalized mode, cannibalism renders visible the melancholic mechanisms of sexuality itself. As such, if we formulate cannibalism as a queer act of melancholic incorporation, then its textual representations must surely make as much space for queer readings as for straight ones.

Indeed, even the very social structure of the knight–cannibal encounter has interesting resonances with Butler’s later development of the social elements of melancholia. She writes: “Survival, not precisely the opposite of melancholia, but what melancholia puts in suspension — requires redirecting rage against the lost other, defiling the sanctity of the dead for the purposes of life, raging against the dead in order not to join them” (1997, 193). This rage of the melancholic, however, takes on particular resonance in the context of a battle to the death, which dramatizes the dependence of literal survival on the redirection of rage against the other, who, although s/he yet lives, is lost because loved and denied, and thus must be killed and incorporated.

Centuries before it can be couched in such terms, this model of queer cannibalism is arguably operative in medieval depictions of the medieval giant–knight encounter. The remainder of this article will be devoted to a series of close readings of scenes from my Galfridian corpus in order to analyze how queer cannibalism plays out on the textual surface, namely in how the representations of the giant–knight encounter are consistently attended by a subtext of homoerotic discourse.

Of course, it would be an anachronistic and unethical critical move simply to apply modern queer theory to medieval texts for two key reasons, the first being that the terms of the former (“queer”, “homosexuality”, “homoeroticism”, etc.) do not easily map onto the historical moment of the latter (on this, see Phillips and Reay, [2013]). However, since the early 1990s medievalist scholars have nevertheless established productive dialogues between medieval literature and modern queer theory. Indeed, in a recent and particularly cogent discussion of the dangers of the term “queer” (noting its frequent reduction to male experiences of queerness, its conflation with homosexuality, its restriction to the late twentieth century), Robert Mills (2015, 21) notes the enduring usefulness of the term, particularly as one which “is not strongly marked as a category of selfhood, nor is it institutionalized as such.” Following Mills, I continue to find the term “queer” useful when discussing moments in medieval texts that conflict with dominant discourses of heteronormativity, though in the cases of these male–male knight–cannibal encounters I also deploy terms such as “homoeroticism” and “same-sex desire.”

The second problem with applying queer theory to medieval texts is a pitfall of any theoretically-oriented approach to literary criticism, namely the danger of denying the medieval text itself any claim to agency, any opportunity to speak back to modern theory. The purpose of the following analyses, however, is to highlight the ways in which the medieval texts under scrutiny not only corroborate the theory of queer cannibalism, but push it even further in ways that ask probing questions of medieval constructions of heterosexual subjectivity. If, for modern theory, the cannibal regressively literalizes the melancholic mechanism of the ambivalent incorporation of a love–object, then the medieval texts are striking and innovative in how they depict the encounter with the cannibal as throwing into stark relief the psychic workings of this melancholia in the heterosexual courtly subject himself.

***Le Chevalier au Delphin vs Holland***

The first encounter to be examined is that of the Chevalier au Delphin with his giant–monster foe Holland of Hollande, whose appetite for human flesh is portrayed even before we meet the giant as particularly excessive. We are told that: “il n’y arrivoit personne estrangiere en Hollande que ce mervilleux monstre n’estranglast et mengast” (no foreigner came to Hollande that this marvelous monster did not strangle and eat; IV.i, 105.316–8). A giant who unleashes lethal fumes and sports extra limbs and a second head, Holland lives alone on his small island of Hollande, where he raises his heir Hollandin. Hollandin is, however, not the giant’s son but his nephew; Holland had abducted his pregnant sister-in-law, intending to wed her after Hollandin’s birth, but she died of fear for him. Although treated well by the giant for his first twenty years, Hollandin is now imprisoned by him because he has fallen in love with Marse, a maiden from a nearby island. Marse has sought the intervention of the Chevalier au Delphin, who, since his vow at the Castle of Maidens, has been set up in the text as a fulfiller of women’s desires.

Holland is thus the obstruction to two heterosexual relationships: first, between his brother and sister-in-law; second, between Marse and Hollandin. Meanwhile, his own ambitions for a heterosexual relationship are thwarted when his sister-in-law dies of fear for him. Furthermore, Sylvia Huot (2007, 139) has persuasively speculated that the text suggests a doubly transgressive homosexual incest with his nephew, suggesting a pairing between “le Paradis du terrible Holland” (the Paradise of the terrible Holland) — the island’s name after Holland’s defeat — and the other *paradis* recounted in *Perceforest*, that of the incestuous father Aroès.

If this giant courts queerness in his obstruction of two heterosexual relationships and possibly in his desires for his own nephew, then it is noteworthy that most of the combat scene is overlaid with a homoeroticism that is largely supplied by the human knight. Take, for example, the knight’s jeers mid-battle:

Holland, beau sire, vous avez perdu le nom de monstre, ou lieu duquel on vous puet bien nommer geant a cause de vostre haulteur, et n’avez maintenant membre sus vous que nature ne puist avoir par honneur. Sy me devez bien aymer, quant j’ay sur vous retrenché les superfluitez de nature qui vous tournoyent a grant reprouche ! (IV.i, 117.695–702)

Holland, good sir, you have lost the name of monster, in place of which we can well name you giant because of your height, and because now you have no member on you that nature cannot have honorably. Thus should you love me well, since I have cut from you the superfluities of nature that so disgrace you!

This taunt underlines the loss of difference between the knight and his foe: by removing the excessive corporeal items (his extra feet, second head, etc.) that differentiate his monstrous body from the gigantic, humanoid one, the Chevalier has made Holland look like him. It is a taunt, moreover, that is implicitly overlaid with an erotic discourse of sexual innuendo and double entendre. For example, in Old French as in modern, *membre* can act as a euphemism for “penis”, and *nature* can also carry the meaning of “lust” or “sexual desire.”[[7]](#endnote-7) It is possible, then, to imagine Holland’s hyper-virile, monstrous body as consisting not only of multiple limbs, but also, perhaps, of multiple penises. The image also, of course, underlines the castrating function of the Chevalier’s handiwork, getting up close and personal with the monster’s many members. The Chevalier might be read, therefore, as claiming not only to have given Holland the correct body according to human anatomy, but also to have corrected his desires according to normatively policed sexuality.

Given the ambiguity of his references to *membre* and *nature*, the Chevalier’s subsequent claim that “Si me devez bien aymer” (You must then love me well; IV.i, 117.700) perhaps also deserves to be taken at more than surface value. *Aimer* is, of course, a semantically rich verb: inflected by the discursive framework of genre, it can suggest, for example, a spiritual love for and of God, the feudal bonds of lordship and service, as well as sexual desire. The deployment of this lexis here is inevitably colored by multiple connotations; yet, given the semantic ambiguity that pervades the Chevalier’s speech, and the various sexual relationships at stake in the encounter, the verb does retain an erotic flavor.

The Chevalier au Delphin, it must not be forgotten, has no erotic stake of his own in the combat; his investment is, supposedly, a purely chivalric, ethical one, having agreed to help Marse. Yet his feudal discourse conceals an erotic subtext referring to virile members, sexual natures, and erotic love. It is here the knight who half-fights, half-flirts with his gigantic cannibal combatant, he who cuts him down into his own image, he who takes him apart member by member.

***Lyonnel vs the Golden-Haired Giant***

My second example of the queer cannibal encounter also comes from the *Perceforest*, though it occurs before the Holland episode. It is the battle between Lyonnel du Glat and the Gayant aux Crins Dorez, or the Golden-Haired Giant. A British native and great-nephew of the evil sorcerer Darnant, Lyonnel is an important character throughout the *Perceforest*, not least because he rejects the *lignaige Darnant*, his great-uncle’s resistance movement, in order to be fully assimilated into the new order of Alexander and Perceforest. In part due to this dubious heritage, Lyonnel’s decapitation of the Golden-Haired Giant is a task set him, via a message left on an oak tree, by Lydoire, the *Royne Fee* of Scotland, in order to marry — and, in fact, meet — her daughter Blanchete. The giant’s head is one of three trophies of Lyonnel’s love service, along with his lion and shield. Unlike the Delphin, then, Lyonnel does have an erotic investment in the battle, since his heterosexual relationship is at stake.

The Golden-Haired Giant, meanwhile, is represented as a hypermasculine figure, as what Huot (2007, 123) calls “the very embodiment of masculinity run amok”: he intends to commit incest with his unconsenting daughter when she is *grande* (grown up/big; II.i, 635.4), though he meanwhile contents himself with raping the maidens of the island, who, because of his size, he thereby kills (which, incidentally, is precisely what the cannibal giant Dinabuc does to Helena in the *Historia Regum Britanniae* and the *Brut*). His own wife’s lamentations suggest that even for a giant his behavior has become unacceptable (II.i, 625–6).

Although there is no mention of the giant sexually tyrannizing men, we are told by the sailor Nabin that the giant does entertain a cannibalistic appetite that certainly does not exclude male flesh: “il se delicte sur toutes viandes a mengier char humaine” (he delights in eating human flesh above all other meats; II.i, 604.5–6). There is a marked semantic field of pleasure here (*se delicter*) and his preference for human flesh *above all other* meats conjures up the kind of excess that also marked Holland’s cannibalistic appetites. Moreover, the giant’s cannibalism is not only eroticized here but also partially homoeroticized, since it is set up as a stand in for a sex act between men: the humans he cannot fuck he eats instead.

Furthermore, even before the encounter itself, the foundations of the heterosexual identities of both Lyonnel and the giant seem somewhat insecure. Of the five forms of heterosexual relationships in this section of the *Perceforest*, one is insubstantial and unconsummated (Lyonnel and Blanchete); one has ceased to be consummated (the giant and giantess); one is unconsummated and incestuous (the giant and Galotine); one is impotent and murderous (the giant and the maidens); and another, the one trumpeted by the colonial text, is essentially pedophilic (Clamidés and the nine-year-old giantess, Galotine). Indeed, one of the giant’s first teasing remarks to Lyonnel is that “la pucelle [Blanchete] amoit mieulx aultrui que vous […] a ce que je puis veoir, elle desiroit a estre delivre de vous” (the maiden loved others better than she did you […] from what I can see, she desired to be freed of you; II.i, 639.2–5). These words must hit a nerve, since Lyonnel has never spoken with Blanchete by this point in the narrative, and does not even know her name. Thus, in one succinct line, the giant’s mouth becomes the agent for the destabilization of the knight’s heterosexual attachment, for the instigation of homoerotic discourse, and for an intended act of cannibalism.

The battle is further eroticized by the conditions set by the combatants, drawing two circles within which the duelers must remain, in a kind of playful bondage restricting the men’s movements. The two then order each other to swear (*vous ferez serement*; *jurez* [II.i, 641.14–3]) not to cross their respective lines in an intimate linguistic pact that, like the Chevalier au Delphin’s use of *aymer*, conflates the feudal and the erotic. Equally, the lighting of candles and torches contributes to the erotic atmosphere, as does the giant’s desire to do battle without armor (i.e. only wearing clothes), suggesting a desire for a more direct kind of bodily contact unhindered by protective coverings (II.i, 640.5–6).

Given the sexual investments and frustrations of the combatants, and the erotic stage management of the event, the duel between Lyonnel and the Golden-Haired Giant is constructed as a complexly libidinous encounter. At the beginning of the battle, the giant openly declares his intentions to enjoy himself: “qu’il vous plaise que je me puisse esbanoier a vous” (may it please you that I might enjoy you; II.i, 640.12–13). Even the subjunctive *plaise* might, in this eroticized context, be read not simply within its formulaic function, but as a more serious exhortation for his opponent to take similar pleasure from their encounter. Moreover, it is not, notably, from the battle that the giant will take pleasure, but from Lyonnel himself, who is the indirect object of *esbanoier*.

The giant’s erotic enjoyment is, however, perhaps most evident in his repeated fondling of his club. The club is, we are told, thirteen feet long and as thick as Lyonnel’s thigh (II.i, 641.4–5), a comparison that telling foregrounds the giant’s weapon’s size by analogy with a somewhat intimate body part of his opponent. Twice the giant explicitly asks Lyonnel to watch him play with it: “mais regardez moy ung pou jouer de ma maçue” (but watch me a while playing with my club; II.i, 641.12–13); “or me regardez ung pou manier ma maçue” (watch me a while handling my club; II.i, 642.3–4). The phallicism of the weapon hardly needs pointing out, but, all flippancy aside, this is a striking and resonant image given the complex (homo)erotic discourse that underlies this scene and its build-up. The giant is enjoying the encounter as a kind of voyeuristic, masturbatory fantasy: he proceeds to swing the club around his head in a display of his prowess that he desires Lyonnel to *regarder*. Which he does: Lyonnel replies that he has “assez veu le jeu de vostre maçue” (sufficiently seen the game of your club; II.i, 643.1–2), where *assez* might be read as “sufficiently” or, alternatively, “much/well/amply.”

As the battle begins, the giant continues to fantasize his enjoyment of Lyonnel, remarking: “je veuil faire de toy ainsi que le jenne chat fait de la soris” (I wish to do with you as the young cat does with the mouse; II.i, 643.10–11). This is, of course, a death threat, but it is also an image of pleasure and enjoyment on the part of the *jenne chat*, toying with his prey before finally ingesting it. Indeed, it is clear that the combatants view the fight as a game to play: Lyonnel referred earlier to the *jeu* of the club; the giant calls the duel “nostre jeu” (II.i, 641.14), and, on being attacked by Lyonnel, he remarks that “il m’est advis que vous ne vous juez pas” (it seems to me that you are not playing; II.i, 644.2–3). Although each of these examples might be translated as “game” or “play”, their enumeration builds up connotations of pleasure, enjoyment, and spectacle.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Indeed, during this battle, each fighter has a chance to kill the other that he chooses not to take, as if each were enjoying the encounter simply too much, desiring to prolong their state of erotic bodily proximity. The giant declares that: “Tu fusses mort, se je voulsisse” (you would be dead, if I wished it; II.i, 643.16–7). But the knight also spares the giant’s life for love of his hair: “vous en eusse la teste coppee se n’eusse cuidié empirier les cheveulx” (I would have cut your head off, if I had not feared damaging the hair; II.i, 646.6–8). Seemingly, each combatant can only speak of the other’s demise in the imperfect subjunctive mode of hypothetical clauses, temporally suspending, even in their grammar, the inevitable conclusion to their battle.

The above discussion has, I hope, made clear the giant’s erotic experience of the encounter, but it is important to underline that Lyonnel is also actively involved in the eroticisation of the duel. He agrees to the giant’s request for space restrictions, and spares his life for his hair. His language also mirrors the giant’s in terms of both structure and semantic field. For example, not only does he replicate the giant’s imperfect subjunctives when referring to their battle’s end, but he also refers to the *jeu* of the club, and his statement that “je desire la bataille” (II.i, 640.2–3) anticipates the giant’s use of *esbanoier* and *plaire*. Furthermore, although specifying the battle not the giant as the direct object of *desirer*, this verb nevertheless treads the line, again like the Chevalier au Delphin’s *aymer*, between feudal and sexual registers.

There are, however, several key ways in which Lyonnel independently contributes to the homoeroticism of this scene. The first lies in his own prolongation of the duel with the slow, piecemeal slaughter of his foe. Indeed, despite his declaration — via a phallic image of castration — that “je ne vous asseure de plus que d’avoir la teste coppee !” (I assure you nothing more than to have your head cut off; II.i, 643.5–6), Lyonnel seems to do everything but. As he dodges the giant’s club, he removes sections of the giant’s body, weakening him, but keeping him alive for as long as possible. He slices first into the giant’s *hanches* (hips) then cuts the *pelices* (robe) — presumably leaving the giant in a state of undress, if not naked — then stabs his *char* (flesh), *rains* (loins), *costes* (ribs), and *eschine* (spine). Like the Delphin with Holland, Lyonnel takes his opponent apart piece by piece and, crucially, *sames* him. Over the course of the battle, the giant’s body appears as so many parts cut off — most of them literally — from the body to which they belong. The oversized, gigantic body is reduced to a series of nouns denoting body parts that could belong to any body: to the list above we might also add, over the course of the battle, *jambe* (leg), *fesse* (thigh), *ortaulx* (toes), *puing* (fist), *chevilles* (ankles), *nombril* (navel), and *col* (neck). In this disassembled form, the giant looks just like Lyonnel; again it is the supposedly non-cannibalistic knight who succeeds in effacing the difference between himself and his victim as surely as if he had eaten him himself.

The second point to mention concerns Lyonnel’s reverence for the giant’s hair, for the sake of which, as mentioned above, he passes up an opportunity to defeat his foe: “se n’eusse cuidié empirier les cheveulx” (if I had not feared damaging the hair; II.i, 646.7–8). He quickly attributes this admiration of the hair to his *belle* who “a plus chier les cheveulx que la teste” (holds dearer the hair than the head; II.i, 646.8–9), and for this reason “en joïssiez vous encores” (you dispose of it still; II.i, 646.9–10). There are two points to make here. First, the verb *joïr* (<*gaudeo*), although presumably intended here in the sense of *to dispose/have use of/possess*, again doubles up as a verb meaning *to enjoy*,[[9]](#endnote-9) and thus extends the semantic field of pleasure that underlies the encounter. Second, the requirement of undamaged hair seems to be entirely of Lyonnel’s own invention, since Lydoire’s note only ever set the requirement of the giant’s *chief* (head; II.i, 344.14, 494.5), and, having not yet spoken with Blanchete, Lyonnel cannot know that she so admires the hair. It seems it is only Lyonnel who is so seduced by it, as, for example, when he tells the giant before the battle, in the first person and the superlative mode, that his hairs “sont les plus beaulx que *je* veisse oncques” (are the most beautiful *I* ever saw; II.i, 638.17, emphasis added). Later, too, shortly before the severed head is stolen, he takes it out of its case to air the hair, and combs it: “il commença a pignier les cheveulx et a redrecer de ses mains” (he began to comb the hair and to groom it with his hands; II.ii, 48.1–2). The verb *redrecer* is particularly resonant here, since the collocation *redrecer a vie* means *to bring back to life*, almost as if Lyonnel were wishing his dead opponent might return to him. Of course, it is wholly possible to argue that the hair merely channels or triangulates Lyonnel’s desire for Blanchete, perhaps in the mold of Lancelot fawning over Guinevere’s hair and comb. However, it is surely problematic for any “straight” reading of this episode that the stand-in for Blanchete here is the severed head of a male giant killed in an erotically charged encounter in which Lyonnel risked being eaten by the very mouth on the head whose hair he now affectionately combs.

The final point I want to make about Lyonnel’s collusion in the queerness of his cannibal encounter concerns a minor but significant detail, namely that, when Lyonnel hacks at the giant’s *rains* (loins), he cuts off “une telle piece de char que son lyon en eut assez .II. jours pour soy repaistre” (such a piece of flesh that his lion had enough to feed upon for two days; II.i, 644.22–3). This detail deserves commentary on two points. First: the verb *repaistre*,although primarily denoting *to feed*, also carries connotations of *to satisfy/satiate/enjoy*,[[10]](#endnote-10) and thus echoes the semantic field of pleasure that so colored the encounter between his master and his meal. Second: at this point in the narrative, Lyonnel has only recently acquired and tamed the lion after killing its anthropophagic parents, who had been terrorizing the kingdom of the Estrange Marche.

It is possible, therefore, to read the lion’s identification of the giant as food as reaffirming Lyonnel’s *mission civilisatrice* vis-à-vis the lion, thereby compounding the dehumanization of the giant. However, the text suggests a certain symbiosis between Lyonnel and the lion that complicates this interpretation: the beast is so central to Lyonnel’s identity that it forms the basis of his very name, and, along with the shield and the giant’s head, it will soon garner him access to his beloved (except that the items are stolen before he can present them to the court). The intimacy of this relation means that the lion’s eating of the giant who sought to eat his master cannot help adding a cannibalistic coloration to Lyonnel himself. Moreover, it is significant that it is the giant’s *rains* (loins) that are devoured, for not only are the human genitalia included within this anatomical region, but *rains* are also used figuratively as the source of physical strength.[[11]](#endnote-11) Indeed, we are told that this giant’s hypermasculine *rains* are “plus grans que tout le corps d’un puissant boeuf” (bigger than the whole body of a powerful bull; II.i, 644.20–1). If the taboo of cannibalism succeeds in preventing the human knight from tasting the flesh of his adversary himself, just as the taboo of homosexuality prevents him from openly desiring him, then the feasting of his intimate animal companion on his foe’s meaty *rains* is surely the next best thing.

Ultimately, in this complex encounter, each combatant’s need to defeat the other does not merely body forth, as Huot (2007, 200) puts it, “a translation of heterosexual desire into homosocial violence.” It also represents, in this queer reading at least, the tipping point of that homosocial violence into same-sex desire. If, on one level, the Golden-Haired Giant simply wants to eat the man defying him, then, on another, that intended act of cannibalism is eroticized by his language and behavior. In this, however, the giant is not alone: even though it posits Blanchete as the ostensible or “official” object of Lyonnel’s love, the text simultaneously makes room for a reading in which the knight, at least for the duration of the encounter, reciprocates his opponent’s desires, returns his flirtatious quips, keeps him alive for as long as he dares, cuts his body into his own image, allows his lion to dine on his body, and laments his loss. In other words, it is not only, as Huot (2016, 271) notes, the giant who ‘reflects back the qualities of the knight—physical prowess, libidinous drives, a handsome appearance’, but also the knight who reflects back the qualities of the queer, cannibalistic giant.

***Corineus vs Gogmagog***

Dunc les veïssez bien suffler,

E nés froncir e fronz suer,

Faces nercir, oilz roïller,

Sorcilz lever, sorcilz baissier,

Denz rechinner, colur muer,

Testes freier, testes hurter,

Buter et sacher et enpeindre,

Lever, surfacher et restreindre,

Baisser e drescer e esmer

E jambet faire et tost turner (1133–42)

There you could see them breathing hard, wrinkling their noses, with sweating foreheads, blackening faces, rolling eyes, raising and lowering their brows, baring their teeth, their color changing, rubbing their heads, bashing their heads, thrusting and pulling and pushing, raising, lifting, and restraining, lowering and rising up and assessing, and kicking and quickly turning.

So goes Robert Wace’s account in the *Roman de Brut* of the battle between Corineus and Gogmagog, between Brutus’s champion and a leader of Britain’s indigenous giants, the descendants of Albina, whose land has recently been invaded by the exiled Trojans. There may, at first glance, seem little of the cannibal about this scene. For one, it is not made clear, either by the *Brut* or its source, Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, whether Gogmagog actually seeks to eat Corineus.

We might, for several contextual reasons, be expected to assume that he does. Firstly, his very name is a composite form derived from the cannibal tribes Gog and Magog encountered in the Alexander legend (Tattersall 1988, 244). Secondly, other giants in the *Historia are* explicitly anthropophagic, such as Dinabuc, the Spanish giant later killed by King Arthur at Mont Saint-Michel (X, 39). And thirdly, Wace’s translation generally shies away from representations of cannibalism. Wace does not, for example, translate Geoffrey’s ascription of cannibalism to Dinabuc. Later, too, where Geoffrey describes the delight of Cadwallo, King of Britain, as he eats part of Brian’s sweet-tasting thigh believing it to be venison (XI, 309–23), Wace intervenes, claiming not to know if the king really ate Brian’s flesh, but that he eventually recovered nonetheless (14221–2). As such, Gogmagog’s cannibalism, which in Geoffrey may be implied or assumed, would have likely been absent from Wace’s work in any case.

Yet, in light of the analyses above, there are several ways in which, even without the explicit assertion of its presence, we might see queer cannibalism as evoked by and within this scene, beginning with its striking dissolution of difference between giant and knight. The repetition of infinitive verbs in the passage above elides their subjects to such an extent that the fighters’ individual movements and bodies become unidentifiable. As Margaret Lamont (2007, 56) notes, the boundaries between human and giant blur ever further in the absence of personal pronouns: “Braz a braz se sunt entrepris” (arm in arm they seize each other; 1117); “Piz contre piz, lez contre lez” (foot against foot, flank against flank; 1120). The text enumerates references to their many fragmented body parts, none of which belong to one fighter specifically: *braz* (arms); *piz* (feet); *lez* (flank); *pied* (foot); *peitrines* (chests); *jambes* (legs); *nés* (nose); *fronz* (brow); *faces* (cheeks); *oilz* (eyes); *sorcilz* (eyebrows); *denz* (teeth); *testes* (heads); *hanche* (hips) (1117–43). The narrative itself seems to chop up their bodies into disjointed pieces, served up to the reader to be devoured in parts, read as discontinuous mouthfuls. To be sure, it would be usual to expect in any combat scene a certain level of obfuscation of subject and object positions; still, difficulty in distinguishing one body from another is pushed here to a radical extreme.

Furthermore, in both the *Historia* and the *Brut*, it is suggested that Corineus already looks like a giant, possessing the size and strength of one. When Brutus meets him in the *Historia* on the shore of the Tyrrhenian Sea, we are told that “si cum aliquo gigante congressum faceret, ilico obruebat eum ac si cum puero contenderet” (if he met any giant, he would overwhelm him immediately, as if he were fighting a child; I, 332–3). The *Brut* describes him as “mult granz, / Hardiz e forz come gaianz” (very big, bold, and strong like a giant; 781–2), and Brutus pits him against Gogmagog “kar chascuns ert merveille grant” (for each was wondrously big; 1104). Indeed, he must be at least giant*-like* in order to defeat Gogmagog, who is described in the *Historia* as twelve cubits tall and able to uproot an oak tree as if it were a hazel twig (I, 470–2). Even from the outset, then, the physical distinction between giant and human, cannibal and cannibalized is troubled, if it exists at all.

The battle of Corineus and Gogmagog, however, is no mere armed duel. These fighters engage in a hand-to-hand wrestling match, thus pushing giant–knight bodily proximity to an even greater extremity than in the *Perceforest* encounters. Indeed, the wrestling match begins in both the *Historia* and the *Brut* with moments of disrobing: “[Corineus] succinxit se, et abiectis armis ipsum” (pulled up his vest and cast aside his weapons; I, 478); “Corineüs se rebraça / Esterchi sei si se molla, / Des pans de la cote se ceinst, / Parmi les flancs alques s’estreinst” (Corineus gathered himself, stood up and flexed his muscles, girded himself with the skirt of his tunic, and pulled in his flanks a little; 1111–4). Thus a sensation of erotic ceremony is evoked as Corineus casts off his sartorial marks of culture to fight bare skin.

Like the duel, the wrestling match constitutes a highly ritualized mode of male interaction that treads the line between what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985, 89) calls “the most sanctioned forms of male homosocial bonding, and the most reprobated expression of male homosexual sociality.” That line is trodden somewhat dangerously, however, by Corineus, whose fierce desire to wrestle the giant is palpable, particularly in the *Historia*, and recalls the excessive desires of Holland and the Golden-Haired Giant to consume human flesh. The Latin text claims that Corineus “Delictabat enim eum contra gigantes dimicare” (delighted in fighting giants; I, 467–8), that he even “cum talibus congredi ultra modum aestuabat” (burned beyond reason to fight with such people; I, 476–7). Here, the adverbial phrase *ultra modum* (beyond reason) especially in conjunction with the verb *aestuo* (to rage, burn), brings a hint of madness to Corineus’s pleasure, suggesting that these desires figure, like those of the giants, as excessive, non-normative, at the very limits of the homosocially sanctionable. Indeed, when he pulls his clothes off to fight Gogmagog, Geoffrey tells us that Corineus is “maximo gaudio fluctuans” (swelling with great joy; I, 477–8), while Wace writes more simply: “Corineüs i acorut / Des que il seut que lutier dut” (Corineus ran forward as soon as he knew he had to wrestle; 1105–6). Still here, however, the verb *acorir* (to come running) paired with the conjunction *des que* (as soon as) continues to imply a considerable level of eagerness.

Moreover, the battle itself is couched in language that, in any other context, would be apt to describe the embrace of lovers, particularly in Wace, who considerably expands the scene. We are told, for example, that “par detriés les dos s’enbracerent / par grant aïr lur mains lacerent” (gripped each other behind their backs, fiercely entwined their hands; 1121). Of course, the literal meaning of *s’enbracer* is simply *to take by the arm*, though it is widely used for its erotic connotations, such that the verb can be used euphemistically. This ambiguity extends into the next line’s “lur mains lacerent” (their hands entwined; 1122), a verb that suggests not only gripping, but also entwining, clasping. Indeed, the symmetry of the lines — the linking of *s’enbracerent* and *lacerent* as a rhyming couplet, the anaphoric repetition of *par* — reflects in the language itself this sense of bodily entanglement. Of course, such intimate physical contact is policed by the adverbial phrase “par grant aïr” (1122); however, connoting as it does only fierceness, speed, suddenness, and violence, this particular phrase is a fairly feeble guarantor of straightforward antagonism.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Even before the opening quotation of repeated infinitives, the description of the battle has been couched in highly symmetrical phrases and lines, the very text replicating and co-operating in the dissolution of difference between giant and human, cannibal and cannibalized:

Dunc veïssez tur contre tur,

Vigur mettre contre vigur,

E pied avant e pied ariere,

E engieng de mainte maniere;

Tornent de ça, tornent de la. (1123–7).

There you saw turn against turn; vigor pitted against vigor; feet forward and feet behind, and all manner of cunning; movements this way, movements that way.

The text then resorts to describing the battle with third person plural verbs describing the crashing together of their *peitrines* (chests) and *jambes* (legs) (1129–30), entangling themselves “si que tut dreit a munt estoent” (such that they were on top of each other; 1132). Again, it is reasonable to expect a level of bodily intimacy in any representation of combat; yet, the writhing, wrestling bodies of practically naked combatants depicted by this scene tips these elements into the excessive, making for an especially *mêlée* mêlée.

As the fight reaches its climax, we are told that Gogmagog pulls Corineus to him so tightly that he breaks three of his ribs (1149–50), before Gogmagog’s ribs are in turn also shattered (1155–6) as the two continue to mimic each other closely. Finally, Corineus emerges victorious when he throws Gogmagog off the cliff. It is significant, however, that the fight cannot be concluded within its own terms: it is only ended by the radical separation of the two bodies, not by the bodily proximity of the format initially selected for it. Their intimate wrestling, it seems, could have gone on and on; it is only with their bodily separation that Corineus’s victory, and difference, can be asserted and that the queerness of this encounter can be brought to a “straight” conclusion with the death of the cannibal giant.

It is clear, however, that queerness is not limitable to Gogmagog, whose difference vis-à-vis Corineus is minimized almost to nonexistence. Corineus resembles his adversary before the match, cannot be told apart from him during it, and even once victorious bears the marks of the giant’s body in his scars and broken ribs. Moreover, if libidinous desire is supplied by anyone in this scene, then it is primarily by Corineus, whose excessive pleasure in fighting giants is repeatedly foregrounded. Yet, Corineus is not alone in his enjoyment of the match: in both the *Historia* and the *Brut*, the wrestling match is staged as a spectacle for Brutus and all the men, who “voluntiers l’unt tuit esguardee” (willingly all watched it; 1110). The syntactic foregrounding of the adverb *voluntiers* emphasizes a peculiar eagerness, echoing in the audience the excessive desire of Corineus. Indeed, the whole episode is facilitated by Brutus himself who has had Gogmagog kept alive precisely in order to watch him fight his champion: “uolens uidere luctationem ipsius et Corinei” (desiring to see the wrestling of him and Corineus; I, 476); “pur essaier / Liquels ert plus fort a lutier” (to test which was better at wrestling; 1101–3).

This fight is an all-male affair, where male bodies are pitted against one another before a male gaze that further interpolates the male members in the text’s audience. This gaze has a double function. Its official role is to regulate the match, ensuring that the lines of homosocial conduct are not transgressed; yet it also takes a voyeuristic pleasure in the sight of two gigantic foes grappling skin-to-skin, flesh-to-flesh. The significant expansion of this scene in the French translation; its increased bodily references; its verbal dynamism: all surely attest to the forbidden appeal of the episode, texturing the encounters of knight and cannibal, audience and text with queer possibilities. Ultimately, the encounter with the text replicates the structure of the encounter with the cannibal, facing both knight and reader with their own queer desires.

**Conclusion**

The encounter with the cannibal giant has emerged from these readings as a crucial image in the medieval, pre-1492 imaginary insofar as it offers a telling, even critical commentary on sexuality itself. My turn to queer theory in this article has been fully motivated by the medieval texts themselves, with the aim of accounting for what are frankly remarkable passages. In so doing, I do not, of course, wish to suggest that the overt or “official” textual position of this corpus is anything other than heteronormative, often aggressively so. My use of queer theory is, in this sense, revisionary, and my readings are, to an extent, counter-readings, aiming to uncover what we might, in Žižekian parlance, call medieval culture’s “obscene underbelly” (Žižek 2004, 127–9), that is, the objects and mechanisms of desire that are obscured by a naturalized, reified heteronormativity.

As such, queer theory provides a useful framework within which to interpret such striking images as a giant demanding to be watched as he fondles his club, a bare-skin giant–man wrestling match, a *chevalier* commanding his victim to love him, or a knight combing the luscious locks of his foe’s severed head. It also allows us to account for the surprisingly erotic language in which these representations are couched, all of them marked by verbs like *se delicter*, *esbanoier*, *joïr*, *plaire*, *delecto*, *aestuo*, *desirer*, *aymer*.

Yet, what is most significant in all of the texts examined here is not merely the eroticism of the knight–cannibal encounter, but the striking *reciprocity* of the fighters’ desires. The knights all flirt back — and herein lies the site at which the medieval texts innovatively radicalize the theoretical model of queer cannibalism. Just as the performance of Butler’s drag artist throws into relief the performativity of all gender, so too, in these texts, does the literal cannibalism of the giant throw into relief the cannibalistic, melancholic structure of the knight’s own heterosexual identity, that is, a heterosexuality predicated upon the incorporation and disavowal of same-sex desire. For the duration of the encounter, at least, that desire rises to the textual surface, and the melancholic mechanism of disavowal is laid bare. As such, the texts open up the term “queer cannibal” — and, indeed, the (admittedly somewhat tongue-in-cheek) “man-eater” of this article’s title — to include not only the hungry giant, but also the courtly knight.

Across many of her works, one of Butler’s most fundamental and persuasive arguments is that gender norms and the heternormativity that they shore up “are continually haunted by their own inefficacy” ([1993] 2011, 181). These medieval texts, however, are not only haunted by, but seemingly revel in their failure — or refusal — to confine queer cannibalism to the giant. Instead, they transgressively explore, extend, and at times, like the knights themselves, seemingly *enjoy* the moments of non-normative male desire. Ultimately, when faced with the drooling chops of the giant, it is difficult, impossible even, for these knights’ slashing blades and flirtatious quips not to reveal a queer similarity between knight and cannibal, sword and tooth.

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1. All translations are my own or modifications of translations of the stated editions. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Admittedly, sex is suggested by Kilgour as an analogously incorporative act. To my knowledge, one notable exception regarding the homoerotics of cannibalism is scholarship on *Robinson Crusoe* (see, for example, Crain 1994; Campana 2007), and a 2015 article by Jeff Casey on the queerness of the cannibal protagonist in NBC’s television series *Hannibal*. Of course, none of these concerns medieval material. Where the erotics of cannibalism have been considered by medievalists, this scholarship is dominated by the motif of the eaten heart. See, for example: Solterer (1992), Jeay (1998), Gaunt (2006; 2008), and Grange (2012). Further, Bruckner (2008) explores the notion of “metaphoric cannibalism”, reading cannibalism as a figure of textual transformation. None of these critics, however, properly explores cannibalism as a *homo*erotic act, which is what this article aims to explore via the trope of the giant–knight duel, though I am convinced that a similar queer reading might be formulated of eaten-heart cannibalism. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I will, in this article, be limiting my discussion to instances of cannibalism between men, largely because the giant–knight encounter is a combat scenario between male protagonists. This is not, however, to say that similar queer readings could not be applied to instances of female–female cannibalism. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See bibliography for editions used. Citations from *Perceforest: Deuxième Partie* take the format: part.volume, paragraph.line(s). Citations from *Perceforest: Quatrième Partie* take the format: part.volume, page.line(s). This is due to Roussineau’s varying editorial practice. Citations from *Historia Regum Britanniae* take the format: book, line(s). Line numbers are given for *Le Roman de Brut*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For a discussion of Lacan’s mantis metaphor in relation to the erotics of the eaten heart, see Gaunt (2006, 93–103). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For further works suggesting the melancholic structure of homosexuality, see du Plessis (1993), Probyn (1996, 93–124), Gordon (1999), and, on historical melancholia, Traub (2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français, 1330*–*1500* [DMF]: <http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/nature>; *Anglo-Norman Dictionary2 Online Edition* [AND]: <http://www.anglo-norman.net/D/nature>. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See *DMF*: <http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/jeu>. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See *DMF*: <http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/jouir>. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See *DMF*: [http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/repaître](http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/repa%C3%AEtre). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l’ancienne langue française*: <http://micmap.org/dicfro/previous/dictionnaire-godefroy/562/6/rain>. Its Latin etymology (*rēn*, *rēnis*) also bears this double anatomical/metaphorical meaning. See *Lewis and Short* (1879). <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=renes&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0059>. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See *AND*: [http://www.anglo-norman.net/D/aïr](http://www.anglo-norman.net/D/a%C3%AFr). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)