MASCULINITY AS POWER:
BI-GENDERED USAGE OF MASCULINITY
IN LATE MEDIEVAL ARTHURIAN LITERATURE

THESIS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE THEORY OF MASCULINITY

According to feminine theorist Marilyn French, "[t]he whole notion of dividing

experience into gender principles is a 'masculine' one. [This is not to say only males

created and perpetuated it. The gender principles as I describe them are not necessarily

identical with gender.] It is 'masculine' because it originally arose as a form of control"

(*Shakespeare's Division of Experience,* 21). Based on French's definition of masculinity

as a "form of control"and "not necessarily identical with gender," males are not the only

gender capable of grasping the reins of masculinity– and women not the only bearers of

the less aggressive feminine qualities of humanity. For the purposes of this thesis, I am

defining the word "bi-gendered" as a trait that can be found in either males or females.

For example, masculinity and femininity are both human qualities. According to social

dictates, men tend to be masculine and women tend to be feminine. However, neither

masculinity nor femininity are sole residents in any one person. To varying degrees in

each individual they share a dichotomous relationship. Some men exhibit less masculinity

than is socially expected and some women exhibit more masculinity than is socially

expected. These are the characteristics on which I will focus.

As a result of loosening restrictions and increased employment opportunities in

the late Middle Ages, women gained more power than they had had in many years.[1] This

power, for the purposes of this paper, is in reference to the secular realm, not the

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[1]Claudia Optiz, "Life in the Late Middle Ages," *A History of Women in the West: II.*
Silence of the Middle Ages, Trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of
Harvard University Press, 1992), 268.

ecclesiastical or monastical in which women experienced varying levels of power for a

much longer period of time. This power is unmistakably present in the importance placed

on women in the literature of the time, Arthurian literature specifically. Arthurian

literature of the Middle Ages is imbued with a subtle emphasis on the changing social

status of women. Within the texts are suggestions of empowered women who are seen as

bold and powerful and able to achieve social status normally associated with men. This

changing viewpoint was most likely noticed by its readers of the English courts and

countryside. This in mind, I propose that the late medieval Arthurian literature of

England exhibits many examples of bi-gendered usage of masculinity as power and

femininity as submission. As such, this power achieved by women, while neither

surpassing nor equaling the collective socio-political control of their male counterparts,

emphasizes the changing role and increased emphasis of literary respect for women in

late medieval England.

As a point of reference, I will examine the male usage of masculinity as a source

of power to determine a more consistent interpretation of masculinity within my thesis.

In Arthurian literature, King Arthur is the archetype of medieval masculinity.

Consequently, his knights of the round table look to him as a role model. A general set of

values and morals are built into the code of chivalry. However, masculinity, as defined

by medieval sex-roles, is manifest in Arthur as a paradigm of power. Accordingly, as a

beacon of masculinity, Arthur emanates his definitive masculinity to *all* of his subjects.

Several females within the confines of these late medieval works, either through design or

necessity, grasp control of specific situations by assuming the traits of the masculine

gender-role. In these instances, masculinity is a viable source of power for women who would likely have not achieved their power otherwise.

Within the works of Sir Thomas Malory, the Gawain Poet, and Marie de France, (who, while she did write in French, wrote for the English court), the usage of bi-gendered masculinity emerges on many occasions. Within Malory's *Works*, I will focus specifically, but not exclusively, on Guinevere's use of masculinity as a control mechanism over her champion Lancelot. While it is true that Lancelot is controlled by Guenevere, I will also focus on the his interactions with other women as well. Another aspect of Lancelot I will discuss is the dichotomous manifestation of both the masculine and the feminine within his actions and psyche.

In Marie de France's *Lanval*, females again assume the power of masculinity, this time with an emphasis on controlling the knight Lanval. Both the Faerie Mistress and the Queen assume the dominant role over Lanval. In this story, I will focus on Lanval's femininity in order to emphasize the level of power that both of these women have gained over him, each with differing results. Finally, Sir Gawain is the semblance of submission to the wife of his host at Hautdesert castle, Lady Bertilak. During his stay as a guest in the castle, the host's wife repeatedly controls him by calling his masculinity into question. In assuming the position of masculinity over Gawain, she teases out his more submissive and feminine qualities. She becomes the dominant one in their interactions. The other aspect of this story which I will address is the Green Knight himself. He exudes masculinity in his every move and exerts his control over Arthur's entire court.

Since the theoretical field of masculinities is relatively new, and the application of

the theory to female characters is even more so, there is not the massive library of theoretical application that might be associated with say a post modernist or a Marxist approach. That is not to say it is non-existent, just that there is a finite supply of information regarding the topic. Looking at the bibliographies of the articles and books that I did find, I found that the works of Michel Foulcault and Marilyn French stood out as important cornerstones of information regarding the topic of gender-roles, with Judith Butler as an increasingly important author in the realm of socially constructed gender identity. Therefore, these authors will play an important role in the advancement of my theoretical derivations as they develop within the confines of current studies in the field of medieval masculinities.

In his ground-breaking work *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault states that, "[p]ower is essentially what dictates its law to sex. Which means first of all that sex is placed by power in a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden. Secondly, power prescribes an 'order' for sex that operates at the same time as a form of intelligibility: sex is to be deciphered on the basis of its relation to the law. And finally, power acts by laying down the rule: power's hold on sex is maintained through language.... It speaks and that is the law." [2] According to this statement then, if one claims power through language by "speaking," then one essentially becomes power incarnate-- the dominant over the submissive. I would add to this defining power struggle the terms masculine and feminine. The language of the masculine is one of dominance--

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[2] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 83.

assumed power. Therefore, any deviance from the aggressive conqueror language of masculinity is seen, by the ruling faction, as "illicit" or "forbidden." This is the position of the feminine. Masculinity is rife with the attributes of power and femininity fits well within the confines of the illicit within the masculine controlled domain. The submissive nature of the conquered language associated with the feminine is in direct contradiction to the essence of masculinity. Femininity resides sub-strata to masculinity, thereby locking both traits into their prospective relational positions.

Without submission , domination would not exist. Consequently, those who become dominant do so at the expense, or by the associative reciprocation, of the submissive. Foucault defines the submissive, or subjected, as such:

> Confronted by a power that is law, the subject who is constituted as subject– who is 'subjectified'– is he who obeys. To the formal homogeneity of power in these various instances corresponds the general form of submission in the one who is constrained by it– whether the individual in question is the subject opposite the monarch, the citizen opposite the state, the child opposite the parent, or the disciple opposite the master. A legislative power on one side, and an obedient subject on the other.... All the modes of domination, submission, and subjugation are ultimately reduced to an effect of obedience. [3]

That the dominant one in any given relational situation is the aggressor is not questioned here. The dominant agent will assume control of the relationship– that is the nature of

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[3] Ibid., 85.

domination. However, if what Foucault claims is true, then the dominant, conqueror, masculine, aggressor, (all similar in function), cannot assume the role of dominance until the submissive, conquered, feminine, passive, has relinquished all hope of attaining that same goal. Once the acts of relinquishment and domination have been enacted, then and only then is the mantle of power assumed by the dominant agent.

But what is power? What is its primordial essence? What defines its true meaning? According to Foucault:

> [P]ower must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent within the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies.[4]

Foucault's definition of power not only refers to the persona, abilities, and actions of the dominant agent, but it also references the very same aspects of the submissive agent as well. For Foucault, the embodiment or idealization of power as it applies to the dominant agent is derived from its direct correlation to the submissive agent-- in effect, the power

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[4]Ibid., 92-93.

which the dominant agent wields not only originates in the subjugation of the submissive

agent but is in fact defined by the very same. In order to define one's power, limits must

be identified. Within the relational situation of the dominant/ submissive interplay,

parameters are set at what I have termed the "point of yield." This is the point where the

aggressor's 'arena of power' and the submissive agent's 'arena of submission' adjoin.

The dominant agent creates their 'point of yield' by simply yielding their aggressive

advance. As example, a parent enforces a curfew of eleven o'clock. The curfew is eleven

o'clock– that is the point of yield. That is not to say that the point of yield cannot be

adjusted in multiple ways. However, it does delineate a permanence in relationship by

way of definition. So, the dominant agent establishes the point of yield, but it is the

submissive agent who defines the extent of the dominant agent's power.

Culturally, humans, with varying versions and few exceptions, are prone to allow

socio-political influences to determine who or what division of humanity is allowed to

gain power as a stereotype: men over women, age over youth, educated over uneducated.

The raw essence of power overrides all of these pairings and in actuality claims equality

for any who aspire to claim it. Power is not held by the strictures of cultural closed-

sightedness. It is greater than that: "We must not look for who has the power in the order

of sexuality [men, adults, parents, doctors] and who is deprived of it [women,

adolescents, children, patients]; nor for who has the right to know and who is forced to

remain ignorant. We must seek rather the pattern of the modifications which the

relationships of force imply by the very nature of their process."[5] In other words, the

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[5]Ibid., 99.

"pattern of the modification" as the process of the "relationships of force," (power), are

the determiners of power, not preconceived contrivances as dictated by a social mandate

from the masses. Cultural influence aside, all are equal in the eyes of power, the lines of

sex are indeterminate. Power is anyone's who has the wherewithal to attain such a goal,

and according to Marilyn French, power is masculine.

In her book *Beyond Power*, the feminist critic Marilyn French defines the term

masculine in such a way as to remove it from the social strictures of sex: "Masculine

qualities are those which demonstrate control and transcendence. Anything that fixes,

makes permanent, creates structure within the seeming flux of nature is 'masculine.' So

codifications of law or prestige or customs are 'masculine:' Authority, rank, status,

legitimacy, and right."[6] French's definition of masculinity parallels Foucault's definition

of power in that masculinity, is historically attributed to men: "The right to own or do

something is related to rights over and to rightness– all associated with the male.

Qualities supporting the ability to kill– prowess, courage, aggressiveness, and physical

skill are also 'masculine.' Ownership, possession is 'masculine' because it is a fixing of

property or persons. Permanence and structure are 'masculine' ideals because they control

or seem to control fluid experience."[7] However, French does admit that women can

exhibit signs of masculinity in certain circumstances: "Not only those things which

counter fluidity but also those which demonstrate freedom from a transcendence over

nature are associated with masculinity.

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[6]Marilyn French, *Beyond Power* (New York: Summit Books, 1985), 92.

[7]Ibid.

So asceticism of all kinds is "masculine (even when women manifest it) and is associated with the highest form of virtues, saintliness."[8]

When defining femininity, French states that, "the feminine principle is associated with nature and is not considered a fully human principle. It is associated with everything fluid, transient, and flexible, qualities sometimes denoted *weak*; with nature, the flesh, and procreation... it is associated with lack of control in every area– sensuous, sensual, emotive, and bodily."[9] This theory of all things feminine is echoed in the words of Michael Uebel: "The norm for medieval personhood was defined– needless to say– as masculine: femininity was construed as imperfection, incompleteness, passivity, childishness, failure."[10] By way of comparison, French's definitions of masculinity and femininity are spectral opposites. They seem to agree with Foucault's definitions of dominance and submission as well. However, French seems to contradict herself: "Because individuality, transcendence, and control are the mark of the human and of the male, any failure to control is seen as unmanly. Since hierarchy requires obedience, however, men must give up control to others. This is resolved: men may properly cede control to superior men, but never to women."[11] French concludes her statement by stating that "sex in the masculine code can only be a controlling act– rape, ownership of

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[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid., 93.

[10]Michael Uebel, "On Becoming–Male," *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 370.

[11]French, 93.

women [through marriage or slavery], or rental of them [prostitution]."[12] Originally

French states that "[n]ot only those things which counter fluidity, but also those which

demonstrate freedom from or transcendence over nature are associated with

masculinity."[13] She then, in the same paragraph, attests that even women can manifest it

through asceticism. On the following page she states that transcendence and control are

the mark of the male. Is this the same control over fluidity and transcendence over nature

that she covers on the prior page? Her definitions of masculinity and femininity are

useful, but I feel she may be too restrictive in not allowing females the ability to attain

power through masculinity and granting them no other avenue toward power other than

through asceticism.

The relation of (male= masculinity) and (female= femininity) and their *apparent*

inseparability is one that posits the question: can females exhibit masculine traits and men

exhibit feminine traits? Judith Butler writes that it is not only a possibility but that it is a

fact of human nature. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler states that there is a definitive

difference between sex and gender: "The distinction between sex and gender serves the

argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally

constructed: hence, gender is neither the casual result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as

sex. The unity of subject is thus already potentially contested by the permits of gender as

a multiple interpretation of sex."[14] Thus stated, gender, the culturally constructed

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[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid., 92.

[14]Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 6.

expectations attached to sex, while assuming a seemingly mimetic pose, can be in-and-of-it-self a self-supporting entity. Butler also states that, "[t]he presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it."[15] While it can mimic the attributes of culturally implied male or female traits both expected and unexpected, it can also echo attributes culturally assigned to both male and female. In other words: expected, (masculine= male/ feminine= female); or unexpected (masculine= female/ feminine= male); or attributes of both, (masculine/ feminine= male), or (feminine/ masculine= female). Any of the these combinations are possible. Butler explains it thus: "When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one."[16]

Butler assumes Luce Irigaray's argument "that women constitute a paradox, if not a contradiction, within the discourse of identity itself. Women are the 'sex' which is not 'one.' Within a language pervasively masculinist, a phallogocentric language, women constitute the *unrepresentable*. In other words, women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity."[17] This would seem to limit women to a non-existence in a masculine world. This is, however not the case. Butler summarizes

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[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid., 9.

Irigaray's argument: "Within a language that rests on univocal signification the female

sex constitutes the unconstrainable and undesignatable. In this sense, women are the sex

which is not 'one,' but multiple."[18] According to this argumentation, women assume the

position of a "gender maverick" who, while not being considered worthy in the eyes of a

phallogocentric society based on a masculine values system, can assume and manipulate

the masculine traits for themselves– gaining power and control in a world that recognizes

masculinity as the only form of "gender tender" and disallows any advancement of the

feminine agent.

Within the realm of Arthurian romance, all of the theoretical references heretofore

mentioned adapt readily to the task of deciphering gender-biased influences, actions, and

reactions. Yet, an even more genre-specific approach can yield results that lend an easier

and more decisive explication of gender studies within Arthurian romance. Geraldine

Heng deals with gender studies in Arthurian romance. One aspect of gender studies on

which she focuses is the empowerment of the women– not only their empowerment as

individuals, but their ability to empower men as well: "On the side of the feminine... rest

hints of authorizations and authoricity eluding masculine determination. Knights require

swords to accomplish deeds, but the permission for their use belongs with women...."[19]

Heng refers to specific exchanges of female to male empowerment regarding swords

within the text *Le Morte Darthur*: "Arthur's sword Excaleber [*sic*], is borrowed from and

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[18]Ibid.

[19]Geraldine Heng, "A Map of Her Desire: Reading the Feminism in Arthurian Romance," *Perceiving Other Worlds* (Singapore: Times Academy, 1991), 255.

ultimately returned to, a woman, with the king acting merely as its temporary custodian, one who is in her debt for its contractual obligations.... Galahad has his formally girded upon him by a holy woman, Perceval's sister, after she has fastened a girdle for it from her own hair."[20] It is the phallogocentric importance and symbolism that medieval society places upon the sword that empowers these notable women, the Lady of the Lake and Perceval's sister and ironically bestows upon them the powers of the masculine.

Another look at the empowerment of men by women is offered by Sheila Fisher. According to Fisher, Guinevere reinforces Lancelot's heroism/ chivalry/ masculinity by frequently needing to be saved and in doing so calling for him to come to the rescue:

> Malory can make political and ideological capital out of Guinevere's personal weaknesses because they go a distance toward constructing and reinforcing Lancelot's heroism, loyalty, and unswerving fidelity to his queen who also happens to be his lover. It really is no paradox in Malory's configuration of chivalric masculinity that Lancelot emerges as Arthur's premier knight specifically because he is the champion of Arthur's frequently imperiled wife.[21]

According to Fisher then, Lancelot is what he is because of Guinevere. Theoretically, if they aren't lovers, then Lancelot ceases to be the premiere knight at the round table. Guinevere *is* his power. She is to Lancelot, not unlike Samson's hair was to him, his source of power.

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[20]Ibid.

[21]Sheila Fisher, "Women and Men in Late Medieval English Romance," *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000),160.

Jacqueline Eccles also deals with the empowerment of women in Arthurian

literature. However, in addition to focusing on specific instances of power, Eccles sheds

light on the femininity of Lanval in Marie de France's lay *Lanval*. His lack of

masculinity serves as a point of delineation between the Fairy Mistress' masculinity, also

Guinevere's to some extent, and his femininity. Eccles explains that "[f]rom the outset

Lanval presents male weakness and its effect on one individual. As a foreigner, Lanval is

legitimately excluded from any corruption which might be present in Arthur's court,

making him all the more pathetic."[22] The Fairy Mistress assumes the mantle of

masculinity in her dealings with Lanval as he "responds generously to his lady's gifts

without any prompting from her"[23] and again, toward the end of the *lais*, "the entrance of

the Fairy Mistress into court is rather a display of female strength and purity.... The Fairy

Mistress is allowed a depth of power which is not afforded the king – at the close of the

lay, she takes Lanval away with her. She thereby breaks his feudal bond with Arthur."[24]

She seems to have taken total control and ownership of him, a masculine trait according

to Marilyn French, by the end of the *lais*: "It is also highly symbolic that Lanval leaps

onto the palfrey *behind* her, reversing the usual subordinate position of the woman behind

the man[25] Eccles' dual approach to *Lanval* allows us to see the two differentiations of

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[22]Jacqueline Eccles, "Feminist Criticism and the lay of *Lanval*: A Replay," *Romance Notes*, 38 (1997), 282.

[23]Ibid., 283.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid.

gender role reversal in both Lanval and in the Fairy Mistress: first, the feminine

assimilation of the androcentric values system inherent in Arthur's court by the Fairy

Mistress serves as the decisive vehicle for the subjugation of Lanval; second, Lanval's

deficiency of masculinity and surplus of femininity forces him to assume the role of the

subjected. Lanval, while still somewhat androgynous, succumbs to the Fairy Mistress'

overpowering authority as a direct result of his femininity.

Lanval is not the only Arthurian knight associated with femininity. While not

assuming the role of the subjugate, save only to women, Lancelot does assume the garb of

femininity. Ad Putter examines Malory's Lancelot, specifically at the Tournament of

Surluse where Lancelot is adorned in a dress. Putter argues that Lancelot wears a dress

not for the purposes of enjoyment or to assume the role of the submissive, but to establish

masculinity as an integral part of his identity as a man and as a knight: "The desire of

knight and king, in romance and in tournament, to efface identity, is produced by the

desire to prove the incontestability of identity. The extra advantage that cross-dressing

offers over other types of disguise is that it makes masculinity an inseparable part of that

incontestable identity."[26] But do the extreme measures that Lancelot goes through to

prove his masculinity bring into question that which was not suspect to begin with? Is

Lancelot overcompensating? Putter would have us think so: "The knight's desire to

prove the 'incontestability' of his gender, his desire to re-encode his body's masculinity

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[26]Ad Putter, "Transvestite Knights in Medieval Life and Literature," *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* (New York: Garland publishing inc. 1997), 287.

in rituals of dressing and undressing, also expose just how fragile and incomplete his

sense of masculinity actually is."[27]

Masculinity is synonymous with knighthood. Therefore Lancelot feels the need to

defend his claims to masculinity and to knighthood. The frailty of Lancelot's masculinity

is apparent in his actions and is indeed called into question by his cross-dressing: "The

need to exorcize femininity by stripping the body of women's clothing betrays an

awareness of the body's constant vulnerability to effeminization."[28] Lancelot fights for

the incontestability of his masculinity when another knight kisses him: "Lancelot pursues

the knight (Sir Belleus) and nearly kills him in a fight, relenting only when the knight

explains his kiss was a misunderstanding. Here..., homosexuality is presented as an

elementary mistake that nobody really intends. Its suppression by force and the

subsequent process of enlightenment re-produces heterosexuality"[29] This appears to be

the only reasonable option for two knights living under such a guardedly stringent set of

masculine societal values as chivalry.

The focus of much scholarly attention lately, Lancelot's femininity has become an

important device in explaining the consequences of gender-role reversal. While not

totally eclipsing his masculinity, in Malory, it does seem to temper his masculinity

creating a more believable and well-rounded Lancelot. According to Donald L. Hoffman,

"Lancelot forges a new and tragic masculinity, a *bricolage* of genre and gender. What

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[27]Ibid.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Ibid., 296.

makes Lancelot so powerful and so appealing... is precisely that he rejects nothing he has not tried, knows all the defects of the accumulated masculinities, and creates something new built on absences and failures... to establish a model that becomes...heroic"[30] Hoffman adds that "he is finally more fully human than anyone else in the narrative, presenting a model of masculinity that accommodates repentance and regret, and tempers heroism with guilt.... All masculine models having failed, he assumes at last the complementary mantles of the Christlike and the feminine and dies both sanctified and smiling."[31] In assuming the feminine mantle, Lancelot becomes an androgyne. That is, he assumes two sets of traits: masculine and feminine. One tempering the other, one complementing the other. This lends Lancelot a sense of realism– gives him a more lifelike quality. It makes him more believable as a character.

Within the works of another author but still in the Arthurian genre is the tale of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Sir Gawain's masculinity, like that of Lancelot and Lanval, is called into question. When Gawain goes to repay his due and allow the Green Knight a return whack at his neck, the lady of Bertilak's castle at which he is staying along the way calls his masculinity into question. There is a constant flirtation between Gawain and the lady, instigated by her. When he fends off her advances she questions Gawain's masculinity. Carolyn Dinshaw comments on the importance of such courtly devices in chivalric society: "Courtly games... with its role reversals, are in fact a serious

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[30]Donald L. Hoffman, "Perceval's Sister: Malory's 'Rejected' Masculinities," *Arthuriana*, 6.4 (1996), 79.

[31]Ibid., 79-80.

business in a world in which identity is constituted by the performance of acts precisely

coded according to normative configurations of gender and desire. And that world, more

than other medieval cultural worlds (because of its emphasis on display, on deeds), is the

chivalric world."[32] The importance of such a structure as chivalry is ingrained into those

who swear by it at an early age. Chivalry establishes the guidelines by which knights

live: "The behavior that makes a knight is intensely rule-governed; it proceeds either as a

game or in the form of a game– tournaments, quests, courtship, .. Knighthood is a

performance– is indeed a performative, conventional and iterable [sic], not freely chosen

but constrained by birth, class status, and other structures of the normative"[33]

Gawain, as a knight of the round table and doer of deeds both perilous and brave,

has gained a reputation for his bravery and masculinity. His reputation becomes one of

his problems: "His reputation has preceded him to Bertilak's castle; he is thus a constant

living up-to that reputation; throughout his time at the castle Gawain is especially anxious

lest he fail in his manner, in the 'fourme'... of his speech and gestures; and he is... through

the course of the poem told, when he is not acting like the reputed Gawain"[34] That is, he

is not acting in the manner of a knight according to the lady. He seems to have given up

the more dominant traits of masculinity in the face of this very aggressive woman who

has assumed the role of the masculine agent in their relationship. According to Dinshaw,

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[32]Carolyn Dinshaw, "A Kiss is Just a Kiss: Heterosexuality and its Consolations in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Diacritics– A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 24(2-3) 1996. 212.

[33]Ibid., 213.

[34]Ibid.

"When his active role is usurped by the lady here, when he is not *doing*, he has no proper, courtly masculine identity."[35] In effect, she is the Delilah that, in removing Sampson's hair, removes his power; only, she dis-empowers him by assuming his socially bestowed role of the masculine dominant agent.

Jerome Mandel deals with the topic of expected gender-role enactment and deviations thereof. Within this area of study falls the inner workings and expectations of courtly love. According to Mandel, "[c]ourtly love emphasized the self-denial implicit in serving the lady, which meant serving not one's equal, another man, but one's inferior, a woman. That is, courtly love institutionalizes the inversion of sexual roles."[36] This "inversion of sexual roles" is not uncommon throughout Arthurian literature. Interestingly, the empowerment of women rarely seems to threaten the masculinity of the men that they dominate. It seems to be an easy transformation for both the men and the women involved. In fact, it seems to be a positive change of roles: "The polymorphous sexuality mix in Malory allows women to mimic the behavior of men in more positive ways. Imprisoned knights, for example, are often freed by other knights in battle , but women save men from prison almost as frequently as men do. On several occasions Lancelot... is freed by women. Once Lancelot is released for a kiss."[37] The role reversal of courtly love, while existent only in the upper echelon, seems to imply, at least on the

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[35]Ibid.

[36]Jerome Mandel, " 'Polymorphous Sexualities' in Chrétien de Troyes and Sir Thomas Malory," *The Body and the Soul in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 68.

[37]Ibid.73.

underlying levels of consciousness, a desire to become that which we are not supposed to be– that which is taboo or against society's written and unwritten guidelines, strictures, and regulations.

Masculinity is a trait, like its counterpart femininity, that is constantly addressed in Arthurian literature. The importance of gender-roles has been established and the effects of what can occur when those gender-roles are switched have been determined, at least within the confines of Arthurian literature. For the remainder of my thesis I will focus more specifically on the works of Sir Thomas Malory, Marie de France, and the Gawain Poet. In particular, I will focus not only on the importance placed upon masculinity and maintaining "proper" socially expected gender-roles within Arthurian literature, but I will also delve into the topic of gender-role reversal and its effects on chivalric society.

CHAPTER 2

THE EMASCULATION OF GAWAIN IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

Courtly literature foregrounds masculine desire. Within that arrangement of codes

and regulations, the disposition of emotion and the value known as chivalry, the

feminine materialises in order to be inducted into providing the enabling

conditions of the chivalric enterprise: to prop, justify and facilitate the masculine

drama of chivalry, the feminine is drawn in, allowed a point of access. The most

relentlessly androcentric of chivalric texts is then the courtly love lyric. Here,

under the magisterial cadences of the single male voice, the woman can, at best,

be said to be constructed as the premise or basis of a subjective masculine

fantasy.[38]

Geraldine Heng's statement above regarding courtly literature and chivalry, as related to

each other, is the argument with which I will contend in this chapter. I agree with Heng

for the most part; however, I would like to make some substitutions– in place of the terms

"male" and "woman" in the last sentence, I would like to substitute the words

"masculine" and "feminine." These terms are somewhat less gender specific and allow

for the cross-gender placement of men within the sphere of the feminine and women

within the sphere of the masculine, an exceedingly important necessity when dealing with

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. In this vein of thought, I argue that within the work

Gawain the positions of the masculine are occupied by those who take control– Lady

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[38]Heng, 250.

Bertilak and Morgan le Fay. Consequently, the feminine position is left for one traditionally masculine in occupation, the knight Gawain. This leaves Gawain to assume the feminine yoke. Bertilak also retains his masculinity over Gawain, which blurs the lines of the homosocial and the homosexual. However, this is only at the whim of Morgan Le Fay, who reinforces the sex-role reversal escapade.

While being an ambassador of Camelot, Arthur, chivalry, and masculinity, Gawain is also a human being put into a situation in which he must react to conflicting stimuli. In the process, the infrastructure of all he represents is called into question. In relieving Arthur of the grave task of beheading the Green Knight, Gawain assumes the position of representative of all Arthurian ideals and hopes as is evident in Arthur's capitulation to his request and his following advice: "'[K]epe the, cosyn,' quoth the kyng, 'that thou on kyrf sette,/ And if thou redes hym ryght, redly I trowe/ That thou schal byden the bur that he schal bede after.'" ["'Take care Kinsman,' said the king, 'that you steady your blow, and if you manage him rightly, I fully believe that you will survive the blow that he will offer later.'"][39] So. in taking up his king's quest, Gawain expects to be victorious and secure the reputation of Arthur, chivalry, and his own masculinity. In denying the Green Knight the assumption of the masculine position over himself or his king by accepting the challenge, Gawain refuses to accept a feminine role relative to that of his adversary's masculine one, at least at first.

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[39]J.J. Anderson, Ed., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: Everyman, 1999),183. Brackets are Anderson's translation.

According to David L. Boyd, the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a

defense of chivalry– a chivalry that is on the decline: "[T]he poem blames the decline on

outside forces: queer male behavior and desire that ultimately derive from the deceits and

wiles of women. By shifting the focus from chivalry's internal problematics to external

threat, *Sir Gawain* subtly constructs 'unnatural' sexual activity as a threat to chivalric

culture's stability."[40] Boyd further argues that, "[b]y emphasizing the idea of sodomy as

yet another device through which women attempt to confound– and to reinterpret–

masculine culture, the poem misogynistically protects and justifies those very ideological

formations through which aristocratic male subjectivity is (re)produced– and through

which women are controlled– hence justifying the need for chivalry's fundamental

basis."[41] In a culture rife with homophobia and misogyny, the decline of chivalry or fear

of its decline would create the need for a scapegoat: "*Sir Gawain* reinforces homophobia

and misogyny as proper, displacing responses to the threat of cultural decline."[42] Boyd's

argument is easily understood: women assuming the traditional role of male power,

forcing the homophobia issue, upends the established cultural parameters and in effect

destroys chivalry. His point is an arguable one. However, I would like to posit this

question: in assuming the role of dominance over men, do Lady Bertilak and Morgan le

Fay not also assume the inherent chivalric responsibilities? Do they not offer protection?

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[40]David L. Boyd, "Sodomy, Misogyny, and Displacement: Occluding Queer Desire in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,*" *Arthuriana* 8(2) (1998), 78.

[41]Ibid.

[42]Ibid.

Lady Bertilak protects Gawain by giving him the girdle which saves his life. Morgan

offers protection for Bertilak as a liege lord would. Do they not offer them gifts which

hold the men in their gratitude? Gawain owes Lady Bertilak his life and gratitude due to

her gift of the girdle, and Bertilak has a magical, but strange, gift of surviving his own

beheading, likely a gift from Morgan le Fay the sorceress. It seems that chivalry has not

died at all, only changed hands. Not only do they *not* destroy chivalry, they uphold it.

An important turn of events, one which places Gawain in the position of the

feminine agent, occurs after he experiences Bertilak's hospitality. Bertilak manipulates

Gawain into a binding agreement:

> A forward we make:
>
> Quat-so-ever I wynne in the wod, hit worthes to
>
> > youres;
>
> And quat chek so ye acheve, chaunge me thereforne.
>
> Swete, swap we so– sware with trawthe–
>
> Quether, leude, so lymp lere other better.'
>
> 'Bi God,' quoth Gawayn the gode, 'I grant thertylle,
>
> And that yow lyst for to layke, lef hit me thynkes.

['let us make an agreement. (Whatever I win in the woods is yours)[43] And

whatever fortune you gain, give it me in exchange for it. Good sir, let us swap in

this way– answer on your honor– whether, sir, it turns out worse or better.' 'By

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[43]Parentheses are my translation in this instance only.

God,' said good Gawain, 'I agree to that: if it pleases you to play, that seems

excellent to me.][44]

It is precisely this agreement instigated by Bertilak as a tool of control and manipulation

which forces Gawain into a sex-role reversal with Bertilak's wife. While it is apparent

that she desires Gawain from a female perspective, her machinations, in an attempt to

attain him in a sexual manner, are somewhat more overt and masculine as she locks him

in his room:

> The dor drawen and dit with a derf haspe.
>
> And sythen I have in this hous hym that al lykes,
>
> I schal ware my whyle wel, quyl hit lastes,
>
> > With tale.
> >
> > Ye are welcum to my cors,
> >
> > Yowre awen wan to wale:
> >
> > Me behoves of fyne force
> >
> > Your servaunt be, and schale.'

[The door closed and fastened with a strong bolt. And since I have in this house

the man whom everyone admires, I shall use my time well, while it lasts, with

speech. You are welcome to me (lit. To my body), to do with as you please (lit.

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[44]Anderson. 213-14.

To choose your own pleasure); I must of absolute necessity be your servant, and I

shall be.][45]

After her initial aggression toward Gawain, Lady Bertilak continues to attack his

position– in effect breaking down his masculinity. In assuming the masculine role over

Gawain, Bertilak's wife leaves Gawain with the option of assuming the feminine

capacity, a yoke not easily worn when knightly values are at stake.

The role that Bertilak's wife plays in the feminization of Gawain is exceedingly

important. It is difficult to say if her part was completely instrumental in Gawain's

feminization. Had it been just Bertilak and Gawain involved in the exchange, would the

sexuality of the situation have been as obvious or would it have even existed? Would not

Bertilak have just lopped off Gawain's head, barring any supernatural intervention, and

leave it at that? What is certain is that "[t]he reversal of courtly roles here couldn't be

clearer, and it seems the poet's conscious choice when we consider traditional

analogues.... *Her* gaze fixes him, *she* names him, *she* offers herself as his servant,

whereas just the night before, greeting the lady and her older companion for the first time,

he offered himself as their 'servaunt.'"[46] She grasps the masculine control position in

their relationship early when she calls his masculinity into question: "Time and time

again through the course of the poem Gawain is told, when he is not acting like the

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[45]Anderson. 219.

[46]Carolyn Dinshaw, "Getting Medieval: *Pulp Fiction*, Gawain, Foucault," *The Book and the Body,* Dolores Warwick Frese, Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe Eds. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 132.

reputed Gawain, that he is not, after all, Gawain.... When his active role is usurped by the lady here, when he is not *doing*, he has no proper, courtly, masculine identity."[47] In effect, she becomes that which he should be, according to medieval social expectations— the masculine agent. He in turn, in not making the decision to become the masculine agent, by default due to lack of reaction, assumes her socially assigned role as the feminine agent. This puts Gawain in a precarious position in his later dealings with Bertilak.

According to the agreement, whatever Bertilak kills on his hunts he will give Gawain. Equally, whatever tokens, spoils, or favors, Gawain might acquire throughout his stay at the castle he is to give to Bertilak.[48] The danger here is that Gawain is not winning kills in the woods, but winning kisses from the lady of the house. Gawain, through continuous repartee, manages to halt them at kisses instead of sexual favors, as they most probably would be if allowed to progress further. This would have been a difficult situation: "If Gawain had intercourse with Lady Bertilak ..., he would be required to give to Bertilak what he had received. But since Gawain could not very well 'return' the Lady's receptacle to Bertilak in this manner..., might not the text imply that the only receptacle logically available to Bertilak as an act of exchange possibly be Gawain's own?"[49] The reality of this exchange is very hazardous to Gawain's masculinity, which is already compromised by Lady Bertilak's aggressive demeanor. If Gawain succumbs to

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[47]Ibid., 133.

[48]Anderson., 213-14.

[49]Boyd., 79.

her advances and indulges in sexual intercourse, then he in turn will have to find a

receptacle for which to offer Bertilak in exchange as per the agreement. The only option,

the only honorable option as a knight who keeps his word, is to offer himself to Bertilak

in the same way Lady Bertilak offers herself to him-- in a sexual manner. David L. Boyd

offers insight into the understanding of the medieval reader regarding this part of the

poem: "[S]uch active/passive, hetero/homo and the potential substitution/exchange of

receptacles would probably have been more familiar to medieval readers not just of

fabliaux but of romance as well, who no doubt would have grasped more readily the

sodomitical implications of this temptation."[50] Boyd argues that the medieval reader's

understanding of the poem would have been more focused on the characters' hierarchic

position within a relationship as opposed to their sexuality: "[M]edieval gender and

sexuality are as much about positionality-- active/passive, top/bottom-- as they are about

genitality *per se*."[51] This being the case, the medieval reader would have noticed the

implications of such an agreement earlier than a reader from a later period in time.

The poet most likely would have us believe that Gawain abstained from the

advances of Lady Bertilak for reasons of honor and chivalry. But there may be more to it

than that. Fear of a homosexual relationship with Bertilak, where he would be made to

assume a feminine position both psychological and literal, may have been instrumental in

the decision not to engage in sexual intercourse with Lady Bertilak: "If Gawain's refusal

of the lady's advances signals a rejection of adultery and disloyalty, then it also denotes

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[50]Boyd., 80.

[51]Ibid.

an implicit repudiation of both homosexual activity and its mediation through heterosexual and homosocial practices. Further..., the threat of sodomy functions as a clever controlling device, supplying a justification for Gawain's chastity."[52] Gawain is forced to make a decision as to which he would be willing to lose– his masculinity or his reputation as a knight willing to appease the ladies. Unwanted physical contact with Bertilak seems to weigh heavily in his decision: "[A]s a perfect knight and paragon of medieval heterosexual masculinity, adultery becomes less probable under these circumstances and would explain why he risks losing his coveted heterosexual reputation rather than, as we have seen, his masculine identification itself."[53] In a situation where he would be the recipient in a sodomitical relationship, the heterosexual Gawain chooses not to commit adultery with Lady Bertilak. This, in effect, is his choice: he must choose to be submissive to either Lady Bertilak, in which case he loses his reputation as a virile knight; or, by not being submissive to her, and allowing her advances to culminate, he chooses submission to Bertilak as his sexual recipient. As it is, "the equation that emerges in the temptation scene– active heterosexual sex = passive homosexual activity = loss of the masculine self– implicitly transforms sodomy and the penetrated male into a figurative death-threat (loss of self) and transforms the implicit threat of homosexual activity into yet another powerful trope of social control."[54] Gawain elects not to commit adultery. The reasons are most likely as Boyd argues above– fear of a sodomitical

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[52]Ibid., 88.

[53]Ibid.

[54]Ibid., 88-89.

relationship with Bertilak: "[I]n a powerful move which both rejects homosexual activity and denies queer connotation Gawain 'just says no' to the lady. Despite the severe consequences of her sexual attempts, his predicament, while illustrating a sodomitical danger, does not disrupt heteronormative identity and sexuality. Rather it secures them by privileging denotation over connotation."[55] Since he chooses not to commit adultery, Gawain's masculinity is not expunged indefinitely, only while in the castle of Bertilak.

Much emphasis is placed on the descriptions of the dismemberment and disembowelment of the animals which Bertilak kills on his hunts, the doe in particular:

> Sythen that slyt the slot, sesed the erber,
>
> Schaved wyth a sharp knyf and the schyre knitten.
>
> Sythen rytte thay the foure lymmes and the rent of the hyde,
>
> Then brek thay the balé, the boweles out token
>
> lystily for laucyng the lere of the knot.
>
> Thay gryped to the gargulun and graythely departed
>
> The wesaunt fro the wynt-hole, and walt out the guttes.

[Then they slit the slot (i.e. the hollow at the base of the throat), seized the gullet, scraped it out with a sharp knife and tied up the white flesh. Next they cut off the four legs and tore off the hide, they opened the belly, took the bowels out carefully to guard against undoing the ligature of the knot. They took hold of the throat and quickly separated the gullet from the wind pipe, and flung out the lungs.][56]

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[55]Ibid., 87.

[56]Anderson, 223.

The parallels between Bertilak's hunting in the woods and Lady Bertilak's hunting in the bedroom are quite noticeable and seem to be parallel to one another. That is to say, what the poet won't tell us directly in the bedroom scenes, he is more than willing to allude to in the hunting scenes: "The feminizing role reversal in the bedroom is mirrored on the first day by Bertilak's choice of prey: Gawain and female deer– barren hinds and does– are hunted in narrative tandem. The animal whose slaughter is described is the mirror image of Gawain: finally killed, her throat is cut, the limbs are cut off, the doe is eviscerated, and her insides are unlaced."[57] This "unlacing" of both the doe and Gawain is not an accident: "Gawain's subjectivity, his identity is unfixed in the bedroom, and that identities unlacing is precisely represented, in its corporeal aspect, in the violent dismemberment of the hunt."[58] The symbolism of the "unlacing" appears to be more apparent once the comparison has been made between Gawain and the doe. The poet seems to be hinting at a symbolic evisceration of Gawain. It is this violent dismemberment and disemboweling of the symbolic deer, so brutally superimposed over Gawain's emasculation, which conjures up morbid visions for the reader and possibly Gawain as well. If this idea is Gawain's motivation, at least in part, it is surely a viable reason for not committing adultery. Dinshaw suggests:

> [T]his unlacing of the body is the poem's visual representation of Gawain's
>
> knightly identity failing. When such identity fails, the body perceptually

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[57]Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 133.

[58]Dinshaw, *A Kiss*, 211.

disaggregates, because it's that identity matrix, that interlocking knot of English

Christian chivalric characteristics and behaviors here, that ideally and even

tenuously accords unity to this knightly body in the first place."[59]

As I stated earlier in this chapter, Gawain is the epitome, the spokesman, the poster-child,

for chivalry. Not only is he representative of chivalry, but he is also representative of

Camelot and Arthur: "The chivalric behavior that Gawain performs is so fundamental that

without its guarantee of unity he is subject to– or, better, subject *of*– corporeal

disaggregation."[60] Stated thus, if any chink appears in Gawain's "armor" of chivalry, then

it fails him and he falls– a precarious perch indeed.

As a gift to help Gawain not only live but also retain his masculinity and chivalric

codes, Lady Bertilak gives him a girdle to protect him from the bite of the Green Knight's

axe. He initially declines the gift, as he had declined the ring offered before it, but Lady

Bertilak realizes that he might want the gift more if he knew what its magical properties

were:

> Bot who-so knew the costes that knit are
>
> > therinne,
>
> He wolde hit prayse at more prys, peraventure;
>
> For quat gome so is gorde with this grene lace,
>
> While he hit hade hemely halched aboute,
>
> Ther is no hathel under heven tohewe hym

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[59]Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 134.

[60]Ibid.

that myght,

For he myght not be slayn for slyght

Upon erthe.

[But whoever knew the properties woven into it, would know its value after a

time. For a man would look like a girl in this green lace. While he has it closely

fastened about him, there is no man under Heaven who might cut him down, for

he may not be slain by any stratagem on Earth.][61]

Upon discovering the magical life-saving qualities of the girdle. Gawain seems much

more interested in the gift and decides to accept it. In a passage that makes Gawain

appear not so gallant, he contemplates the advantages of having the girdle:

Then kest the knyght, and hit come to his

Hert

Hit were a juel for the jeopardé that hym jugged were,

When he acheved to the chapel his chek for to fech;

Myght he haf slypped to be unslayn, the sleght were noble.

Thenne he thulged with her threpe and tholed hir to speke,

And ho bere on hym the belt and bede hit hym swythe.

[(Then pondered the knight and it came to his heart), it would be a jewel for the

peril that had been decreed for him, when he came to the chapel to meet his fate;

if he might escape alive, that would be an excellent trick. Then he bore with her

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[61]Anderson. 247. The translation in this particular passage is a combination of Anderson and myself.

importunity and allowed her to speak, and she pressed the belt on him and offered

it to him eagerly.][62]

Dodging the perils of Lady Bertilak's sexual aggression, more importantly, Bertilak's

exchanges of homo-erotically charged gifts, Gawain's next feat to overcome, according to

their agreement one year prior, is Bertilak's return blow to his neck.

As the poem comes around full circle over the course of a year– the last portion of

it very difficult on Gawain and all he represents (chivalry, Arthur, Camelot, masculinity)-

- he finds himself in yet another predicament which places all of his symbolic attributes in

jeopardy. The underlying homophobia/homo-fascination of the poet is noticeable within

the episode at the Green Chapel: "The exchange of blows... between Gawain and the

Green Knight becomes (homo)erotically charged. The detailed description of the two

men, taking on dominant/submissive or active/passive positions as they take turns

exchanging blows on Circumcision day symbolically places the receiver, though denoted

as hypermasculine, in a feminized position."[63] Gawain goes through with the ordeal for

his honor and word as a knight of Camelot or because he feels the girdle gives him an

added benefit– either or both reasons work, but the point is that he goes through with it.

Bearing the feminine, yet magical, gift of Lady Bertilak, "the girdle is wrapped around his

waist– Gawain must kneel before the Green Knight and accept a blow from his massive

weapon.... [T]he image of the Green Knight's large axe coming down on the submissive

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[62]Ibid., The translation in the parentheses is mine, the reminder of the translation is
Anderson's.

[63]Boyd., 86.

and girdled Gawain and creating a gash-like wound from which blood flows suggest both

a loss of maidenhead and a figurative castration threat."[64] Both of these suggestions that

Boyd makes comparing the wound on Gawain's neck to "a loss of maidenhead" and "a

figurative castration threat" openly allude to a feminized Gawain. Another aspect of his

feminization is the girdle: "Girdle and wound become signs connecting Gawain's faults

specifically to the feminine– and to his feminization– and serve as reminder of the loss of

masculinity that such feminine positions can incur... Despite his manly appearance as he

leaves Bertilak's court, he has also forsaken his masculinity and has willingly adopted an

overt passive position in order to save his life."[65] An argument can be made that in giving

up his honor in bowing to and exchanging homosexually charged kisses with Bertilak,

Gawain has, in actuality, given up his masculinity and assumed the role of the

passive/feminine. Yet, in doing so, he allows himself the ability to "reenter the masculine

sociosymbolic order."[66]

Masculinity as a source of power is a trend throughout the poem. Although, no

one within *Gawain* holds the masculine reigns with more confidence than Morgan le Fay,

not even Arthur. Toward the end of the poem we find that Morgan le Fay is the power

behind the Green Knight– we find this out in his dialogue with Gawain:

> And koyntyse of clergye, bi craftes wel lerned,
>
> The Maystriés of Merlyn mony has ho taken,

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[64]Ibid., 90.

[65]Ibid.

[66]Ibid.

For ho has dalt drwry ful dere sumtyme

With that conable klerk, that knowes alle your knyghtes

at hame.

[And (through her) knowledge of magic arts, by skills well learned. She has

acquired many of the powers of Merlin, for she has in the past had most intimate

love-dealings with that accomplished man of learning, as all your knights at home

know.]"[67]

Morgan takes a masculine position in that she takes what she wants, but she does it by her

own cunning and not by using the masculine rules associated with a patriarchal

misogynistic society: "[I]n a dizzying turn around, the Green Knight not only admits

Morgan's overarching authority and powers in an astonishing, prolonged excursus– an

admission that represents him no longer as master-manipulator but only as a servant, and

Morgan's obedient creature– but also hints at the extent of her reach and possible

status."[68] The Green Knight is a powerful figure within the poem; Morgan le Fay, in

becoming his master, is made even more powerful– even more powerful than Arthur. In

controlling the Green Knight who controls Gawain, and in a sense Arthur by showing

disrespect to both him and his knights without retaliation, Morgan becomes the main

power figure in the story. According to Boyd, "Morgan, through her sexual wiles and

acquired magical skills, has taken the secrets of control from men. Not playing by their

rules, she cannot be ruled by them: untamable, she can tame everyone else; ungovernable

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[67]Anderson, 273.

[68]Heng, *Feminine Knots,* 508.

she can make perverse the practices governing their lives."[69] Even though it is only a

small part of the poem, Morgan's power over all the characters places her at the top of the

power structure. Morgan is above the misogynistic patriarchal law in that she does not

operate within the confines of it. She is not a product of it therefore she is not

empowered by it:

> In conjunction with her interpretive desires, the textual representation of this
>
> 'auncian lady' places her in a position outside the homosocial patriarchy and also
>
> misogynistically proposes that, existing behind and ultimately controlling the
>
> masculine order, there is a gynocracy in which masculine culture can be
>
> reinterpreted and males can be playthings trafficked among women to work out
>
> their feminine jealousies, hatreds, and other negative desires.[70]

In bypassing the power structure and not paying homage to the system in order to gain her

power, Morgan has assumed a most powerful position within the poem and is in turn

untouchable.

The sex-role reversals within *Gawain* almost always reverse societal expectations.

From the beginning the converse of what is expected happens. The Green Knight, who

should be respectful of Arthur in his own castle, disrespects him by denouncing his

knights masculinity calling them "berdles chylder."[71] By challenging Arthur's knights, he

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[69]Boyd., 92.

[70]Ibid.

[71]Anderson, 179.

is essentially assuming the masculine role and forcing them into the feminine. Lady

Bertilak quickly took the masculine position over Gawain. Bertilak, who in his own

home is the only one expected to maintain the controlling masculine position, also

controls Gawain. Finally, Morgan le Fay is shown to be above all others in the poem

because she chooses not to play by the rules of the misogynistic patriarchy. The poem is

rife with gender role-reversal, masculinity, and homophobic connotations, all of which

are manipulators of power. However, if women assuming the male-dominated role of

power are destroying chivalry, as Boyd argues, then it is only a partial destruction and one

that is replaced with a kinder, less belittling version of the same. Bertilak seems to

operate without any supervision from Morgan, and Gawain never sees Lady Bertilak

again, not even to thank her. Neither of the women seem to demand homage for their

masculine gifts and protection, yet they are as chivalrous, if not more, than any knight in

the poem.

CHAPTER 3

LANCELOT'S SUBMISSION TO FEMINIZED MASCULINITY IN

MORTE DARTHUR

The increase of women's power in the Middle Ages, though almost always

overshadowed by patriarchal misogynistic control, is well documented in history and well

known in academia:

> The late medieval period– despite its catastrophes and conflicts, economic and
>
> cultural upheavals, the prevalence of religious hysteria and expectations of the end
>
> of the world– was a period of awakening and positive change, not least for
>
> members of the female sex. While women shared in the ravages wrought by
>
> economic crises and epidemics, they also profited by increased possibilities for
>
> social mobility, technical innovations in agriculture and urban trades, and even
>
> from new cultural and religious movements.[72]

According to Claudia Optiz, quoted above, a series of events led to the increased

empowerment of women in the Middle Ages. One can surmise, then, that with new

empowerment would come a new understanding of social place and capacity. This new

understanding would allow for an increased capacity to manipulate one's socio-political

situation through machinations of self and place in relation to the phallogocentric regime

established millennia prior– to become empowered in terms pre-established by the

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[72]Claudia Opitz, "Life in the Late Middle Ages," *A History of Women in the West: II. Silence of the Middle Ages.* Trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 268.

masculine. Marilyn French argues that "[t]he male is the image of the human, the standard, in the moral, political, or philosophical dimension... expected to take his place in the hierarchy of males without demur. Females can never fully enter this dimension. They represent the non-human; they are the super-human (inlaw aspect) or subhuman (outlaw aspect), but they are differentiated from the human."[73] In regard to the situation of medieval women, Sarah Salih contends that "[w]omen's only option is to accept their identification with the flesh and thus confirm the patriarchal categorization that makes them bodily others, nature to men's culture." Yet she quotes Elizabeth Robertson who states, "[i]t can be argued that medieval women gained power by accepting medieval categories of male and female and then manipulating them to their own advantage. Perhaps these women would finally have been more powerful had they abandoned these categories altogether."[74] I agree with French but would add this: in addition to feminine manipulation, which Robertson argues as problematic to women's further empowerment, there are situations in which medieval women can and do assume the powers of masculinity in order to manipulate and improve their social situation.

Social manipulation by women in the Middle Ages is not uncommon. According to Carolyn Walker Bynum, "women's food practices frequently enabled them to determine the shape of their lives– to reject unwanted marriages, to substitute religious activities for more menial duties within the family, to redirect the use of fathers' or

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[73]French, *Shakespeare's Division*, 28.

[74]Sarah Salih, "Performing Virginity: Sex and Violence in the *Katherine* Group," *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*, Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl, eds. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 97.

husbands' resources..., to criticize powerful secular or religious authorities, and to claim

for themselves, teaching, counseling and reforming roles."[75] Bynum's observations on

the use of eating practices by medieval women are a form of power, and as such performs

its function as a catalyst of change for its user. However, since it is not within the realm

of the masculine (i.e. aggressive, appropriative, dominating), since it is manipulative and

not possessive in nature, starvation of one's self is an appropriative act. The difference

being that, a masculine reaction would be to starve someone else until a desired effect

were achieved, a feminine reaction would be to starve one's self. Marilyn French argues

that the feminine principle is natural and that the male principle is associated more with

society/control: "Repudiation of food and drink in fasting; repudiation of the need for

shelter...; repudiation of sex; self-flagellation, wearing of hair shirts or chains about the

body; and even self-mutilations like castration are seen as virtuous because they assert

superiority to natural need and thus to nature. Humanness is identical with control, and

control is opposed to nature."[76] Women are seen in Arthurian literature residing in the

"natural" sphere, but they also behave in a masculine manner as well; that is, they assume

the guise of the masculine in order to attain a desired effect or goal, or to control.

The sister of Sir Melyot de Logyrs uses Lancelot's chivalry, or his reputation as a

chivalrous knight, in order to bend him to do her bidding and save her brother: "Well be

ye founde my lorde. And now I requyre you of your knyghthode helpe my brother that is

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[75]Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 220.

[76]French, *Beyond Power*, 93.

sore wounded and never styntyth bledyng; for this day he fought with sir Gylberte the

Bastarde and slew him in playne batayle, and there was my brother sore wounded."[77] The

maiden could have just asked Lancelot to help her brother and he may would have

happily done so. However, she chooses to press him into her service by holding his

chivalry, or reputation as a chivalrous knight, over his head as a mechanism to ensure his

compliance with her wishes. This masculine approach in gaining Lancelot's

acquiescence did more than empower her with the masculine role– it forced Lancelot into

the feminine role. By his capitulation he dis-empowers himself, or is dis-empowered by

the maiden, and is left with no other choice than to comply. Held by his chivalrous code,

he will deny no help to a maiden in distress. This is arguably a meager reference to

female masculinity and male femininity, but it does lay the groundwork for the rest of the

chapter and it does something else– it proffers the question, what about male femininity?

How was it perceived in the Middle Ages?

According to Vern L. Bullough, "[a] woman can be encouraged to adopt

'masculine' ways of thinking, even 'masculine' ways of action, but any male who

demonstrates any inclination toward showing a more feminine side is deprecated, as this

is a sign of weakness, not strength." In this instance the double standard swings the other

way. "A woman can raise her status and role in society by acting as a man (provided she

does not show a woman's sexuality) without any threat to society. Males who fail to

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[77]Thomas Malory, *Works*, Eugene Vinaver Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 167.

perform as males have their manhood questioned."[78] This is not surprising in a society

where masculinity is the basis for politics and moral code. An important part of

Bullough's argument is the parenthetic comment, "provided she does not show a

woman's sexuality." This is of paramount importance to female status elevation within

the confines of medieval society– any sign of femininity will not be allowed

advancement– only masculinity is rewarded with social empowerment. This does not

imply a one-sided progression toward either the masculine or the feminine; on the

contrary, "to be a man or a woman [in the Middle Ages] was to hold a social rank, a place

in society, to assume a cultural role, not to be organically one or the other of the two

incommensurable sexes... 'male' and 'female' are not discreet essences but points on a

continuum, creating the possibility for intermediate genders."[79] The intermingling of both

masculine and feminine qualities is regarded by many twentieth-century scholars to be a

genetic and/or socially contrived truth. However, in the Middle Ages, it was a double-

edged sword: women could utilize masculine characteristics to assume certain levels of

social control as long as their femininity was kept in check; men on the other hand, could

show no sign of femininity without fear of repercussion against their social ranking and

masculinity. This 'boys will be boys' and 'girls will be girls' mentality pervades much of

the Arthurian literature of late medieval England, but not entirely throughout. Indeed, the

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[78]Vern L. Bullough, "On Being Male in the Middle Ages," *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1994), 33.

[79]Salih, 99.

opposite can be found in varying degrees throughout the very same literature– sometimes

'boys will be girls' and 'girls will be boys.'

Much has been written about Guenevere's power in Arthurian culture.

Traditionally, Guenevere is seen as a powerful but feminine force. The same holds true

in *Morte Darthur*: "Readings on women characters in Malory are by tradition tacitly

inclined to concede to the feminine only as a supporting place in the Arthurian society of

the text. The image of knightly culture on which that civilisation [sic] is posited must

assume feminine presence and assistance for its completion, yet also constitute the

feminine in essentially subsidiary relation to the masculine."[80] Varying depictions of

Guenevere exist showing her to be an aggressor capable of controlling men– after all, it is

Guenevere who assumes the masculine role of the sexual aggressor that leads to her

infidelity and Arthur's emasculation. Roberta L. Krueger notes that, "[i]n the prose

Lancelot, Guenevere occupies a paradoxical role both as a queen who betrays her

husband and as a woman whose love has inspired the best knight in the world..., whose

prowess derives from his love for her. Because she dares to love in such an

unconventional fashion and yet remain the highest-ranking woman at court, she at times

seems to usurp the power of men at court."[81] A similar representation of Guenevere

exists in the later English work as well, as noted by Edward Donald Kennedy, who

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[80]Geraldine Heng, "Enchanted Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory," *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*, Thelma S. Fenster, ed. (New York: Garland, 1996), 97.

[81]Roberta L. Kreuger, ed., "Questions of Gender in Old French Courtly Romance," *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 141.

addresses Guenevere's ability to lead Lancelot to salvation when Galahad could not: "In

Malory's *Morte Darthur*, a book that with its emphasis on knighthood might appear to

have been written by an author primarily interested in masculine loyalties, it is

remarkable that a woman was able to achieve what Galahad [the symbolic knight of

purity] had not."[82]   Maureen Fries, another scholar focusing of Guenevere, observes that

Guenevere's rejection of Lancelot's marital offer and plea for one last kiss, "casts her into

a heroic mold, but it is a male inspired one: that of the repentant worldly woman, on the

model of Mary Magdalene, Mary of Egypt, and other formerly sexual females."[83]

Krueger argues that Guenevere "usurps" the power of men, Kennedy feels that she

outdoes Galahad, and Fries describes her as heroic. All of these arguments vary in

substance but they do seem to find common ground on one point: Guenevere is powerful,

and in a world where society is ruled by the masculine, Guenevere can be seen as queen—

traditionally a feminine role; yet she exudes the capability of social control– a trait that is

more commonly equated with the masculine.

Traditionally, Lancelot has been seen in the light of the glorious knight in shining

armor coming to the rescue of many a damsel in distress, not the least of which being

Guenevere. This convention is prevalent in Malory as well. According to Sheila Fisher,

Malory uses Guenevere's knack of getting into trouble as a tool to construct the

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[82]Edward Donald Kennedy, "Malory's Guenevere: 'A Woman Who Had Grown a Soul,"
Arthuriana 9(2), 1999, 42.

[83]Maureen Fries, "Female Heroes, Heroines, and Counter-Heroes: Images of Women in
Arthurian Tradition," *Arthurian
Women: A Casebook*, Thelma S. Fenster, ed. (New York: Garland, 1996), 66.

archetypal knight in Lancelot. Guenevere's "weaknesses" are important to his position because they lend credibility to his chivalry, they create in him a reason to exist within the realm of chivalry. It is the fact that she needs to be rescued at all which empowers Lancelot with the chivalric masculinity which is so important in knighthood and in turn creates, in him, the classic knight.[84] I agree with Fisher in part, in that Guenevere does create in Lancelot the archetypal knight. However, I would argue that it is not Guenevere's "weaknesses" that create in Lancelot the knight immaculate, on the contrary. It is her strength/ masculinity which creates in him the knight emasculate.

Marilyn French contends that "[l]ove is 'feminine'... all flexible and fluid experience is 'feminine'– spontaneity, playfulness, creativity."[85] Lancelot loves Guenevere. Thus it is this "feminine" love which pervades his actions in reference to his queen. He gives his all to her: "In expressly assigning the queen the purpose and uses of his life, Lancelot subsumes his identity with her own, his volition existing separately only insofar as it is a force for instituting her authority and spatial presence within the world.... Indeed, his submission to his lady's will is so perfect... that it is awarded the supreme accolade of being suspected to be founded in supernatural causes."[86] Indeed, he is unsurpassed, even by her husband Arthur, in his devotion to Guenevere. In his acquiescence to his queen, he is emasculated. He assumes the role of the feminine to her masculine in that he is willing to do all that she demands, regardless of the consequences.

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[84]Sheila Fisher, 160.

[85]French, *Beyond Power*, 93

[86]Heng, *Enchanted Ground*, 102.

Therefore, he becomes not only an entity of femininity but a proponent of it as well: "Lancelot is the most effective agent in the text for the transliteration of female will and desire because of the emotional logic of serving a particular lady translates polysemously for him into dedication to a feminine principle, affirmed in the enormous variety of requests successfully made of him by women."[87] For example, King Bagdemagus's daughter offers Lancelot freedom in exchange for his promise of helping her father: "[B]ut an ye woll be ruled by me I shall helpe you oute of this dystresse, and ye shall have no shame or velony, so that ye wol⟨d⟩ [hold] my promyse."[88] This is but one occurrence. There are quite a few more that I will address at a later point in this chapter. Suffice it to say that, throughout the novel, Lancelot is manipulated time and again for feminine amelioration: "Ultimately, it is in this that the meaning of his characterisation is to be found, located within a world of feminine purpose without which a Lancelot as we know him would be unimaginable: seen thus, Lancelot's desire, then, is the desire not *for* the feminine, but *of* the feminine."[89] In this light, Lancelot is seen not only in the feminine guise, but also as an agent of the feminine.

One of the most symbolic objects of power in Arthurian literature is the sword. However, it is also the paramount symbol of phallic empowerment. In a society where such a symbolic sword of power exists, it is not surprising that as power is associated with the sword in a phallogocentric society, so also is the masculine associated with such

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[87]Ibid., 103

[88]Malory, 152.

[89]Heng, *Enchanted Ground*, 103.

a power. Indeed, are not Arthur's knights in awe of his 'sword' Excalibur? More than a few items represent power in Malory: Isode's bracelet; Lyonesses's ring; Lyonet's magical ointment; Morgan le Fay's cloak, horn, and shield, and the Grail, to mention a few. Yet, "[perhaps] the most enigmatic and dangerous items of this material trove are *swords*, the instruments on which all masculine accomplishment must turn, and therefore pivotal to conceptions of male identity and personal force. These are so strongly associated with feminine sources and ownership as sometimes to be only temporarily accessible to men."[90] While women seem to own most of the items of power, it is through their acquiescence that the masculine agents gain their power. However, this is not to say that Malory's women are powerless, they prove themselves active agents of masculinity/power time and again.

Geraldine Heng argues that women are symbols of power only as a supporting role to the more masculine, chivalrous, knightly culture– a subsidiary role only in the wake of Arthurian phallogocentricity.[91] This argument weighs heavily on the fact that femininity is substrata to masculinity in Arthurian culture. I agree with this point. However, it is not the feminine power which assumes situational control in the incidents of female dominance over males– it is masculine power. As I have argued earlier, women in a patriarchally dominated culture who are insistent on gaining situational power must assert masculine tactics in the dominance of the 'other' in order to maintain situational superiority. Masculinity is the fuel of power in a masculine culture. Nynyve,

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[90]Heng, *Enchanted Ground*, 98.

[91]Ibid., 97.

the Lady of the Lake, is respected by Sir Pelleas in the role of judge, a traditionally

masculine role: "So hit happed the Damesell of the Lake, Nynyve, mette with a knyght of

sir Pelleas... making grete doole, and she asked him the cause; and so the wofull knyght

tolde her all how his mayster the lorde was betrayed thorow a knyght and a lady....

'Brynge me to hym,' seyde she anon, 'and y woll waraunte his lyfe.'"[92] Another

occurrence of female masculinity arises in the form of four queens, Morgan le Fay being

one. Lancelot is threatened with imprisonment if he does not chose one of them for a

lover: "[F]or it behoveth the now to chose one of us four, for I am quene Morgan le Fay,

quene of the londe of Gore, and here is the quene of North Galys, and the quene of

Estlonde, and the quene of the Oute Iles. Now chose one of us, whyche that thou wolte

have to thy peramour, other ellys to dye in this preson."[93] Lancelot refuses the queens and

resigns himself to imprisonment. However, he then is approached by a damsel who

offers to help him on one condition: "[A]n ye would promyse me to helpe my fadir on

Tewesday next commynge, that hath made a turnemente betwyxt hym and the kyng of

North Galys— for the last Tewesday past my fadir loste the felde thorow three knights of

Arthurs courte— and yf ye will be there on Tewesday next commynge and helpe my fadir,

and to-morne be pryme by the grace of God I shall delyver you clene."[94] In each case—

Nyneve, the four queens, and the damsel— women assume the masculine role over a

knight in order to obtain an objective: Nyneve acts as judge in order to exact justice, the

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[92]Malory, 103-04.

[93]Ibid., 152.

[94]Ibid.

four queens force Lancelot to choose one of them as a lover, and the damsel makes

Lancelot promise to help her father in order to gain his freedom. Each of the women use

masculinity as a tool to obtain their goal. Although the four queens failed, they all knew

what was required of them to gain the reins of masculinity and, in doing so, empowering

themselves in a masculine culture.

In his article "On Becoming Male," Michael Uebel maintains that medieval men,

despite the belabored contention "of their superiority and transcendence in learned texts...

nevertheless were, like women, subject to categorical assumptions constraining the range

of their corporeal activities... the passive living in one's own political, social, or gendered

identity is nothing short of an impossibility since thinking itself is dependent for its

activity upon the state of one's corporeality."[95] Operating on the assumption that no one

is an island unto themselves– in a societal context it is an impossibility to be unaffected

by socio-political, socio-sexual, cultural, etc... influences, every action, movement, or

thought is corrupted by influence of all encompassing conditions– social, familial, and

corporeal. Indeed, the corporeal may have been the most important influence of all of

these to medieval men. For in a "masculine culture" as defined by Foucault, French, and

Butler, masculine traits are more likely to attain a level of power higher than what

feminine traits might. Assuming this, the medieval male body seems to have played an

important role in acquiring such power. Uebel asserts too that "[m]ale bodies are

assemblages of dynamic parts , the proper preservation and ordering of which ensure a

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[95]Michael Uebel, "On Becoming Male," *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*" (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 371.

body's claim to dominance in the social sphere."[96] That is, to look the part of the socially

expected male, to become the masculine in a masculine culture, assured one of a position

of power. Power over, if not others in the political, merchant, or familial spheres, then

one's own actions– a right not afforded most medieval women. This posits the question,

why would medieval men choose to associate with the feminine in a social environment?

Jerome Mandel addresses the cross-dressing events that take place at the

Tournament at Surluse: "The Tournament at Surluse, for a variety of reasons, is one of

the major events in the disintegration of Arthurian civilization. It is a tournament

characterized by entropy, the movement from order to disorder, from heroic to comic,

articulated in the disguise of personal identity and inversion of sexual roles."[97] Lancelot

is seen early in the tournament as the true picture of Arthurian knighthood: chivalrous,

courteous, powerful, and masculine. He not only looks the part of chivalry, but also acts

the part: "[S]ir Lancelot smote down sir Dynadan and made his men to unarme hym. And

so brought hym to the quene, and tho the haute prynce lowghe sir Dynadan, that they

might not stonde."[98] In capitulating to the will of Lancelot, Dynadan is forced into the

submissive feminine role before the quene. Lancelot seems acquainted with the

masculine in this instance, but later in the tournament he dons a feminine guise: "[S]ir

Lancelot disgysed hymselff and put uppon his armour a maydyns garment freysshley

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[96]Ibid., 376.

[97]Mandel, 75.

[98]Malory, 407.

attyred.... and all men had wonder what damesell was that."[99] Sir Dynadan fears that he

might be fooled by Lancelot in disguise so he is wary, "but sir Lancelot cam on hym so

faste that he smote sir Dynadan... and into the foreyste there besyde, they displayed hym

unto his sherte and put upon hym a womans garmente."[100] Malory's reasoning in letting

us see this side of Lancelot may be, as Mandel states, a symbolic deterioration of

Arthurian culture. Or, could it be that Lancelot so wants to disgrace sir Dynadan that he

does it in feminine guise to increase the embarrassment? For would it not be an

embarrassment to any knight to be defeated by a woman, the very prize they were sworn

to protect? The humiliation Dynadan endures must surely be a fate worse than losing a

hundred jousts to a "worthy" opponent. Whatever the reason, it seems that Lancelot is

comfortable enough with his masculinity that he is able to don the feminine guise and still

defeat Dynadan in a most humiliating manner. But how is his cross-dressing seen in the

public eye?

According to Mandel, Lancelot's "blurring of gender lines for himself and for

Dynadan would have affected medieval perceptions of him. Not only does he violate the

rules governing his class and rank, but he breaches the 'expected boundaries of gender

identification or gender decorum.... By abandoning the clothes as well as the behavior

proper to knighthood, Lancelot implicitly abandons his noble state."[101] This is similar to

what Guenevere does, with the exception of the cross dressing. She assumes the role of

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[99]Ibid., 410.

[100]Ibid.

[101]Mandel, 76.

the masculine, a role somewhat afforded her by her position as queen, but not to the extent to which Arthur or Lancelot are granted as masculine agents. Even in a dress, Lancelot is a powerful force on the field, the symbolic stomping ground of chivalrous endeavors. Guenevere, too, takes on the role, normally socially associated with men, of masculinity and realigns it with herself as a powerful force— powerful enough to direct Lancelot's actions forcing him into the submissive feminine role. In the culture of Arthurian chivalry, there are clear-cut rules, or boundaries if you will. That which is masculine assumes the dominant role in any relational situation be it social, political, or familial. Guenevere does it, Lancelot does it in a dress, but without masculinity as their qualifying dominant force, both of these aggressors would fall short of their goal of power. The masculine quality of their actions, in Malory, is the unifying common denominator between Guenevere and Lancelot— they are not the same characters without it.

CHAPTER 4

THE FAERIE MISTRESS, GUINEVERE, AND LANVAL: SEX-ROLE REVERSAL

IN MARIE DE FRANCE'S *LAIS* OF *LANVAL*

To some medieval women, the idea of controlling their own destinies must have

seemed an impossibility, or at best a tantalizingly unattainable dream. The fact that men

were irremovably in control of medieval women's fate, future, and fortunes must have

been a terrible reality with which to live. Although some women in the Middle Ages had

power and little or no control from their male counterparts, these cases are few

comparatively and represent the exceptions, not the rule. Most medieval women had

little hope of breaking the patriarchal stranglehold which held them in submission. This

seems to be the exact audience for whom Marie de France was writing. In a masculine-

based society women were afforded little power. The few that did were most likely

watched and held in check by their oftentimes unsympathetic fathers and husbands.

Marie de France wrote her *lais* in a way which seems to give hope to her medieval female

readers. The prevailing theme in her lay *Lanval* is power– masculinity as power which is

in turn defined by feminine boundaries. However, I propose that it is not conventional

masculinity which overpowers conventional femininity, but feminized masculinity (in the

Faerie Mistress and Guenevere), which dominates the unconventional femininity of

Lanval.

When Lanval first meets the Faerie Mistress, he is struck by her beauty. She is

confident in her actions and assumes the role of aggressor/conqueror:

'Lanval,' fet ele, 'beus amis

Pur vus vienc jeo fors de ma tere;

De luinz vus sui venu[e] quere.

Se vus estes pruz e cutries,

Empererene quens ne reis

N'ot unkes tant joie ne bien.'[102]

['Lanval,' she said, 'sweet love,/ because of you I have come from my land;/ I

came to seek you from far away./ If you are brave and courtly,/ no emperor or

count or king/ will ever have known such joy or good;/ for I love you more than

anything.'][103]

It is true that this statement by the Faerie Mistress seems harmless enough, but bear with

me. First, she tells Lanval that he is the reason for which she left her land. This puts

Lanval in the position of feeling responsible for inconveniencing her– a feeling which

usually evokes an apologetic, subservient reaction. Second, she dangles her love for him

as an attainable prize. This keeps him in her power because she controls the time, place

and amount of love to be meted out. Third, she puts conditions on her love: "If you are

brave and courtly." This assures her that Lanval's actions will be in her best interest; she

merely need to cut off the outpouring of love to exact a desired reaction from him. This

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[102]Marie de France, "*Lanval*," *Marie de France Lais*, Alfred Ewert Ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960), 60.

[103]Marie de France, "*Lanval*," *The Lais of Marie de France*, Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante Trans. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 108. This text will serve as the English translation throughout the rest of the chapter.

is a masculine approach to gaining social power. By putting Lanval in the position of needing to act and react to her requests or demands, she leaves him only one option for attaining her love– his complete subjectification to her.

Between her beauty and sexual/political bartering for his love, the Faerie Mistress has assumed the dominant role over Lanval who gladly accepts the role of feminine counterpart:

> 'Bele,' fet il, 'si vus pleiseit
>
> E cele joie me aveneit
>
> Que vue me vousissez amer,
>
> Ne saveriez rien comander
>
> Que jeo ne face a mien poeir,
>
> Turt a folie u a saveir.
>
> Jeo f[e]rai voz comandemenz,
>
> Pur vus guerpirai tutes genz.'[104]

['lovely one,' he said, 'if it pleased you,/ if such joy might be mine/ that you would love me,/ there is nothing you might command,/ within my power, that I would not do,/ whether foolish or wise./ I shall obey your command;/ for you, I shall abandon everyone.'][105]

Lanval is willing to give up everything he stands for, including his fealty to Arthur's own masculine power, in order to keep the Faerie Mistress's love. It is an act of complete and

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[104]*Marie de France Lais*, 61.

[105]*The Lais of Marie de France*, 108.

utter submission. Under the codes of Arthurian chivalry, this capitulation of one's entire

self-control to that of another is seen as a defeat– true, it is a defeat that Lanval acquiesces

to with open abandon, but it is a defeat nonetheless. In yielding to the

aggressor/conqueror, one defeated in battle, or in this case love, concedes any right to

signs of aggression within the relationship; whether it be conqueror over conquered,

aggressive lover over submissive lover, or employer over employee, the aggressive

"masculine" trait always assumes a role of domination over the socially perceived

weaker "feminine" trait. As I have argued before, this is not to be mistaken as male over

female, but masculine over feminine– something entirely different. To say that one has

either all masculine traits or all feminine is an untruth. We all exude, to varying degrees,

aspects of both the masculine and the feminine. The same is true for Lanval.

Lanval, in his subservience to his Mistress, has regained a portion of his

masculinity through hers. She gives him a gift: no matter how much he gives or spends,

she will furnish him with what he needs.[106] Lanval in turn is lavish with his gifts and

charity– this is proof of his power:

> N'ot en le vile chevalier
>
> Ki de surjur ait grant mestier,
>
> Quë il ne face a lui venir
>
> E richement e bien sevir.
>
> Lanval donout les riches duns,
>
> Lanval aquitout les prisuns,

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[106]Ibid., 108.

Lanval vesteit les jugleürs,

Lanval leseit les granz honurs:

N'i ot estrange ne privé

A ki Lanval n'eüst doné.[107]

[There was no knight in the city/ who really needed a place to stay/ whom he

didn't invite to join him/ to be well and richly served./ Lanval gave rich gifts,/

Lanval released prisoners,/ Lanval dressed jongleurs [performers],/ Lanval offered

great honors./ There was no stranger or friend/ to whom Lanval didn't give.][108]

As Jacqueline Eccles notes, Lanval gives freely of his gifts without any prompting from

the Faerie Mistress.[109] This self- motivated generosity seems to be purely of a giving

nature and, indeed, were it the only driving force behind his actions it would be highly

commendable. However, I would argue that his motives may not be purely philanthropic.

As one usually associated with masculinity, Lanval may not be totally unwilling to forego

his chivalric heritage entirely. In an attempt to regain at least some of his masculinity

Lanval doles out gifts and gestures of goodwill in order to reinforce his masculinity and

appease his damaged male ego. His gift giving reinforces his role as provider, a dominant

role, and puts him in control of the amount and type of goodwill to be distributed. In

becoming a benefactor, Lanval positions himself in such a way as to receive praise and

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[107]*Marie de France Lais*, 63.

[108]*The Lais of Marie de France*, 110-11.

[109]Eccles, 283.

honor from his fellow knights, a desirable response for a masculine ego. However, in the

end Lanval again becomes the feminine subject to his Faerie Mistress, but not before he

encounters trouble in the form of a very domineering Guenevere.

Guenevere desires Lanval and in a bold move offers him her sexual favors.

Lanval declines to commit adultery against Arthur and infuriates the queen by doing so.

She is angered and seems to strike out at Lanval:

> 'Lanval,' fet ele, 'bien le quit,
>
> Vus n'amez gueres cel delit;
>
> Asez le m'ad hum dit sovent
>
> Que des femmez n'avez talent.
>
> Vallez avez bien afeitiez,
>
> Ensemble od eus vus deduiez.
>
> Vileins cuarz, mauveis failliz'
>
> Mut est mi sires maubailliz
>
> Que pres de lui vus ad suffert;
>
> Mun escïent que Deus en pert!'[110]

['Lanval,' she said, '/ I am sure you don't care for such pleasure;/ people have

often told me/ that you have no interest in women./ You have fine-looking boys/

with whom you enjoy yourself./ Base coward, lousy cripple,/ my lord made a bad

---

[110]*Marie de France Lais*, 65.

mistake/ when he let you stay with him./ For all I know, He'll lose God because

of it.']¹¹¹

According to David L. Boyd, "This accusation, sexualizing Lanval's homosocial

relationship with his retinue, is, of course, untrue and functions as Guenevere's means of

controlling him and avenging her rejection."¹¹² This accusation seems to be an attempt at

emasculating Lanval. By accusing him of homosexual behavior Guenevere insinuates

that he does not have in him the expected amount of testosterone-driven desire for the

opposite sex. This ploy at controlling him obviously works since it prompts him to

divulge the secret affair he is having with the Faerie Mistress. This brings up another

feminization of Lanval. His inability to keep a secret is something commonly attributed

to women. This divulgence offers a new problem for Lanval and he knows it: in telling

of his secret affair, he thinks that he has broken his pact with his Mistress and has

terminated their relationship. In calling his masculinity into question,Guenevere has the

control mechanism on him she desired, but now she uses it for destruction not seduction.

Her use of masculinity is malicious in its intent, the Faerie Mistress, however, uses

masculinity in a more benevolent manner.

The Faerie Mistress's power is apparent in her entrance into Arthur's court.

Arthur and all of his vassals are taken by her beauty, and all of them, Arthur included,

offer her their services.¹¹³ She is a commanding presence and assumes the most

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¹¹¹*The Lais of Marie de France*, 112-13.

¹¹²Boyd, 93.

¹¹³*The Lais of Marie de France*, 120-22.

masculine role in the court, even over Arthur. The entrance "of the Fairy Mistress into the court is rather a display of female strength [or masculinity] and purity.... The Fairy Mistress is allowed a depth of power which is not afforded the king– at the close of the lay, she takes Lanval away with her.... It is highly symbolic that Lanval leaps onto the palfrey *behind* her, reversing the usually subordinate position of the woman behind the man."[114] This final "symbolic" leap into the subordinate position is indeed symbolic of the entire story. From the beginning, Lanval shows no interest in even attempting to subjugate the Faerie Mistress. She assumes the position of authority and dispenses love and justice to Lanval as she sees fit. He assumes the subordinate role and is happy to do so.

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[114]Eccles, 283.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Lanval, Gawain, and Lancelot, are all similar in their situations. They are all representative of the highly held expectations of Arthurian chivalry. Within medieval society, even the semi-fictional one of Arthurian legend, roles were symbolic– even more so was the role of the knight. There were cut-and-dried rules and regulations for the knights and high expectations to be met. It is this very unyielding tenet, with which all knights are measured, which seems to make these three men stand out from their brethren. They are all knights of King Arthur. Lanval is the least renowned of the three, yet, once he is given the gift of the Faerie Mistress, he leads the life of a knight quite well. He is generous with his riches and charitable in his distribution of justice. Gawain is a young knight at the time of the ordeal with the Green Knight, but he is already well known as a brave and fair knight, and by the end of the poem he is well in control of his reputation as one of Arthur's elite. Lancelot is the knight most recognized in Arthurian literature– simply because he is the best. True he has a fatal flaw in his adulterous relationship with Guenevere, but in his knightly duties there are none who can surpass him. All three men are good knights. Yet, in their interactions with the women in their lives, they assume subordinate feminine roles to their female counterparts, who in turn assume the role of the masculine.

Gawain, Lancelot, and Lanval, in their interactions with their perspective female counterparts, have one thing in common: none of these knights attempt to control, manipulate, or dominate the women. As knights of the round table, they are due a certain

level of authority– authority which has been usurped by Lady Bertilak, Guenevere, and the Faerie Mistress. There are two possible occurrences which may have a bearing on the outcome of these socially obverse gender-coded events: firstly, all three women are not ordinary medieval woman since they are all women of power; secondly, they all hold some form of power over the knights. Lady Bertilak is the lady of the house in which Gawain is a guest and therefore deserves a modicum of respect. Guenevere is the queen of both Lancelot and Lanval and as such, is to be revered by the knights of the realm which they protect. The Faerie Mistress gives Lanval all that he wants in love and worldly possessions and is responsible for his becoming a good knight. She too is of royalty– a faerie variety to be sure, but royalty just the same– a moniker which demands respect of all. It seems that the positions of authority themselves do not cause the women to assume roles of authority but something forces their aggressive demeanor toward the knights whose personas once exuded dominant/masculine traits. This is possibly a result of the expectations of knights within the code of chivalry: fealty to one's monarch; respect toward females, especially maidens; and maintaining honor at all times.

In assuming the subordinate role to the women, the knights have subjected themselves to the task of always being subservient. This subsevience seems to propel the more aggressive women even further in their controlling endeavors. It may well be that the knight's submission is the key event to which they owe their reversal of socially expected gender-roles: Gawain's submission to Lady Bertilak allows her to use his feminine mien against him; Lancelot's acquiescence to Guenevere puts her in the position where she can employ him as she sees fit; Lanval's case is less extreme-- the Faerie

Mistress is honorable throughout the poem but she still maintains control over him in every way. The source of domination in each case is the knight's submission. Power is not only defined by its submissive counterpart– it is fed by it.

In conclusion, within the realm of medieval Arthurian literature are woven the morals, honor, and gender-coded expectations of chivalry. Within these codes are unwritten guidelines as to what measure of masculinity/femininity is required from the subjectified, both male and female, and to which polarity of either dominance or submission each are expected to lean. The polarity determinant is largely based on gender, but as we've seen not only in the knights Lanval, Lancelot, and Gawain but also in Lady Bertilak, Guenevere, and the Faerie Mistress, degrees of masculinity and femininity can reside in a dichotomous relationship within one person. However, in the Arthurian culture, as in most cultures, masculinity reigns dominant over femininity. Marilyn French argues that, "[t]he most common form of arrangement is to see the masculine principle as dominant. Its power makes it legitimate, and right and rights are its prerogatives. It accepts the feminine principle... insofar as it volitionally subordinates itself to the nourishment and support of the masculine ends of control and transcendence."[115] This is an arguably substantive statement, but it doesn't cover the question of gender duality– the sharing of both masculine and feminine traits within an individual. According to Judith Butler, "'the body' appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself. In either case,

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[115]French, *Shakespeare's Division.* 30.

the body is figured as a mere *instrument* or *medium* for which a set of cultural meanings

are only externally related."[116] Butler's argument would have us rightly seeing the body

as an malleable will to which cultural expectations are applied in a conforming gender

specific manner. She also adds, more importantly, that the body "determines a cultural

meaning for itself."[117] Therein lies the rub, for while cultural expectations are forced on

the Arthurian gender-encoded individual, it is still their "will" which decides what

polarity and extremity, or degree of conformity if you will, to which they gravitate.

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[116]Butler, 8.

[117]Ibid.

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VITA

Damon Randall Caraway was born in Fort Worth, Texas on April 11, 1967, the eldest son of Bobby Joe Caraway and Genita Gayle Caraway. After graduating from Decatur High School in 1985, he became a student of life for a time, not always learning the easy way, but always learning. He began dating his wife-to-be Donna Jo Ann Miller in 1993 and she inspired in him a reason for self-betterment. They both started college in the spring semester of 1995 and both prospered academically. After taking general classes at both Odessa and Midland Colleges, he attended the University of Texas at the Permian Basin where he double majored in history and English, the later was an afterthought. English soon became his favorite subject so he pursued English as his major in graduate school. After he graduated *Cum Laude* in 2000, he was accepted at Southwest Texas State University where he majored in English with a minor in history, medieval influences in both.

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