

## ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the roles women play as third parties in male homosocial relationships through English literature from the Medieval and Renaissance periods. That is, it analyzes what, in today’s society, would be derogatorily considered female “beards” from the fourteenth century to the sixteenth century. To do so, this project studies one Middle English work, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late 14th century), as well as two works from the Elizabethan period: *Edward II* by Christopher Marlowe (1594) and *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare (1600). The three female characters examined in this study are Lady Bertilak (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), Queen Isabella (*Edward II*), and Portia of Belmont (*Merchant of Venice*). Each text not only includes a relationship that could register as queer between two male characters, but most importantly, also includes a female character stuck in the middle. At stake in this project is the larger debate about the intersectionality between male homosociality and female agency. Specifically, I explore three questions: 1. Do female characters enable or impede queer or “sodomitical” relationships between men? 2. Are they polyamorous allies to these relationships, or do they work to disrupt them? 3. How do these texts display, or not display, female agency in these triangular relationships? This study found that female “beards” in Medieval and Elizabethan English literature further the queerness of the narrative already set forth by the male-male bonds. All of the studied female characters are far more resilient than many previous readers have interpreted. This resilience demonstrates that women do not simply exist as plot devices to push heterosexual romances; they are strong characters who take control of their own situation, despite any oppressive circumstances set up against them.